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To be or not to be like Iceland? (Ontological) Politics of comparison in Greenlandic tourism development

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Abstract

In this article, we introduce the concept of *politics of comparison* in tourism development, looking at how comparison contributes to shaping and making sense of tourism development in Greenland. Decision makers and operators in Greenland foresee tourism growth as new transatlantic airports are set to open by 2024. To navigate an uncertain tourism future, many look towards neighbouring Iceland, who experienced exponential growth in international tourism arrivals between 2010 and 2018. In this North Atlantic reflection, comparison also works as a tool to understand tourism, positioning Greenland as a potential destination and deliberating about the future of tourism in the region, while also bringing forth competing logics and trajectories of development. Thus, comparison serves to engage with the meaning and value of tourism, seeing it not only as a pillar of the economy but also as a force affecting landscapes and communities. We argue that the comparisons made by tourism actors work epistemologically – creating knowledge of 'what is' – as well as ontologically, forcefully interfering with and producing tourism realities.

Introduction

In September 2019, we took part in a meeting in Nuuk where tourism researchers and consultants from Iceland, United States and Denmark met with representatives of Visit Greenland, Greenland's national Destination Management Organisation. The meeting formed part of a research project aimed at better understanding how Iceland's experiences responding to rapid and sometimes uncontrolled growth in tourism could be translated and used in planning for and managing an expected increase in tourism in neighbouring Greenland. At one stage of the meeting, the managing director explained how they worked with tourism within the organisation. The conversation took a humorous turn as she added to her explanation: "Because as you know, you can't really foresee when Trump says something." The comment referred to US President Donald Trump, who had proposed just a month before the meeting to buy Greenland (from Denmark), describing it as a large real estate deal. The proposition led to a minor crisis between the US and Denmark and ultimately resulted in the cancelling of a Trump state visit to Denmark. However, it also provided Greenland with a unique opportunity to promote itself as an attractive destination, spurred by the instant and intense global attention – as illustrated by the brief crash of its website shortly after Trumps' proposal.

While the comment was directed in a humorous way at one of the researchers, an American, it also reflected the often-unpredictable ways in which destinations may rise to fame. This was picked up by another of the Icelandic researchers, adding "If Trump could be your Eyjafjallajökull," alluding to the volcanic eruption, which in March 2010 propelled Iceland onto the world stage as it disrupted air traffic over western and northern part of Europe during its outburst. The eruption and the global media attention surrounding it undoubtedly played a decisive role in attracting a staggering number of tourists to Iceland in the years to follow (Benediktsson, Lund & Huijbens, 2011). The destination manager seemed to agree with this comparison, stating that these "are actually comparable things, even though they are very different. What really put Iceland on the world map was the volcano eruption."

The above quote might merely reflect a similarity in how local events in Greenland and Iceland became global conversation starters and branding platforms. However, it may also serve to highlight how pointing to "comparable things" and comparison more generally, in this case between Greenland and Iceland, may act as instruments for making sense of tourism and for shaping specific directions of development in tourism. In this article, we are interested in probing such 'comparable things' by exploring what we refer to as the *politics of comparison* and more specifically to how specific events, directions and instruments are addressed in Greenlandic tourism development as *comparable* to that of Iceland. In our research, we ask how Greenland compares itself to Iceland and compares Greenlandic tourism to tourism in

Iceland, in order to explore *how the dynamics of comparison work to direct and shape tourism development in Greenland.* We do so by looking at how politicians, policymakers and tourism managers craft and point out specific comparative directions for developing communities, businesses and the economy through tourism.

While researchers have described how tourism development trajectories are informed by specific visions of tourism as an industry (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006) or as a tool for sustainable or community development (Hall, Müller & Saarinen, 2009; Lundmark & Carson, 2020), we explore in this paper how tourism – and more broadly societal – development may also be driven through comparisons to those that we identify ourselves with and those that we distance us from. We agree with Gad (2021) that as part of understanding the wider and drastic geo-political transformations in the Arctic, a better understanding of how Greenland is imagining itself towards independence by way of comparisons is needed. This entails looking at how Greenland is picking peers to compare itself with, setting up models and bogies for itself in different contexts.

