

Keeping Calm on the Tourism Roller Coaster: Resident Attitudes and Perceptions of Social Impacts over Time

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Abstract

The increase in international visitation to Iceland between 2010 and 2018 led to concern that the number of visitors superseded perceived social, cultural, and environmental sustainability. However, when international tourism arrivals collapsed during the COVID-19 pandemic the agenda shifted from responding to overtourism to dealing with undertourism and recovery from recession where demand falls far below supply. In 2023, two years after the lowest arrivals in 2021, international tourism rebounded to levels close to its pre-pandemic peak. This case of rapid rise, fall and resurgence of international tourism arrivals begs the question of whether resident perceptions of and attitudes toward tourism in their daily environment changed or remained stable through the roller coaster ride. How resilient are they? We address this question through a review of data sourced from longitudinal mixed-method research conducted from 2014 to 2023 on resident perceptions of and attitudes toward tourism in Iceland as a measure of social impact. The results demonstrate that in Iceland, resident attitudes remained stable during the swing from tourism growth to a sudden recession, showing strong capacity for social resilience. The mixed-method approach uncovered important distinctions in resident perceptions and attitudes at the local community level and, due to the longitudinal nature of the data, offers a unique opportunity to investigate how residents relate to the swinging fortunes of tourism development.

KEYWORDS: Tourism; Resident attitudes and perceptions; Social impacts; Resilience; Mixed-methods; Longitudinal studies; Iceland





Introduction

This paper is based on longitudinal mixed-method research on resident perceptions of, experiences with, and attitudes toward tourism and tourists, as a measure of social impact, during periods of extreme growth and deep recession in Icelandic tourism. It contributes to understanding the complexity in how residents relate to tourism and their social resilience in the face of fluctuating visitor numbers. Such analyses based on mixed-method monitoring over time can become a watershed in how tourism research conceptualises and addresses social impact (Woosnam & Ribeiro, 2023) and informs sustainable tourism development and destination management.

Tourism, Iceland's largest export industry, played a key role in the recovery of the Icelandic economy after the 2008 financial collapse, which made Iceland a more affordable destination (Jóhannesson & Huijbens, 2010). Publicity around the Eyjafjallajökull eruption in 2010 placed Iceland firmly on the world tourism map. Between 2010 and 2018, international arrivals surged from around 500,000 to 2.3 million, while domestic tourists accounted for only 13% of overnight stays, much lower than in other Nordic countries (Statistics Iceland, 2023; Paavola et al., 2023). As the tourism boom intensified, concerns about overtourism emerged in Icelandic media (e.g., Daðason, 2018; Sigurðsson, 2017; Gísladóttir, 2014) and some scholars have pointed to signs that Iceland was experiencing overtourism, especially in areas under strain from visitor pressure (e.g., Ren & Jóhannesson, 2023; Sæþórsdóttir et al., 2020). By the summer of 2023 international tourist arrivals neared the record levels of 2018, just two years after the sharp decline caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Icelandic Tourist Board, 2023). This rapid resurgence revived concern about overtourism in Iceland, echoing ongoing debates in both academia and media. This mirrors discussions in other Arctic and Nordic destinations, where balancing economic benefits with sustainability remains a key challenge (Ren & Jóhannesson, 2023; Sæþórsdóttir et al., 2020; Helgadóttir et al., 2019; Jóhannesson & Lund, 2019; Diamond & Olito, 2019; Maher, 2017; Luebke, 2017; Mallonee, 2017; Sykes, 2014).

Iceland's geographic position at the edge of the Arctic shapes its tourism dynamics, particularly regarding extreme seasonality, environmental vulnerabilities, and remoteness (Hall & Saarinen, 2010). Iceland, like many Arctic and Nordic destinations, is sparsely populated with vast rural areas (European Commission, n.d.). Rapid tourism growth in such regions can accelerate development but also put pressure on infrastructure, including health services and law enforcement (Helgadóttir & Dashper, 2020). Understanding residents' social resilience matters because it shapes support for policy, tolerance for visitor pressure and the capacity of communities to adapt without eroding everyday quality of life. Thus, resilience plays a decisive role in whether destinations can sustain tourism through periods of rapid growth, sudden decline and resurgence. Many Arctic destinations face similar challenges, where local communities balance economic reliance on tourism with concerns over environmental sustainability and infrastructure strain (Maher, 2017; Rantala & Müller, 2024). Icelandic tourism authorities aim to make tourism a sustainable and profitable sector, enhancing prosperity and quality of life by 2030 (Icelandic Parliament, 2023-2024).

Icelandic residents' perceptions and attitudes, monitored during the era of growth, reflected generally positive views in 2014 (Huijbens & Bjarnadóttir, 2015). By 2015 some destinations began perceiving disturbances, while others wished for more tourists (Helgadóttir et al., 2016). Comparing results from the growth era to an era of limited tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic decline and subsequent recovery provides insights into whether, and how, Icelanders' perceptions and attitudes toward tourism shifted in response to fluctuating visitor numbers. Our research explores how resident perceptions of and attitudes toward tourism and tourists have changed over a period of rapid growth, sudden decline, and resurgence.

To contextualise the research question, we first review the literature on resident attitudes and perceptions. This is followed by a discussion of the research methodology applied to this topic before we present data from longitudinal and mixed-methods studies on tourism in Iceland. The case



of Iceland contributes to broader discussions on tourism resilience, seasonality and sustainability in northern regions and Arctic tourism context.

