

## THE POTENTIAL OF LAKES AND LAKE LANDSCAPE IN THE CONCEPT OF NORDIC WELLBEING

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**Key words:** Lakes, lake landscape, wellbeing, tourism.

### Abstract

The concept of Nordic Wellbeing was developed on a joint research project involving researchers from each of the Nordic countries. As lakes and lake landscape are dominant in Finland, the aim of this paper is to examine if lakes and lake landscapes can bring new content and added value into Nordic wellbeing tourism development. This is done by using Finnish case studies of the Nordic Wellbeing Project.

The data is collected from interviews with stakeholders of the Nordic Wellbeing Project, on participation in project activities, and on secondary sources including analyses undertaken by the laboratory areas. The interviews constitute the main data of this report.

As a conclusion, the lake tourism development in the wellness/wellbeing context is ongoing up and the future looks bright despite the great challenges of the development work in businesses but also in the implementation of the national Wellbeing Tourism Strategy.

## POTENCJAŁ JEZIOR I KRAJOBRAZÓW POJEZIERZY W KONTEKŚCIE IDEI NORDYCKIEGO DOBROSTANU

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**Słowa kluczowe:** jeziora, krajobraz pojezierza, dobrostan, turystyka.

### Abstract

Ideę nordyckiego dobrostanu wypracowano w trakcie projektu badawczego z udziałem badaczy z krajów nordyckich. Jako że w Finlandii dominują jeziora i krajobrazy jeziorne, celem artykułu było sprawdzenie, czy jeziora i pojezierza mogą wnieść nową treść i wartość dodaną do rozwoju turystyki

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opartej na idei nordyckiego dobrostanu. Oceny tej dokonano w oparciu o badania przypadków z Finlandii włączonych do projektu „Nordycki dobrostan”.

Dane zgromadzono podczas wywiadów przeprowadzonych z uczestnikami projektu „Nordycki Dobrostan” na temat uczestnictwa w działaniach projektu, a także, korzystając ze źródeł pośrednich, łącznie z analizami wykonanymi w warunkach laboratoryjnych. Podstawowe informacje zawarte w tym raporcie pochodzą z wywiadów.

Należy zauważyć ciągły rozwój turystyki w kontekście osiągania dobrej kondycji i dobrostanu uczestników oraz stwierdzić, że przyszłość rysuje się jasno, mimo wyzwań, które stawia dalszy rozwój tej gałęzi biznesu, a także realizacja krajowej Strategii rozwoju turystyki dobrostanu.

## Introduction

“Tourism plays a vital role in contributing to people’s wellbeing” (SCHOFIELD 2004, 135 cited by KULCZYCKI and LÜCK 2009). In recent decades the popularity of Finland, Sweden, Norway, Iceland and Denmark as tourism destinations has increased (*Tourism in peripheries...*, 2007, HALL et al. 2008). Nordic countries are blessed with a significant variety of landscape types and climates, and there are many options for activities in all seasons. From the perspective of wellness and wellbeing tourism, however, the Nordic countries lack natural healing assets and tradition, which has led to a situation in which wellness and wellbeing tourism are mainly based on relaxation and include services like massage, fitness, bath and sauna (SMITH and PUCZKÓ 2009). Thus it is justified to say that the Nordic countries and their image depend on a landscape of natural beauty, adventurous activities, cultural experiences as well as good services (see e.g GENC 2010). As traditional tourism destinations are becoming more crowded, people are looking for alternatives, inspiring locations and activities (SMITH and KELLY 2006) and less crowded and densely populated areas (BJÖRK et al. 2011). DE BOTTON (2002) likewise describes how travellers are attracted to landscapes that benefit their soul by making them feel small, yet part of an infinite and universal cycle. A similar statement was made by SHELDON and PARK (2009), who say that the place in which wellness tourism occurs significantly influences the quality of the experience. Thus it is no coincidence that many wellness and wellbeing centres are located beside the ocean or on a mountain top (SMITH and PUCZKÓ 2009). To give an example, PECHLANER and FISCHER (2006) raised the significance of location in the context of Alpine wellness, while KANGAS and TUOHINO (2008) raised the lakes at the centre of wellbeing tourism in Finland as Finland can offer numerous unique tourism experiences in lake environments.