We argue that comparison by way of *identification* as well as *contrastation* is embedded in discourses of national identity and shifting geo-political alliances, where previous (post-)colonial relationships – and hence, routes of development, trade and collaboration – are increasingly replaced with new meaningful, or *comparable,* Others. However, and as we shall see, comparing is a selective undertaking and even when learning and making sense of something through comparison, what is being chosen and brought forward as comparable is a matter of constant negotiation. Comparison does not simply take place between already defined and neatly demarcated locations but enacts dynamic and fluid spaces, which in our case stabilise as well as disrupt the shape and position of Iceland and Greenland as objects of comparison. This brings forth somewhat stratified trajectories of tourism development in Greenland in which the object of comparison – tourism – is simultaneously produced and questioned.

In the following, we first sketch out the background and offset for the article, namely tourism development in Arctic destinations. We introduce Iceland's exceptional and unexpected growth in tourism and sketch out Greenland's trajectory towards independence in which tourism plays a central part. In our analysis, we describe three versions of comparison and the ways in which they work to frame and position Greenland and Iceland as tourist destinations while also delineating tourism possibilities and concerns. In this light, we show how politics of comparison serve as an epistemological tool to explore how stakeholders imagine, discuss, prepare and plan for a Greenlandic tourism future. However, and as we show, comparison also works ontologically by bringing competing tourism realities to the fore. We finish by discussing politics of comparison as a heuristic tool for exploring Greenlandic tourism futures.

Tourism in the Arctic North Atlantic

During the last decade, tourism has been on a steep increase in the circumpolar Arctic (Maher, Jóhannesson, Kvidal-Røvik, Müller & Rantala, 2022). Tourism growth in the Arctic is however unevenly distributed between and within regions. Destinations, usually urban centres, in the Scandinavian North, Iceland and Yukon have experienced proportionally fastest growth. The reasons for the rapid (or lacking) increase in tourism in the high north are varied but it is tempting to link this trend to a growing political and economic interests in the area related to improved access to the circumpolar North and its resources (Lundmark, Müller &

Bohn, 2020). Arctic tourism is also tightly connected to a global increase in tourism demand. As such, it is a manifestation of the intensified search and staging of unique experiences as well as an outcome of systematic efforts by local, regional and transnational governing bodies to develop and enhance tourism.

Tourism has been promoted by authorities at different levels as an efficient tool for economic development often in face of ensuing changes in other more traditional sectors, such as fisheries, mining and forestry (Hall et al., 2009; Huijbens, Jóhannesson & Jóhannesson, 2014). While research has argued that tourism development is far from a simple 'plug'n'play' process, it has for some places proved successful – albeit often controversial (Huijbens & Jóhannesson, 2019). Arctic destinations have moved closer to larger origin markets due to organisational changes in the tourism offer and in infrastructure investments such as in airports, harbours and hotels and in terms of geographical imaginations, which draw on and play with traditional Northern markers and imagery in a new service economy context (Huijbens, 2022; Lundmark et al., 2020).

Iceland is among those Arctic destinations that have experienced the most rapid growth in tourism during the last decade. In the period of 2010 to 2018, the number of international tourist arrivals more than quadrupled and reached little over 2.3 million. In 2018, tourism counted for 8,6% of the island's GDP, which is among the highest in the OECD countries (Ferdamalastofa, 2020). Iceland's position as a tourist destination has consolidated during this period, and it has also increasingly taken the position of a gateway to other Arctic destinations, especially Greenland (Huijbens, 2015a; Lund, Loftsdóttir & Leonard, 2017). There are many different and interlinked reasons for this fast growth. Iceland has for decades enjoyed good flight connections to mainland Europe and North America, benefiting from its location in the middle of the North Atlantic (Jóhannesson, Huijbens & Sharpley, 2010). The meltdown of the Icelandic economy in autumn 2008 prompted the government to attend to tourism as a potential provider of foreign currency. Tourism was firmly cast as a production industry with the focus on "getting as many tourists as possible" (Jóhannesson & Huijbens, 2010, 2013) and thus primarily as a question of economic development. To that end, public and private actors jointly invested in marketing campaigns (Huijbens, 2015b). The devaluation of the Icelandic currency also helped in that respect, making what many see as the exotic north more affordable than before.

As mentioned above, the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull in 2010 contributed to place Iceland on the map of international tourism. The fast growth of tourism in Iceland catapulted the national economy out of a period of recession in the aftermath of the financial meltdown in 2008 together with other more traditional industries like fisheries, which also blossomed in the period. It also however brought about perils and controversies. Lack of planning, policy on environmental conservation and sustainability as well as underinvestment in research and education were identified as key challenges prior to the tourism boom (Jóhannesson et al., 2010). This resulted in Iceland not being prepared for fast growth in tourism and as increasingly perceived as a destination marked by overtourism (Sæþórsdóttir et al., 2020a; 2020b).

