Regenerative Wellbeing in Arctic Tourism: Sense of Place and Community Resilience

Verena Karlsdóttir
University of Akureyri, Akureyri, Iceland

verena@unak.is

Abstract: As Arctic and sub-Arctic destinations face increasing environmental, climatic, and social pressures, the tourism sector is being reimagined as a regenerative system that restores both human and ecological well-being. Tourism no longer serves just as an economic driver but as a catalyst for community resilience, cultural continuity, and care for the environment. This paper examines how nature-based and community-driven tourism in Iceland and Finnish Lapland cultivates resilience through a shared sense of place and explores how wellbeing can emerge as a collective, place-based achievement. Drawing on comparative qualitative research involving tourism organisations from Iceland and Lapland, the study investigates how tourism organisations embed local values, environmental respect, and care for people and place within their daily operations. The analysis highlights that the natural environment functions not only as the leading tourism attraction but also as a psychological, social, and cultural (re-)source for employees and residents. In both regions, connection with nature strengthens emotional resilience, job satisfaction, and commitment to sustainable practices, while also reinforcing a deeper understanding of Arctic fragility and interdependence. Leaders who integrate empathy, learning, and trust into their management styles promote supportive, value-driven workplaces that mirror the patterns of local settings. Community collaboration, storytelling, and shared outdoor experiences enhance belonging and stability, transforming tourism from seasonal employment into participation in living cultural ecosystems. The research demonstrates that regenerative wellbeing in tourism emerges when organisations align their operations with the ecological and cultural identity of their environment. In Iceland, this manifests through locally rooted entrepreneurship and community stewardship; in Lapland, through multicultural collaboration and a shared Arctic identity constructed through work in extreme environments. Both regions illustrate how tourism can move beyond sustainability toward the active renewal of ecosystems, cultural heritage, and human connection. By situating the sense of place and well-being at the centre of regenerative tourism, the paper contributes a framework linking leadership, culture, and community resilience.

Keywords: Regenerative Tourism; Arctic Wellbeing; Sense of Place; Community Resilience; Nature-based Tourism

1. Introduction

Tourism has become one of the most significant economic and cultural drivers shaping the Arctic and North Atlantic regions over the past two decades. In countries such as Iceland and Finland, particularly in the Lapland area, tourism represents not only a vital source of employment and innovation but also a complex field of social transformation (Saarinen 2013; Helgadóttir et al. 2019). For small rural and coastal communities, the expansion of nature-based and experiential tourism has created new opportunities to diversify income and foster entrepreneurship. However, it has also generated challenges linked to seasonality, workforce instability, housing shortages due to increased workforce, and environmental tensions. In both regions, the North of Iceland and Lapland, these dynamics are particularly evident because of their peripheral location, climatic and weather extremes, and dependency on seasonal flows of visitors. In Iceland, most tourists visit in the summer months; however, in Lapland, winter is the primary peak season for foreign tourists. As studies have shown, the success of tourism in such environments depends not only on infrastructure and marketing but on the social and emotional resilience of the people and organisations that sustain it (Sheppard & Williams 2016).

Against this backdrop, understanding how communities and tourism organisations adapt to changing conditions while maintaining their social and cultural integrity has become a central question in sustainable Arctic and sub-Arctic development. One key concept that helps explain this process is the *sense of place*: the emotional, symbolic, and functional connection between people and their environment (Relph 1976). In tourism contexts, the sense of place goes beyond the physical setting to include values, identities, and traditions that outline how people live, work, and interpret value in specific environments. It is through these place-based connections that residents, employees, and visitors co-create a destination's identity and authenticity (Lew 2014; Stedman 2003). In the Arctic, where jobs and survival have long depended on a profound interrelationship with the environment, a sense of place becomes a foundation of both cultural stability and resilience (Bærenholdt, Haldrup, and Urry 2004).

The notion of sense of place also offers a valuable framework for linking social sustainability with tourism management and leadership. As tourism expands into fragile and remote regions, maintaining the emotional and ethical connection between people and place becomes crucial to ensuring that development aligns with

community values rather than undermining them (Yanan, Ismail, and Aminuddin 2024). Within this study, sense of place is understood as the integration of cultural identity, environmental respect, and social belonging that shapes how tourism organisation's function and adapt. This approach highlights the human factor in sustainability, i.e., how emotional connection, pride, and shared responsibility translate into daily practices that support long-term well-being and, in turn, sustain the natural environment (Wu 2013).