Resident Attitudes toward and Perceptions of Tourism

Research on the topic of resident attitudes toward, and support for, tourism development is plentiful (Kim et al., 2023). Underlying much of this literature is the assumption that tourism will eventually exceed tolerance limits within a community and that residents' attitudes will inevitably shift from positive to negative (Canavan, 2014). This focus on the outcome rather than the means of achieving socially sustainable development of tourism may overlook how residents interact with tourism as it changes. Gössling et al. (2020) highlight the ways in which residents express their agency, including how people resist changes from tourism. Understanding how residents, as key stakeholders, relate to tourism and tourists in their daily lives is crucial. Do residents adjust to tourism growth, or do they see increase in tourists and tourism as a disruption?

Resident attitudes are shaped by many factors, including perceived personal or community benefits, quality of life, economic dependency and proximity to tourists. Community identity and the feeling of having some influence over tourism development also play a role (Kim et al., 2023). These factors are reflected in several established frameworks. For example, Social Exchange Theory (Ap, 1992) suggests that residents evaluate costs and benefits when forming their views. Doxey's (1975) irritation index describes how attitudes may shift from euphoria to antagonism as tourism grows. Butler's (1980) Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model links changes in tourism development to changes in communities. Although these models provide useful insights, they often assume that change follows a fixed or linear path and may not capture the resilience in how residents adapt to tourism over time.

The term overtourism became widely used in the early 21st century, though the issues it describes are not new (Gössling et al., 2020; Volo, 2020; Dodds & Butler, 2019; Milano, et al., 2019). It refers to "a large number of phenomena related to congestion, poor destination infrastructures, and increased resistance from local inhabitants" (Santos-Rojo et al., 2023:2). The idea of undertourism is not new either. It appears indirectly in models like TALC (Butler, 1980), where a drop in visitor numbers marks a destination's decline. While research has largely focused on problems linked to growing visitor numbers, less attention has been given to undertourism, situations where too few tourists create economic and social challenges (Gowreesunkar & Vo Thanh, 2020; Barač-Miftarević, 2023). Dissatisfaction can also arise from undertourism where there are not enough tourists to sustain services and benefits (Mihalic, 2020). Furthermore, a sudden drop in tourist numbers, due to external crises like travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, may lead to significant challenges and tangible losses both for tourism businesses and communities that depend on them (Blázquez-Salom et al., 2021).

While previous studies show that residents' perceptions of tourism impact significantly shape their attitudes (Kim et al., 2023; Gössling et al., 2020), few studies have followed whether and then how such attitudes shift with fluctuations in visitor numbers. Despite growing interest in long-term dynamics, few studies have captured how resilience might shape residents' evolving responses across cycles of tourism growth, decline and resurgence.

Social resilience in tourism destinations

Resilience is the capacity of a system to learn and adapt to challenging situations (Manner-Baldeen et al., 2024). Unlike sustainability, which often focuses on preventing change to maintain a static state, resilience embraces adaptation and flexibility (Burns, 2018). This shift in focus is particularly relevant for tourism destinations facing rapid change. Communities are social systems in which resilience can be defined as "residents' existence, development, and participation in surviving in an



environment characterized by change and uncertainty” (Manner-Baldeon et al., 2024, p. 165), as exemplified by the fluctuations in Icelandic tourism.

Tourism is a complex adaptive system and, as such, “lends itself to the integrative, interdisciplinary and non-linear approach to interpreting the world which is fundamental to resilience” (Cochrane, 2010, p. 173). As an open system involving residents and frequent visitors, tourism destinations are susceptible to external disruptions (Bec et al., 2015). Social resilience, which is the ability of communities to manage these pressures, is well-documented in disaster risk management (Lin & Lin, 2020) but remains scarce in literature on tourism, particularly in resident-centric studies (Weaver et al., 2021) focused on perceptions and attitudes.

This paper uses the concept of social resilience to examine how residents in Iceland have adapted to shifts in tourism development. This approach responds to calls for more dynamic approaches in research on resident attitudes and perceptions, especially in relation to social resilience.

Methodological Issues

Studying how resident attitudes and perceptions change over time requires approaches that are sensitive to both temporal shifts and contextual differences in tourism development. In this study, we use a longitudinal and mixed-method approach to provide this sensitivity. This kind of approach is valuable for understanding how social processes develop over time, especially in contexts marked by uncertainty and change (Vogl, 2023).

Resident attitudes regarding tourism and tourists have traditionally been studied using quantitative surveys aimed at generalising findings from a sample to a population (Almeida-García et al., 2015; Sharpley, 2014). While these studies paint a large picture and offer comparability, they may miss the lived, everyday experiences of residents co-existing with tourism in particular communities. Several scholars have called for more qualitative, critical and ethnographic studies to better capture these local perspectives (Hadinejad et al., 2019; Gössling et al., 2020; Helgadóttir et al., 2022). Mixed-method designs can help bridge this gap by providing a fuller picture of the complex exchanges between residents and tourists (Kim et al., 2023).

Longitudinal research is particularly important when studying change in resident perspectives. Studies based on a single point in time offer only limited insights into how attitudes shift. Although calls for longitudinal designs in tourism research are not new (e.g., Perdue et al., 1990), such approaches remain relatively rare (Rastegar et al., 2022; Liang et al., 2021; Wassler et al., 2019). As Woosnam & Ribeiro (2023) note, studies that follow the same population over time using the same measures are often recommended but rarely carried out. Our study addresses this gap by examining how resident attitudes change over time and across different communities in Iceland.

