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The Struggles of Seasonality Among Businesses

The Case of Åland, Finland

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Abstract

The Struggles of Seasonality Among Businesses: The Case of Åland, Finland

Fanny Mathilda Skogster

Businesses in Åland are more than familiar with the fact that the tourism season consists of a relatively short and hectic summer, a quieter autumn and an almost entirely silent winter. This seasonality favours few; it causes economic and social consequences and can be considered an environmental concern. Previous studies have shown that many island destinations struggle to cope with seasonality, and Åland is no different.

Tourism is highly integrated throughout Ålandic society, as the local population fully controls the Ålandic tourism industry, and most businesses are small-scale family businesses. This thesis examines whether seasonality is a problem that needs to be addressed or a norm that needs to be accepted. It also examines how entrepreneurs in the hospitality industry experience seasonality in Åland, highlights the attempts to increase the destination's attractiveness outside the high season and evaluates current tourism and sustainability strategies.

An overview of projects with the aim of promoting tourism and events organised out-of-season is included, which is necessary to analyse and discuss the attempts to increase Åland's attractiveness outside the high season. The qualitative study concludes that despite its difficulties, seasonality is a characteristic feature of the Åland tourism industry. Though it can be coped with, many desire a longer season.

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I. Introduction

The Åland Islands are located between Sweden and Finland, in the middle of the Baltic Sea. It is a small autonomous province of Finland with Swedish as the official language. The Åland archipelago consists of over 6,500 islands and is known as a beautiful, nature-oriented destination - it attracts many with its rich maritime history and outdoor activities (Visit Finland, n.d). Åland is fairly small and inhabits only 30,000 residents; however, the only town, Mariehamn, is quite lively, especially during the summer. This beautiful archipelago depends on tourism.



Figure 1 *Map of the Åland Islands (Google maps, 2023, retrieved 11/06/23)*

Previous studies have proven that many islands struggle with tourism seasonality, both in coldwater destinations (Twining-Ward and Baum, 1998; Baum and Hagen, 1999; Getz and Nilsson, 2004; Sæþórsdóttir, Hall and Stefánsson, 2019; Beckman, 2020) and in warmer climates (Cuccia and Rizzo, 2011; Duro and Turrión-Prats, 2019; Agius and Briguglio, 2021; Barbu, Popa and Ionaşcu, 2022). Åland is no different, as with many other peripheral destinations, tourism is an essential industry - in 2018, this island region welcomed over 2 million visitors (ÅSUB, 2019a). It was noted already in the 1990s that tourism in Åland is highly seasonal, and the 1994 arrival statistics demonstrate that the primary season was

between June and August (Baum, 1996). The arrival statistics from recent years demonstrate a similar pattern (ÅSUB, 2019b, 2020).

Seasonality is a phenomenon that has been widely studied over the years by many researchers since Baron (1975) coined the term. The studied perspectives include issues, problems and implications relating to seasonality (Butler, 1994, 1998), responses to seasonality (Baum and Hagen, 1999; Getz and Nilsson, 2004; Koenig-Lewis and Bischoff, 2010), as well as the role of seasonality in the future of tourism (Butler, 2008). Nevertheless, it is a topic that continues to capture the attention of scholars, and with good reason - seasonality is complex and often considered problematic on all levels of sustainability (Koenig-Lewis and Bischoff, 2010; Shields and Shelleman, 2013; Duro and Turrión-Prats, 2019). Though seasonality is so widely researched and the importance of the subject is acknowledged, it is also considered one of the least understood concepts in tourism research (Higham and Hinch, 2002; Cannas, 2012). It is also argued that research in the context of tourism seasonality lacks a proper theoretical framework (Koenig-Lewis and Bischoff, 2005).

I.1 Aim and research questions

As Åland depends on tourism, seasonality can seriously affect it. Therefore, several attempts have been made to increase the attraction of Åland as a destination outside the high season. This thesis aims to discuss the experiences of seasonality among local businesses and analyse the attempts made to increase the destination's attractiveness outside the high season. Three research questions guide the thesis:

- *How are businesses in Åland experiencing seasonality?*
- *What is being done in the province of Åland to increase the attractiveness outside the high season?*
- *What can be done to counteract seasonality?*

I.2 Research objectives

- i) To discuss the importance of the tourism industry in Åland.
- ii) To evaluate the Åland Islands tourism strategy and sustainability agenda.
- iii) To identify the causes for and impacts of tourism seasonality in Åland among businesses.
- iiii) To convey the businesses experiences with seasonality and their expectations regarding the future of tourism in Åland.

2. Background

2.1 The Importance of Tourism on the Ålandic Society

Island destinations often attract visitors with their natural romantic feel of remoteness and uniqueness (Baum, 1996). Åland can be considered unique because of many things; however, in this case, the focus lies mainly on the unique economic structure of the Ålandic community.

The ferry traffic is the basis for the vast majority of the transport infrastructure to and from Åland and thus constitutes the fundamental precondition for the tourism industry (ÅSUB, 2019a). In the 90s, ferries accounted for 90% of the tourist arrivals to Åland (Baum, 1996). An Ålandic slot machine and gambling company has provided the ferries with games since 1973 and can therefore be considered partly responsible for why and how tourism infiltrates the whole Ålandic society. During the 1990s, this company donated around €34 million to the Åland society. The company still often sponsors events and activities financially, meaning they continuously distribute the revenue tourists create directly to the community (PAF, n.d). Another aspect that makes the economic sector interesting in Åland is a particular law restricting outsiders and non-natives from owning businesses on the island. This ultimately means that all companies in Åland are locally owned. Hence, island ownership controls tourism (Baum 1996; Twining-Ward & Baum 1998).

The economic impact of tourism in Åland is described by Baum (1996, p. 117) as “concentrated, to an unusual level, within the local island economy”, and it is similarly stated by Twining-Ward & Baum (1998, p. 135), that Åland demonstrates “a quite unique example of an economically integrated island tourism industry”. This unusual economic structure can be considered a strength of the industry, and it may also be among the main reasons for the overall strength of the Åland economy. On the other hand, it is also stated that this level of dependency means that a decline in the tourism industry dramatically and rapidly affects the overall economy on the island (Baum, 1996).

Åland fascinates many, both scholars and visitors. Studies have previously been conducted in Åland, and similar destinations, exploring a similar theme as this paper aims to examine. However, these previous studies have not sought to examine seasonality in Åland from the

perspective of businesses. The effect that seasonality can have on businesses in Åland can be considered crucial when trying to understand the overall impact of the phenomenon on the island.

One-fifth of Åland's population works in tourism-related industries (ÅSUB, 2019a). In addition, the Åland tourism industry is controlled by island ownership, i.e. island residents (Baum, 1996), and most of the tourism businesses are small-scale and often family-owned (Baum, 1996; ÅSUB, 2023). Hotel, trade and restaurant businesses are closely associated with the tourism industry, and are thus among the businesses that are mostly affected by variations in visitor numbers. At the end of 2022, there were 601 registered companies in Åland within this sector, and 83% of these had 0-4 employees (ÅSUB, n.da). Furthermore, as family-owned businesses are a dominant part of the tourism industry, the variations in demand can be considered crucial, not least for the family in question, the business and the society, but it can also affect the destinations development and its competitiveness (Getz and Nilsson, 2004; Shields and Shelleman, 2013).

Furthermore, Shields and Shelleman (2013) argue that there is insufficient research done regarding the relationship between seasonality and small business management practices. Therefore, the seasonal effects on businesses in Åland can be assumed to be significant, yet the topic remains unexplored. Hence there is a considerable gap in the research thus far.

2.2 An Overview of Efforts to Increase Out-of-season Attractiveness in Åland

Several endeavours have attempted to increase the attractiveness of Åland outside the summer season; however, the success of these varies. An overview of more or less successful attempts is presented below to help understand Åland's current attractiveness outside the summer.