At the same time, resilience has emerged as a key concept in understanding how tourism systems adapt to uncertainty and change. Resilience refers to the capacity of individuals, organisations, and communities to respond to instability and conflicts while maintaining critical functions and identity (Magis 2010; Berkes & Ross 2013). In Arctic tourism, resilience manifests not only in the ability to cope with environmental shocks and market fluctuations but also in the strength of social networks, leadership, and learning cultures that allow organisations to thrive under pressure. This study identified several factors that contribute to resilience in remote tourism work: flexibility in staffing and operations, the use of nature as a source of well-being, strong community ties that respond to isolation, and opportunities for continuous learning and skill development.

The contexts of Iceland and Lapland offer complementary perspectives on how the sense of place and resilience interact in Arctic tourism. Although both Iceland and Lapland have been widely studied in relation to tourism growth and sustainability, less attention has been paid to how a sense of place translates into organisational and leadership practices that foster resilience and employee well-being. Existing research often treats sense of place as a cultural or geographic phenomenon and resilience as an economic or ecological one, scanning their interconnection at the level of daily organisational life (Lundmark & Müller 2010). This article addresses that gap by examining how tourism companies in Iceland and Lapland integrate cultural identity, environmental respect, and social well-being into their human resource and leadership practices.

Three research questions guide the study:

1. How do tourism organisations in Iceland and Lapland embed a sense of place in their operations and leadership practices?
2. How does this integration influence employee well-being and organisational resilience?
3. What lessons can small rural communities draw for value-driven and regenerative tourism development in Arctic and sub-Arctic regions?

By comparing the Icelandic and Lapland cases, this paper seeks to demonstrate that resilience in Arctic tourism is deeply rooted in a sense of place expressed through care for nature, commitment to community, and leadership that emphasizes trust, empathy, and learning. The findings aim to contribute to broader debates on sustainable and regenerative tourism by showing how place-based values can guide the transformation of tourism from a seasonal economic activity into a long-term, community-centred practice that enhances both livelihoods and local pride.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Sense of Place and Cultural Identity

The concept of *sense of place* has its origins in human geography and environmental psychology. It refers to the affective and cognitive ties that connect people to specific environments and fill them with meaning (Relph 1976). These bonds are not entirely emotional; they shape how individuals and groups perceive, inhabit, and act within their surroundings. Scholars such as Stedman (2003) have distinguished between *place attachment*: the emotional connection to a location, and *place meaning*, which captures the symbolic and cultural significance assigned to it. Together, these dimensions form a foundation for place-based identity and belonging.

In the context of tourism, the *sense of place* serves a dual function. On one hand, it contributes to destination authenticity, shaping how visitors experience and value a location (Lew 2014; Raymond, Giusti, and Barthel 2018). On the other hand, it influences how local communities and tourism workers construct and sustain their identities within dynamic, often globalized tourism systems. For Arctic and sub-Arctic regions, where natural landscapes are closely tied to cultural identity and employment, a sense of place carries a deep ethical dimension. As Bærenholdt, Haldrup, and Urry (2014) argue, place is "performed" through everyday practices that sustain community life and connect cultural traditions with care for the environment.

The *sense of place* perspective highlights that sustainable tourism development cannot be separated from the lived experiences of residents and workers. In small, remote communities in Iceland and Lapland, it manifests

through practices of storytelling, hospitality, and respect for nature; values that align closely with Nordic and Arctic traditions of coexistence with the environment (Oslund 2011). These affective connections to place help tourism organisations preserve authenticity while likewise steering pressures of global tourism, labour mobility, and environmental change. Thus, a *sense of place* serves not only as an emotional but also as a managerial and strategic resource in building community and organisational resilience.

2.2 Community Resilience in Peripheral Tourism Regions

The concept of *resilience* originated in ecological systems theory (Folke 2006) and has since been applied to social and community contexts. It refers to the ability of a system, whether ecological, social, or organisational, to absorb upsets and adapt while maintaining its vital structure and function (Magis 2010; Berkes & Ross 2013). In tourism studies, resilience describes how destinations respond to external pressures, such as seasonality, crises (e.g., COVID-19), labour fluctuations, and climate change (Lew 2014). However, recent work emphasizes that resilience is not simply about recovery from interruption, but about learning, transformation, and the creation of new routes for sustainability (Biggs, Hall, and Stoeckl 2012).

