



In the absence of a main attraction – Perspectives from polar bear watching tourism participants

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ABSTRACT

Wildlife watching tourism has recently received more attention in the tourism literature. However, research is still needed on participants' perceptions on the unpredictable nature of wild animals as main attractions. Information on this topic may help providers keep participants satisfied in the absence of wildlife and move away from exploitative practices sometimes used to guarantee close encounters. Using polar bear tourism as a case study, content analysis of TripAdvisor reviews from Churchill (Canada) and Svalbard (Norway) was used to examine participants' comments on unpredictable wildlife and reactions when polar bears were not found. Findings indicate that to keep participants satisfied, wildlife watching tourism providers should focus on more controllable parts of the experience, such as high-quality guiding, expectations management, and secondary, more guaranteed side activities. They should also make the most of the natural surroundings, other wildlife in the area and signs of the focal species when encountered.

1. Introduction

Wildlife Tourism can be defined as a niche nature based tourism activity, based on interactions with wild animals (Borges de Lima & Green, 2017). The interactions include non-consumptive activities such as safaris or birdwatching and consumptive activities such as fishing and hunting, and occur in animals' natural environments, semi-captivity or captivity (Higginbottom, 2004). This niche activity is becoming increasingly popular, and occurs in a wide range of settings worldwide (Ayazlar, 2017). The type of wildlife tourism that has grown most in recent years is wildlife watching tourism (Hassan & Sharma, 2017; Manfredo & Fulton, 2008; Newsome, Dowling, & Moore, 2005), defined as "tourism that is organized and undertaken to watch wildlife in a natural setting" (Tapper, 2006, p. 7). It has historically received less attention in the academic discourse than hunting, fishing and zoo tourism, but interest is increasing (Burns, 2017). People often have extremely intense and deeply personal experiences through watching wild animals in their natural environments (Valentine & Birtles, 2004). The experiences may reawaken urbanized participants' connection with nature (Ayazlar, 2017; Curtin, 2013; Curtin & Kragh, 2014) and provide psychological benefits such as stress relief, improved cognitive capacities and opportunities for reflection (Curtin, 2009, 2013). Participating may also lead to improved conservation attitudes (Ballantyne, Packer, &

Falk, 2011; Ballantyne, Packer, & Hughes, 2009; Ballantyne, Packer, & Sutherland, 2009). Most forms of wildlife watching tourism seek to provide these benefits for participants (Valentine & Birtles, 2004). However, the evasiveness of wild animals often make them difficult to observe, and unpredictable main attractions (Knight, 2010).

Species that are exotic, threatened or inhabit remote and sensitive environments are especially attractive to wildlife watching tourists (Cong, Wu, Morrison, Shu, & Wang, 2014; Lemelin, 2006). However, they are also particularly challenging as tourism attractions because laws and regulations often limit wildlife watching tourism focusing on them to specific areas and/or forbid exploitative practices such as habituation and food provision (see for example National Tiger Conservation Authority, 2016; Walpole, 2001). The polar bear is considered one of the more challenging wildlife watching animals, due to its status as a vulnerable species and remote Arctic location. While rules and regulations vary depending on the area, polar bear watching is in most cases restricted to specific areas or forbidden, and food conditioning illegal (See for example Manitoba.ca, 2018; The Svalbard Environmental Protection Act, 2001). Research on tourists' perceptions of unpredictable target wildlife watching is needed (Margaryan & Wall-Reinius, 2017). So is research on how tourists receive communication from tourism providers who rely on unpredictable natural attractions (Heimtun & Lovelock, 2017). Therefore, the aim of this

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research paper is to analyze participant reactions to the possibility that their target species may not be found, using polar bear tourism as a case activity.

2. Expectations, uncertainty and exploitative practices in wildlife watching tourism

Expectations may significantly condition participants' perceptions of their experiences, as well as their satisfaction (Rodríguez del Bosque, San Martín, del Mar García de los Salmones, & Collado, 2009). They are linked to pre-visit knowledge, such as thoughts and desires, consumer-driven images (Skinner & Theodossopoulos, 2011) and personal needs (Andersson & Mossberg, 2004). Customers' level of satisfaction is related to the confirmation or disconfirmation of their expectations (Pleger Bebko, 2000), and the more favorable marketing of experiences by tour operators and destinations is, the higher tourists' expectations are (Rodríguez del Bosque, San Martín, del MarGarcía-Salmones, & Collado, 2009). When tourists' expectations are challenged, confronted or disappointed, they react by amending or revising them, or by critiquing and complaining about their experiences (Skinner & Theodossopoulos, 2011). The motivation to pursue a particular type of experience can also be modified unexpectedly in certain situations (Chen, Prebensen, & Uysal, 2018), and if the main experience appears to be disappointing or lacking, high quality supporting services may in some cases fully compensate for this deficiency (Mossberg, 2007). Managing expectations means managing the uncertainty a consumer faces when buying a service, and successful providers make it possible for consumers to paint a realistic set of expectations (Pleger Bebko, 2000). Guides also play important roles shaping visitor experiences and expectations (Hansen & Mossberg, 2016; Randall & Rollins, 2009).