Turning to Greenland, tourism has existed in Greenland as a small side income for a few entrepreneurs since the early 1970s (Ren & Hall, 2021). Within the last decades, tourism has taken a central position within political discussions on how to grow and diversify the Greenlandic economy, currently dominated by income from fisheries (93% of exports, Statistics Greenland, 2021) and not counting the recent 'COVID years', tourism numbers have been rising steadily. Similar to many developing

Table 1. Total number of overnight stays in Greenland and Iceland 2018–2021

	2018	2019	2020	2021
Greenland	259.282	264.830	174.814	231.550
Iceland	8.548.886	8.406.291	3.295.504	5.011.871

Source: Statistics Iceland (2022); Statistics Greenland (2022).

economies, tourism in Greenland is seen as a lever for economic development and diversification as well as a tool to detach the nation from the Danish Kingdom. In this process of becoming the first independent Inuit state (Nuttall, 2008), much political and public discussion revolves around whether Greenland is economically fit to become so, and which new affiliations Greenland could engage in "post-Denmark" (Grydehøj, 2016).

In ongoing discussions on economic and societal development in Greenland, some have argued for an increase in North Atlantic regionalisation (Kahlig, 2019) or closer pan-Arctic, Inuit (ICC) or indigenous affiliation. Others again point to or warn against the role that China, the U.S. and Russia might play in the future, specifically around mining, but also in less controversial areas, such as tourism, through investments in land and operations (for an Icelandic example see Huijbens & Alessio, 2015). As tourism is set to 'take off' in Greenland after the COVID-19 pandemic and in the light of the transatlantic airports planned to open in 2024, decision makers and operators seek new pathways to navigate into unknown tourism territories (Table 1).

Tourism politics of comparison

As displayed above, tourism development is not an innocent or purely economic endeavour in an Arctic context. In Greenland, the development of tourism is explicitly linked to independence as the economic tool to make it financially viable (Ren & Abildgaard, 2021). Tourism is also linked to independence in terms of identity, seen as how the tourism product – the land and its people – is constructed through its branding, staging and consumption (Ren, Gad & Bjørst, 2019).

In Greenlandic political debates and public policy, comparisons are often to be found – explicitly or implicitly – with other Arctic indigenous communities, Nordic welfare states, postcolonial societies, non-sovereign Overseas Territories, and even Danish municipalities. According to Gad (2021), while much research has put Greenland in perspective, it has failed to note the uneasy fit of employed categories, most often generated in other theoretical or empirical contexts and overlooked the inquiry of how the development of Greenlandic society and economy is systematically shaped by knowledge actors and policy instruments by way of comparisons and outside models.

To remedy these gaps, we engage in this article with tourism, seeing how Greenland looks to others for examples of what has been and could be done, and maybe what should not be done or avoided in the process of its development through a *politics of comparison*. We see tourism as an object or tool forging relations to relevant others and hereby both reflecting and shaping Greenland's own position as a future independent nation state. This approach follows a longstanding argument in tourism research, namely that tourism is performative (Bærenholdt, Haldrup, Larsen & Urry, 2004). It entails that tourism is done and enacted through embodied practices that are shaped by discourses and habits but are also unruly and creative; tourist places

are scripted in certain ways to attract and manage visitors but those visitors are also able to contest and play with the script (see e.g. Edensor, 2001; Larsen & Urry, 2011). An important side of this argument is that tourism performances do not "take place in already existing locations" (Gregson & Rose, 2000, p. 441) but rather produce the spaces we recognise as sites and stages of tourism such as the hotel, the airport or the tourist destination to name a few iconic examples.

Along these lines, Franklin (2004, 2012) has described tourism as an ordering. Tourism produces spaces that manifest power dynamics while being simultaneously shaped by other space-producing practices. This move blurs the distinction between epistemology and ontology. For example, a particular discourse about tourism promotes certain understanding or knowledge about the value and meaning of tourism *and* enacts a certain version of tourism reality. Thus, tourism does not happen in pre-defined space, it performs space. This opens up the possibility to think of multiple versions of enacted space (see also Mol, 2002).