Methods

This paper is based on a longitudinal mixed-methods approach, combining survey data with qualitative interviews to capture national trends and community-specific experiences. The Icelandic Tourist Board initiated the first study in 2014 to assess tourism’s social impact. This was followed by nationwide surveys and mixed-method studies in selected destinations, annually until 2023, allowing for flexibility and adjustments to various components as new data were collected.

Quantitative surveys

Nationwide telephone surveys were conducted in 2014, 2017, 2019, 2021, 2022 and 2023. The initial survey sampled 2000 residents, achieving a 58% response rate, using a random sampling method. From 2017 onwards, surveys used stratified random sampling from Registers Iceland to ensure regional representation, targeting 350-400 responses from each of the seven regions for destination marketing in Iceland, and achieving response rates of 42-48%. Data were weighted for



national representativeness, and demographic profiles are summarised in Appendix 1. Additionally, surveys in selected communities in 2016, 2018, and 2020 captured community-specific perceptions and attitudes, complementing the nationwide data. Figure 1 shows the full scope of data collection, including both national and community level surveys as well as qualitative interviews across the years. The surveys were conducted in October and November, Iceland's low season for tourism. The timing may influence attitudes and is acknowledged as a potential limitation.

Key survey themes included resident perceptions of tourist numbers across seasons, disturbance from tourism activities, and adaptation to tourism-related changes. The full survey covered seven topics:

- Tourist Presence and Interaction: Frequency of encounters and communication with tourists, and satisfaction with these interactions.
- Perceptions of Tourist Numbers: Views on the number of tourists during high (summer) and low (winter) season.
- Economic Impact of Tourism: Assessment of tourism's economic benefits, beneficiaries and income retention within communities.
- Attitudes Toward Tourism and Tourists: Agreement with statements on tourism impact on services, community changes, and personal experiences.
- Quality of Life: Tourism impact on general well-being.
- Demographic Information: Residency by region, educational level, employment status, gender and age.
- Open-Ended Questions: Views on the most positive and negative aspects of tourism in the community.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 and 2022, a shorter survey with six questions focused specifically on perceptions of tourist numbers and social impacts was conducted.

Qualitative interviews

In addition to the quantitative surveys, semi-structured interviews were conducted in ten selected destination communities around Iceland in 2015, 2016, 2018, and 2020, capturing resident experiences and perceptions of tourism. Each round included five to twelve interviews per location, totalling 108 interviews (49 males, 59 females, aged 19 to 73). The selected communities represent different geographical areas and varied tourism profiles, included sites of cruise tourism (Ísafjörður), mass tourism (Reykjavík), and rural service hubs along Road 1 (Hella and Mývatn), and near popular tourist destinations (Hornafjörður, Húsavík and Stykkishólmur) (Figure 1). In this paper we focus primarily on the four communities that were researched twice: 101 Reykjavík (the postal code for the capital city centre), Mývatn, Ísafjörður and Hornafjörður. These locations are highlighted in Figure 1, which presents the timing and geographical spread of both survey and interview data collection between 2014 and 2023.

Interviewees, aged 18+ and not employed in tourism, were chosen using a mix of purposive and random sampling. Initial contacts in each community identified potential participants, from whom researchers randomly selected and recruited individuals. Interviews were conducted in person, except in 2020, when they moved online due to pandemic restrictions. Anonymity was ensured, with interviewees referred to by location, number, and year of interview.

The interviews explored resident experiences with tourists, the tourism industry, and governance, capturing impacts on their daily lives. Special focus in 2020 examined the effects of the tourism collapse due to the COVID-19 pandemic on resident attitudes toward tourism and development. This paper is mainly based on material from 2020, as it provides insights from the four com-



munities that were researched both during the tourism boom and downturn due to the pandemic. Interviews conducted in other locations and earlier years also informed contextual understanding and were valuable in supporting interpretation and selection of communities for this analysis.