The role of the guide was first conceptualized by Cohen (1985) who divided it into four components. The instrumental component involves leading the way, providing access, safety and efficiency. The social component involves tension-management, social integration, group morale and cohesion. The interactional component involves acting as a link between the area and the tourist party through representation and organization. Finally, the communicative component involves providing information and interpretation as well as selecting what points of interests to show the party. When examining the roles of guides in nature-based tourism, Weiler and Davis (1993) found that Cohen's work did not incorporate guides' responsibilities towards their surroundings, and suggested two additional components for nature based experiences. Motivation involves managing tourists' behavior and impacts on-site, and environmental interpretation involves improving tourists' environmental behavior in the long term. In their study on kayakers in Pacific Rim National Park, Randall and Rollins (2009) found support for all six components, although support for the communicative component was slightly lower than for the other five. Guides also play important roles in wildlife watching tourism, and are the forefront of product development, client satisfaction and responsible wildlife watching (Curtin, 2010). Environmental interpretation is especially important in this setting, as it allows guides to raise environmental awareness and educate tourists (Ballantyne, Packer, & Hughes, 2009; Lück, 2003). Participants also increasingly expect interpretative experiences, and are interested in learning about wildlife and conservation issues (Lück, 2015).

According to Williams and Baláz (2015), risk and uncertainty concerns the limits of our knowledge. There are additional twists to uncertainty in the tourism sector, due to the complex nature of the sector and experiences offered (ibid). Tourists use internal sources (past experience) and external sources (e.g. advertisements, brochures or word-of-mouth) to reduce uncertainty, and form expectations of future experiences (Rodríguez del Bosque et al., 2009). Providers need to be cautious when promoting their products and services, as appealing advertising may unrealistically raise tourists' expectations (Chen et al., 2018; Pleger Bebko, 2000). In their study on the whale shark industry on

Isla Holbox, Ziegler, Dearden, and Rollins (2012) for example found that false advertising within the industry caused many whale shark tourism participants to have unrealistic expectations of species diversity and underwater visibility, contributing to lower satisfaction with these factors. Many of the criteria which consumers use in their evaluation of an experience involve how well their tourism providers are able to recover if a service failure occurs, and it is important to take complaints seriously (Pleger Bebko, 2000). Wildlife watching tourism's reliance on wild animals as main attractions makes this niche activity especially unpredictable.

Similar to other forms of nature based tourism, such as northern lights tourism (Heimtun & Lovelock, 2017) and wildflower tourism (Kruger, Viljoen, & Saayman, 2013, Kruger, Viljoen, & Saayman, 2015), wildlife watching tourism relies upon a temporally and spatially discontinuous natural phenomenon. Wild animals' behavioral elusiveness, geographical remoteness and sometimes nomadic or ranging behavior make them especially unpredictable main attractions (Knight, 2009, 2010). Providers build their businesses on a promise they have no guarantee of fulfilling - showing wild animals in their natural environments (Margaryan & Wall-Reinius, 2017), and participants spend time and money on main attractions that they may not be able to encounter. Considering these challenges, wildlife watching tourism's increasing popularity may seem unexpected or even paradoxical. Nevertheless, tour operators keep offering tourism activities based on sightings, and tourists continue to buy their products (Heimtun & Lovelock, 2017). According to Knight (2009), the reason wild animals can be viewed on the scale that they are today is that they have been *made* viewable through human intervention.

In many parts of the world, the wildlife watching tourism industry employs exploitative practices in its drive to increase chances of animal sightings (Margaryan & Wall-Reinius, 2017). Tourism providers and local governments use feeding and conditioning to make wildlife more viewable, and ensure a continued stream of visitors and source of revenue for wildlife areas and the surrounding communities (Knight, 2009, 2010; Walpole, 2001; Ziegler et al., 2018). Negative impacts on wildlife include alterations to animals' natural behavior, habituation, food conditioning, crowding, stress, contamination, relocation or displacement, habitat degradation and in some cases local extinction (Green & Giese, 2004). Any of these disturbances to individual animals or groups of animals may have the potential to cause a decline in a species' population (Green, 2017). Feeding wildlife may also cause animals to identify humans as a food source instead of a threat, and compromise human safety (Manfredo, 2008). Nevertheless, with the growing popularity of wildlife watching, tourism businesses sometimes use these practices to minimize uncertainty under the pressure to deliver a guaranteed close encounter with an otherwise elusive animal (Margaryan & Wall-Reinius, 2017). However, the demand for new and authentic tourism experiences has increased in the last twenty years (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2018). Wildlife watching tourists also increasingly seek more authentic wildlife experiences, and express distress at seeing what they perceive as animal unhappiness (Bulbeck, 2005).

Authenticity has been widely used as an estimate of tourism providers' honesty (Reynolds & Braithwaite, 2001), and while uncertainty is generally seen as troublesome, it may also contribute to an experience's authenticity. For example, Heimtun and Lovelock (2017) found that a strategy used in northern lights tourism was to carefully embrace the unpredictable nature of the main attraction through a narrative of the chase or hunt, seeking to bind the tourist and operator in a quest for an authentic tourism experience. In wildlife watching tourism, authenticity is related to the degree of natural behavior exhibited by the fauna, and the environment that it is viewed in (Reynolds & Braithwaite, 2001). In their study among wildlife tourism providers in Sweden, Margaryan and Wall-Reinius (2017) found that the unpredictability of animal sightings became a signifier of an "authentic wilderness", or a proof that animal autonomy was not violated. Thus, the notion of authenticity depends upon the animal being in its natural habitat and

free to “choose” the encounter (Bulbeck, 2005). These studies also provide insights into which strategies tour operators use to manage the unpredictable nature of temporally and spatially discontinuous natural attractions.