For peripheral and rural Arctic and sub-Arctic communities, resilience is deeply connected with *social capital*, the networks of trust, collaboration, and mutual support that facilitate collective action (Magis 2010). Berkes and Ross (2013) describe community resilience as a dynamic process built through *learning to live with change*, *fostering social networks*, and *building a shared sense of identity and purpose*. In Icelandic and Lapland contexts, these principles are evident in how tourism organisations and communities collaborate to sustain year-round employment.

Research in Arctic regions suggests that resilience is enhanced when local actors retain control over tourism development, when knowledge is shared across generations, and when the social composition of communities remains strong (Saarinen 2013). This research study identified similar mechanisms: flexible human resource practices, community-based collaboration, and the integration of nature into well-being strategies. These practices mirror what Berkes and Ross (2013) term *psychological and social resilience*, where belonging, trust, and shared learning help communities adapt without losing their identity.

For tourism companies, resilience therefore extends beyond economic adaptability to include *organisational culture*, *leadership style*, and *employee well-being*. Leaders who foster belonging, purpose, and learning within teams strengthen both individual and collective resilience; an approach especially critical in geographically isolated settings such as the Arctic.

2.3 Regenerative and Value-driven Tourism

Over the past decade, the dialogue on sustainability in tourism has evolved toward regenerative tourism, which emphasizes restoring ecosystems, cultures, and communities rather than just minimizing damage (Dredge 2022). However, central sustainability paradigms in tourism have also been criticised for remaining largely incremental; often emphasising harm reduction, compliance, and managerial control, while leaving growth reasoning and other socio-ecological relations largely undiscussed (Cave 2022). Within current scholarly debates, regenerative tourism has been framed by some as a substantive advance grounded in living-systems thinking and reciprocal human–nature relations, yet it has also been questioned as a potential rebranding of sustainability if it remains a rhetorical label without conceptual rigour or operational clarity (Becken & Kaur 2022; Cave 2022). To address this tension, we treat “regeneration” as more than improved sustainability performance: in this study, it means place-grounded practices that actively contribute to renewal (i.e., ecological, cultural, and social) and can be seen in organisational routines, relationships, and decision-making (Becken & Kaur 2022).

Regenerative tourism positions destinations as living systems in which human and environmental well-being are interdependent. This model aligns closely with the values rooted in Arctic communities, where nature and culture have historically been seen as inseparable. In practice, regenerative tourism involves co-creation among residents, tourism workers, and visitors, grounded in a shared sense of place. The approach values knowledge embedded in local culture, traditional livelihoods, and indigenous practices (Berkes & Folke 2000). In both Iceland and Lapland, regenerative principles are reflected in initiatives that prioritize environmental stewardship, local food systems, and cultural storytelling within the visitor experience. We therefore discuss such initiatives as “regenerative” only where they demonstrate a realistic purpose to restore and strengthen local socio-ecological relationships, rather than minimise negative impacts. These practices not only enhance visitor satisfaction but also contribute to social and ecological renewal by reinforcing local identity and pride.

From an organisational perspective, regenerative tourism requires leadership that goes beyond profit-driven management. It calls for ethical decision-making, participatory governance, and the encouragement of relationships that sustain community well-being (Farrell & Twining-Ward 2004). This responds to recurring critiques that "sustainability" can remain an ambition unless it is translated into accountable practices and shared values within organisational cultures and leadership routines (Cave 2022). Such value-driven leadership is particularly relevant in small Arctic organisations, where community, environment, and business often overlap.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a comparative qualitative case study design (Yin 2018) to examine how tourism companies in Iceland and Finnish Lapland integrate a *sense of place* and *community resilience* into their daily operations, leadership, and human resource practices. The comparative approach was chosen to explore both shared and context-specific strategies across two Arctic/sub-Arctic regions that, while geographically distinct, face similar challenges: strong seasonality, remoteness, labour shortages, a mostly foreign workforce, and, as a result, the need to sustain well-being and authenticity in tourism-dependent communities. The study followed an interpretivist paradigm, emphasizing how participants construct meaning from their lived experiences and relationships with place (Creswell & Poth 2018). This approach is particularly suitable for Arctic and rural research contexts, where human-environment interactions and local knowledge are central to understanding social and organisational dynamics (Saarinen 2013).