The Government of Åland has made some attempts to increase the amount of tourism during the low season, mainly by encouraging events. Businesses and organisations that want to establish a new event can apply for a financial grant. This event grant was established to promote new events that positively affect the tourism industry and contribute to an increased number of overnight stays and visitors. The event must be organised outside the absolute high

season, meaning outside July, and events in the low season are prioritised. Financing can be obtained for a maximum of three years for recurring events (Ålands Landskapsregering, 2022). Project grants for one-off cultural projects can also be applied for, and the purpose of this grant is to encourage a varied cultural offering throughout Åland and to promote the development of knowledge and skills. It can also be awarded for tours and cultural exports (Ålands Landskapsregering, 2015).

2.2.1 Off-season Events

Most events and festivals in Åland are organised during the summer, with the vast majority occurring at the end of July. However, three events have been set up in the low season to promote out-of-season travelling.

The most popular of these three is Skördefesten Åland, the harvest festival, which is considered the highlight of autumn. It is said to be the beating heart of the food culture on the island, and the event has been organised since 1997. Skördefesten gives people an opportunity to visit local farms around the island, pet animals, and buy local products directly from the producer. Some farms sell food and organise various games, competitions and other activities. The event aims to highlight Åland as a destination during autumn. They advertise to potential visitors in Sweden and Finland and invite them to come to Åland and enjoy the countryside in the midst of the richest harvest season, learn about life in the countryside, shop directly from the producers and eat good food based on local and seasonal ingredients (Skördefestens vänner r.f, n.db). Skördefesten is an event that extends the tourist season, promotes the countryside and local producers, and contributes to positive economic effects for the whole of Åland. In 2017 the three-day-long harvest festival had over 14 400 visitors, and as a result, €1,25 million was estimated to enter the economic cycle in Åland (Björkman, 2018). As this event has become quite popular, it led to the creation of two similar events taking place in the spring and winter.

These two other events have similar goals as Skördefesten - they also focus on promoting Åland out-of-season while highlighting local products. Åland Grönskar is a spring festival that takes place over a weekend at the end of May and has been organised since 2017. The event is described as a spring fair or a sowing festival, and the concept is the same as in the

harvest event. Visitors are, thus, given the opportunity to sow produce in the spring and return in the autumn to harvest it, promoting off-season visitation further - both before and after the summer (Skördefestens vänner r.f, n.da).

The event Åland Glimrar was established in 2022 and attempts to promote Åland as an attractive tourist destination during the cold and dark winter. The festival takes place over three weekends before Christmas, and the event wants to highlight local producers, farms and their unique products. Again, visitors are given an opportunity to interact with local producers, this time by visiting local Christmas markets and buying unique, locally produced Christmas gifts (Skördefestens vänner r.f, 2022).

2.2.2 Åland as a Conference Destination

To reach a new customer group, business travellers, efforts have been made to establish Åland as a conference destination. This is an attempt to attract a new customer group that is not necessarily tied to the weather, time of day or season but who is able and willing to travel during the low season.

Åland has been marketed as a meeting place in the Baltic Sea that is quick and easy to get to, as the Åland Convention Bureau describes Åland as a perfect destination for conferences and business travel. The convention bureau advocates for potential clients to travel to Åland by ferry and advertises the trip itself as part of the overall experience (Åland Convention Bureau, 2018), though it takes about 30 minutes to fly from the neighbouring mainlands. As the marketing of Åland as a conference destination often occurs at business fairs or directly between companies, it is not easy to evaluate its effectiveness. Moreover, these visitors may not be directly visible in the cityscape, as they often have pre-determined dinners, accommodations, and busy schedules.

2.3 Current Tourism Strategies in Åland

Åland's previous official tourism strategy comprised the years 2012-2022, and the new strategy, starting in 2023, is currently under development. The previous tourism strategy discussed mainly profiling and destination marketing, meaning the main focus was on strengthening Åland's position in the market and improving the destination's image.

Neither sustainability nor seasonality is extensively mentioned in the strategy. Despite the fact that seasonality has been recognised as a problem in Åland since the 90s (Baum, 1996), it is only mentioned briefly in the 2012-2022 tourism strategy. The need for creating 'new seasons' is mentioned throughout the report; however, no details regarding this statement are provided, nor solutions or suggestions on how to create them. Seasonality is mentioned partly in one sentence in the chapter on product development "We can also create travel incentives for new seasons" (Ålands Landskapsregering and Visit Åland, 2012, p. 9), displaying the lack of the topic in the whole strategy report.

An 'event wheel' is presented within the chapter regarding events, displaying all the significant events organised around the year. It can be clearly observed that the vast majority of events are organised between April and September. The strategy report acknowledges that events are an important tool, both in attracting new visitors and getting more repeat visitors; thus, events are mentioned to serve as a showcase for Åland, an opportunity to come into contact with new customers and as a tool to spark an interest among them (Ålands Landskapsregering and Visit Åland, 2012).

Work is underway to develop a new plan for Åland's most important industry. The new tourism strategy is called the 'Plan for Sustainable Tourism 2030' and will be based on Åland's sustainability agenda (Ålands Landskapsregering, 2019; Visit Åland, n.d), presented in the next chapter. As the new tourism strategy is in the making, several studies on Åland's tourism industry and market analyses have been recently published. A report by Placebrander, a company with expertise in destination marketing, presented a market analysis of Åland during a seminar in March 2023. The company concludes in the report that Åland is an attractive destination, though the seasons must be prolonged and new seasons must be established (Placebrander, 2023).

2.3.1 Sustainability Agenda

The endeavour to create a sustainability agenda came a few years after the tourism strategy was created, which can be considered to be why there is a lack of sustainability within the previous tourism strategy.

Ålands sustainability agenda describes an opportunity to build the world's best sustainable society - on over 6,500 islands in the middle of the Baltic Sea. The agenda was launched in 2014 when elected representatives in the parliament and the government of Åland agreed that fully sustainable development in Åland needs to be achieved by 2051. No sustainability strategy or agenda existed before this; thus, this marks the birth of Ålands journey toward becoming a sustainable destination (Bärkraft Åland, 2016).

Seven development goals are defined in the agenda, all aiming to be achieved by 2030 and thus contributing toward the ultimate goal to be reached in 2051. All these development goals are linked in some way to urban planning, lifestyle as well as land and water resources. These goals have also been developed in line with the UN's 17 global goals from the 2030 Agenda. Ålands seven goals are; the well-being of people in Åland, opportunities for all to influence and participate in society, good water quality, balanced ecosystems and biodiversity, attractiveness for residents, travellers and businesses, an increased share of renewable energy, and sustainable consumption and production methods. These development goals are said to be regularly measured and evaluated in order to track progress. It is mentioned that a combination of commitment and conscious actions by stakeholders in all sectors is required in order to achieve the vision of a sustainable Åland. Furthermore, a special council has been appointed to take responsibility for the development and sustainability agenda. This council consists of leading figures from different sectors and is responsible for the vitality and long-term existence of the agenda. The members are appointed by the government and meet twice yearly (Bärkraft Åland, 2016).

2.4 Means of travelling

Åland is an island, meaning ferry traffic can control the number of tourist arrivals. The inbound travellers are mainly divided into four groups: people living in Åland who have been away and are returning home, cruise passengers who stay overnight onboard the cruise ship, day travellers who leave Åland on the same day as they arrive and tourists who stay overnight in establishments on land. However, the statistics do not allocate travellers to these categories (ÅSUB, 2023b).

Some visit the Åland archipelago with their own boat, although knowing precisely how many arrive isn't easy. However, in 2018, 29,600 boat nights were registered in guest harbours in Åland (ÅSUB, n.d), and a survey conducted in the same year found that leisure boat tourists often travel in groups of 2-3 people and stay for about six days (ÅSUB, 2019a), meaning the number of travellers arriving with their own boat can be estimated to be around 12-14,000. Most of these arrivals, 99%, were also noted in 2018 to be during the peak season.

Furthermore, Mariehamn Airport welcomes flights from Finland and Sweden daily; however, the number of travellers arriving in Åland by air has declined since the 1990s (ÅSUB, 2021). The number of arrivals at Mariehamn Airport in 2022 was around 26,000, of which more than half, 57%, were domestic travellers (Finavia, 2023). This means that the percentage of arrivals by air is very small.