Strategies used by northern light tourism providers included attempts to shift participants’ focus to other aspects of the experience, such as the quality of the location, the guides’ competence and involvement, as well as how tourists’ behavior could increase chances of sightings (Heimtun & Lovelock, 2017). Strategies adopted by wildlife watching tourism providers included staying up to date on information about wildlife in the area, using pictures to attract customers before providing information about the unpredictability of sightings in person, as well as shifting participants’ attention towards secondary but more guaranteed side activities (Margaryan & Wall-Reinius, 2017). These studies indicate that it is possible to create positive experiences for participants even in the absence of unpredictable main attractions. However, moving away from the more exploitative practices sometimes used in wildlife watching tourism is highly dependent on participants that are willing to join activities where sightings are less predictable.

There are few studies on wildlife watching tourism participants’ perceptions of the unpredictable nature of wildlife as a main attraction, and the studies that address the topic provide conflicting results. In his study on whale watching tourism, Orams (2000) found that high degrees of customer satisfaction could be achieved even in the absence of whales. Other elements such as the design of the boat, number of passengers onboard, service provided, duration and commentary given regarding whales and other attractions also influenced customers’ enjoyment. However, in Davis, Banks, Birtles, Valentine and Cuthill’s (1997) study on whale shark tourism, visitors indicated that their best experiences involved interaction with whale sharks, and being close to them. Similarly, in Valentine, Birtles, Curnock, Arnold, and Dunstan’s (2004) study on whale watching, results indicated that proximity to the whales was significantly linked to satisfaction. Furthermore, in Ziegler et al. (2018)s study on whale shark tourism, over 90% of respondents supported feeding activities used to secure encounters, as they would recommend tours using feeding to others. TripAdvisor reviews of tours that fed whale sharks were also overwhelmingly positive, and participants were not willing to pay as much for experiences where sharks were not fed if it meant lower chances of encounters. While these studies made important observations on participants’ perspectives on unpredictable wildlife watching tourism, a study focusing on participants’ perspectives on the possibility that their target species may not be encountered at all can provide further insight. Thus, building on these observations, this study investigates wildlife watching tourists’ reactions when their target species was not found and comments on unpredictable wildlife, in order to understand:

- Whether it is possible for wildlife watching tourists to remain satisfied also in the absence of their target species
- How other parts of the wildlife watching experience affect satisfaction in the absence of the target species
- How online marketing affects participant satisfaction in the absence of the target species.

3. Polar bear tourism as a case study

Polar bears are found in the U.S (Alaska), Canada, Russia, Greenland, and Norway (Svalbard) (Polar Bears International, 2019). The species is listed as an endangered species internationally, and in 1973, the polar bear range states signed an agreement on the conservation of polar bears, recognizing that it is a significant resource in the Arctic region and requires additional protection (IUCN, 2013). Lemelin and Dyck (2008) defines polar bear tourism as “viewing, photographing and otherwise interacting with polar bears in their natural environment without an intent to consume”, and this niche activity has become popular in most of the polar bear range states. Svalbard in Norway and

Churchill in Canada were chosen as the main case study sites, because these sites had the most data available regarding tourists’ perceptions of unpredictable wildlife. Their approaches to polar bear tourism will be briefly discussed in the following sections.

3.1. Svalbard

Svalbard is a group of islands located between approximately 74 and 81° north, included in the Kingdom of Norway (Thuesen & Barr, 2018). Norwegian law states that it is forbidden to lure, pursue or in any other active act seek polar bears out to interfere with them or endanger humans or polar bears (The Svalbard Environmental Protection Act, 2001), and Visit Svalbard (2018) warns visitors that there are no “polar bear safaris”. However, it is possible to book snowmobile trips and boat cruises that deliberately enter polar bear territory in hopes of encounters (See for example Better Moments AS, 2017; Visit Svalbard, 2018). As operators on such trips are not allowed to actively seek out polar bears, the chances of encountering the target species are low and the animals generally seen from a distance. Nevertheless, the author found 8 companies offering this type of trip in Svalbard, using snowmobiles, ships or boats to enter polar bear territory, with prices ranging from about 100 to 300 euros per day.

3.2. Churchill

Churchill is the northernmost seaport of Canada, on the west coast of Hudson Bay. It has become known as the “Polar Bear Capitol of the World”, because polar bears aggregate along the shores of the Hudson Bay in relatively large numbers yearly to await the formation of sea ice in early to mid-November (Lemelin, 2006). The number of commercial tour operators and the number of vehicles permitted in the high-use areas east of the town site is limited, and measures are taken to restrict travel to existing trails (Manitoba.ca, 2018). Conservative estimates place the annual number of visitors between 2100 and 3000 (Lemelin, 2006), and the author found nine companies in the Churchill area offering polar bear tourism activities, using tundra vehicles, lodges, walking safaris, and boat trips to get close to polar bears in the area. The prices varied and started at approximately 300 euros per day for day trips with tundra vehicles in large groups, going up to approximately 2700 euros per day for stays at exclusive polar bear lodges.