Doreen Massey argues that multiplicity and space are co-constitutive. According to her: "Perhaps we could imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far" (2005, p. 9). In this view, comparing is thereby an act of ontological politics that has to do with what kind of tourism should or could be created, made accessible and attractive; what kind of stories of and about tourism in a given destination are enacted. Following this, a tourism politics of comparison is one way to enact particular versions of a Greenland (and Iceland) of the future as comparisons open up the scripted object of tourism, to trace its manifestation and (spatial) configurations. In the following, we identify Iceland as a significant tourism Other for Greenland. By tracing how particular comparisons perform tourisms (as multiple), we see how comparisons made to this peer inform the dynamics and logics of tourism development and how tourism is perceived to be of value for Greenlandic society.

Methodology

The empirical material for this article consists of a range of interviews, documents, meeting and field notes produced during visits to Greenland in 2019 as part of a project funded by the North Atlantic Tourism Association. As part of a team of researchers from Iceland, USA and Denmark, we conducted a three-part engagement and research process. First, we identified and corresponded with a range of tourism stakeholders known from previous visits to Greenland and engagement with various tourism stakeholders. Approached stakeholders came from state and local government, small and large tourism operators, NGOs and educational institutions in Greenland and also included experts and stakeholders from Iceland, Denmark, the United States and elsewhere. From a total of 90 stakeholders, a subset of organisations was identified in a next step for interviews during a field visit conducted between the 2 and 6 September 2019.

In our desk research and visit, we focussed on three destinations: Nuuk, Greenland's capital from which both national and local perspectives were drawn, *Ilulissat*, the primary destination in North Greenland, the region of the country most visited by foreign tourists in recent years (Visit Greenland, 2020), and Kangerlussuaq, the main international airport and transportation hub of Greenland, also home of many tourism businesses, located about 130 km inland from Sisimiut. The 13 interviews with 18 informants were semi-structured and guided by questions that

Fig. 1. Administrative divisions of Greenland since 2018/01/01, with municipal centres marked with numbers (Anon, 2018).

inquired into capacity constraints related to tourism management and sustainable development and needs for coordination, planning and governance related to tourism. We also discussed expectations about the future of tourism demand and tourism development patterns in Greenland and the stakeholder's knowledge about and views of Iceland's tourism experience and responses to growth. Lastly, points of comparison and the desirability of transferring knowledge between Greenland and Iceland were inquired.

After returning to Iceland and Denmark, and for the purpose of this article, interviews were transcribed and read through by the authors individually looking for issues and overarching themes pertaining to comparison, focusing on similarity and contrast between Greenland and Iceland. In our analysis, we were interested, first, in whether and how Greenlandic stakeholders compared or contrasted tourism development in Greenland to that in Iceland and, second, in the tourism issues that stakeholders pointed to and highlighted as key during our conversations (Fig. 1).

Analysis I: comparing sameness – working together in tourism

How does Greenland compare itself to Iceland in developing tourism? Judging from many of the conversations with tourism stakeholders and pointing back to our opening story, the answer to this question is: "easily". In many of the conversations, seemingly natural and seamless comparisons were made between tourism in two North Atlantic nations. In these instances, comparison functioned as a way to imply similarity or even sameness most often centred on common challenges such as *peripheral capacity*. In the material, the most prominent common peripheral challenges were seasonality and bottlenecks, both in terms of infrastructure and human resources.

In conversations around seasonality, stakeholders talked about similar difficulties to attract investments in accommodation due to a short season and shared experiences with extending a season that is compromised by rough weather or on developing products in order to extend tourist stay. While Icelandic tourism has been characterised by a strong seasonality pattern that is still very apparent in the countryside (Rantala et al., 2019; Þórhallsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2017), the average stay of tourists is however longer in Iceland than in Greenland (2019: 6,7 nights in Iceland (Ferðamálastofa, 2022)). The lack of 'things to do' in Greenland was often mentioned as a reason for this difference.

> A good measure of being successful is having a variety of activities or offers to (. . .) whereas we would say in Ilulissat, it is maybe 3 or 4 days or something. And then you combine it with another destination. Unless you really appreciate not doing anything and just enjoy the silence or the quiet and just looking at the icebergs, I think most people would like to have more activities. (Representative, Air Greenland)

Human resources, especially the limited domestic labour market and upskilling, were also identified as common basic challenges: "[I]n Greenland we have one person, and if that person decides that he does not want to work with tourism anymore or even moving away getting a new job; there are no resources left. So, it is extremely vulnerable" (Tourism entrepreneur). This situation is not uncommon in peripheral destinations and could also apply to many places in the Arctic (Rantala et al., 2019). This included Iceland, where the bulk of tourism companies are small or micro-sized. As also stated in the interviews, the tourism sector is not competitive when it comes to attracting local people for work and often has to rely on migrant workers, especially in the periphery, which has also been the case in Iceland (Wendt, Jóhannesson & Skaptadóttir, 2020).