3. Literature review

3.1 Seasonality

There are almost as many definitions of seasonality as papers written on the subject. This is voiced by Koenig-Lewis and Bischoff (2010), who argue there is no commonly known or used definition of seasonality in the context of tourism. It can be defined simply as busier destinations at some times of the year than others. A more detailed description is brought forth by Butler (1994, p. 332, in 1998), describing seasonality as "a temporal imbalance in the phenomena of tourism, and may be expressed in terms of dimensions of such elements as number of visitors [...]".

3.2 Causes of Seasonality in Tourism

Causes of seasonality are often divided into categories, the most common being the simple divide into natural and institutional factors (Shields and Shelleman, 2013; Connell, Page and Meyer, 2015; Alshuqaiqi and Omar, 2019). Some researchers categorise seasonality causes further, adding human or social factors (Cannas, 2012). However, Butler (1994 in Baum and Hagen, 1999) identifies up to five leading causes. Similarly, Baum and Hagen (1999) present five causes of seasonality, a categorisation which is extended from Frechtling's (1996) four causes. Although these factors are named differently, they convey roughly the same message. Climate and weather are considered obvious reasons for seasonality, followed by holidays like Christmas or school breaks. Sporting seasons or events, traditions, calendar effects and supply-side constraints are also mentioned (Butler, 1994; Frechtling, 1996; Baum and Hagen, 1999).

3.2.1 Impacts of Seasonality

As tourism is a fast-growing sector, it significantly benefits communities worldwide (Edgell Sr. *et al.*, 2018). However, tourism also brings struggles - one of the main issues being seasonality and the economic loss it can inflict on businesses (Butler, 1998; Alshuqaiqi and Omar, 2019). The monetary significance tourism has is clear in terms of employment and income. As seasonality can have negative effects on the economy, it has been grabbing the

attention of scholars, authorities, and governments, which has then resulted in a growing interest in researching current strategies as well as attempts to develop tourism further by coming up with new policies (Cannas, 2012; Edgell Sr. *et al.*, 2018).

Seasonality can bring struggles in the form of staff rehiring and difficulties in obtaining financing, ultimately causing a loss of resources and potential business. Businesses may also choose to close their operations for the off-season, leading to reduced services for the local residents (Butler, 1998; Cannas, 2012). This may lead to a lack of workplaces and be considered problematic regarding social sustainability, as reduced income may affect the quality of life (Cannas, 2012). Still, some argue that seasonality is a necessity since some destinations may not have the labour needed to keep up services year-round. Seasonal destinations with staff not available year-round often depend on seasonal employment, which is often untrained and in the form of students on a school break (Baum and Hagen, 1999).

Seasonality is often recognised as a characteristic of tourism, a complex subject, usually painted merely as an economic challenge. Still, it can also have significant environmental and sociocultural impacts due to the fluctuations in visitor numbers. The economic effects are often associated with the low season and a lack of visitors, while the environmental and sociocultural issues are usually linked to the high season and an abundance of visitors. This means that seasonality can be perceived to have positive effects as well, especially for nature. The environment benefits from the absence of people and thus has a chance to recover after a peak season (Butler, 1998; Baum and Hagen, 1999; Koenig-Lewis and Bischoff, 2005). Seasonality affects each destination differently, and the effects it generates and the opinions it arouses differ (Baum and Hagen, 1999). As a result, it can be seen as detrimental in some places and a necessity in others, as it is also argued that the impacts have become more prominent as tourism has grown (Koenig-Lewis and Bischoff, 2005).

The negative effects are, however, not limited only to the low season. On the contrary, seasonality can also negatively affect the peak season - consumers and providers may experience impacts, including overcrowding, declining service quality, stress, and long working hours (Koenig-Lewis and Bischoff, 2005).

3.3 Managing Seasonality

Baum and Hagen (1999) argue that the aim to overcome seasonality completely is often unrealistic, and extending the season is a more common and realistic approach to the complex phenomenon. Getz and Nilsson (2004) state that the way businesses can deal with seasonality can be divided into three categories: coping, combating, or capitulating. The category of coping includes the operation being shut down after the peak, meaning the off-season is spent with the maintenance of the facilities, planning for the upcoming season, or finding an alternative income. The operation may also be open but run only by limited staff or is open per-demand out-of-season. Ultimately, it means that businesses surrender to seasonality, necessarily do not care or mind it, and are not doing anything to counter it. On the other hand, businesses can also choose to combat seasonality and are thus actively taking action in trying to 'defeat' the seasonal dependency or try to expand the season further. Still, these entrepreneurs may be forced to shut down for a while during the off-season because of a lack of visitors. The third and most extreme way for businesses to deal with seasonality is identified as capitulating (Getz and Nilsson, 2004). This means the business is completely laid off, sold, or shut down for good because of seasonal fluctuations. The reasoning behind this is most often economic aspects, meaning the business is not creating enough revenue during the high season, and the entrepreneurs need to move on to something that gives them the opportunity to earn a better living.

Four main strategies are identified to counter seasonality in island destinations: events and festivals, market diversification, product diversification, and structural responses (Baum and Hagen, 1999).

3.3.1 Events and Festivals

Many scholars recognise events as useful tools in the battle against seasonality (Baum and Hagen, 1999; Koenig-Lewis and Bischoff, 2005; Connell, Page and Meyer, 2015). According to Getz (2010), events and festivals can contribute to the destination's image, attract visitors, and bring further economic benefits. As presented in Chapter 2.3.1, this can be observed in the case of Åland and the harvesting festival, Skördefesten. It is also noted by Baum and Hagen (1999) that events and festivals are the most common approach in attempts to combat

or counter seasonality and claim that “Events and festivals can be developed specifically with the objective of supporting extensions to the existing tourism season.” (Baum and Hagen, 1999, p. 306). Baum and Hagen (1999) also advocate for the possibility of an event taking place during the high season to be slowly moved out of season. This would minimise congestion and overcrowding during the peak season while distributing visitors more evenly over the months. To exemplify, a popular event that has built up a following of repeat visitors, usually organised in July, might be moved to August without losing its crowd. However, this requires that the event is not tied to specific surrounding circumstances.

3.3.2 Market Diversification

Another way to deal with seasonality is to find new markets to enter. The current market may depend on a particular time of year for travelling, causing a destination to become seasonally dependent. A quite simple market diversification strategy seeks to find new markets for existing tourism products. Still, doing this can be challenging, especially if the products are inflexible or dependent on the weather or other circumstances. Furthermore, different seasons may demand different products. If the aim is to increase off-season tourism, market diversification may also need to include off-season pricing, other off-season products and different packaging to attract the new target group (Baum and Hagen, 1999), i.e. product diversification which is presented next.

3.3.3 Product Diversification

Finding a new target group or market is the first step, but destinations must also ensure they are seen as attractive for this particular market. As discussed in the section above, different target groups may require different products. Product diversification as a tool to attract a new target group can be achieved by either developing the best product on the market, meaning the competition is beat, or creating a product that is unusual for the current environment, thus attracting visitors to experience this unusuality (Baum and Hagen, 1999).

However, a mix of product and market diversification is considered the most effective, as all-weather resorts have been one of the most successful responses to climate-related causes of seasonal demand variation (Baum and Hagen, 1999).

3.3.4 Structural Responses

The effects of seasonality can also be reduced by finding new uses for existing facilities and resources, thus saving costs in the low season. Destinations with a flexible infrastructure can manage peaks cost-effectively without expensive yearly maintenance. For example, costs can be significantly reduced by using tourist facilities for other activities off-peak. However, this means the destination must be careful about how it markets itself year-round. The image of a destination can be at risk when trying to promote tourism outside the high season. Travellers may expect the same range of activities and services in high and low seasons and may be disappointed if they are not fulfilled. Furthermore, visitors in the off-season may be met by bad weather, insufficient entertainment, and closed attractions (Koenig-Lewis and Bischoff, 2005).

Of course, a destination can't always be expected to have the same level of service all year round. Still, the destination must maintain and offer satisfactory services year-round if trying to promote off-season tourism (Baum and Hagen, 1999; Koenig-Lewis and Bischoff, 2005).