4. Methods

4.1. Data collection

Online user-generated content was the main source of data for the study. While most researchers confirm its trustworthiness as a data source, some are also skeptical, arguing that trusting electronic word of mouth relies on source–receiver relationships, channel variety and presentation of contents (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Users are also in complete control of what they would like to share or not share and as a result, the content is not typically a representative sample of the tourism population at the sites assessed. Another limitation is linked to lack of uniformity, as some reviews are brief comments, while others are more extensive and can be classified as blogs (Cong et al., 2014). However, using online user generated content as a data source allowed the author to compare more than one case area, and access data generated over the course of five years. The fact that participants were in complete control of what they shared and not shared also made it possible to study what was most important to participants with no interference from the author, allowing access to unprompted, honest opinions.

The user-generated content chosen for analysis was reviews written on TripAdvisor.com, considered one of the largest online travel forums in the world (Ayazlar, 2017; Cong et al., 2014). All reviews mentioning polar bear tourism were included in the initial analysis, resulting in 925 reviews in total: 154 from Svalbard (Norway), 697 from Churchill

(Canada), 64 from Alaska (The US) and 10 from Wrangel Island (Russia), written from 2012 to 2017. The reviews found were mainly written in English, but there were also reviews in other languages. Reviews written in Norwegian, Swedish or Danish were translated by the author, while reviews written in other languages were translated using TripAdvisor’s automatic translation function. To compare participant perceptions to marketing and information given by tourism providers, provider websites were also included in the study. Twenty-seven polar bear tourism companies were found based on the reviews: 8 from Svalbard, 9 from Churchill, 7 from Alaska and 1 from Wrangel Island. Fourteen of these companies were mentioned in reviews from participants who did not encounter polar bears and analyzed looking for possible links between online marketing and reviewer satisfaction. As there were no previous studies containing information on polar bear tourism participants’ nationalities, age and gender, and reviewers are free not to display this information on TripAdvisor, it was not possible to compare the sampled population to the actual tourist population with these characteristics. Thus, the sample cannot be used to generalize the tourist populations at the sites.

4.2. Data analysis

When analyzing the data, a combination of content analysis (Joffe & Yardley, 2004) and thematic analysis (Clarke, 2006) was applied. Polar bear watching activities varied depending on site, mode of transportation and group size. Thus, different language was used to describe similar aspects of participants’ experiences. Owing to the complexity of the data, manual analysis was performed instead of utilizing software, to avoid missing any reoccurring themes or patterns.

The Trip Advisor reviews were analyzed in two phases. In the first phase, content analysis with pre-defined categories was applied to identify reviews commenting on the unpredictable nature of polar bears as a main attraction, reviews varied by participants who did not encounter polar bears during their activity, and reviews from participants who did not see as many polar bears as they had hoped for. A total of 152 reviews belonged to at least one of these categories (64 from Svalbard and 87 from Churchill) and were included in the next phase. The study site (i.e., Svalbard or Churchill) and the star rating (i.e., reviewer provided star-rating on possible five-point scale) were recorded for each review. Since TripAdvisor reviews from Wrangel Island and Alaska did not include feedback from participants who did not encounter polar bears, Churchill (Canada) and Svalbard (Norway) were the two case study sites selected moving forward. In the second phase, reviews were analyzed more thoroughly, applying thematic analysis and open coding to find reoccurring themes and patterns, as shown in Table 1.

The safari provider websites were analyzed using content analysis only, using the categories displayed in Table 2. Fourteen providers were included in the analysis, 6 from Churchill and 8 from Svalbard. The analysis was limited to the home page of the companies’ websites (the first page shown when visiting), lists of activities offered, and descriptions of each individual activity offered.

Finally, the results of the two analyses were compared, again applying thematic analysis, to look for connections between customers’ reactions to not seeing (enough) polar bears and the information and marketing displayed online.

5. Results

Reviewers who did not see (enough) polar bears during their polar bear viewing activity appeared relatively satisfied with their providers, as they, on average, gave them a star rating of 4.21 out of 5, as shown in Table 3. However, ratings were lower for reviewers from Churchill (3.48) than for reviewers from Svalbard (4.57).

Independent sample t-tests showed a significant difference between the star ratings of reviewers who did not see (enough) polar bears and

Table 1 Codes used and themes found in thematic analysis.

Codes	Categories	Themes
Reviewer perspectives on unpredictable wildlife	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comments from participants who saw polar bears •Comments from participants who did not see polar bears 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Statements that there are no guarantees with wildlife oParticipants who felt privileged to see target species oUnpredictable behavior and/or proximity oStaff effort and skill locating wildlife oAdvice for future participants oBad weather conditions oStaff skill and dedication (or lack of skill and dedication) oOther wildlife making experiences better oSigns of the focal species’ presence in the area oNatural surroundings oSide and/or backup activities oOther participants oResponses to feedback from participants oTour ended earlier than advertised oInaccurate information provided on chances of sightings oMisleading pictures displayed online oSightings of polar bears promised online
Polar Bears not found/ Fewer Polar Bears found than reviewer expected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Disappointment •Understandable reason provided •Other aspects of the experience (positive) •Other aspects of the experience (negative) 	
Advertisement and information from tour operators mentioned in reviews		

reviewers who did in Churchill, while the difference for the same groups was not significant in Svalbard. The point biserial effect size of 0.70 for Churchill indicates that the strength of the difference was substantial, while the point biserial effect size of 0.22 for Svalbard indicates that the difference was minimal to typical (Vaske, 2008). As 25 of the 697 reviews found from Churchill were written by participants who did not encounter polar bears while 49 of the 154 reviews found from Svalbard were written by participants who did not encounter polar bears, the success rates of tour operators in Churchill appeared higher than in Svalbard.