The term wellbeing was chosen to describe the context of Nordic wellness and wellbeing tourism as a result of earlier research and feedback from the field. The term is also seen as an umbrella term including a variety of aspects: *Wellbeing is a multidimensional state of being describing the existence*

*of positive health of body, mind and soul. Wellbeing is an individual issue, but is manifest only in congruence with the wellbeing of the surrounding environment and community* (HJALAGER et al. 2011, p. 10).

### **Defining Nordic wellbeing**

In recent years, health, wellness and wellbeing concepts have fascinated tourism scholars in Nordic countries (e.g. BJÖRK et al. 2011, HJALAGER 2005, 2010, 2011, HJALAGER et al. 2008, HJALAGER and NORDIN 2011, HJALAGER and KONU 2011, HUIJBENS 2011, KANGAS and TUOHINO 2008, KONU et al. 2010, 2011, TUOHINO and KANGAS 2009, TUOHINO 2012 ). This increased interest could be seen as a reflection of changes in values and lifestyles. Terms such as quality of life, self-fulfilment, slow-life, downshifting and experiences coincide with an increased interest in beauty and health treatments, illness prevention, down-aging and self-improvement. The aging population tends to be more active, healthier, wealthier, and also to live longer (HJALAGER et al. 2011, TUOHINO et al. 2012). More consumers are travelling to improve their general wellness and health; the health and wellness tourism segment is in an early phase of growth with considerable future potential. These wellbeing tourists are willing and able to be proactive regarding their general physical and mental wellbeing, sometimes even exaggeratedly so (KORTHALS 2004, HJALAGER et al. 2011, YEOMAN 2008). An inversely related factor influencing the interest in health, wellness and wellbeing entails the downside of modern affluence (HJALAGER et al. 2011).

In response to these challenges the concept of Nordic wellbeing was developed in the joint research project which involved researchers from the universities of the five Nordic countries. The project *Nordic Wellbeing – A health tourism approach to enhance competitiveness of Nordic Tourism enterprises and destinations* (<http://www.uef.fi/mot/nordic-wellbeing>) was implemented in 2009 and 2010. The main aim was to draw a wider picture of what constitutes the wellbeing category of tourism in the overarching, transnational geographical context of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. A further aim was to explore the potential utilization of special and even unique Nordic resources and advantages articulated in policy considerations for the emergence and support of a *Nordic Wellbeing* brand. Accordingly, the joint research achieved a more profound understanding of the driving forces that could lead to the successful development of coherent wellbeing tourism in the Nordic region (HJALAGER et al. 2011).

The concept building was based on the idea that the Nordic countries are favored by a significant variety of landscape types and climates, and there are many options for activities in the context of wellbeing in all seasons. From the

Finnish perspective, lakes and lake landscape (lakescape) are an essential part of the Finnish landscape. For this reason, the Nordic wellbeing concept in the Finnish context could be associated with nature, outdoor life, purity, healthy image, and values of the northern hemisphere. In future, Nordic wellbeing could be a significant profiler of the Finnish tourism business sector in European markets.

### **Wellbeing tourism development in Finland on strategic and practical levels**

The first discussions about wellness and wellbeing tourism in the Finnish tourism industry started in 2002, when the Finnish Tourist Board recognized the importance of wellbeing tourism development (TUOHINO 2012). The first investigation of the contemporary state of Finnish wellbeing products was made in 2007 (*Hyvinvointituotteiden...* 2008). This led to the establishment of a strategy group for wellbeing tourism, and in January 2009 the new Finnish Wellbeing Tourism Strategy was launched. The strategy defines (*Development Strategy...* 2009) defines three different kinds of goals for the period 2009–2013. These are operational goals, image goals and quantitative goals. Operational goals include the implementation of terminology and theme-based thinking in the field. This, to give an example, includes the identification of core products; new product innovation in wellness/wellbeing tourism and support for common product ideas.