4. Theoretical background

4.1 Tourism

UNWTO (2008) defines tourism simply as an activity performed by visitors. It is a cultural, social and economic phenomenon involving people travelling and visiting places outside their usual environment for business, leisure or other personal reasons. Three primary forms of tourism have been distinguished, and it is the most common categorisation, comprising domestic tourism, outbound tourism and inbound tourism. It is, however, important to note that tourism can further be categorised when considering travel motivation and reasons.

Tourism can be considered to be challenging to define because of the broadness of nature - there are no clear boundaries concerning which sectors it includes and what activities it covers. This complexity has led to an abundance of research from various perspectives concerning tourism in relation to other sciences (Fletcher *et al.*, 2018).

As noted, tourism can bring both positive and negative impacts to destinations (Edgell Sr. *et al.*, 2018; Fletcher *et al.*, 2018). The effects are most often categorised as environmental, economic, and socio-cultural. In this thesis, economic aspects have been mentioned thus far, mainly as off-season losses associated with seasonality. However, it needs to be recognised that tourism also acts as the most effective means of spreading economic benefits. Tourism is the world's fastest-growing industry and can cause not only direct impacts but also simulate indirect investments in infrastructure improvements and other aspects that benefit locals and tourists alike (Edgell Sr. *et al.*, 2018).

4.2 Sustainability

Sustainability as a concept is usually associated with being responsible and respectful of resources and the environment. The UN defined sustainability in the 1980s as trying to co-exist with the resources, simply not overuse, to meet the needs of the present without compromising the needs of the future (Fletcher *et al.*, 2018). Today, the definition of sustainability can be considered a bit more detailed and is, similarly to the effects brought by tourism, considered to consist of three dimensions. These dimensions are in the context of

sustainability, often described as the three pillars; environmental, economic and social (Cameron and Green, 2019).

Sustainable development is a concept aimed at businesses and organisations and has risen with the global goals set by the UN (Cameron and Green, 2019). The sustainable development approach means businesses and organisations must strive for growth without overexploiting resources. However, tourism is an industry that may not directly align with sustainable values. International travel is often seen as a significant environmental culprit because of transport emissions, air pollution and exploitation of resources (Fletcher *et al.*, 2018). Approaches that can be taken to reduce threats aimed at sustainability and the long-term prosperity of the tourism industry have been discussed. These include setting limits on future growth, changing the attitudes and behaviour among stakeholders and making the practices and tourism products more sustainable, or simply replacing the current products with new, sustainable ones. However, it is argued that all three of these must be combined to reach a long-term sustainable tourism industry (Fletcher *et al.*, 2018).

In the past, sustainability used to be considered the responsibility of the producer rather than the consumer. Now, consumers also place the responsibility on themselves, choosing the more sustainable options, and they are willing to spend more on sustainable services and products. Thus, sustainability significantly impacts the market and can affect the competitiveness of products (Petro, 2022). Although sustainable travel has been a growing trend for some time, the pandemic has given it a new boost in interest, especially among the younger generations. Travellers want to have the opportunity to act sustainably - to be environmentally friendly, use less water and generate less waste, even when on vacation (Economist, 2022).

Furthermore, the rising concerns about climate change and global warming have made people more aware of their lifestyles. As a result, sustainability has become increasingly popular and is something companies and organisations must pay attention to. Sustainability is not only an environmental matter but is more widely recognised as one of the most effective marketing methods (Petro, 2022). If companies and destinations want to be considered competitive, a sustainability strategy is necessary, which makes the CSR essential and change management a great tool.

4.3 Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a concept referring to the company's obligation and commitment to conduct business in a sustainable manner. It is used both as a synonym (Moon, 2007; Strand, Freeman and Hockerts, 2015) and as a contradiction for sustainability (Moon, 2007). Dahlsrud (2008) argues that there is no universally accepted definition of CSR but concludes that all convey roughly the same message.

CSR policies can be considered to be a collection of self-regulation processes, ensuring the business is conducted in compliance with the law, international norms and ethical standards (Fontaine, 2013). Contrary to the other theoretical concepts brought forth in this thesis, CSR is considered to consist of a total of five dimensions. The three pillars, social, economic and environmental, are, of course, accounted for but are accompanied by something called the stakeholder and voluntariness dimensions. The stakeholder dimension includes interactions with internal and external stakeholders, coworkers and suppliers and how they are treated. The voluntariness dimension consists of actions not ordered by law, thus, including ethical and moral values reaching beyond legal obligations (Dahlsrud, 2008). Ultimately CSR sets requirements on businesses and organisations, demanding that economic, social and environmental impacts of the operations are managed so that the benefits are maximised and the downsides are minimised (Fontaine, 2013). Both sustainable development and CSR are some of the key concepts and can also be seen as the foundation for change management, as discussed next in Chapter 4.4.

4.4 Change Management

As global awareness surrounding the environment and environmental degradation has increased in recent years, businesses and organisations must incorporate a green mindset. As discussed, CSR is ultimately a collection of requirements needed to fulfil (Fontaine, 2013), while change management can be described more as a collection of guidelines and principles that can be used (Cameron and Green, 2019). These two concepts complement each other when navigating change toward more sustainable operations.

Change management is valuable in finding solutions for issues and can help manage global challenges that need to be tackled (Cameron and Green, 2019). This chapter briefly presents how change management could be helpful in the struggles against seasonality. A number of sustainability principles are presented below, and these could, for example, be incorporated within the new Åland Islands tourism strategy. As established earlier, seasonality affects the three pillars of sustainability. We have also already concluded that it can impact destinations everywhere. The phenomenon of seasonality is regarded as a complex, global challenge in the context of tourism, and change management can, in this instance, be viewed as helpful when investigating the struggle as well as strategies regarding it.

Nine sustainability principles for sustainable development have been identified by Blowfield (2013). These principles need to be addressed by organisations and consist of organisational ethics, transparency, governance, relationships, financial return, community involvement, the value of services, employment practices and protection of the environment. It can be observed that some of Blowfield's (2013) principles of sustainable development relate to challenges that can be caused by seasonality. To exemplify, if one strives to follow the principle of the value of services, the goal is to provide the highest levels of products and services (Cameron and Green, 2019). This can be a challenge to achieve in a seasonally dependent destination, where the staff during the peak is often seasonal and untrained (Baum and Hagen, 1999), hence unable to provide the best level of service. Protection of the environment, the last of the nine principles, is one of sustainability's most important and well-known aspects; however, this can also be a challenge in seasonal destinations, as an abundance of visitors can severely damage nature. The issues caused by seasonality were further accounted for in chapter three.

The overlap between the sustainability principles and the struggles caused by seasonality can be seen as problematic, but understanding this can also be very helpful when creating new policies. Furthermore, it may mean that if a well-functioning strategy is implemented, it can help to address the harmful effects of seasonality and help destinations on their sustainability journey. Thus, change management and the principles of sustainable development presented can be considered valuable tools for achieving the goal mentioned in the Åland sustainability agenda - to achieve fully sustainable development by 2051.

All concepts presented are interrelated and together form the theoretical background of this paper. In the context of this thesis, it can be considered that one of the concepts cannot exist without the others. For example, seasonality is viewed as a dilemma regarding sustainability, which is necessary for CSR, which, in turn, complements and can be considered essential for change management, as change management can be a helpful tool for further combating seasonality.

5. Methodology

5.1 Qualitative Research

A qualitative research method was chosen to develop knowledge about how businesses in Åland experience seasonality. Qualitative research is the method to be used when the research aims to understand people and their experiences (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016); therefore, the method was considered suitable for this study. Qualitative methods of research have, of course, faced some criticism. They are most commonly criticised for being too subjective and not transparent enough. Furthermore, as qualitative methods are usually very flexible and rely a lot on the researcher, they can also be described as difficult to replicate, i.e. the external reliability can always be considered to be relatively low (Clark *et al.*, 2021).

The thesis is based on primary data collected through semi-structured interviews. The interviews are the primary tool for understanding how seasonality is experienced and how it affects businesses in Åland. In addition, secondary data was collected from scientific literature and previous research by scholars, presented in the previous chapters.