In cases when reviewers did not encounter (enough) polar bears, other parts of the reviewers’ experiences were in most cases listed as the main reasons why they were happy or unhappy, as shown in Table 1. Other parts of the experience were also mentioned by reviewers who did encounter polar bears. However, this group focused more on the quality of their polar bear encounters mentioning aspects such as proximity to the animals, the animals’ activity level and whether polar bear cubs were sighted. In the following sections, other parts of the experience mentioned by reviewers who did not encounter (enough) polar bears, reviewer perspectives on the unpredictable nature of wildlife as a main attraction, and connections found between tour company websites and reviews are presented.

5.1. Reviewer perspectives on the unpredictable nature of wildlife as a main attraction

“When we arrived at the glacier we hung around for half an hour before we were lucky enough to see a polar bear, it was a fantastic sight, something I hoped I’d see but didn’t think I would” (Respondent 1, Svalbard).

Table 2
Summary of characteristics of tour operators offering polar bear tours at the case study sites.

	Product range ●small: 1–10 products ●medium 10–20 products ●large: 20 and more	Degree of specialization ●high: all products polar bear related ●medium: >50% of products polar bear related ●low: < 50% of products polar bear related	Polar Bear sightings guaranteed (Y/N)	Warnings that polar bears sightings are not guaranteed present (Y/N)	No. polar bear pictures displayed/No. total pictures displayed	Price range ●low = 100–300€ per day, ●medium = 300–1000€ per day ●high = more than 1000€ per day
Churchill Company 1	medium	high	N	Y	22/25	high
Company 2	medium	low	N	N	8/41	high
Company 3	medium	medium	Y	N	7/27	high
Company 4	medium	medium	Y	N	11/25	high
Company 5	small	medium	Y	N	9/18	high
Company 6	small	medium	N	Y	1/3	low
Svalbard Company 1	small	medium	N	Y	1/11	low
Company 2	small	high	N	N	1/29	low
Company 3	large	low	N	Y	6/40	medium
Company 4	medium	high	N	Y	2/23	high
Company 5	large	low	N	Y	0/6	low
Company 6	large	low	N	N	2/34	medium
Company 7	large	low	N	N	2/62	medium
Company 8	large	Low	N	Y	1/63	medium

Seventy-seven reviews commenting on the unpredictable nature of polar bears as a main attraction were found. While participants who did not encounter polar bears wrote some of these reviews, participants who encountered polar bears wrote most of them. Several reviewers wrote that there were no guarantees with wildlife, using statements such as “Wildlife viewing always involves a risk you will not see anything” (Respondent 1, Churchill) and “Obviously, seeing wildlife on boat-trips is always a question of luck (and effort)” (Respondent 2, Svalbard). While some reviewers wrote that sightings were a question of luck, others wrote that staff skills and effort were the reasons polar bears were found. Furthermore, reviewers mentioned that polar bears could be very hard to spot, even if they were close by, as illustrated by this quote:

“Polar bears can be hard to spot. I have added 4 photos to prove to you that they can be tricky. You can play “Spot the Polar Bear”. It will let you know what to scan for when you are on the buggy. Yes, each photo has a bear in it.” (Respondent 2, Churchill).

Reviewers also mentioned that proximity to the polar bears, and polar bear behavior was unpredictable. However, in most cases, they expressed understanding that polar bears were wild animals that could not be controlled. Examples included “but we are looking at these amazing animals in their own habitat not a zoo so we were patient.” (Respondent 3, Churchill), “You have to appreciate this is not like the TV” (Respondent 4, Churchill) and “seeing them in their natural habitat and knowing that the bears may be extinct in that habitat years from now gave meaning to the trip and made it poignant.” (Respondent 5, Churchill). Several reviews also warned future participants to be patient, as during their polar bear experience most of the time was spent waiting for sightings and/or searching for polar bears, even in cases when they were found. Moreover, they commented that it was important to remain flexible, as activities often changed according to when and where polar bears were

seen. In Churchill, the absence or presence of polar bears during the winter was linked to whether Hudson Bay was frozen, and reviewers commented that there was a risk it would freeze too early, decreasing chances of sightings. They therefore advised future participants to book in the middle of the winter season. Reviewers from Svalbard warned potential participants that chances of sightings were low, especially on day trips from Longyearbyen. As most polar bears were found on the east coast of Svalbard, a large area far away from Longyearbyen, reviewers advised future participants to enjoy the scenery rather than hope for sightings. Nevertheless, most of these reviewers remained positive, and the ones that had seen polar bears recognized that they had been lucky. Similarly, reviewers who had been on polar bear safaris in Churchill in the summer warned potential future participants not to get their hopes up, as sightings were rarer than in the winter.

5.2. Factors that made experiences better when polar bears were not found

“Unfortunately we only saw some polar bear tracks, but we did see plenty of seals, reindeer and bird life. (Guide’s name) went out of his way to try and find us some bears, but despite his best efforts, the sea ice is so big, and the bears are so few! But his effort really showed how dedicated the staff are to ensuring you achieve the best Arctic experience.” (Respondent 2, Svalbard).

Reviewers who remained positive in the absence of polar bears generally mentioned other aspects of their experience as the reasons they still gave high ratings. A dedicated staff was the reason provided most often, with examples including guides who were skilled in tracking polar bears, provided interesting information on polar bears, the arctic eco-system and environmental threats, were friendly and entertained their guests. Another positive aspect was sightings of other wildlife.