While Greenlandic stakeholders identified Greenland and Iceland as having comparable peripheral challenges, Iceland was also drawn into proximity with Greenland on a more advantageous level in relation to marketing and accessibility. In this context, both were framed as part of a new, attractive North Atlantic region for present and future tourists. For some of our interviewees, Iceland represented an example of what could happen in Greenland. The rapid growth of tourism in Iceland confirms that there is a demand for Northern and even Arctic experiences among international tourists, where Greenland could become like Iceland if the necessary infrastructure for securing access to Greenland could be set in place. The closeness to Iceland was highlighted as important to improve accessibility and as a gateway to Greenland and thus of high relevance for enabling future growth.

Common for many of these examples is how Iceland was perceived as not only "same" (of the same peripheral challenge, of a

global interest in the Arctic) but also as "ahead" of Greenland. The relationship was not only similar but also in some instances asynchronous, due to a perceived more advanced tourism situation in Iceland. In line with the project, the relationship was identified as one, where Greenland could learn from Iceland as argued by this operator in Ilulissat: "There was no tourism when I started up (. . .). I built the hotel. And we also went to Iceland at that time. To see tourism (. . .) to learn something in Iceland. And we went there many times to see how (Iceland developed tourism)." Also in local government, Iceland is perceived as relevant to learn from: "We have been working some bits with tourism. So it is very exciting to learn from their Icelandic case. I think there are a lot of lessons to be taught." (Municipal Head of Growth and Sustainability).

In preparing for an uncertain future, Iceland becomes a comparable partner to learn from: "We are shaking our hands these days and (. . .) we were a bit anxious about the future to be honest. But we look very much to you, to Iceland, your guys' management, and we also know people in Iceland. So we hope that we can learn from the good examples and the experiences that you made" (Regional destination manager).

The above quotes manifest a will to get closer to the Icelandic experience and to exchange, or at least translate, knowledge between the countries by way of comparison. Through the comparison of *sameness*, Greenland and Iceland are brought closer together within and into a new North Atlantic region, where things can be learnt from one another (but mostly from Iceland to Greenland) based on common challenges and advantages. Iceland is thus framed as collaborator for creating and acting on knowhow and experience. In this relationship, tourism is configured as stable, uncontested and valued due to its growth potential, seen as driven by demand and as limited by common properties of the sector in the form of accessibility, infrastructure and available services.

Analysis II: comparing difference – negotiating the value of tourism

As maps, statistics and observations on the ground will quickly tell, Greenland and Greenlandic tourism are also very different from Iceland and its tourism industry. This was also highlighted by many stakeholders, who used comparison as a way to contrast Greenland and its tourism situation to that of Iceland and to how things are perceived to be developed and managed there. One of the prominent themes drawn forward in the conversations was Greenland's insular structure as well as its massive size that creates different kinds of challenges for tourism development than in Iceland. This means, as argued by some, that every settlement and every town need to be self-sufficient as underlined by a tourism operator:

> In Iceland you can have a person working in Selfoss one day and then work Keflavik the other day. It is possible. You can take your car, you can drive up. Here, you cannot work in Nuuk one day, and then maybe your expertise is needed in Ilulissat (. . .). We have this insular structure in Greenland where every settlement and every town needs to be self-sufficient with – you know – your guides, your accommodation and all that. You cannot just stay 20 kilometres in the next town and then drive in. It is just not possible – you have to stay there. Which also makes it more difficult to expand infrastructure in Greenland of course, because you will have so much surplus. It is really, really difficult to get the right – or to balance, the right number.

The vast distances between towns and settlements mean that service is expensive as everything, from spare parts to food supplies must be transported by ship or by airplane. Another effect of

the felt remoteness was described by an experienced tourism operator: "It is hard to find people who want to live here. Because it is a special place. If you look out, it is boring town. But it is the most fantastic nature around." Here, Iceland is used as a contrast to extrapolate what was acknowledged as critical challenges particularly relevant to Greenland related to accessibility and to the limitations for expansion and the lack of synergies in tourism operations that it entails.