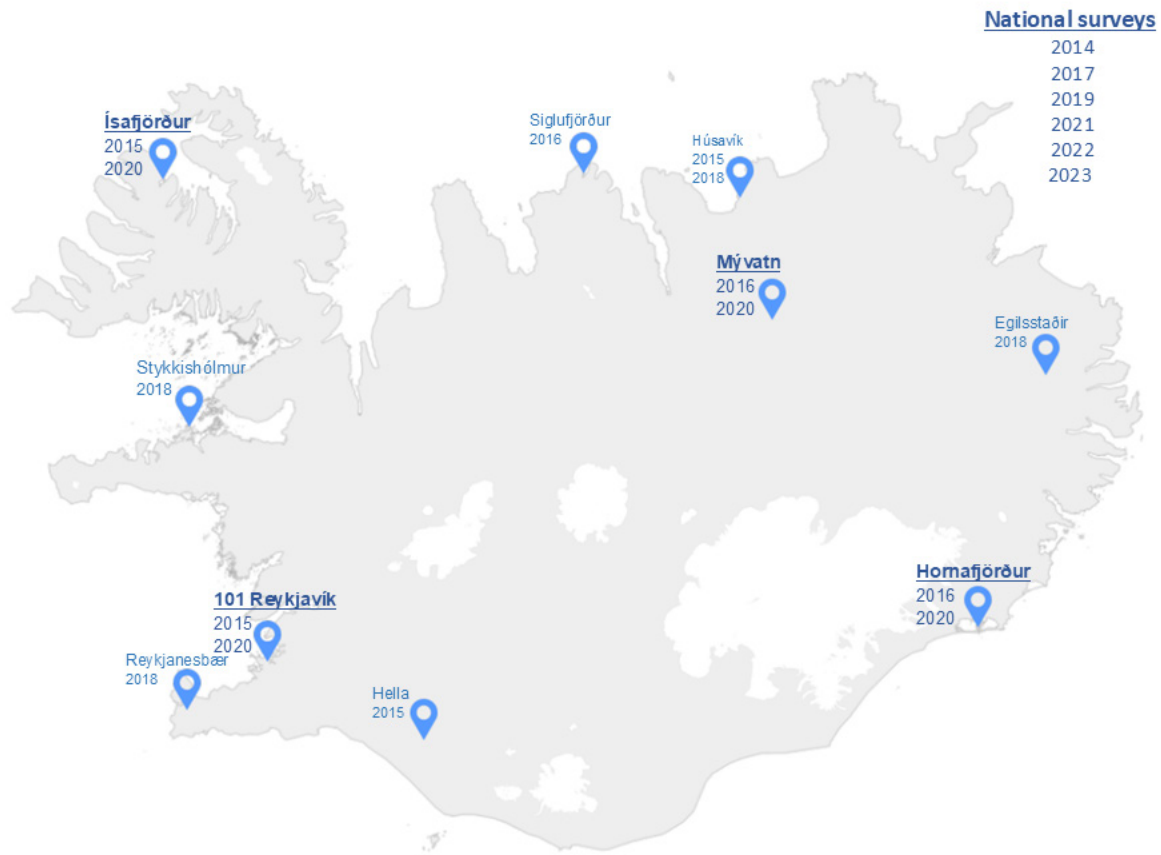


Figure 1: Timing of data collection and locations of destination communities. Both national and community level surveys are included, as well as qualitative interviews conducted between 2014 and 2023. Ísafjörður, Mývatn, Hornafjörður and 101 Reykjavík, the four communities included in the present analysis, are highlighted on the map. Note: In 2015, only qualitative data were collected; community level surveys began in 2016. Map adapted from National Land Survey of Iceland (n.d.).

Data analysis

The quantitative survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics to summarise responses and identify changes in resident perceptions and attitudes over time. This provided insight into how perceptions of tourism evolved during phases of growth, decline, and resurgence and revealed both regional differences and broader national patterns. Chi-square tests were used to assess whether observed differences between years and between locations were statistically significant. For community level data from 2016, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine differences in perceived disturbance between Mývatn and Hornafjörður.

The qualitative interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically coded using a detailed framework to categorise key themes such as resilience, adaptation, and coping mechanisms. The thematic organisation of the data revealed patterns and variations within and across communities, providing depth to our understanding of resident experiences with tourism. By comparing qualitative insights with the survey data, we uncovered nuanced perspectives on the social impacts of tourism at the community level.



By combining quantitative and qualitative data, we explore how residents perceive and adapt to changes in tourism over time. This mixed-methods design provides a foundation for interpreting both national and community level patterns in relation to resident lived experiences and perceived changes in tourism over the past decade.

Findings

This section presents findings from both quantitative and qualitative data collected between 2014 and 2023. In line with our longitudinal mixed-methods design, we explore how resident perceptions and attitudes toward tourism have evolved across different phases of growth, decline and resurgence. The findings are organised thematically and draw on both national trends and community-specific experiences, with a focus on how residents interpret, respond to and adapt to tourism in everyday life. Findings are presented chronologically, integrating national survey data with community-specific insights.

This research began in response to concerns over the rapid increase in tourist numbers in Iceland, with initial surveys and interviews conducted in a period of exponential growth in international arrivals. Data from this study focused on resident experience of and attitudes toward tourists and tourism in their daily environment. The findings are further explored in three main themes: (i) resident views of tourist numbers and (ii) their perceptions of disturbances related to tourism and (iii) how residents adapt to changes in daily life due to tourism.

Perceptions of Tourist Numbers

National surveys from 2014 to 2023 provide an overview of Icelandic resident perceptions of tourist numbers during high season. Throughout this period, many residents (61% to 68%) consistently perceived tourist numbers as moderate, indicating general acceptance despite significant fluctuations in visitor arrivals. Perceptions varied slightly between years ($\chi^2(20, N = 13,467) = 410.17, p < .001$), but the proportion of residents who perceived tourist numbers as moderate remained stable throughout the period.

In 2014, with around 408,640 international visitors during the summer (June-August), about 29% of residents felt there were too many tourists. This sentiment decreased even as arrivals rose, with tourist numbers peaking at 803,831 in the summer of 2018, when only 19% of residents perceived visitor numbers as excessive (Figure 2).

Despite a 13% decline in arrivals between 2017 and 2019 and a 55% drop from 2019 to 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the perception of tourist numbers as moderate remained stable. By 2023, as international arrivals rebounded close to pre-pandemic levels (789,321 visitors in the high season), the proportion of residents who felt tourist numbers were too high rose slightly to 30% (Figure 2).