Table 3
Summary of data used in the analysis.

	Churchill (Canada)	Svalbard (Norway)	Alaska (USA) ^a	Wrangel Island (Russia) ^a	Total n
Total Reviews	697	154	64	10	925
No. reviews used in thematic analysis	87	64	–	–	152
Number of respondents who did not encounter enough polar bears	25	49	–	–	74
Number of comments on unpredictable wildlife	62	15	–	–	77
No. tour operators used in thematic analysis	6	8	–	–	14
Mean star rating overall (SD)	4.82 (0.61)	4.76 (0.74)	4.88 (0.55)	4.6 (0.84)	4.81 (0.64)
Mean star rating for reviewers that encountered polar bears (SD) ^b	4.86 (0.52)	4.85 (0.59)	4.88 (0.55)	4.6 (0.84)	4.86 (0.54)
Mean star rating for reviewers that did not encounter (enough) polar bears (SD) ^b	3.48 (1.44)	4.57 (0.98)	–	–	4.21 (1.25)

^a sites were not included in the final analysis because there were no reviews written by participants who did not encounter (enough) polar bears during their experience.

^b Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare the average star rating of reviewers who did not see (enough) polar bears during their experience and reviewers who did in Churchill and Svalbard. There was a significant difference between these groups among respondents from Churchill ($t(22.20) = 4.60$, $p = 0.00$, $r = 0.70$), but there was not a significant difference between these groups among respondents from Svalbard ($t(64.49) = 1.83$, $p = 0.07$, $r = 0.22$).

Examples included a reviewer in Churchill that called wolves he encountered the “stars of the show” and a reviewer in Svalbard who would have liked to spend more time photographing Svalbard reindeer. Several reviewers also mentioned signs of polar bears in the area, such as tracks or seal carcasses, writing that these signs made them sure the polar bears were there even if were not encountered. The natural surroundings were also mentioned frequently, and reviewers wrote that they enjoyed “just being there”, taking pictures of the landscape and the silence of the Arctic. Many positive reviews mentioned why no polar bears were found, with examples including bad weather, Hudson Bay freezing earlier than anticipated and dangerous waves. Finally, reviewers often wrote about other activities that were a part of, and improved their polar bear safaris, or were provided as backup when polar bears were not found. Activities included lunch by a glacier, driving snowmobiles, driving a specialized tundra vehicle under the guide’s supervision and learning about the area and/or polar bears and other wildlife.

5.3. Factors that made experiences worse when polar bears were not found or fewer polar bears were found than anticipated

“Wildlife is unpredictable, so it’s not (company name)’s responsibility that we had no good polar bear sightings on this tour at the peak of bear season. What is within their control is advertising a day tour for \$479 and then giving up the search for bears and heading back to base at 2pm (the tour was over by 3pm).” (Respondent 6, Churchill).

There were generally also other contributing factors when

participants who did not see (enough) polar bears wrote negative reviews. Perceived lack of staff dedication was mentioned most often, with examples including guides who did not look for polar bears the whole time, returned to base earlier than advertised, or spoke to other guests in a language the reviewer did not understand. Reviewers wrote that these behaviors made them feel as if their wishes were not taken seriously, or that the guides did not see them as valued customers. Other participants could also make experiences worse. In Svalbard, when the activities took place on snowmobiles, reviewers wrote that other less skilled participants slowed them down. Examples from Churchill included other participants talking loudly or getting in the way of the reviewers’ photos, mainly when safaris took place in bigger groups. Reviewers also mentioned information given beforehand being inaccurate, making them feel as if the tour company broke their promises when polar bears were not found. Some reviewers also wrote that lack of alternative activities was the main reason they were unhappy, especially when participating in activities that lasted longer than one day. Finally, there were also participants who were unhappy with how the tour company reacted to complaints. In these cases, customers gave their provider low ratings on TripAdvisor and expressed great disappointment, as illustrated by this quote:

“I can’t say what happened or why I am being blown off this way, but I can tell you how it feels. It feels like now that they got my money and I took my trip, they are unconcerned with customer service” (Respondent 7, Churchill).

5.4. Links between company websites and TripAdvisor reviews

Positive and negative reviews in the absence of polar bears were compared to provider websites, looking into the information given, the number of pictures of polar bears displayed and polar bear related products offered, applying thematic analysis. As chances of sightings appeared higher in Churchill than Svalbard and the products offered were different, findings are presented separated by site.

5.4.1. Provider websites in Churchill

Three of the providers in Churchill promised future participants sightings of polar bears on their websites, using phrases such as “we see polar bears in the summer!” (Company 1, Churchill) and “polar bears venture up to both the windows and the lodge fences” (Company 2, Churchill). In cases when polar bears were not found, statements like these were used against providers in reviews and described as broken promises. Negative comments included “I can’t blame the company about the lack of wildlife, but they could be honest about the poor chances” (Respondent 8, Churchill) and “Overall the polar bear trip was a bit disappointing as they had portrayed it that there would be bears all around the lodge and area” (Respondent 9, Churchill). Two of the providers displayed warnings that polar bear sightings were not guaranteed on their websites. Reviews from participants who did not encounter polar bears were more positive for these providers, often repeating that there were no guarantees with wild animals. Two of the providers displayed over 10 pictures of polar bears on their websites, and half of the pictures on one of the smaller providers’ website was of polar bears. One reviewer commented on the number of pictures, writing that “It seems many of the photographs were taken at an island 20 km north which can only be accessed in perfect weather conditions” (Respondent 10, Churchill). However, the number of pictures displayed was only mentioned by this reviewer from Churchill while it was mentioned in two reviews from Svalbard.

