

2017

Co-Living with Light: Autoethnography of Nature-Based Tourism in Lapland

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Recommended Citation

Kosonen, Janne; Sposato, Anu; and Ismo Alakärppä, Ismo (2017) "Co-Living with Light: Autoethnography of Nature-Based Tourism in Lapland," *Critical Tourism Studies Proceedings*: Vol. 2017 , Article 72.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.library.tru.ca/cts-proceedings/vol2017/iss1/72>

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Title: Co-Living with Light: Autoethnography of Nature-Based Tourism in Lapland

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Session Type: Presentation

Abstract:

This study addresses one significant, yet seldom explored, constituent of tourist experience: light. While light affects every experience in obvious or subtle ways, our focus is on nature-based experiences, as this context allows us to explore the intriguing relation between natural and artificial light, human and non-human bodies, and the environment. The more specific aim of the paper is to work towards a theoretical lens that allows us to trace the role of light in the consumption and production of nature-based experiences. To this aim, it draws on anthropological studies on luminosity and acknowledges the materiality and sociality of light as well as its agential quality. The paper also builds on, and seeks to expand, existing literature on nature-based tourism, and that of mobility.

A multi-sited autoethnographic study—conducted by the second author—took place in Finnish Lapland, in the woods, fells, and the outdoor Arctic zoo, during the dark autumn and winter season in 2015–2016. The empirical materials consist of written notes and vignettes, photographs, and videos based upon participant observations. The preliminary analysis first details and characterizes different types of light identified during the fieldwork. It demonstrates how the natural light takes various forms that are materially and culturally specific. Think of, for instance, sunshine, moonlight, aurora borealis and stars, reflections from the snow or ice, or flames from the fireplace. These types of light are changeable depending on the weather condition (e.g., fog) or on the form of the landscape. Also, the artificial or electric light comes in many varieties—from the bright light of flashlight, to the reflections of city light in the sky, or the blue light of smart phones. The situated and temporal nature of these various lights (e.g., the momentary and withdrawing nature of the ray of light) is then given attention.

Second, the analysis turns to explore the agency of light: what do these different lights do? How do they alter tourist experiences? How does the changing light change the perception of the entire environment, or affect social relations? How does the material light affect corporeal experiences, for instance, the warmth of the sun versus the cold of shadow? Or affect materially, smelting the snow, or framing the moves of animals and their sleeping patterns.

Third, the analysis ponders how the light is used in various ways and for various purposes. Lights can be orchestrated, for instance, by guides, to produce an experience, or as a social technique to reveal the beauty of the place, or to connect, separate, or guide people. Light also can be used as an affective technique to create an experience or a particular atmosphere. All this shapes experiences in culturally and situationally specific ways. Altogether, these empirical insights enrich existing literature on nature-based experiences and that of mobility by way of pointing to the moving nature of light and its ability to affect and move people and animals.