5.1.1 Case Study

Since this study focuses on understanding a particular issue in a specific place, it can be described as a case study. Case studies are often used to describe or explain phenomena where they occur (Yin, 2009), in this case, the phenomena of seasonality in Åland. A case study is a valuable research design used when the researcher wants to generate a more in-depth understanding of a more complex subject (Yin, 2009; Brotherton, 2015), which also is the aim of this thesis.

5.1.2 Interviews

Five semi-structured interviews served as this thesis's primary data collection method. Interviews are commonly used data collection tools in qualitative research and are used when the researcher wants to understand the reasoning or motivation behind an answer (DeCarlo, 2018). The choice of interview method, semi-structured interviews, consisted of a number of open-ended questions. As described by Merriam & Tisdell (2016), semi-structured interviews allow the interviewees to explain what they think of the topic in their own words, allowing the researcher to respond as and if needed, depending on the participants' answers to the questions. To understand the interviewees' personal experience of seasonality, the interviews were conducted in the interviewees' native language, in this case, Swedish. Semi-structured interviews use an interview guide as support, although it is not always necessary to follow it (DeCarlo, 2018). The guide for this study was written in Swedish and can be seen in Appendix 1. The interview guide was composed of questions related to the topic and consisted, besides background questions, of three main themes; seasonality, tourism strategies, and sustainability.

This study's target group were hospitality businesses, meaning restaurants and accommodations in Åland. A decision was made not to exclude anyone but to include both year-round-open and seasonal businesses. This choice aims to create a complete overview and result in a broader understanding of how seasonality may or may not affect businesses. Potential participants for the study were identified and selected through an online travel guide of Åland, which offered a complete list of all accommodations and restaurants, regardless of size or location. A total of 20 businesses were contacted through email, and nine answered the inquiry. Finally, five businesses participated in this study. The sampling process can thus be described as purposive sampling (Brotherton, 2015); companies were selected because they possess characteristics that need to be included in the study, meaning they are selected "on purpose". As this study focuses on companies in Åland, the sample naturally needed to consist of hospitality businesses in Åland.

5.2 Ethical Considerations

Brotherton (2015) describes research ethics as concerns regarding honesty, transparency, obligations and responsibility, in short, behaving properly and conducting research correctly.

Non-harm and informed consent can be considered vital concepts in ethical concerns (Brotherton, 2015), and these have been considered when conducting this study. All participants were informed of the aim and purpose. A choice was made to keep all participants anonymous. However, although Åland has a large number of businesses active in the hospitality industry, it is still quite a small community. Therefore, the anonymity can be described as partial anonymity (Veal, 2018), as it can be considered unrealistic to believe that participants in the study could remain completely anonymous. Thus, anonymity can be granted but not guaranteed, though names are not disclosed, and details regarding the specific business are kept vague and to a minimum.

All participants also agreed in writing to participate in the study and had the right to withdraw their participation at any time. The form of consent, written in Swedish, can be seen in Appendix 2. Furthermore, the interview recordings were deleted immediately after transcription.

5.3 Data Analysis

To maintain the anonymity of the respondents, they have been assigned numbers and are referred to only as R1, R2, R3, and so on. Four of the interviews were conducted in person and two via the phone. All interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed to text. The transcribed interviews were first coded and analysed individually. Next, the identified themes between all interviews were compared and compiled. Further, the themes were linked to the purpose of the study, the research questions it sought to answer, and to literature and theory. As the interviews were conducted in Swedish, they were only translated into English after the coding and the analysis were done.

6. Results

The companies that participated in the study consist of small, medium, and large businesses located around Åland - in the city, the countryside and the archipelago. The majority of establishments offer both food and accommodation. The minority are open all year round, as the majority, three businesses, are closing, or partially closing, their operations for the low season.

6.1 Experiences of Seasonality

It can be considered natural to experience seasonal variations and changes in demand as a business in Åland. The interviewees deem most impacts of seasonality as harmful. The weather and climate were mentioned as the main reasons why tourism in Åland is so highly seasonal, "Who would want to go somewhere when it is cold, dark and there's nothing to do?" (R3), as was the time of the summer holiday, "People go on holidays during the summer of course, when it is the warmest." (R4).

The apparent effect of seasonality is the sudden drop in visitors and, thus, a sudden drop in revenue. Seasonality is described as exhausting and intense, as it is also said to bring stress and concerns about making enough revenue to 'survive' the winter "You make a loss now, and then you make a profit, and then you hope for the best" (R2). However, one positive point was made: the off-season grants an opportunity to take a holiday and rest. It is also noted that it would not be possible to maintain the business at the same standard around the year, as there is not enough staff available. Some companies have tried to stay open later after the summer but with not-so-good results. One of the respondents, R4, mentioned that there have been many travellers still in August and September, "these travellers from further away, those from southern Europe, come later", but no labour has been available. This means that when schools start in August, the seasonal workers leave, and companies are left to work at reduced labour. This often leads to them being unable to accommodate the same capacity and suffering service levels.

The staffing issue was raised further, as all respondents expressed it is vital when discussing challenges relating to seasonality. In addition to some mentioning that it would not be possible

to accommodate the same amount of visitors during the low and high seasons due to a lack of labour, it was also mentioned that the pandemic did cause many to change industries. The staff can sometimes be inexperienced and perhaps even uninterested, which can compromise the service's quality. Word-of-mouth marketing is considered the best form of marketing, and if a guest is unhappy, the business can face severe consequences. Moreover, training new staff every year takes time, money and patience.

One aspect that can also affect tourism in island destinations is transport links. Åland has always had good ferry connections to Finland and Sweden, but the number of departures has significantly been reduced. This fact also concerned the interviewees, as they will not make as much revenue as in previous years if the number of tourist arrivals decreases.

6.1.1 Managing Seasonality

How the business manages seasonality depends on whether they are open all year round or not. Of five businesses participating in the study, two were open year-round. The two companies respond to seasonality in several ways, including less staff in the low season, shorter opening hours and changes in pricing. Three businesses were open during the summer, from May to September, or per demand during the off-season. The entrepreneurs who run a seasonal business spend the off-season doing other activities - some take the opportunity to travel, while others prepare for the coming season, do marketing, maintenance, or have a second job.

All businesses have tried to increase attraction out of peak and the number of tourists; however, the success of these attempts varies. Some had been greeted with more visitors, while others' attempts remained unsuccessful.

The interviewees all agree that events have worked best as season extenders. The importance of the harvest festival is evident. However, the impact of Åland Grönskar can be considered less critical as the festival has been established relatively recently and has not yet reached the same popularity as its predecessor. Still, the respondents agree that the summer season begins with Åland Grönskar in May and stretches all the way to Skördefesten in September. Furthermore, without downplaying the obvious benefits of it, one of the interviewees argued that the harvest festival, Skördefesten, may have become too popular. The three-day event is

considered quite intense, and it is questioned how over 10 000 visitors at once can be good for the environment and the carrying capacity in the otherwise pristine countryside.

6.2 Tourism Strategies and Marketing

The general view among the interviewees was that the efforts made so far have worked and been satisfactory, although they are far too few, “We should talk more about what can be done to extend the season.” (R1). All participants agree that marketing to the domestic market was very successful during the years of the pandemic and somewhat mitigated what could have ended in disaster for the Ålandic tourism industry. Now the companies believe that there are opportunities to do even more and that the efforts made could be more visible. However, there are differences regarding this issue, as some companies consider the marketing of Åland as a conference destination very successful. In contrast, others had not noticed its effects at all. One entrepreneur mentioned that they do not experience direct effects but do experience ripple effects, as they get a lot of guests only because the guests attending conferences may fully book the hotels. One respondent also expressed that although the government, or other organisations, may be taking action, it is difficult to know what works or not, “Efforts are being made, but assessing how they work out can be challenging.” (R1). Furthermore, as most events organised in Åland occur between June and August, all interviewees agreed that no extra marketing is needed for the summer season.