5.4.2. Provider websites in Svalbard

None of the providers in Svalbard promised future participants sightings of polar bears on their websites. However, one of the larger providers offered tours named *Ursus Maritimus* (The latin name for polar bear) – King of the Arctic, and *Ursus Maritimus* – East Coast Extreme. Reviewers commented that these names were misleading with

comments such as “you should be aware that there is little chances that you will see a polar bear even if the trips is named *ursus maritimus*” (Respondent 3, Svalbard), but their star ratings were still positive, at 4 or 5 stars. Five of the providers warned future participants that sightings were not guaranteed on their websites. Reviews about these providers were generally positive, with comments that the lack of polar bears meant that they would have to book with the same tour operator again, and repetitions of the message that wildlife sightings can never be guaranteed. Examples included “We didn’t see any whales or polar bears (But we did see reindeer and a seal). - But had a great time. No one can ever guarantee wildlife, but (name of the tour) is about more than that.” (Respondent 4, Svalbard) and “we didn’t saw polar bear, this means we must come back here again, and I must book this trip by this company!!” (Respondent 5, Svalbard). While none of the providers displayed many pictures of polar bears compared to the amount of other pictures displayed on their websites, two of the negative reviews commented on the pictures that were displayed, writing that “The nicely designed and eye catching field pictures on their official website make you feel everything looks simply promised” (Respondent 6, Svalbard), and that “their colorful website can be misleading.” (Respondent 7, Svalbard).

6. Discussion and conclusion

This study contributes to the wildlife watching tourism literature by analyzing participants’ perspectives on unpredictable wildlife and reactions when their target species was not found. Findings on what factors contributed to participant satisfaction in the absence of polar bears may also be helpful to polar bear tourism providers and possibly other wildlife watching tourism providers when developing future experiences.

Results indicate that while seeing polar bears remained important to participants, they mainly respected that sightings were not guaranteed. Reviewer comments on unpredictable wildlife as a main attraction indicated positive feelings towards authentic experiences, as they positively differentiated their experiences from television shows and zoos and provided advice on how future participants should behave and what to expect. Furthermore, readers were warned that sightings were not guaranteed, nor was the distance to the polar bears or their behavior, as they were wild animals. These comments support providers’ claims that the possibilities of not encountering wildlife make wildlife watching experiences more authentic (Margaryan & Wall-Reinius, 2017) and are in line with Bulbeck’s (2005) claims that the market for authentic wildlife watching tourism is growing. However, authenticity’s importance varies from activity to activity, and experiences based on habituated or food provisioned wildlife remain popular in many parts of the world (see for example Knight, 2010; Walker et al., 2006; Ziegler et al., 2018). Nevertheless, in the case of polar bear watching tourism where these practices were not allowed, participants were willing to join the experiences offered and mainly accepted that chances of sightings were lower.

In cases when polar bears were not encountered, other aspects of the experience determined whether reviews were positive or negative, including staff dedication, other participants’ behavior, encounters with other wildlife in the area, signs of polar bears in the area, as well as secondary experiences offered (or not offered). As reviews from participants who did encounter polar bears focused less on these other factors, results indicate that they become more important in the absence of the target species. These findings support Orams’ (2000) study on whale watching tourism, where other factors than proximity to whales affected whale watching participants’ experiences, and Mossberg’s (2007) claims that supporting services can compensate for deficiencies in cases when the main experience is disappointing or lacking. It is also in line with strategies used by wildlife watching tourism providers and northern lights tourism providers, who shifted focus to other aspects of the experience to ensure participant satisfaction (Heimtun & Lovelock, 2017; Margaryan & Wall-Reinius, 2017). The factor mentioned most

often in both positive and negative reviews was staff dedication. According to Cohen (1985) and Randall and Rollins (2009), guides play six important roles in tourism experiences in natural surroundings; the instrumental role, the interactional role, the social role, the communicative role, the motivator role and the environmental interpreter role. Positive reviewers mentioned guides who were entertaining and friendly, skilled at locating polar bears and provided interesting interpretation. These comments indicate that the instrumental role, the social role and the environmental interpretative role were especially important to participants, and that guides who mastered these roles were able to improve participant satisfaction. Negative reviewers mentioned guides who did not look for polar bears the whole time, returned to base earlier than advertised and spoke in languages they did not understand. This indicates that guides who did not master the instrumental, the interactional, the social or the communicative role made experiences worse. Negative comments on other participants’ behavior also underlined the importance of the social role, the interactional role and the motivator role, as guides may have been able to avoid unwanted behaviors from participants through social integration, modification of tourist behavior, building group morale and organization. Based on these findings, all six roles appeared important to polar bear watching participants in the absence of polar bears. However, the interpretative, instrumental and social roles appeared more important than the others, as guides who mastered these roles were also mentioned in positive reviews, indicating that they were able to increase customer satisfaction. These findings are in line with previous studies that highlight the importance of high-quality interpretation in wildlife watching tourism (Ballantyne, Packer, & Sutherland, 2011; Lück, 2003, 2015).

