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Discourses of Indigenous Tourism of the North: Conceptualizations of Distance and Difference

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Title: Discourses of Indigenous Tourism of the North: Conceptualizations of Distance and Difference

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Abstract:

Through discursive practices of ordering and delineation, Indigenous cultures, groups of people and places, are constructed as different, distant and as ‘the Other’. In this paper the conceptualization of *the Indigenous*, in relation to the *non-Indigenous*, as expressed in tourism activities and marketing of northern areas, and the connection to other concepts that connotes a geographic as well as a symbolic location are analyzed. We aim to deconstruct the “Indigenous” – “non-Indigenous” conceptualizations as well as the geographical categories these are linked to, with examples from northern Fennoscandia and Russia, aiming to illustrate that rather than clarifying, these categories are often used—in tourism and destination marketing—to obscure what are locally and regionally very varying circumstances. The official state definitions and the self-definitions of Indigenous peoples only partly coincide with the definitions of the Indigenous in tourism contexts.

Hegemonic connotations of northern or Arctic areas are nature and wilderness, which also implies that the northern areas are conceptualized as peripheral, and related to concepts and signifiers such as local, genuine, authentic, and Indigenous. In the tourism context, authenticity (as given meaning in relation to Indigenous experiences) has been conceptualized as a value that connotes the true, genuine, and unspoilt, and as ‘old’ cultural practices from a time and place distant from the western modern world and from the urban. There is a clear similarity here to how the concepts of the genuine and the local are used to give meaning to and revalorize tourism products and places. Similarly, the Indigenous is a concept that has been given meaning in tourism as something exotic and different, and as part of exclusive experiences of a spiritual connection to nature.

By studying the ways in which the concept of Indigenous is used in tourism, related to other value-laden and geographically situated concepts, we want to contribute to the critical debate on the role of tourism in processes of ‘Othering’ and shaping of power imbalances. We also want to suggest potentials for resistance to the normalized understandings through Indigenous tourism practices.

One example is the label called the Sapmi Experience, which has been developed recently within a project run by a network of tourism operators, to distinguish tourism products that offer “authentic” Sami tourism experiences by local Sami hosts. The label is given to companies that offer products and services that are in line with the ethical standards and basic values set by the organization Visit Sapmi. Stating that there is a real Sami experience and that some tourism experiences are more authentic than others, but at the same time disputing and trying to resist the touristic objectification of the Sami culture is an example of the paradoxical practices of the conceptualization of the Indigenous in Indigenous tourism.