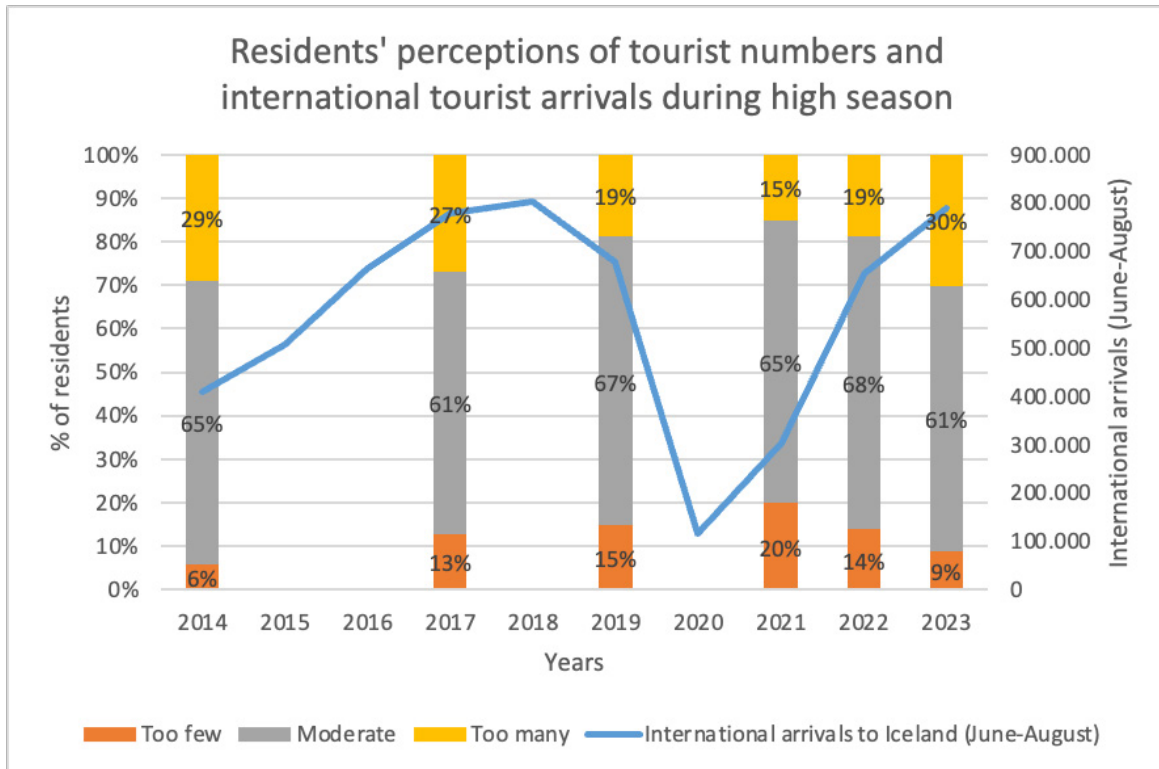


Figure 2: Residents' perceptions of tourist numbers during the high season (June-August) 2014-2023 and international arrivals to Iceland over the same period. Bars show the proportion of residents who perceived tourist numbers as too few, moderate or too many. The line shows international arrivals (June-August only). Source of arrival data: Icelandic Tourist Board (n.d.).

While national surveys provide a general overview, community-specific data reveal more complex dynamics. In some areas, resident perceptions align with national trends, while in others, perceptions vary significantly due to the uneven distribution of tourists. Rural tourism hotspots like Hornafjörður, at the base of Vatnajökull glacier, and Mývatn, known for its unique lava formations and rich birdlife, show higher instances of residents perceiving tourist numbers as too high. In 2016, 56% of Hornafjörður residents and 77% of Mývatn residents reported that tourist numbers felt excessive during the summer, pointing to stronger perceptions of pressure in these communities than at the national level (Figure 2).

In Hornafjörður, the transition from a seasonal to a year-round tourism destination has altered local life. "What used to be a season from Easter to September became constant, with tourists here all year round by 2015 or 2016," noted one resident (Hornafjörður 01-2020). By 2019, the growing demand prompted some businesses that traditionally closed after the summer season, to remain open. At Mývatn, residents observed that tourists now tend to rush through major attractions, contributing to crowding and shortening their stays: "People used to stay longer, but now they just run a quick lap through Dimmuborgir and move on" (Mývatn 04-2020).

In contrast to other destinations, the cruise destination of Ísafjörður experiences short but intense surges in tourist numbers. During peak summer months, cruise arrivals can lead to a doubling of the town's population for a few hours, creating unique challenges for accommodating such large numbers in a limited space and timeframe.

In the capital city centre, 101 Reykjavík, resident experiences vary. Long-term residents feel tourism has transformed the city's atmosphere, sometimes to a great degree: "After the tourist boom, it felt overwhelming at times, like I was walking through a foreign city" (Reykjavík 02-2020).



In contrast, newer residents who arrived during the peak tourism period report little impact from the influx.

These findings show that national level perceptions appear stable, but local experiences vary. The uneven distribution of tourism and different rhythms of visitation shape place-specific responses that are influenced by seasonality, infrastructure and local capacity.

Perceptions of Disturbance

While perceptions of overall tourist numbers provide one lens into resident experiences, it is equally important to examine whether and how tourism is perceived to interfere with daily life. We explore how residents experience disturbance, based on national and community data. Figure 3 presents national trends in perceived disturbance from tourists from 2017 to 2023 alongside community level data from Mývatn and Hornafjörður in 2016. While responses varied over time, most residents consistently disagreed with the statement that tourists disturbed their daily lives (e.g., 83% disagreed in 2023). Differences across survey years were statistically significant ($\chi^2(16, N = 12,465) = 754.20, p < .001$), though the general pattern remained relatively stable. Of the four communities discussed in the analysis, only Mývatn and Hornafjörður had survey data suitable for comparison with national figures. In Mývatn, 60% of respondents agreed that tourists disturbed their daily routines, compared to 32% in Hornafjörður, with both figures notably higher than any of the national proportions reported between 2017 and 2023. The difference between the two communities was statistically significant (ANOVA: $F(1, 365) = 82.10, p < .001$).

