Governance innovation cases in coastal tourism
Governing tourists’ foraging for mussels and oysters

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Governing tourists’ foraging for mussels and oysters

In tourism there is a continuous claim for innovative products and services. Culinary experiences are highly valued, and are a distinct focus in the branding and promotion of many local areas. Food tells good stories. A new and upcoming trend in tourism and gastronomy is foraging: experiences where tourists collect their own food in nature, perhaps to then prepare and eat the food at or in close vicinity to the place where the food was collected. This suggests a totality of landscapes, weather conditions, and edible materials that constitute an experiential symbiosis. Hunting and angling tourism are well-known examples of foraging tourism, and practices and facilities have been developed to support the foragers. In recent years, the trend has been supplemented by foragers seeking to pick berries, mushrooms, herbs, and wild fruit, and even to harvest insects.

Oysters and mussels are found often in quite substantial amounts on Denmark’s west coast. The resource of mussels and oysters is increasingly becoming a leisure foraging resource exploited by locals as well as tourists. Commercial fishing is an activity that is rigidly controlled and governed by, among others, the EU fisheries’ policies and national implementations. However, the governance structures are generally geared toward commercial fishing rather than toward those foraging as a leisure activity. This case study addresses the governance and the potential need for governance innovation concerning the foraging of oysters. The Wadden Sea is a national park and designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site, and fishing regulation is a matter of importance for the environmental balances.

Overall, governance innovations can be characterized as changes in content and methods of rule-making, rule-setting, and rule implementation. They are innovations in the way that actors make
something happen and change incentives. Governance innovations can embody new approaches for institutions to be built and modified, and they can include new arrangements that rearticulate the state-civil relationship, thereby repositioning the meaning of citizenship (Swyngedoduw, 2005).

Invasive species

The oysters on the Danish coast are controversial in the sense that they are an invasive species. The population has been increasing at the expense of other habitats, such as mussels. Collecting oysters may be an environmentally positive activity, as it leaves space for the mussels, which are far more important than oysters for the millions of migrating birds. The shellfish feed the birds. Fishing is an activity that, when undertaken unsustainably, can disturb the ecosystem as a whole.

If the risks of the capricious tides are taken into account and trips are planned accordingly, it is quite simple to forage for oysters and mussels in the Wadden Sea. The water is normally shallow and the oyster beds are accessible from the shore. Foragers bring a bucket, and with some endeavor they can collect themselves a luxurious evening meal. If they do not wish to conquer the elements on their own, local tour guides provide tours to the oyster beds. Some of the guided tours include not only interpretation and assistance in the collection activities, but also champagne and accompanying food items for a party on the beach following the harvest. These oyster safaris are becoming more popular. Oyster festivals have even been inaugurated lately, included as an element in a comprehensive Wadden Sea Festival, at which local restaurants are eager to contribute to the festival’s portfolio of experiences.

For recreational users, there is an open and free access to the oyster resource, and they can collect it for their own consumption. Fishing with tools requires a license, but picking a product with one’s hands does not. In the Wadden Sea, there is (for the time being) no commercial exploitation allowed in the fishery, because of the Natura 2000 status. In this context, tour guiding companies are not considered commercial fishing entities. This is a matter that has been examined by legal experts, and no reasons have been identified to change it.

Food safety

One of the main concerns about foraging oysters and mussels in the Wadden Sea is connected to food safety. The season for collecting oysters is autumn and winter. In the summer period, there exists the risk of toxic phytoplankton in the area. The touristic seasons and oyster seasons are therefore not in sync. Tourists who, during the summer, are not aware of the risks may be in danger of getting sick if they eat the oysters and mussels.

The Danish Veterinary and Food Administration is in charge of the continuous supervision of the quality of the oysters and their living conditions. Weekly tests are made in a surveillance program. According to the regulations, only commercial providers of fish are obliged to take samples to be sent for examination by authorized test institutes. The authorities will prohibit fishing and foraging in case of the discovery of toxic phytoplankton. The findings constitute the basis of quality control. However, insights into the sources of contamination are not fully mapped.