3.2 Case Selection and Data Collection

Two regional cases were selected to reflect different but complementary models of Arctic tourism development. The Icelandic part of the study focuses on tourism and hospitality companies located in remote coastal and rural areas in the North and South of the country. These companies were purposefully selected because they are actively engaged in sustainable tourism, invest in staff training, and maintain close collaboration with their local communities. The sample includes a mix of small accommodation providers, adventure and wellness tourism operators, and rural hospitality businesses.

The Lapland case is centred on a large Arctic resort. This resort operates in a highly international and strongly seasonal tourism environment and serves as a representative example of multicultural, globally oriented Arctic tourism. Its workforce includes a high proportion of seasonal and international employees working across accommodation, activities, and guest services. The case highlights key challenges typical for the region, including employee retention, cultural integration in diverse teams, and the ongoing need to balance rapid tourism growth with social and environmental sustainability in a fragile Arctic landscape.

The combination of these two settings enabled an exploration of *how place-based values are enacted in different organisational forms*: locally embedded versus globally networked, and how they influence resilience at both individual and community levels. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted in Iceland with managers, supervisors, and long-term staff members across several participating companies. These interviews explored perceptions of place and identity, leadership and well-being practices, and strategies for coping with seasonality and remoteness. Second, for the Lapland case, thematic qualitative materials from a series of field-based research reports were analysed. These reports included interviews, workplace observations, and reflections on leadership, diversity, and employee experiences within a large Arctic resort. They were selected because they offer rich, situated insights into the lived realities of multicultural tourism work and leadership in a highly seasonal and international context. Finally, supplementary documents, including company websites, social media communications, sustainability strategies, and staff training materials, were reviewed to contextualise organisational practices and regional conditions. All data were collected and analysed in accordance with ethical guidelines, and the anonymity of individuals and organisations was fully preserved.

The analysis followed a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke 2006), combining both inductive and deductive coding.

Three overarching themes were identified:

- Nature as a Resource for Well-being and Resilience
- Belonging and Social Cohesion
- Supportive Leadership and Learning

These themes structure the findings section (Section 4) and serve as the basis for the comparative discussion between the Icelandic and Lapland contexts.

4. Findings

The findings are structured around three interconnected themes that emerged from the comparative analysis. Together, these themes reveal how a *sense of place* operates as both an emotional and organisational resource in Arctic and sub-Arctic tourism, influencing how employees experience their work, how leaders shape motivation and cohesion, and how communities sustain themselves within fast tourism growth and seasonal fluctuations.

4.1 Nature as a Resource for Well-being and Resilience

Across Iceland and Lapland, nature was described not only as the foundation of the tourism experience and the overall business, but also as an everyday (re-)source that shapes work routines, motivation, and emotional balance. Although the landscapes differ visually, employees in both regions work under relatively similar environmental conditions: strong seasonality, rapidly changing weather, long periods of darkness or low light in winter, cold, and long winter months, yet they are also very close to nature and remote. These shared features make nature an active part of everyday working life.

In Iceland, participants highlighted how immersion in the landscape supports resilience and helps them cope with seasonal demands. Stepping outside was seen as essential for "resetting" during long shifts. Nature was fully integrated into daily rhythms rather than treated as something separate. Staff often described a fluid boundary between the workplace and the surrounding environment and frequently referred to their role as "showing others our home," reflecting strong place attachment and pride.

In Lapland, employees expressed views very similar to those in other regions. Daily work was shaped by snow, silence, cold, and limited daylight during winter, which required continuous adaptation and awareness. Staff explained that working outdoors, preparing winter activities, or simply moving around the resort helped them stay grounded and focused. Nature-based routines, such as short outdoor breaks, aurora viewing, or shared sauna sessions, played an important role in reducing stress and fostering structure within a multicultural workforce.

Across both regions, nature acted as a stabilising force during demanding periods. Employees repeatedly described feeling calmer, more balanced, and more connected when they could integrate nature into their workday. Whether through briefly stepping outside, working in natural settings, or sharing experiences linked to the landscape, nature functioned as a buffer against fatigue, isolation, and seasonal pressure. This direct, everyday engagement with the environment contributed to well-being, motivation, and a sense of purpose in remote tourism settings.

4.2 Belonging and Social Cohesion

The second theme highlights the importance of social ties and shared commitment. In Iceland, tourism companies often operate within small, interdependent communities where professional and personal relationships overlap. Employers and employees frequently described their business as "extended families." Participants repeatedly emphasised teamwork, mutual support, and the feeling that "people look out for each other." Staff often relied on colleagues and the broader community for practical help, emotional support, and problem-solving during busy or challenging periods. This sense of belonging contributed to strong loyalty and long-term commitment.