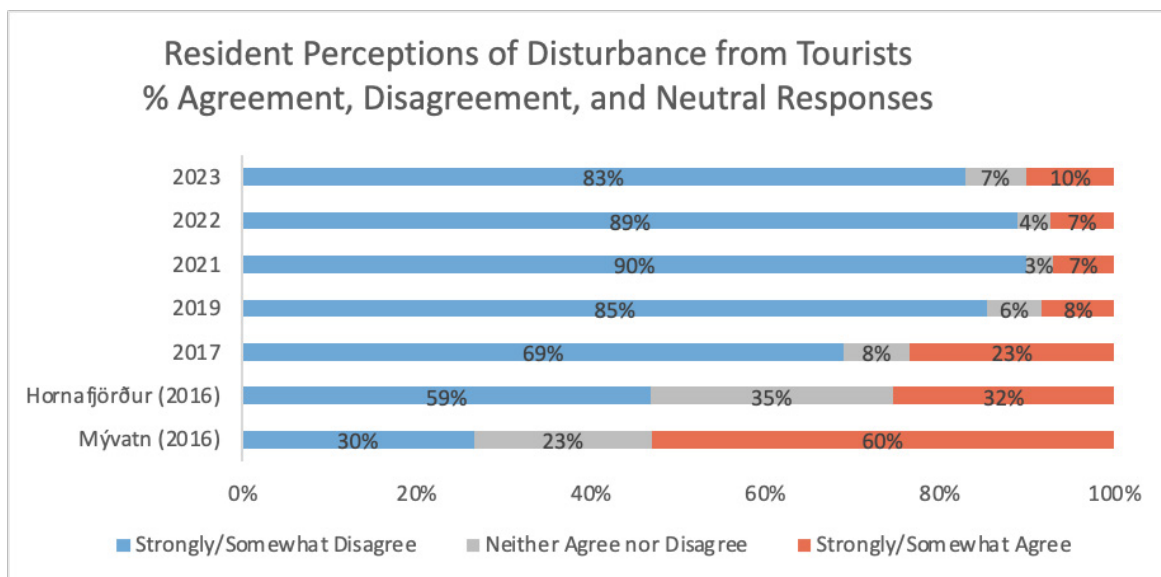


Figure 3: Resident perceptions of disturbance from tourists, 2016-2023. National results (2017-2023) are shown alongside data from Mývatn and Hornafjörður (2016), the only communities among the four included in the analysis for which comparable survey data are available.

In Mývatn, disturbance was linked to overcrowding at key natural sites. One resident explained: “You can’t turn around without having a tourist in your back. They are everywhere. They are there when you go for a walk, or in the supermarket or in the local nature bath” (Mývatn 10-2020). Shorter tourist stays in this location intensified pressure on local services, such as the small supermarket: “The supermarket is full of tourists and there are no goods left for the locals” (Mývatn 07-2020).



In Hornafjörður, a similar shift was observed as tourism developed into a year-round activity. Around 30% of residents reported experiencing disturbance, especially in stores and restaurants, which made it difficult for locals to access essential services. One resident remarked, “You come to the store, and it’s packed with tourists, leaving little for the locals” (Hornafjörður 09-2020).

In Ísafjörður, the arrival of large cruise ships brings a noticeable surge of tourists, affecting local infrastructure and resident routines. Here the concentrated presence of tourists sometimes feels overwhelming, as one resident noted: “When you have 5,000 or 6,000 people disembarking, it becomes much more noticeable” (Ísafjörður 09-2020). While many residents acknowledge the economic benefits, the temporary influx of visitors also brings challenges in accommodating daily needs alongside the tourist presence.

In 101 Reykjavík, the tourism boom between 2015 and 2018 led to notable disruptions. The rise of short-term rentals like Airbnb altered the housing market, reducing long-term residences and impacting the sense of community: “Our apartment building used to have families, now it’s all Airbnb” (Reykjavík 08-2020). These changes led to a loss of neighbourhood connections and, in some cases, unwelcome interactions as tourists mistakenly visited private homes. Parking and traffic problems worsened, with rental cars occupying residential spaces and tour buses congesting narrow streets. One local noted, “The streets are packed with rental cars, making it hard to find parking” (Reykjavík 01-2020) and another added, “Shops for locals have disappeared, replaced by stores selling tourist trinkets” (Reykjavík 10-2020). For many, these changes created the sense of living in a tourist attraction rather than a community: “It felt overwhelming at times, like we were living in a theme park” (Reykjavík 03-2020).

Although national survey data indicate that most Icelanders do not report disturbances from tourism, community level findings suggest that such experiences are often localised. While these disruptions are less visible in national trends, they are deeply felt in areas where tourism is more concentrated. However, the experiences shared by residents in the four communities show that tourism can affect daily life in different ways depending on local conditions. These community perspectives draw attention to disruptions that may not be captured in national level data but are nonetheless felt in everyday routines where tourism is more concentrated.