Links found between polar bear tourism providers’ websites and reviews indicate that managing expectations through messages and images displayed online was important to ensure positive participant experiences in the absence of polar bears. Reviewers who did not encounter (enough) polar bears tended to be more negative when providers displayed many pictures of polar bears and indicated high chances of sightings on their websites, while reviewers mostly remained positive in cases when providers displayed warnings that sightings were not guaranteed. Negative reviews from Churchill mainly focused on the text displayed on the website rather than on photographs displayed, while the few negative reviews from Svalbard mentioning provider websites focused more on the number of photographs displayed. A possible explanation is that none of the providers in Svalbard promised polar bear sightings on their websites, while three providers in Churchill did. Thus, while providers in Churchill displayed more photographs of polar bears than the providers in Svalbard, the written promises that polar bears would be found appeared more important to participants than the photographs displayed in cases when polar bears were not found. These findings support claims that expectations are linked to pre-visit knowledge such as consumer-driven images (Skinner & Theodoropoulos, 2011), and that providers need to be cautious in promoting their reliability (Pleger Bebko, 2000; Prebensen, Chen, & Uysal, 2018), as false advertisement can lead to unrealistically high expectations (Ziegler et al., 2012). Thus, while it may be tempting to attract customers with pictures of the target species (Margaryan & Wall-Reinius, 2017) or promises that chances of sightings are high or guaranteed, it is also important to balance this with keeping participants’ expectations on a realistic level.

The destination visited also affected participant satisfaction, as reviewers who did not encounter polar bears mainly remained more positive in Svalbard than in Churchill. This may partially be explained by the price levels, which were higher in Churchill. However, the difference may also be linked to how Churchill and Svalbard were perceived as destinations, as image can be considered one of the main factors generating expectations of a destination (Rodríguez del Bosque et al., 2009). Due to the law prohibiting providers from actively seeking out polar bears, marketing of polar bears as an attraction in Svalbard was limited, and visitors were informed that polar bear safaris were

forbidden. Thus, tourists who still chose to join polar bear watching experiences were most likely highly aware that chances were low. Churchill, on the other hand, is known as the polar bear capital of the world and polar bear viewing is marketed as the area's main attraction online (The Town of Churchill, 2019). According to Rodríguez del Bosque et al. (2009), destination image and external communication are two of the main factors influencing visitor expectations of future destination experiences. Thus, while Churchill's image was an important part of its success as a polar bear tourism destination, it most likely also increased participants' expectations of sightings and contributed to negative reviews in cases where polar bears were not found. This also indicated that expectation management was particularly important for polar bear watching tourism companies in Churchill, as their participants were more likely to already have high expectations of sightings. On the other hand, the success rates of companies operating in Churchill appeared higher than for companies in Svalbard, indicating that the issue was smaller in Churchill.

The findings in this study are important to the future development of wildlife watching tourism activities, as providers who understand that it is possible for participants to have positive experiences even in absence of their target species are more likely to move away from exploitative practices such as food provision and habituation. Reviews indicated that providers who focus on other more controllable aspects of the experiences they offer their participants can also secure positive feedback in the absence of wildlife. These other aspects include having a dedicated staff, managing participant expectations, providing secondary but more guaranteed experiences, and listening to customer feedback. Other aspects of participant experiences that are not within providers' control should also be given proper attention when possible or needed, such as the natural surroundings, other wildlife, signs of the focal species in the area and other participants' behavior. The importance of the natural surroundings is also noted by (Fossgard & Fredman (2019)), who found that the large-scale scenery, as well as possibilities of connecting with the narrow small-scale elements of nature enhanced nature based tourism experiences. As staff dedication was mentioned more frequently than any other factor in both positive and negative reviews from participants who did not encounter polar bears, ensuring quality guiding and customer service appears especially important when developing future wildlife watching tourism experiences. Furthermore, the importance of these other parts of the experience suggest that wildlife watching tourism based on species that are difficult to encounter is possible, if providers ensure that the more controllable parts of the experience are of high quality.

6.1. Limitations/suggestions for further research

Research on wildlife watching tourists who did not encounter their target species is challenging, as most wildlife tourism operators have relatively high success rates. Although polar bear tourism was perceived as an activity with low success rates, most reviewers included in the initial analysis had seen polar bears. As it was not possible to compare the sampled population to the actual tourist population at the case sites and the sample size was relatively small, the data also does not allow for generalization. Furthermore, TripAdvisor reviews do not provide data on the socio-demographics of the subsample that was examined. In order to better understand participant perceptions of the possibilities that the target species may not be found, an expansion of this study using interviews, focus groups and surveys with tourists and operators to triangulate the themes and outcomes identified here may be useful. Further research on activities with lower success rates than polar bear watching may also provide a larger sample of tourists who did not encounter their target species and provide further insight into what factors contribute to positive or negative experiences. As wildlife watching tourism occurs in a wide range of settings worldwide (Ayazlar, 2017), it is also difficult to generalize findings to other wildlife watching activities, as participant expectations may be affected by different

management scenarios, species characteristics and perceived predictability as well as the many different approaches to wildlife watching activities that exist. However, the findings in this study are based on two different case areas, where chances of sightings, modes of transportation, management strategies, approaches to wildlife watching tourism and marketing were not the same. Thus, while findings cannot be generalized to all wildlife watching tourism activities, they show that some of these differences affect customer expectations and satisfaction, while other factors such as staff dedication and secondary more guaranteed experiences affected participants in different case areas.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Hilde Nikoline Hambro Dybsand: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.

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