Some respondents also believe that Åland is already an established destination for Finnish and Swedish tourists; hence Åland should begin to invest in new markets and promote the destination more on the European market. Other respondents believe that Finland and Sweden should remain the focus, but that accessibility should be emphasised more, how easy and fast it can be to travel to the island from the neighbouring countries.

6.2.1 Sustainability as a Strategy

When examining sustainability within these companies, it could be determined that the participants are very conscious of the actions in their organisations and aware of their impacts on the environment. Smaller companies like those participating in this study are less likely to have a written CSR policy. However, sustainability measures are seen as a matter of course, something that is incorporated into everyday life. Most measures are done automatically and therefore do not require any extra action. Sustainability is mainly reflected in a high level of cooperation among local actors, trying to stick to local produce and promoting local entrepreneurship as much as possible. Within this, the local stakeholders in question are mainly considered stakeholders within the same village or community rather than the whole of Åland. Several respondents also mention that they fulfil all the requirements to become Green Key certified but have not taken that step for one reason or another.

All interviewees believed that nature-based tourism in Åland is not given as much attention as it should. Some respondents also consider not enough has been done to market Åland as a sustainable destination and archipelago, which can be a missed opportunity. Three of the interviewees mentioned that a person quickly becomes 'home-blind' and may not notice all the things that could be utilised in the surrounding environment, "Åland has so much to offer all year round if you manage to package it well." (R1). Though the respondents think that nature tourism should be marketed more and that tourists should be encouraged to go outside the city border, they also expressed that some parts should be kept untouched to avoid overexploitation of the island.

It is argued that Åland has an advantage regarding sustainable transportation, as most travellers arrive by ferry rather than by flying. However, the ferry departures have decreased during the past year. One respondent pointed out that public transport needs to be developed if Åland is to be perceived as a fully sustainable destination, as transport today is considered lacking.

7. Discussion

The results show that the main reasons why Åland's tourism is seasonal are the weather and the timing of the school summer holidays - both natural and institutional causes. These results are consistent with the causes listed in the literature (Frechtling, 1996; Butler, 1998; Baum and Hagen, 1999; Shields and Shelleman, 2013; Connell, Page and Meyer, 2015).

Businesses in Åland rely heavily on temporary imported labour or students on summer break as their staff, which can cause struggles with finding staff outside the summer season. Åland has educational institutions that offer training for several occupations in the accommodation and restaurant business, so it should not be difficult to find trained staff. The problem seems to be that if companies cannot offer a permanent position, meaning a job during both high and low seasons, people go abroad or change professions. A business cannot stay open without either customers or labour. Therefore, increasing the attraction for tourists and locals alike is of the utmost importance.

Companies in Åland ultimately face two choices concerning the labour issue, which can both lead to the destination's attractiveness suffering. Suppose companies stay open longer into the shoulder season. In that case, they are doing so with reduced staff and services, which can lead to unsatisfied customers who expect the same level of service quality as during the peak. Suppose companies, on the other hand, choose to close the business. In that case, potential customers may again be disappointed since they expect the same amount of facilities to be open and the same number of services to be available year-round. Thus, supply-side constraints may appear and could also be considered a cause for seasonality (Butler, 1998; Baum and Hagen, 1999). Either way, the attractiveness of a destination can be compromised. Closing for the off-season can furthermore be considered harmful in the context of social sustainability, as a reduction in jobs can generally affect the quality of life, as argued by Cannas (2012). Still, in Åland, many businesses may feel they have no choice, as there is a lack of customers. Besides the evident effect of seasonality, reduced revenue, businesses also experience stress and long working hours during the peak. In addition, as most companies are small-scale and do not have large premises or facilities, overcrowding is common, which can be uncomfortable for both the customer and the worker.

Further, Connell et al., (2015) conclude that over 30% of businesses participating in their study regarding visitor events as a response to seasonality did not think that events helped their business remain cost-effective during the off-season. This can be considered partly true in this case, as the events established thus far have had a positive impact. However, since the two most significant events are organised in the shoulder seasons, there is quite a large gap over the winter. Thus, even though Skördefesten and Åland Grönskar are working well to prolong the season, they do not generate enough revenue for the individual business to remain cost-effective over the off-season. Further, as conferences can also be considered to be visitor events, only two out of five companies noticed any effects of the marketing of Åland as a conference destination. However, this may be mainly depending on the location of the business. Some disagreement is also expressed among the interviewees regarding the possible relocation of events, as Baum and Hagen (1999) propose the possibility of moving events to spread out visitors. One respondent believes that there is no possibility that it could succeed; however, at the same time, another thinks it would be a good way to potentially spread out tourism. Moreover, it can be concluded that events should be further encouraged, as they are proven by the literature, the event of Skördefesten, and the opinions and experiences of businesses brought forth in this study to function well as tools in prolonging the season. Since two corresponding events to the harvest festival already exist, they must be developed and marketed further to reach the same popularity as Skördefesten and thus possibly create new seasons.

Although concrete CSR policies are missing, both the stakeholder and voluntariness dimensions are very present in the companies involved. Moreover, as Åland is a relatively small society, the local cohesion is strong, which is reflected in the operations of the companies. The Åland sustainability agenda states under the 2030 goals, regarding 'attractiveness for residents, travellers and businesses', that the number of overnight visitors in commercial accommodation facilities should increase to 300,000 by 2030, as the current number is 210,000. The respondents voiced confusion and concern regarding this goal, as stated, "It can't be done in July, so we really must work on levelling these seasonal variations" (R2). At this moment, the focus seems to be on attracting as many tourists as possible; thus, many visitors are people only on a day cruise or passing by. All interviewees believe the focus

should instead be on promoting longer stays and encouraging visitors to experience the archipelago and the countryside.

As ferry traffic accounts for the majority of the travellers to and from Åland, the number of arriving tourists will naturally decrease if departures are reduced. In addition, if you look at the total number of tourist arrivals from previous years, the amount of overnight stays is quite low. Those who are only on a day cruise do not necessarily benefit the companies on land, especially not those in the countryside. Now, decision-makers and ship operators have recently, during May of 2023, received a lot of criticism regarding ferry traffic and the lack of departures and arrivals before the summer season. Companies express concern, both those who participated in the study and others publicly in the newspapers, as they believe this year's tourist season will worsen. Already, several departures are fully booked, and accommodation establishments have received cancellations because travellers do not fit on board. However, the deteriorating ferry traffic can be considered both positive and negative for Åland. With fewer ferries comes fewer travellers, which can be positive from the environmental perspective for the carrying capacity but bad in terms of economic loss. On the other hand, the fact that the ferries are fully booked during the peak season can cause an increase in the number of travellers arriving during the shoulder seasons and, thus, extend the season. The other scenario is that travellers who had planned to travel to Åland choose another destination instead due to transport difficulties. Though traffic can cause issues for the tourism industry for Åland as a whole, the businesses in the archipelago may suffer even more. Due to additional difficulties relating to transportation, the seasonality of Åland can be considered more challenging for companies in the archipelago as they depend not only on the ferry traffic between the neighbouring countries but also on the smaller archipelago ferries, which reduce the number of departures even more during the low season.

To a certain extent, the companies in Åland have had to accept that tourism, and therefore the business, is seasonal. Nevertheless, a clear opinion is expressed in favour of more measures regarding the possibility of extending the season. Although it is possible to apply for funding for events promoting tourism, not many businesses seemed aware of it. Moreover, even if they were aware of the grants, they would most likely not have the time or energy to organise an event or festival on their own. The stakeholders who participated in this study have come

up with ideas on what could be done to stimulate tourism, which are presented below. However, the question remains - who should take on these tasks?

7.1 Expectations Regarding the Future of Tourism Strategies in Åland

The businesses that participated in this study experience the challenges related to seasonality yearly and most respondents have grown up in the industry and have many years of experience. Knowing the struggle, they have many ideas for events and activities that could hopefully extend the season further and contribute to the attractiveness of Åland in the low season.

As Ålands sustainability agenda states that the archipelago aims to be fully sustainable by 2051, change management and the principles of sustainable development, presented within chapter 4, could be considered valuable tools for achieving the goal. Sustainability could, furthermore, be considered a marketing strategy that could increase Ålands attractiveness outside the high season if the correct target group is reached and the proper measures are implemented. The increasing popularity of sustainable travel can also benefit Åland and increase the destination's overall attractiveness and image.