Adaptation to Tourism

The rise, fall and resurgence of tourism in Iceland have shaped how residents in different communities adapt to the pressures of tourism. This has led to various strategies to cope with the increased influx of visitors. Interviews from 2020 in communities also studied in 2015 and 2016 (Mývatn, Hornafjörður, Ísafjörður and 101 Reykjavík) reveal how residents developed strategies to manage change and showed varying forms of resilience.

In Mývatn, for instance, residents quickly adapted to the rhythms of tourist traffic, learning to time their visits to local attractions and stores to avoid the crowds. “You quickly learn how and when to go to avoid the crowds. If it is raining, tourists arrive early, but if it’s sunny, they come later to this place” (Mývatn 06-2020). The same interviewee noted, “Without tourists, we wouldn’t have the infrastructure we rely on” (Mývatn 06-2020).

Hornafjörður shows similar adaptations. Despite occasional frustrations with congestion, residents adapted their routines and acknowledged tourism’s economic value. As one interviewee mentioned, “You may get frustrated in the store, but still be happy about the business that tourists bring” (Hornafjörður 09-2020).

In Ísafjörður, residents adapted to cruise ship tourism by monitoring the ship schedules and adjusting routines. One resident noted, “You just take these days into account” (Ísafjörður 07-2020). While cruise tourism generates economic benefits, concerns about straining and overburdening the town’s capacity remain.



101 Reykjavík has undergone significant transformation due to tourism and residents have displayed resilience by adjusting to changes in their environment. Residents expressed both frustration with commercialisation and appreciation for increased diversity. One interviewee noted, “There’s so much more variety now in restaurants and cafés, something that wasn’t there before” (Reykjavík 05-2020). The community’s ability to find positive outcomes amidst changes speaks to their resilience in adapting to tourism pressures.

The COVID-19 pandemic gave communities a temporary reprieve and time to reflect. Many residents expressed that the pause allowed them to appreciate tourism’s role in sustaining their communities while also providing space to consider how they could better manage it moving forward. In Hornafjörður, many interviewees looked forward to welcoming tourists back, while others emphasised the need to be more prepared: “We need to be more ready than we were before” (Hornafjörður 09-2020). Similarly, in Ísafjörður, residents appreciated the quieter summers without cruise ships but were ready to adapt again to their return, albeit in a more controlled manner. Across communities, this period of reduced tourism highlighted the balance between economic dependence on visitors and the desire to maintain quality of life for locals.

Across different local conditions, residents maintained their routines while adapting to tourism. Whether by avoiding crowded places during peak times or leveraging tourism for economic opportunities, they demonstrated significant flexibility in responding to changing conditions. This adaptability forms a foundation for discussions on how Iceland can manage tourism in ways that support both community well-being and long-term sustainability.

Discussion

This study contributes three key insights to the literature. First, it demonstrates that resident attitudes can remain stable across rapid growth, sudden decline and resurgence, challenging long-held assumptions about linear decline (Doxey, 1975) and life cycle changes (Butler, 1980) of destinations. Second, it shows that stability at the national level can mask place-specific pressure points, underscoring the need for geographically sensitive monitoring (e.g., Helgadóttir et al., 2019; Santos-Rojo et al., 2023). Third, it positions this pattern as evidence of active social resilience, where everyday adaptations (timing use, routinising avoidance, leveraging benefits) allow residents to live with tourism while signalling governance gaps that require response (Burns, 2018; Maher, 2017).

Findings from this study offer a nuanced perspective on how residents in Iceland have responded to tourism growth, decline and recovery. Residents across the four studied communities consistently recognised the dual impact of tourism; its contribution to local economies and services as well as the disruptions it can introduce into daily life. The national level stability in perceived numbers refines volume-dissatisfaction assumptions by showing that attitudes can remain steady despite growth and collapse, which speaks directly to how context mediates evaluation rather than headcounts alone. This trend supports more recent studies (e.g., Woosnam & Ribeiro, 2023) that highlight the contextual flexibility of resident attitudes and question Doxey’s (1975) classic model of declining tolerance. The concentration of disturbance in specific places indicates actionable, place-based thresholds, supporting geographically sensitive monitoring and management rather than reliance on national aggregates (Helgadóttir et al., 2019; Mihalic, 2020). The everyday strategies we document (timing use, routinised avoidance, leveraging benefits) are consistent with resilience framings of tourism as a complex adaptive system and position residents as agents, not passive recipients (Cochrane, 2010; Bec et al., 2015; Gössling et al., 2020).

Residents described how they modified daily routines to cope with tourist activity. Their adaptations reflect more than temporary fixes. They point to an ongoing negotiation, where residents learn to live with tourism without necessarily losing control over their communities. Social resilience helps to understand this behaviour. Our findings align with perspectives that view it as an



active process shaped by local conditions and histories (Burns, 2018). In rural areas, where services often rely on visitor demand, tourism was seen as both vital for maintaining infrastructure and as a source of disturbance in daily life. The resilience of communities that are not only absorbing tourism but also reacting in ways that affect how it is experienced is captured by the ambivalence that residents described.

Seasonality, with long periods of low visitation followed by intense summer peaks, puts pressure on small populations and limited infrastructure which increases the need for local adaptability and community-driven responses (Hall & Saarinen, 2010). The resilience displayed by Icelandic residents, particularly in rural areas, aligns with Arctic tourism research that emphasises community adaptability and diversification as critical for sustaining tourism development (Maher, 2017). Our findings reveal that residents have employed various strategies to adapt to fluctuating tourist numbers to accommodate demand. These adaptive strategies demonstrate resilience in Arctic and sub-Arctic communities, where tourism's fluctuations demand local adaptability and diversification (Maher, 2017).