Another difference that came up in many of the interviews concerned tourism growth with reference to the rapid and uncontrolled rise in tourism number in Iceland in pre-pandemic years. Many raised cautions against what was addressed as an Icelandic way of focusing on growth-oriented mass tourism development. In these conversations, themes revolved around how to avoid Iceland's negative experiences with tourism, as seen in this quote by a destination manager around his concerns for the future after the opening of the airport:

> It's a thing that we are all talking about. And we are concerned of course. Of course we are worried if we can handle this. (. . .). And we also know to a certain extent, we can control the development. This is not going to be a problem. We can absorb or handle. But still there are worries about (how) it is a big mouthful. And especially because you guys in Iceland have been overrun so violently, we've got the message and we don't want to be there.

In many interviews, a strong wish for more sustainable and smallscale tourism was indicated and contrasted to mass tourism, also underlining that Greenland should not copy Iceland as a tourist destination. There were concerns with how the building of new international airports was linked to and demanded a growth-oriented tourism development strategy. Instead, some argued, Greenland should find its own path and niche on the global tourism stage. Some extended that line of thought by proposing Greenland as a more sustainable choice than Iceland. In that line of comparison, Iceland and Greenland were framed in contrast, as opposite and, one might argue, competitors battling for global positioning as a more sustainable or responsible destination in the Arctic.

In this comparison, Greenland stands out as the alternative, sustainable (and less travelled) choice on the North Atlantic or adventure tourism scene. In this movement, Greenland explicitly turns away from Iceland looking for other tourism Others:

> But we don't want to use the Icelandic version. No no no, because the Icelandic version was . . . you were a bit behind. You were turning off a fire. And we don't want to have the cinder bursting into flames. We want to do it beforehand. And we have been looking very much, especially Visit Greenland has been looking very much globally, especially Nordic countries. What's out there that we can use? What are the practices from these countries (National tourist board representative).

By contrasting Greenland to Iceland, or even introducing *other* tourism Others, a distance is created between the two countries and the situation and dynamics of tourism there. Iceland is used as an example to avoid when it comes to managing tourism growth in Greenland, while Iceland also manifests a potential future situation in Greenland, depending on values and rationalities of tourism development and management and planning practices as tourism growth is, according to many, foreseeable. By framing Greenland as the sustainable choice, the destination is also highlighted as a player equal to (or even ahead of), and in competition to Iceland on a global tourism stage.

In this contrasting mode, comparison serves as a tool for global positioning, offering stakeholders an occasion to specifically delimit Greenlandic challenges as well as a way to better carve

out their own international destination branch. Like the above analysis however, tourism in Analysis II is still perceived as an economic tool driven by demand and fuelled by suppliers. The comparisons made about tourism are *epistemological*: connected to efforts to know and make tourism comparable through facts and figures across distances. This logic is, however, challenged in the last analysis, opening up a new politics of comparison.

Analysis III: comparing what? Negotiating the ontology of tourism

As shown, discussions about Greenlandic tourism and its development led in different ways to see Iceland as an example of either similarity or contrast, as proximate or distant. But another comparative modus was also at play in many of the deliberations in which tourism actors shared concerns about tourism, or perhaps rather tourism*s* in plural as well as their potential realities. This concerned not the comparison of Greenland and Iceland, or the way the development of tourism was afforded or had taken place there, but rather the ontology politics of tourism (Jóhannesson, 2015; Mol, 1999) in which the 'real' and the political interlink in the performing of tourism.

As argued by Law and Urry (2004), ontological politics ultimately refer to the question of "which realities might we try to enact?" (p. 396) for instance by enacting (or cutting) connections with and between objects and broader entities. As argued by Allen (2011), such entities "can be used to establish connections between disparate issues, settings and actors" that enact topological space. Topology refers to how power relations "compose the spaces of which they are a part" (p. 284) and offers ways to grasp spatialities of constant movement, fluctuations and instabilities (Harvey, 2012). The connectivities may happen seamlessly but may also manifest themselves as controversies as the process of linking "disparate issues" entails deliberating on what counts as relevant, important or valuable and thus to decide which realities should be enacted (Law & Urry, 2004). An example which serves to illustrate this is the issue of *tourism data*, which was brought up by many stakeholders, typically as something lacking or entirely missing. Tourism data were presented as a key resource for tourism governance and decision making as it enables linking tourism operations and economic, social and natural ramifications. Many of our interviewees lamented this default in tourism data and that statistics were lacking in Greenland and the fact that it was not on par with those in Iceland.