Åland has a unique environment that could be utilised further for sustainable nature-based tourism. Though the destination is known as beautiful and nature-oriented, most visitors admire its beauty mainly from a distance. Only a handful of the arrivals to Mariehamn leave the city or visit only the most popular attractions by pre-booked bus tours. The results of this study show that hospitality businesses see ecotourism as an excellent opportunity to extend the season and to encourage sustainable travel in Åland year-round and, thus, a more vibrant countryside. Åland is a well-known destination among domestic cyclists, and continues to attract cycling tourists. Furthermore, the archipelago has beautiful nature, providing an excellent basis for flourishing ecotourism. The growing interest in the environment among the younger generation and the goals in the Åland sustainability agenda also favour it. Moreover, the potential is also observed among businesses.

Four interviewees mentioned nature or wildlife tourism, stating that it should be promoted more. The respondents stated there should be increased marketing of hiking, especially the pilgrimage route and the multiple trails, which are existing products that could be further

developed. In addition, excursions in the wilderness, nature observation tours, canoeing and other water activities are mentioned as alternatives to increase nature-based tourism in Åland year-round. Opportunities to promote tourism through various associations, such as birdwatchers or scouts, are also seen as opportunities to increase tourism sustainably.

Although several respondents have ideas for developing tourism in Åland, they do not have the time to deal with them in addition to taking care of the business. One respondent thinks there clearly is a need for a new, joint administrator, an umbrella organisation, who oversees, collects and evaluates the ideas brought forth by entrepreneurs, organises project groups, and, if needed, distributes events directly to associations, like the scouts or the bird-watching association. “A joint body of some kind must be created to take care of these ideas and projects because it is not possible just to outsource it completely to non-profit organisations.” (R6).

The weather and climate will cause the Åland archipelago to remain, to some extent, seasonal, as the majority of people will still in the future have the desire to spend their vacations at destinations with good weather. As the season in Åland is also partially driven by the school holidays market and product diversification could relieve the seasonal dependence.

8. Conclusions

As this thesis aimed to discuss the experiences of seasonality among local businesses and analyse the attempts made to increase the destination's attractiveness outside the high season, it can be considered to fulfil its aim. To summarise, seasonality takes a toll; the summer is dreaded yearly, and navigating the seasonal fluctuations is still challenging.

The current structure of Åland's tourism industry can be considered unsustainable. Although tourism is vital to the Åland and integrates the society, seasonality has been surprisingly little emphasised in the past. The seasonality of Åland may have become a norm and something learnt to deal with, but that does not mean that seasonality is insurmountable. On the contrary, willing and enthusiastic businesses, incredible nature that can be utilised, and a well-designed sustainability agenda give Åland all the tools needed to become a sustainable destination and thus less seasonally dependent. With concerns about the upcoming season already growing due to reduced ferry departures, there is a need, and an excellent opportunity, to encourage visitation out-of-season and more extended visits rather than more visitors.

Can Åland overcome seasonality? Probably not completely, but the adverse effects can be mitigated if enough effort is put into the endeavours and all sectors work together. The messages conveyed by businesses during this study are clear: seasonality is a problem that needs to be addressed. The ideas put forward by the companies in this study are not extreme or radical but rather things that can be fulfilled. This thesis tried to bring forth businesses' struggles and experiences and now seeks to pass on their valuable ideas and knowledge.

Furthermore, greater cooperation between the decision-makers in tourism, local people and businesses is needed to counteract seasonality. It is preferable to bring all stakeholders to the negotiating table as the aim is to achieve a sustainable tourism industry and a sustainable Åland. However, during the writing of this thesis, the official DMO of Åland invited citizens to participate in a digital dialogue on the new tourism strategy in which locals can anonymously contribute their opinions on how Åland should be marketed and known. Thus, greater cooperation seems to be underway already.

Of course, just talking and writing down the ideas to develop tourism is easy, as actually implementing them in practice can be more of a challenge. As the new tourism strategy is to

be ready during the summer of 2023, this thesis hopes to contribute with information, insight and inspiration - not only to the decision-makers on possibly easing the struggle with seasonality but also to the businesses struggling with it.

As many others, this study concludes that seasonality is a challenging topic, both to define and analyse and, not least, overcome. Despite its difficulties, seasonality is a characteristic feature of the Åland tourism industry. Though it can be coped with, many desire a longer season.

8.1 Limitations

The limitations of this study can be considered to be time and a lack of measurements. Time can be considered a constraint since many businesses were at the time of writing busy with preparations for the upcoming season and did not find the time to participate in the study. Furthermore, this study did not measure the seasonality of Åland or the island carrying capacity.

8.2 Future Research

Future research could include a study regarding off-season tourism in Åland and examine the reasons why tourists visit Åland during that time. The research could also include what they find lacking in services when travelling out-of-season, i.e., what can be improved to possibly increase off-season travelling further.

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Appendix

Appendix I. Interview Guide

Bakgrundsfrågor:

F1: Kan du kort beskriva verksamheten?

F2: Hur länge har du bedrivit verksamheten / jobbat inom företaget?

Frågor gällande turismen på Åland:

F3: Hur betydelsefull är turismen för företaget?

F3.1: Har ni en stor del besökare i form av lokalbefolkning?

Frågor gällande säsongsbundenhet:

F4: Vad skulle du säga att är orsak till att turismen på Åland är säsongsbunden?

F5: Hur påverkas ni av säsongerna, känner ni av det och hur?

F6: Kan du kort berätta hur ett verksamhetsår ser ut för er?

F6.1 (Om verksamheten är stängd delvis under året): Vad har ni för sysselsättning om verksamheten är stängd?

F6.2 (Om verksamheten är öppen året runt): Reagerar ni på säsongsvariationerna? Hur anpassar ni er?

F7: Gör ni någonting själv för att försöka öka turism eller attrahera fler besökare, endera inom Åland, eller utåt mot övriga Sverige-Finland under lågsäsong?

F7.1: Samarbetar ni med andra entreprenörer/företag? Hur? Gynnar det er?

Frågor gällande turismstrategier:

F8: Vad tycker du om insatserna som är gjorda för att öka Ålands attraktionskraft i lågsäsong? (Evenemang, hemestererbjudanden, konferenspaket..) Har de fungerat? / Har ni känt av insatserna?

F8.1: Är insatserna tillräckliga eller tycker du det borde göras flera försök på att

- öka Ålands attraktionskraft utanför högsäsongen?
- förlänga själva högsäsongen på Åland?

F9: Statliga organisationer förespråkar mycket för en hållbar turistnäring och uttalar sig i att man ska stödja och främja lokala aktörer inom näringen året runt. Anser du att de någonsin visat stöd under svårare perioder? Har någon annan offentlig organisation visat stöd?

F9.1: Anser du att säsongsmässighet och följderna har lyfts fram och diskuterats tillräckligt?

F9.2: Vad anser du att man kunde göra, inom olika offentliga organisationer för att lätta på säsongsberoendet? Vad borde implementeras i den nya turismstrategin?

Frågor gällande hållbarhet:

Åland har tagit stora steg mot hållbarhet och hållbar utveckling de senaste åren och även den nya turismstrategin är döpt till "Färdplan för hållbar turism 2030". Dessutom har hållbarhet som koncept och hållbart resande uppmärksammats mycket, och anses vara en av de stora resetrenderna, samt något som konsumenter efterfrågar mer och mer.

F10: Arbetar ni med hållbarhet? Hurdant hållbarhetsarbete drivs inom verksamheten?

F11: Vad skulle behövas för en mer hållbar turism på ön?

F11.1: Tror du att flera hållbara åtgärder skulle locka fler turister under lågsäsongen?

F11.2: Vad borde dessa åtgärder bestå av / vara?

Avslutande:

F12: Finns det något ytterligare du vill nämna?