By bringing together national survey results and qualitative interviews, our study shows both general agreement and local differences in how tourism is experienced. While most Icelanders did not report serious disturbance, the qualitative data highlight how certain pressure points build up in smaller communities, especially during peak season. Residents spoke of crowded shops, housing pressures and limited access to nature, all of which signal the need for more localised planning. Their stories also suggest that resident perceptions of fairness and involvement in decisions matter for whether tourism feels welcome or intrusive. Across all four communities, residents did not reject tourism outright but instead expressed a desire for meaningful involvement and responsive governance. Residents frequently expressed a sense of agency through how they managed their routines, in how they reflected during interviews and weighed the trade-offs tourism demands. This supports arguments by Gössling et al. (2020) that resident agency is an essential aspect of socially sustainable tourism development. Furthermore, residents' reflections highlight the importance of basing tourism governance on everyday experience and local knowledge which calls for integrated monitoring of social sustainability of tourism (Mihalic, 2020). National level surveys may show where pressure is increasing, but they reveal little about how and why it is experienced. Our mixed-method approach can assist in addressing the need to pay attention to lived experiences and realities as noted by Santos-Rojo et al. (2023).

Through this study, we found that participants often appreciated the researchers' impartiality, which encouraged them to share their experiences openly and helped to establish trust. Many expressed that they valued the opportunity to discuss tourism in their communities with researchers who had no vested interests in tourism development (Helgadóttir et al., 2016; 2019; Bjarnadóttir, 2021). Residents' positive engagement with the research process demonstrates the importance of giving them a voice in tourism discussions. These reflections strengthened trust between participants and researchers and served as a reminder that those who experience tourism impacts should have a say in how it is managed.

Although this study offers comprehensive insights into resident attitudes toward tourism, some limitations may affect longitudinal consistency, such as modifications made to the survey instrument over time for increased local precision. To further understand resident perceptions, future studies could benefit from even more consistent design and more detailed demographic factor analysis.

Conclusion

This research adds to wider debates about overtourism and undertourism. It also shows how perceptions and attitudes depend not just on volume but on timing, infrastructure and local conditions. Residents' everyday experiences offer important insights that can ground policy in the reali-



ties of daily life. Despite sharp fluctuations in international arrivals, Iceland's residents have remained calm on the tourism roller coaster: adapting, negotiating and maintaining a generally positive outlook. Their adaptability and critical engagement remind us that tourism is not just something that happens to places, but something that is interpreted, negotiated and reshaped through everyday life. In Iceland, resident responses to tourism have demonstrated adaptability, resilience and a continued openness to tourism's benefits, reinforcing the importance of effective destination management and sustainable tourism strategies.

This study examined Icelandic residents' experiences with tourism in everyday life, building on the need for long-term monitoring in tourism research. The long-term perspective reveals that residents' views on tourists and tourism in Iceland have remained remarkably stable, despite the roller coaster ups and downs of the industry. The mixed-method approach provides comprehensive insights from various destinations that further highlight the contextual nature of social impacts of tourism.

The social resilience and adaptability found in this study aligns with trends observed in other Arctic and sub-Arctic communities, where tourism influences daily life and economic and environmental conditions. Their ongoing hospitality to tourists implies that it promotes social sustainability. These insights can inform tourism management in Arctic and sparsely populated areas dealing with similar issues.

Declaration of interest

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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Appendix 1

Profile of participants of national surveys 2014-2023

Variables	2014 (N=1,167)	2017 (N=2,324)	2019 (N=2,622)	2021 (N=2,604)	2022 (N=2,595)	2023 (N=2,419)
<i>Gender</i>						
Male	47%	51%	51%	-	-	51%
Female	53%	49%	49%	-	-	49%
<i>Age</i>						
18-29	19%	12%	12%	12%	6%	7%
30-44	26%	25%	24%	25%	22%	24%
45-59	28%	31%	30%	27%	29%	27%
≥60	27%	32%	34%	36%	43%	42%
<i>Education</i>						
Primary school or less	21%	22%	23%	-	-	20%
Vocational and/or secondary schooling	36%	34%	31%	-	-	30%
Other vocational schooling	5%	7%	9%	-	-	11%
University/postgraduate education	37%	36%	37%	-	-	39%
<i>Occupational status</i>						
Employee	54%	59%	56%	-	-	51%
Independent/employer	14%	16%	18%	-	-	18%
Retired	14%	15%	15%	-	-	22%
Other	18%	11%	12%	-	-	8%
<i>Residency by region</i>						
East Iceland	-	15%	14%	14%	14%	16%
Capital region	-	16%	15%	15%	15%	14%
North Iceland	-	15%	14%	14%	14%	16%
South Iceland	-	15%	15%	14%	14%	16%
Reykjanes peninsula	-	12%	14%	14%	14%	11%
Westfjords	-	13%	14%	14%	14%	14%
West Iceland	-	14%	14%	14%	14%	14%
<i>Works in tourism</i>						
Yes	12%	19%	17%	-	-	13%
No	88%	81%	83%	-	-	87%

*Data about residency by region was not collected in 2014. Information about respondents' gender, education, occupational status and work in tourism were not obtained in the short version surveys 2021 and 2022.