In Lapland, community ties were more complex due to the highly international, seasonal, and diverse workforce. Resorts, such as in the case study, employ staff from more than 10 nationalities, many on short-term contracts, who want to stay for a few months to experience the Finnish winter. Managers and employees therefore emphasized the importance of deliberately building "micro-communities", for example, through shared housing groups, team gatherings, shared hobbies and activities, as well as shared meals, informal social events, cultural exchange, and support for newcomers adjusting to Arctic conditions. Community in Lapland thus takes a constructed rather than pre-existing form. It relies on intentional social design and leadership support, with social connection helping employees cope with long shifts, remoteness, and cultural differences, and ultimately contributing to a strong sense of "being part of something," higher job satisfaction, and better performance.

Despite different contexts, both cases demonstrate that resilience is strengthened when employees feel included, supported, and socially connected. Belonging reduces turnover, increases teamwork, and helps staff cope with the physical and emotional demands of Arctic tourism, especially during the winter season.

4.3 Supportive Leadership and Learning

The third theme concerns leadership behaviours and opportunities for learning. In the Icelandic companies, leadership was described as hands-on, approachable, and based on trust. Managers often worked alongside staff and maintained open communication. Employees valued leaders who understood the realities of remote tourism work and who supported them during high season, unexpected events, or long work periods.

In Lapland, leadership played a central role in helping a multicultural workforce navigate seasonal work, extreme weather, and intense guest demand. Leaders focused on clear instructions, patience, and ensuring that international staff felt safe and informed. Guiding local customs, Arctic weather, and daily routines was significant. Staff described feeling more confident and integrated when supervisors created structure and encouraged teamwork.

Learning, both formal and informal, also contributed to resilience. In Iceland, employees often learned about local culture, nature, and hospitality through experience and mentorship. In Lapland, learning was more focused on adaptation, i.e., understanding how to operate safely and effectively in Arctic conditions and in diverse teams.

Across both cases, leadership that emphasised support, clarity, and fairness had a direct impact on wellbeing and performance. Learning helped staff feel more capable, settled, and confident.

5. Discussion

Taken together, the themes show that *sense of place* in Arctic tourism is not a fixed cultural trait, but a dynamic relationship between people, organisations, and landscapes. Employees and managers in both Iceland and Lapland draw extensively on their immediate environment, i.e., harsh weather, different seasons, remoteness, and daily contact with nature, as an ongoing source of stability, motivation, and shared purpose. Nature becomes part of the work rhythm, not a conceptual setting. This supports the argument that sense of place is shaped by continuous interaction between people and their surroundings, rather than by cultural tradition alone.

Although the two cases differ: local rootedness and community continuity in Iceland, multicultural teamwork and higher seasonal adaptation in Lapland, both rely on similar mechanisms. Nature provides a daily basis, but also regeneration; social connection creates an emotional structure; learning and leadership translate values into practice; and shared identity establishes organisational stability. These mechanisms highlight that resilience in Arctic tourism is interactive, emerging from everyday practices that connect employees to place and to one another.

The findings also show that a sense of place is both inherited and created. In Iceland, it grows from long-standing community ties and the overlap between work, life, and nature. In Lapland, place identity develops through shared environmental experiences, team practices, and leadership support that helps international staff “learn” the Arctic. Both contexts demonstrate that organisations can actively cultivate place-based attachment as a resilience strategy through inclusive leadership, nature-based routines, and opportunities for connection.

Leadership plays a central role in this process. Supportive managers who emphasise trust, fairness, and clear communication help staff navigate demanding conditions and cultural diversity. Leaders facilitate the relationship between people and place: they set nature as a resource, give the tone for community, and create space and time for learning. This extends existing leadership models by showing that effective leadership in Arctic tourism requires ecological awareness and sensitivity to local or multicultural contexts.

The findings challenge narrow views of sustainable tourism focused mainly on environmental management. Instead, they support a more regenerative perspective, where well-being, cultural continuity, and care for place are understood as core elements of long-term sustainability. Resilient tourism in the Arctic is not achieved through infrastructure alone, but through strengthening the social and emotional ties that make employees feel connected, capable, and part of a living community.