In the Finnish language the words corresponding to wellness and wellbeing are complex in the tourism context. Wellness tourism is usually associated with luxury products and five-star hotels while wellbeing tourism may include products and services from a wider scale, possibly pampering, activities and experiences of luxury, but it does not necessarily come from high-class hotels. In the Finnish context the concept of wellbeing tourism is more appropriate because the broader definition highlights better the Finnish understanding. In contrast to this idea, the word wellness was used in the development of a Finnish Lake Wellness Experience product (KONU et al. 2010). Behind this was the notion that the Lake Wellness Experience product is expected to include all the attributes connected to the word wellness (e.g. high quality and luxury). This interpretation is supported by YEOMAN (2008), who suggests that the future tourist is increasingly aware of luxury as a concept of fulfilment instead of materialism.

At present the wellbeing segment in Finland is booming and is among the main themes in Finnish tourism strategy. The implementation of the national

wellbeing tourism strategy is ongoing in wellbeing tourism businesses. However, the profile of Finland's wellbeing tourism can still be described as weak and unspecific despite the systematic work by the Finnish Tourism Board in recent years (TUOHINO 2012).

The development of the Lake Wellness concept sprang from the academic research idea of using the main tourism resource of Finland – the lakes. All the businesses involved in the concept development were located on lake shores (see KANGAS and TUOHINO 2008, TUOHINO and KANGAS 2009). However, at that time, the lakes were more valued as a framing landscape for outdoor activities rather than for their offering of sellable tourism products. As a result of a development process the following fundamental pillars were defined (KANGAS and TUOHINO 2008, TUOHINO and KANGAS 2009):

- spirit, mind, and self-development: relaxing excursions in the forest and lacustrine environment;
- health: Nordic walking around the lake shores or through forests, traditional and preventive treatments;
- healthy cuisine: local raw materials and freshwater fish;
- internal and external beauty: Finnish sauna, peat sauna treatment;
- relaxation and comfort: swimming in the lake, Finnish sauna experience, baths in a barrel of hot water, campfire relaxation;
- tailor-made, movement/fitness: guided tours in and on the lake, kick sledging or trip skating on frozen lakes.

The pillars included various elements taken from the ideas of the interviewees and adapted to the model of MÜLLER and LANZ KAUFMANN (2001). As well as these, the accommodation is an essential part of the Lake Wellness Concept. In Finland the Finnish Tourist Board (*Hyvinvointimatkailumökkit...* 2011) has defined the criteria for so-called wellbeing accommodation in cottages.

The Lake Wellness Concept development included the ideation for the core product, namely experiencing the lake, and concept development. The various elements of the Lake Wellness Product were tested at Nordic Tourism Fairs in 2010 to obtain more customer information about the suitability of the concept for potential customers. According to the survey, potential tourists predominantly expected relaxation and comfort from their wellbeing tourism product. The second most important element was healthy food and the third health promotion and health-enhancing services. The results confirmed that taking care of oneself and relaxation are the most highly valued activities on a wellbeing holiday. According to the study, there was room for a new innovative resource based concept and Lake Wellness could be deemed a holistic response to this (TUOHINO et al. 2012).

Below this paper discusses the role of lakes in the Nordic Wellbeing Concept. This is done by using Finnish case studies of the Nordic Wellbeing Project within a theoretical framework of Nordic wellbeing and Lake Wellness concepts.

## Materials and Methods

A qualitative research method was chosen. ECHTNER and RITCHIE (1993) claim that a structured questionnaire is extremely ill suited to the scrutiny of the unique, holistic components of images. There are many unstructured ways of gathering research data. This includes among others content analyses and both visual and written information, interactive individual or group interviews (JENKINS 1999, SHANI and WANG 2011). In consumer research it is possible to conduct qualitative research using open-ended questions. The research can be implemented either as a focus group interview or individual interviews (MIDDLETON and CLARKE 2001). In the present study individual interviews were chosen because this was found to be more appropriate given the resources available.

The data is based on three different kinds of materials: interviews with stakeholders in the laboratory areas of the Nordic Wellbeing Project and supplemented by data from Savonlinna Region, participation in laboratory activities, and secondary sources including analyses undertaken by the laboratory areas. However, the interviews constitute the main data of this report.