The local tour guiding companies underline that collecting and eating occurs at the tourists’ own risk. If the authorities identify quality problems, warnings are issued. Guided tours will normally be cancelled. Unlike the Wadden Sea coastlines in Germany and The Netherlands, where tourism pres-
sure is heavier, there is in Denmark no access control to the foraging areas. The districts for foraging are so large, that at the moment, there are no possibilities to close or control the areas efficiently.

Guided foraging tour to the oyster banks
Photo: RedStar

Warnings about toxic contamination are communicated via the press and through The Danish Veterinary and Food Administration’s Facebook wall, which has 16,000 followers (not all of whom are interested in oysters). The algae situation is discussed a lot in the local area, and is a matter of great concern for the citizens and the media, who want to see the environment be “clean” and “safe.” However, the communication from the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration is only in Danish. The area is a popular touristic destination for visitors from Germany, but they do not necessarily understand the local language. There is no clear knowledge about how efficiently information is disseminated to potential oyster pickers.

Systematic surveillance and information are the main governance instruments. Information is possibly fully sufficient, as long as the number of foragers for oysters and mussels remains fairly low, and as long as they participate in guided tours. The oyster stock is plenty enough, and limiting the expansion of the invasive species through recreational picking is regarded as environmentally beneficial. However, an increase in the popularity of foraging could demand the development of new and wide-ranging communication instruments or the regulation of access. The inclusion, in real-time, of touristic apps is an opportunity that might fit the problem well, but no such app has been developed yet.

Around the world, “early warning” and “safety tips” systems have been introduced to mitigate risks for tourists, for example in earthquake areas or in destinations at risk of flooding. Such apps could also be informative in the sense that they could lead tourists to well supplied (and safe) resources. Neither the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration nor the tourism DMOs and interpretation bodies have yet attempted to exploit such opportunities.
Efficient, real-time information systems can prolong the possibility for tourists to act freely and without restrictions and supervision in their foraging endeavor. On the other hand, radically increased interest in foraging in nature, and/or decreased aquatic quality, can provoke discussions of such types of access control. However, in a wider perspective, access restrictions are not considered very compatible with Danish tourism policies, which favor open exploration opportunities in nature environments.

Fishing regulations

In terms of regulation, Danish food policies have gradually recognized the importance of local food provision, among others, for the benefit of tourism. In 2016, the Ministry of Food and Agriculture changed the authorization regulations for fish and shellfish to allow fishermen to sell small amounts to local retailers and directly to consumers right off the boat or off the shore. In fact, this was largely a modest legalization of an otherwise widespread illegal practice. A former requirement to sell via safety certified dealers has been removed for such small amounts. The change in regulations might stimulate locals to start businesses with mussels and oysters as products. Due to EU fisheries’ regulations and quota, commercial or semi-commercial fishing licenses are significant entry barriers for new business actors. The costs of the weekly testing for toxins are carried by a single commercial fisherman or collaborative groups of fishermen, a regulation that does not favor small scale fishing operations. There is a growing interest in the Wadden Sea area to develop sustainable fishery and adequate governance structures, including such initiatives that go hand in hand with foraging, culinary services, and interpretation. After a more accurate scientific investigation of the size of the stock in 2017 and 2018, the Ministry is expected to reassess the regulations.

The efforts to allow an expansion of the commercial fishery of oysters are highly controversial, as long as the stock assessments are lacking and as long as the fishing methods are under negotiation. Both guiding companies and nature scientists are concerned about the ecosystems, which take a long time to recover after undergoing mechanized commercial harvesting methods. Accordingly, this case demonstrates that touristic oyster foraging in the Wadden Sea may be a matter that is likely to be a continual issue in regulatory interventions, the directions of such yet to be settled.

Further reading and viewing


www.nationalparkvadehavet.dk

http://www.vadehavscentret.dk/en/frontpage/