Appendix 2. Form of Consent

Samtycke till deltagande i forskningsprojektet

Jag ger härmed mitt samtycke till att delta i forskningsprojektet "The Struggles of Seasonality Among Businesses" som leds av Fanny Skogster, student vid Uppsala Universitet. Jag är medveten om att mitt deltagande i projektet innebär att jag kommer att bli intervjuad om yrkesposition, erfarenheter inom den åländska turistnäringen, åsikter gällande turismstrategier och mina upplevelser gällande säsongsvariationer.

1. Jag är medveten om att deltagandet är helt frivilligt och att jag när som helst har rätt att återkalla mitt samtycke utan att ange orsak
2. Jag förstår att det står mig fritt att avsluta intervjun eller vägra att svara på en fråga utan att ange orsak
3. Jag förstår att intervjun ljudinspelas. Själva ljudinspelningen är en personuppgift som behandlas med stöd av ditt samtycke. Ljudinspelningen kommer att raderas efter att intervjun transkriberats, dvs. skrivits ut. Jag godkänner ljudinspelningen av intervjun och samtycker till att denna behandlas i enlighet med informationen ovan.
4. Forskningsmålet är förklarat och jag känner mig trygg när det gäller syftet med undersökningen
5. Jag förstår att jag kommer att få en kopia av denna samtyckesblankett och att jag kan återkalla samtycket före, under och efter intervjun. Jag vet hur och vem jag ska kontakta om jag vill göra det.

Jag vill att mitt och verksamhetens namn anonymiseras i avhandlingen: Ja / Nej

Jag vill emotta en kopia av det färdiga arbetet: Ja / Nej

Namn

Underskrift

Ort & Datum

Appendix 3. Interview summaries in English

Interview 1

R1 runs an accommodation and restaurant business, with accommodation being the main activity. Tourism is considered crucial for the business; it is a seasonal business, meaning they are open during the summer. R1 says they can open for enquiries even in winter, but that rarely happens, and thus they spend the low season doing other things, like travelling.

The seasonality of Åland described by R1 to be due to the general holiday period and because most people consider Åland to be strictly a summer destination, partly because of the marketing that has been done. R1 thinks there is definitely potential for Åland to be a year-round destination and that there are more opportunities than what is being offered at the moment. The events, Skördefesten and Åland Grönskar are said to be valuable tools in prolonging the season, but apart from the events, it can be difficult to assess the effects of the efforts.

R1 states that it is fun to have a lot of customers, but the issue with seasonality is that it is often too intense. Many visitors in such a short time can be exhausting, and the focus should lie more on spreading out events over the year, thus spreading out the visitors. With a seasonal business, there is a lot of focus on making enough revenue during the summer to make it feel worthwhile. Seasonality also brings struggles with maintaining and finding staff.

Instead of increasing the number of visitors, R1 thinks strategies should be developed to make people stay longer in Åland, as extending the tourists' visits can also be considered better in terms of sustainability. However, R1 also believes that by encouraging longer visits, people would venture more into the countryside and archipelago, thus promoting the activities of the smaller businesses outside the city.

Interview 2

The business offers both food and accommodation, and it is open year-round. Still, it is described as very dependent on tourism. The restaurant has a relatively large proportion of local people as guests, significantly reducing the restaurant's seasonal dependence.

R2 describes the tourism season in Åland as stretching from May to September and states that tourism is seasonal mainly because of the weather. However, a lack of labour during the off-season is also mentioned as a cause by R2, as keeping the business functioning without staff is challenging.

R2 generally expresses satisfaction regarding the incentives and efforts to extend the tourist season and create more tourism in the low season. The harvest festival, Skördefesten, and its impact are described as favourable for the island and the tourist season; "It is a way to extend the season and a good way to promote Åland" (R2). Furthermore, destination marketing is seen as successful, as during the pandemic, people could not travel overseas, so Åland was heavily targeted in the Finnish market. The interviewee says this has contributed to increased awareness of Åland in the domestic market. They also consider that the season has become slightly longer after the pandemic, thanks to more domestic tourists.

R2 says the company works actively with sustainability in all dimensions and has a certification. They view sustainability as a strategy for the future, as both beneficial and necessary, as the island's carrying capacity needs to be considered. R2 mentions that travelling out-of-season is something that needs to be highlighted more, especially since there is a goal to increase overnight visitors in commercial accommodation facilities to 300,000; the interviewee shares their opinion - that if this goal is to be reached, it needs to happen outside the summer season.

It is clear after the interview that the company experiences seasonality but that they have learnt the curve and are able to adapt: "You know that if there is one thing that is certain, it is that you will die - the last two weeks of July are very busy" (R2). However, R2 acknowledges that the current seasonality of tourism is not sustainable in the long run, nor can they ignore that breaking the seasonal dependency will be difficult.

Interview 3

The respondent runs an accommodation and restaurant business. The company is a seasonal business that is only open from June to August, meaning, during the absolute high season. R3 describes the weather and the summer holidays as reasons for the seasonality, however, the lack of activities and that only a few establishments are open during winter is also mentioned.

For winter, they also close down their activities completely but can open for requests, even though they rarely come. During the low season, the employees work in other occupations, and R3 says that they often travel, work with another occupation or do maintenance for the coming summer. The interviewee states that they do not really experience struggles with finding staff, as they mainly have staff who return every year who do not mind working at the organisation only from June to August.

R3 says they would like to stay open longer into the shoulder season, but it is not economically viable. The company can notice the efforts made to extend the season, but to a very small extent, which is why they have chosen not to extend the opening hours. Sustainability is seen as a key concept, and the respondent says that the whole of Åland is environmentally conscious, making it easy to 'do the right thing'. Nature and maritime culture are highlighted as something that could be marketed more in tourism, as should the many small guest harbours.

Interview 4

R4 runs an accommodation and restaurant business open during the high season, from May to October. Since they have adapted their opening hours to the absolute tourist season, tourism is essential for the company. During the low season, they have another occupation that can be combined with the seasonal business.

R4 states tourism in Åland is seasonal since people have their holidays during the summer. However, they mention that there is potential in a customer group, older people, who have the opportunity and often travel outside the season.

R4 says that the efforts made to extend the season are successful, and they notice the effects on their business; "if there is a conference in Mariehamn during a weekend in September, we can be fully booked because all the hotel rooms are booked" (R4). The challenges of seasonality can be seen in the availability of services during the low season. If the business is open out of season, guests are often disappointed because there is not enough in Åland to do. "They complained about the shops being closed, but it's not my fault. You can't attract people in the low season without having something for them to do" (R4). People need a reason to travel, and the need for activities in the low season is evident, but the question of who should take the initiative remains. Skördefesten and Åland Grönskar are mentioned as two very successful events that have already helped extend the otherwise short season. R4 also sees potential in making Åland a winter destination by further developing the Christmas events.

Although the efforts made so far are described as successful, R4 also believes there is room to do much more. For example, nature tourism is highlighted as an untapped goldmine as Åland has a unique and beautiful environment. Furthermore, R4 sees potential in marketing Åland as a sustainable travel destination but believes that the well-being of the Baltic Sea must first be taken care of and restored, and public transport needs to be developed.

Interview 5

The business offers food and visitation activities. Tourism in Åland is considered very seasonal, and the peak can be clearly observed to be during the summer months. The company has a high number of visitors, both tourists and locals, during the peak season, but it is not seen as an attractive place during winter. Tourism is mentioned to be seasonal because of the weather and partially because Åland is marketed as a summer destination. The business adapts to variations in demand by hiring more staff for the summer and adjusting the services. R5 says that during the pandemic they tried to attract the local population with offers and marketing, but it was not a great success, though they gained some visitors from the efforts.

The efforts that have been made to extend the season, Åland Grönskar and the harvest festival, are seen as successful, and the interviewee thinks that more events need to be established since they work well as seasonal extenders. R5 does however state that it now can

be questioned if the harvest festival has grown too popular, as the carrying capacity may be compromised. Tourism during the low season has also increased according to R5, but it can still become overcrowded during peak periods.

R5 thinks Åland should be marketed more as a destination outside the summer, such as in spring and autumn to enhance attractiveness among new target groups. The efforts made by the Government of Åland to support tourism are satisfactory, but there is room for more to be done.