The stakeholder interviews were conducted in the laboratory areas of Nordic Wellbeing project in Jyväskylä, Vuokatti and Vaasa Regions (Figure 1) and supplemented in Savonlinna Region. In total 54 interviews were conducted during autumn 2009 and spring 2010. The interviewees were tourism and wellbeing professionals such as tourism entrepreneurs (1/3), experts (1/3) and regional developers (1/3) from the laboratory areas. The interviews took from 40 minutes to two hours.

The interviews were taped and later transcribed. The data was classified and grouped by the researchers. Grouping was based on both questions presented and keywords from respondents. In this phase the supplementary information from the laboratory areas was also taken into account.

The thematic questionnaire included questions about unique selling points, networking and cooperation in the laboratory areas, structure of the business environment (e.g. locomotive entrepreneurs, competitiveness, competition, cooperation and internationalization), sources of information and the utilization of information in their development processes, motivations, innovation factors and the understanding of the Nordic wellbeing concept and its content.



Fig. 1. Finnish laboratory areas of Nordic Wellbeing project (map made by Laura Koskinen, UEF)

Due to the nature of the joint project, the whole study was large in size. For this reason this paper presents only the results of specific issues, i.e. the Nordic Wellbeing Concept and its contents in the lake context. More detailed research questions were as follows:

- how do you see the unique selling points of your laboratory area/Nordic countries; what are the main resources of the area, about what the area is

know well, what are the factors that give added value for the region/customer, and what customers value on the region?

- Nordic Wellbeing – what does it bring to mind? What kind of features might it include, what does it describe or what would be the content of the concept?
- Nordic Wellness – what does it bring to mind? What kind of features might it include, what does it describe or what would be the content of the concept?
- Lake Wellness in the Finnish context – what does it bring to mind? What kind of features might it include, what does it describe or what would be the content of the concept?

### **The Nordic Wellbeing Concept and its potential for lake tourism development**

Nordic Wellbeing was described from a general and comprehensive perspective, and also by specifying the tourism and tourism product context. Some of the interviewees mentioned products, services and elements that the concept may include, for instance, various activities (e.g. running, Nordic walking and hiking) and wellbeing services (e.g. massages, sauna and spa treatments). Resources that were mentioned when the unique selling points of the Nordic countries were discussed included locally produced and “clean” (Nordic) food (also including ingredients from the forests e.g. berries), nature and natural elements (e.g. lakes and forests), culture, and natural ingredients that can also be used e.g. in different treatments. In addition, infrastructure and opportunities for various fitness and sports facilities were mentioned. Some of the interviewees connected medical services to Nordic Wellbeing. Utilizing resources (nature, infrastructure, facilities etc.) in services makes it possible for customers to do different things and to participate in a variety of activities according to their own abilities and interests. Additionally, there are opportunities for various treatments and also to use technical equipment for stimulation and new challenges. All this is supported by good accommodation and catering facilities and the chance to have fun and enjoy oneself. These elements form a comprehensive package of high quality designed in the Nordic way. One interviewee hoped that the focus of products and services would have a more spiritual context in future.

The Nordic Wellbeing products and services were mentioned to be of high quality and reliable. The importance of co-operation was emphasized when product development and service packages were discussed. Accessibility and availability of services were deemed essential. The importance of customers being able to actually buy products and services at the travel destination was mentioned because it was felt that it creates trust and an image of reliability regarding the area and the products it offers.

Abstract issues were also connected to the Nordic Wellbeing concept. Nordic values such as equality, respect for others, appreciating, supporting, taking care of others and appreciating nature were mentioned several times. How these values could be connected to tourism products was also discussed. It was deemed important that when Nordic Wellbeing is discussed, the importance of nature and the Nordic way of life should be highlighted.