To make the study’s theoretical contribution explicit, we synthesised the findings into the *Place-Based Regenerative Resilience Framework,* which links leadership practices, organisational culture, and community resilience through a sense of place. The framework proposes that (1) leadership enables regenerative routines

(e.g., trust, learning, and care for people and environment), (2) these routines shape an organisational culture of belonging and meaning, and (3) culture strengthens community resilience through collaboration, identity continuity, and place stewardship (Figure 1).

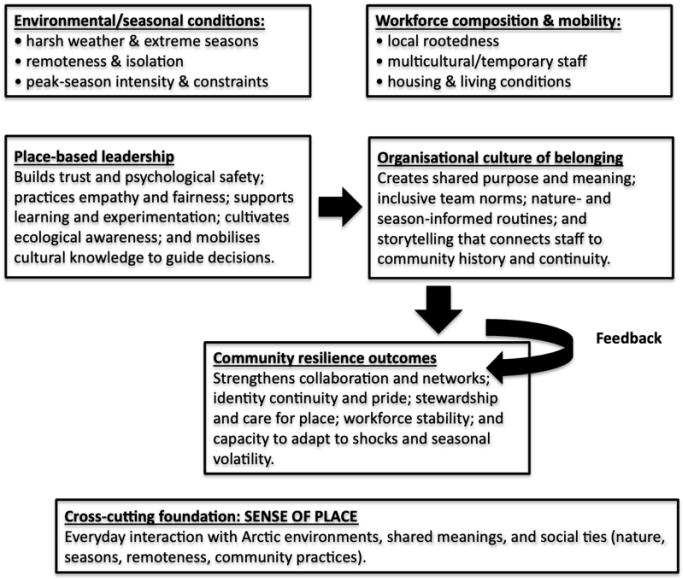

Figure 1: Place-Based Regenerative Resilience Framework

6. Conclusion and Practical Implications

This study shows that in both Iceland and Finnish Lapland, a sense of place is not a decorative element of tourism but a central force shaping how people work, team up, and cope with the demands of remote, seasonal environments. Nature, community, and supportive leadership together create the social and emotional grounds that emphasize employee wellbeing and organisational resilience. Whether rooted in long-standing local traditions, as in Iceland, or constructed through multicultural collaboration, as in Lapland, place-based relationships give tourism work meaning and stability. These findings suggest that Arctic tourism can become more sustainable not through infrastructure alone but by strengthening everyday ties among people, culture, and nature. Building on this, our *Place-Based Regenerative Resilience Framework* specifies what is novel in the move from "sustainability" to "regeneration": it shifts attention from impact mitigation toward the everyday organisational mechanisms through which tourism can actively renew socio-ecological relationships, by leadership, culture, and community collaboration grounded in a sense of place (Figure 1).

The results offer several practical implications. For tourism organisations, staff introductions and training should include place-based orientation to local culture, nature, and traditions, helping seasonal and international employees integrate and adapt more quickly. Nature-based wellbeing practices such as outdoor breaks or shared experiences in natural settings can reduce stress and strengthen team cohesion. Peer-mentoring systems and leadership training that emphasise empathy, cultural sensitivity, and environmental awareness further support belonging and performance. Creating simple community rituals, whether shared meals, taking part in local traditions such as sauna or sea bathing, or seasonal gatherings, helps foster connection in demanding working conditions.

For regional development actors, the findings highlight the importance of social infrastructure. Affordable seasonal housing and stable living arrangements underpin workforce retention and community integration. Public support for place-based training programmes and micro-credentials in Arctic hospitality, wellbeing, and cultural literacy can strengthen local skill development. Recognising tourism workers as contributors to community life and elevating local knowledge, storytelling, and cultural heritage within regional strategies can thereby reinforce the link between tourism and community wellbeing.

For researchers, the study points to the value of field-based Arctic learning models and the need for continued research on multicultural identity formation, workforce experiences, and regenerative wellbeing. Developing metrics that capture place-based wellbeing, community cohesion, and local value creation would allow destinations to evaluate sustainability beyond visitor numbers and revenue.

Overall, the study demonstrates that in Iceland and Lapland, place is not a setting; it is an active participant in tourism. Resilience grows when organisations and communities recognise this relationship and invest in belonging, identity, and care for place. Strengthening these connections offers a pathway toward a more regenerative and socially grounded future for Arctic and sub-Arctic tourism.

Ethics Declaration

Personal and organisational identities have been anonymised. No additional ethical issues arose during this research.

AI Declaration

ChatGPT 5.1 and Grammarly were used as writing aids for thesaurus-style word choice, grammar improvement, and occasional rephrasing.

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