Since 2015, Icelandic authorities have worked towards strengthening the support system of the tourism sector and creating the preconditions for data-driven policymaking and management. The so-called "Tourism Task Force" was established in 2015 as a temporary intra-governmental coordinating unit headed by the Minister of Tourism, Industry and Innovation but with memberships from three other ministries as well as the Icelandic Tourism Association and the Association of Icelandic Municipalities. One of the biggest tasks initiated by the task force was the establishment of a management tool titled the National Tourism Carrying Capacity Assessment (Jafnvægisás) intended to respond to the question of how many visitors Iceland could accommodate. In basic terms, the tool is based on sustainability indicators on which thresholds are defined as well as assessments for alternative growth scenarios and estimates of cost and time for required infrastructure improvement. In this context, data can be viewed as a question of performance: the ability and power – or the lack thereof – of performing tourism in some particular versions. Tourism data serves, for instance, as

instrumental for *proving* the economic worth of tourism and securing its sustainability.

Talking about the good number of visitors to Greenland, a representative of the national airline said: "So you always need to calibrate (. . .) and that is also why it cannot be an objective. It needs to be subjective. You cannot just say 'this is the number' as the Icelandic politicians were asking for. You cannot say 'We can take so many people'. Because you could have a measure for maybe 'how many people can you take now under this and this and this and this circumstance', but tomorrow you may be able to accept more because you have done stuff (. . .)."

This call for calibration and subjective assessment implicitly challenges not only the work of the Tourism Carrying Capacity Assessment but also its premises: that it is possible to find the *right number* of tourists to successfully accommodate for a destination. This questions what kind of – or even whether and how – data and measurements are valuable for taking decisions about tourism development.

The quote also points to – and questions – the performative power of data. A tool like the Tourism Carrying Capacity Assessment may be framed more by what data are available to feed into the assessment, rather than what data is useful, or relevant for that matter. This raises questions of what kind of tourism reality the assessment is enacting, which kind of realities are chosen over others. Lastly, the quote underlines that the availability of data – or a derived datafication or quantification of tourism as "numbers" – does not solve the value-based question of how to build responsible tourism and what responsible or sustainable tourism might look like.

Another issue lingering in discussions on tourism development in Greenland is how the planned development of two international airports will affect tourism for Greenlandic tourism. In official presentations by Air Greenland or investors, the airports are often addressed as a "game changer" in Greenlandic tourism. In an interview, a tourism entrepreneur described however his concerns that some stakeholders in Greenland had too high expectations regarding tourism growth after building the international airports. In his words:

> I will never, ever take to the destination because they have a good airport. No way! But they think that. And the government in Nuuk thinks: "Ah, here we have an airport, so a lot of people will come here." No! I say: "No, no, no, no, no." When I travel, I never take to a place because they have an international airport. No way! But try to say that to the mayor. Say it! And he will be upset. (Tourism operator, Ilulissat)

The quote underlines how certain aspects of tourism development are contested; in this case, the construction of airports and specifically whether more infrastructure serves as a "game changer" in tourism. It also goes to show how the power or ability to enact tourism – for instance being as closely connected or derived from infrastructural development, is not evenly distributed. Here, we see a rift between the understanding of the tourism operator and the mayor and more broadly the politicians taking decisions about infrastructure development.

In the interviews, Iceland plays a major role as the 'deliberative other' through various modes of comparisons. However, in the third analysis, we move beyond proximity and distance in Euclidian space, similarity and difference between separate destinations, bringing forth contradictory trajectories of tourism development and contrasting views on the values and meaning of tourism development and how knowledge resources can be used to enact those values. Stakeholders no longer deliberate around the question of "who Greenland compares itself to and how" but rather "what kinds of 'tourisms' are compared(able?) and

valued(able?)"? Should tourism be framed as an economic or political tool? Should tourism policy be growth-oriented or value-based in the future development of tourism in Greenland?

In such deliberations, there are no stable points of observation from which to describe or interpret Greenland tourism development in comparison to an Icelandic ditto. In seeing comparison as a question of *ontological* politics, the comparison between the two nations and their tourism activities does not take place in a static, or bilateral, environment where pre-defined spaces are compared, or reflected but also works to compose and shape these spaces. This allows for openings rather than closure, to move on with uncertainty and to grasp multiple controversies and think through alternative (becoming) spaces of tourism development. Tourism becomes a catalyst for ontological trouble, destabilising tourism actors, tools and objects. In these openings, tourism produces, questions and takes part in a negotiation of the various development trajectories and enactments as comparison connects to things beyond 'tourism proper', beyond its political or economic aims and goals.