Nordic Wellbeing was also described as holistic wellbeing including wellbeing of mind, body and soul. Aspects of intellectuality were mentioned. Some of the interviewees felt that holistic wellbeing emanates partly from Nordic values, but also from the environment. The concept was described with adjectives such as authentic, ecological and exotic. Being together with others and having fun was also one aspect that was connected to the theme. The chance to be oneself was also emphasized. This included being in harmony with one's own body, mind and also the social or natural environment. Nordic Wellbeing and services connected to it were seen as a chance to balance individuals' stress and stress factors thereby improving their wellbeing. Wellbeing was thought to be achieved if the individual has an active role in taking care him/herself either physically and/or mentally. In the Nordic contexts holistic wellbeing was seen to come from the different Nordic environments and unique features and resources of the Nordic countries.

Sauna was seen as the most celebrated wellbeing and wellness service of the Nordic countries. One of the interviewees commented that there is a sauna in almost every wellness centre in Europe: "Well it is sauna. It is probably it. And is it Swedish sauna or Finnish sauna, well that's the question". (F4S, free translation by the author). She said that even though it was not always clear if it was Finnish or Swedish sauna, it was connected to the Nordic countries.

Many of the interviewees approached the Nordic Wellbeing concept by describing the end state that people will achieve by using the services and products of the concept. The main aim was to help customers to get the feeling of wellbeing. It was also noted that this was very subjective and that it is challenging to provide the prerequisites that make the feeling possible for everyone – it cannot be achieved by offering the same products and services to everyone. The feeling of wellbeing was seen to come from a clear mind, a clean and healthy body, clean and pure nature, fresh air, and from interaction with nature.

Some of the interviewees approached the concept more generally, taking a more social perspective. In this respect the role and wellbeing of local people was considerable. It was deemed important that the region should also provide good life for local people. These ideas and issues were connected to the discussion about the welfare state, and to mental, environmental, social and community wellbeing and welfare.

One of the interviewees felt that there are no clear images for the Nordic countries, Scandinavia or Finland as wellbeing destinations. It was mentioned that a shared understanding of the Nordic Wellbeing and Nordic Wellness concepts was needed. This was considered important if and when products and services are provided and marketed under the themes. However, one of the interviewees said that it was not clear what concept should be used. There was also criticism; only one concept should be used to avoid confusion. It is not possible to brand things and issues connected to the wellbeing and wellness of the Nordic countries if there is no shared understanding on what concept should be used.

To be more specific, the following sub-sections discuss the lakes, lake landscapes and their potential within the Nordic wellbeing concept.

### **Lake Wellness and its potential within the Nordic wellbeing concept**

The interviewees contemplated the Lake Wellness concept from different angles. First of all, the great potential of the concept was recognized. The concept could offer new product development potential as well as new ideas for the development work. The connection with nature and the potential for wellbeing tourism were deemed one of the main issues. Some interviewees perceived Lake Wellness as a non-motorized, non-technological based concept.

The connection to nature became evident in comments focusing on hiking and trekking in lake environments as well as national parks near shorelines. In this context seasonality issues were also taken into account; lake tourism could be both winter tourism utilizing ice and snow and summer tourism e.g. with rowing boats. Rowing was mentioned as an example of an activity which offers peacefulness and experiences. More broadly, the Lake Wellness concept was deemed a nature-based experience making people feel well and offering multidimensional experiences. A spiritual approach was also mentioned as well as flow experiences. Lake Wellness was furthermore a matter of transcending one's own limitations or something exotic for foreigners. With a touch of luxury the concept was deemed to be closer to the continental European understanding of wellness.

However, many respondents recognized the challenges the concept will face in the future. The potential for Lake Wellness in volume was estimated to be rather small. On the other hand, the concept was seen to be undervalued in Finland compared to businesses located on lake shores.

## **Unique selling points and the added value of the lakes for wellbeing tourism**

As unique selling points the respondents mentioned first of all the lake landscape itself and its beauty. The uniqueness of the natural scenery together with good services close to the lakes and their greater utilization were mentioned as an important issue in the future. Values connected to nature and nature friendliness were described through attributes like peacefulness, safety, cleanliness or individuality.

Unique selling points were also evaluated from the perspective of future potential. Lakes and lakescapes were seen as attractive factors for foreigners. On the other hand the potentiality of lakes and lakescapes was evaluated from the recreational perspective. Lakes and lakescapes could offer an ideal environment for hobbies, leisure and work.

It was challenging for some interviewees to define what aspects and attributes give added value for tourists in the Nordic countries. Many of the interviewees mentioned nature as a unique attribute, but later started to think about what actually makes this natural environment so special, and gives added value for tourists. Keeping in mind the idea of strengthening the image of the Nordic countries as a wellbeing destination they began to consider the wholesomeness of forest berries and the health benefits of exercising in forest areas.

## **Conclusions**

To summarize, most of the interviewees found that the resources connected to the environment and natural surroundings, Nordic values and the human-nature relationship were the core of the framework for Nordic Wellbeing products and services. These were also things that to a certain extent impart content and unique characteristics to diverse wellbeing tourism products, services and activities offered in the Nordic countries. The considered necessary end-state for customers was a feeling of wellbeing realized through holistic wellbeing experiences. The interviews show that the majority of the respondents prefer the Nordic Wellbeing concept because Nordic Wellness products and services are seen in many cases to be part of the wider Nordic Wellbeing Concept.

The potential of the Lake Wellness Concept was also seen. With a touch of luxury the concept was deemed closer to the continental European conception of wellness. However, the potential volume of Lake Wellness was estimated to be rather small and to face many challenges in future development phases. On

the other hand the concept was considered to be undervalued as in Finland many tourism businesses are located on lake shores or at least lakes are easily accessible.

## Discussion

The aim of this article was to examine if Nordic wellbeing concept and lakes and lake landscapes can imbue Nordic wellbeing tourism development with new content and added value. This was done using Finnish case studies of the Nordic wellbeing project.

It became fairly obvious that Finland has very good core resources and attractions. However, some of the resources, e.g. lakes and lake landscape, are not utilized efficiently and there so far no clear profile of wellbeing in the laboratory areas from a tourism perspective.

The Nordic wellbeing tourism product is typically oriented towards nature and outdoor experience and enjoyment combined with achievement, healthy local food, local culture and purity of nature, water and air. In the future it will be necessary to identify the unique selling points of each destination and utilize these more efficiently in product and service development processes. Implementation also entails the allocation of tangible and intangible resources.

The potentiality of lakes and lakescapes was also seen within the Nordic Wellbeing Concept. In addition, Lake Wellness as a more specific concept was deemed to have future potential. However, the concept was seen probably more as a niche product for certain markets, although the potential was recognized. It should be noted that lakes and lakescapes are not only undervalued as wellbeing tourism resources, but also in a broader sense in Finnish nature-based tourism resource.

And how should we proceed in future? Right now the Nordic Wellbeing Concept is closely connected to two spin-off projects. SaimaaLife ([www.saimaalife.com](http://www.saimaalife.com)) is a lifestyle blog about finding a balance and happiness in a woman's life. It is also a place to hear about other women's ways to be well and thoughts about balance in life and happiness. It offers inspiration and simple ways for natural wellbeing. SaimaaLife is all about quality of life, relaxed attitude, real food, creating one's own way of life, deriving wellbeing from nature and from all things natural. All the activities are built around the blog. Holistic wellbeing, naturalness, learning and happiness are the pervasive themes in the blog. Right now the blogger is building her short-term business plan around the blog for the following four years. As the process in its early stages, the focus is currently on the target group of the blog, and on the forthcoming service concepts and services. Nature and lakescape are in

a significant role in the blog. The long-term aim is to build business activities round the blog.

Travel and Relax – developing wellbeing tourism in the Vaasa Region is another spin-off project of Nordic Wellbeing, and is based on the findings of the Vaasa laboratory area. According to the results, Vaasa Region and its local nature and culture, as well as fitness training and exercise should be highlighted as the main themes of the area in developing wellbeing tourism in the region. The main focus of the project is to build a multi-disciplinary network, to create new innovative product development work and to promote availability and accessibility of wellbeing tourism services. Travel and Relax -project started in April 2012 and will last until December 2013.

To summarize, the lake tourism development in the wellness/wellbeing context in both the Finnish and Nordic contexts is operational up and the future is bright despite the great challenges in the development work in businesses but also in the implementation of the national Wellbeing Tourism Strategy.

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