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we explored how Greenland compares itself to Iceland and compare Greenlandic tourism to tourism in Iceland. In our interrogation, we were interested in exploring and discussing the politics of comparison in tourism development, looking at what comparisons were made and how these were productive in shaping – and, as we saw, problematising, tourism development in Greenland, where stakeholders currently seek pathways to navigate uncertain tourism futures. Towards this aim, we drew on conversations with Greenlandic decision makers, managers and operators on whether and how to transfer Iceland's experience with booming tourism to Greenland. Other than comparing Greenland's experience to that of Iceland, they enabled a view into an ongoing deliberation about ways of developing and valuing tourism futures.

In the first analysis, we saw how comparison served as a way of offering identification and confirmation of Greenland as a tourist destination: Greenland and Iceland were identified as *same*, but also at times as *asynchronous*. Both nations were seen as positioned on the same (evolutionary) ladder, although perhaps situated on different steps. This meant that Greenland was able to work together with or learn from Iceland based on perceived similarities. In the second analysis, Greenland and Iceland were compared through contrasting. In this comparison, the two destinations were perceived to have different approaches to tourism growth and sustainability. In this contrastation, Greenland positions itself as equal, or even as being ahead of Iceland as a more sustainable destination. Competition now enters the picture as does the discussion of bringing other (tourism) values to the table.

In both analyses, the politics of comparison serves as a mode of inquiry – an epistemological tool – to deliberate on and make sense of new relations in which different identities and positions emerged. In these attempts to *reflect* Greenland situation in Iceland's experiences, some things were highlighted, while others were kept at distance in preparing and planning for a Greenlandic tourism future, thus working to order Greenland as a tourist destination, order tourism as a pillar of the economy and a cultural phenomenon affecting landscapes and communities. As meanings and values of tourism were deliberated, the positionality of Iceland and Greenland shifted as objects of comparison, bringing forth often competing and contradictory trajectories of tourism development in Greenland. The politics of comparison generates knowledge about 'what is' by inquiring into – but also presupposing – (some

kind of) relations between stable entities 'out there.' Both islands were framed as homogeneous destinations dealing with similar or different problems and any internal regional or local difference was downplayed. A case in point is that tourism in Iceland is quite different in the peripheral regions in the Westfjords and East fjords from what is happening in the South-West, Capital area and along the South coast. While the notion of overtourism may aptly describe the situation at some of the most visited attractions in the latter, it is far from an accurate description of tourism in most of the country (Sæþórsdóttir, Hall & Wendt, 2020b).

In the last analysis, the politics of comparison worked in a slightly different way, further upsetting Iceland and Greenland as stable objects of comparison and bringing forth somewhat contradictory trajectories of tourism development in Greenland. Both countries were positioned in the midst of potential future scenarios of tourism in the Arctic. What is now being compared, tourism, changes from a matter of *fact* (as peripheral, as sustainable, as a game changer, as datafied through quantitative measurements) to a matter of *concern* (Latour, 2004). Here, the politics of comparison works as an ontological force or an ordering (Franklin, 2004) enacting things that are in motion and do not rest still – turbulent, potential, and emerging tourism realities.

Beyond the purely economic tool of development, tourism emerges as a topological object pointing to how tourism development is indeed a matter of ontological politics (Jóhannesson, van der Duim & Ren, 2015). As such, rather than being a tool to fill up empty destination space with touristic content, it works as a performative force (Law & Urry, 2004), enacting destinations in particular and at times contradictory ways. This affects the notions of proximity and distance. In this process of creating and negotiating tourism realities, comparison no longer reflects stable entities, Iceland and Greenland, but diffracted the entity under exploration, tourism, into a multiple enacting alternative stories of future tourism realities, sometimes bringing the two countries closer together while at the same time increasing the distance between them. The politics of comparison shapes and disrupts tourism realities, moving beyond Euclidean location and opening new horizons to discuss and reflect on tourism's value and how it may come to matter and shape Greenland as a tourist place. As we saw, there are different narratives in play, some of which highlight slow growth, careful management and planning while others leaning towards growth. Evidently, Greenland is on the move and tourism is a powerful ordering tool for the future Arctic region. In the time to come, it will be interesting to follow how old, like Danish or Nordic, and new, such as Faroese or Nunavut Others will emerge or disappear in the continued conversation of 'who to be like' in the development of Greenland as a tourism destination.

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