

A tourism master thesis

# THE COMPLEX WORLD OF SUSTAINABILITY: A CASE STUDY WITH FOCUS ON NATIONALPARK THY



*(Source: Private picture by Merete S. Kvorning).*

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# Abstract

The concept of sustainability has, in recent decades, emerged as an important paradigm and gained increased attention across a wide range of different industries in relation to, for instance, consumption, production, and behaviour. In this context, the tourism industry is no exception. It has been deemed to be a valid tool to aid in creating progress from an environmental, socio-cultural, and economic perspective as a part of destination development (Clausen & Gyimóthy, 2016). As a result of the amplified interest in the concept, trends such as Ecotourism, 'Green' Tourism, and Responsible Tourism have appeared since the 1990s (Saarinen, 2006). The coherence between the tourism industry and sustainable development has, nevertheless, been criticised by several scholars who emphasise the incompatible or conflicting nature of the two (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2014; Butler, 2015; Hall, 2009). Sustainability does furthermore cause confusion in terms of both conceptualisation and implementation of the concept, and can thus be argued to result in challenges during the process of sustainable development (Butler, 2015).

The aim of this thesis has been to investigate how operators understand and implement sustainability in their businesses and institutions in and around Nationalpark Thy. In terms of the data collection, the primary sample was chosen to include operators offering either nature- or food-based experiences in and around the park, since these were found to be plentiful and interesting for this topic. Additionally, three other operators were deemed relevant for this study because of their position and knowledge regarding tourism and development within the national park. The findings revealed how the operators often conceptualised sustainability on a rather local level with emphasis on their own businesses as well as the local community. Here the environmental and socio-cultural aspects were found to dominate the answers to a larger extent than the economic one, but correlations between the type of tourism and ways of approaching the concept were found to have an impact. Nevertheless, several operators pointed to the economic aspect in relation to the support of the local economy. Similar to the results from the literature, the concept of sustainability and sustainable development seemed to be challenging for the operators. This was both evident in terms of understanding and implementation, which might explain the lacking examples of a more holistic perspective.

**Keywords:** Sustainability, Sustainable Development, Tourism, Nationalpark Thy, Nature-based experiences, Food-based experiences, Conceptual complexity.

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# Introduction

The concept of sustainability has become a buzzword within many different industries, and the tourism sphere is no exception to this. Sustainability and sustainable development seem to have a rather important position in the minds of the consumers as well as being a well-discussed paradigm in international politics (Higgins-Desbiolles et al. 2019b). The topic has become a mega-trend within this industry, which can be seen in especially the discourses linked to environmental sustainability, where issues such as responsible tourism and Ecotourism have emerged among a range of other definitions about sustainability (Saarinen, 2014). This is not surprising, giving the rise of the tourism industry, which also provides a valid foundation for the actions taken towards becoming a “greener” industry. Tourism and being a tourist are something that almost everyone can relate to at some stage in life. Since the mid 20th century, it has been one of the world’s fastest-growing industries, which has led to its role as an important and influential actor in the global economy.

The expansion of the tourism industry has, without a doubt, been positively seen from an economic and strategic perspective. However, it is important to remember that tourism development is not only associated with economic benefits, but also for its ties to both environmental and socio-cultural contexts regarding improvements of human conditions (Eizenberg & Jabareen, 2017). This advantageous position is, nevertheless, very suitable to foster socio-economic growth and enable sustainable development initiatives to protect the environment. According to United Nations (UN) and WTO (World Tourism Organisation) and the Sustainable development goals (SDG’s), this is evident on, e.g. responsible consumption and production, and clean coastal and maritime tourism (Tourism in the 2030 Agenda, 2020). Because of the rapid growth and the subsequent impacts, more attention has been given to responsibility in tourism, and both the industry and tourists themselves have become more aware of the need to do so. Consumer responses and consumer behaviour sadly seem conflicting, since only a small segment of consumers alters their behaviour accordingly when choosing where and how to travel. Thus, the stated and revealed preferences do not always coincide (Pulido-Fernández & López-Sánchez, 2016).

However, destinations, tourism operators, and organisations such as the UNWTO are supportive and working in the direction of a more sustainable tourism industry. It is unlikely that tourism can ever be categorised as a sustainable activity. Still, it can be altered to become more responsible in terms of economic, social, and environmental matters. The aforementioned has undoubtedly contributed to the development of the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with the preparation of the 17 sustainable Development Goals (SDG's). In this, tourism is mentioned in number eight, 12, and 14, which emphasises the influence the industry can have on the socio-cultural and environmental aspects in the world (Sustainable Development Goals, 2020). However, the complexity of the issue of sustainability within the tourism sphere is understandable, since several definitions seem similar but have minor variations to them, which furthers the conceptual confusion. In addition, the literature provides discussions about the well-known model of the Three Pillars of Sustainability, which has been used as a general guiding principle in various discourses of tourism and sustainability.

The aim of this thesis has been to explore how sustainability is, from a supplier perspective, understood and possibly implemented into specific operators' businesses/experiences. The area of interest is Nationalpark Thy. Thy is located between the North Sea and the Limfjord in the Northwest of Jutland and has in the last decades become an increasingly more popular destination among tourists with the establishment of Nationalpark Thy and surfing events in Klitmøller hosted by Cold Hawaii. According to a business case made for Thisted Municipality Council, Nationalpark Thy has a brand awareness on 52 per cent among the Danish population, and an estimated visitors' number of 1,2-1,5 million visitors a year (Erhvervsforum, 2018). With this in mind, it would be interesting to investigate if tourism operators in this area were concerned about sustainability in terms of their business and the experiences they offer to the tourists/guests. Based on this, two segments of operators were chosen. These either offer food-related experiences or nature-based experiences in or close to the national park itself. Additionally, three other operators were deemed relevant for this study because of their position and knowledge regarding tourism and development within the national park. The aforementioned thus constitutes the background for this study. With the abovementioned in mind, this thesis seeks to investigate the following problem formulation:

*- How do operators working with tourism in and around Nationalpark Thy understand and implement the concept of sustainable development within their business?*

# Theoretical framework

## Introducing the chapter

As it has been described within the abovementioned introduction for this thesis, the concept of sustainable tourism development is rather complex. Stating this, the concept has been understood and defined in many different ways by scholars to which suggestions on how to approach it in practice varies as well. As this thesis seeks to examine *how operators working with tourism in and around Thy Nationalpark understand and implement the concept of sustainable development within their business*, this chapter will introduce different takes on the concept whereby provide an insight into the complexity of sustainable tourism development. Thus, this knowledge will be included in the analysis to help answer the problem formulation. In this, it will be possible to investigate if there are similarities or differences between the understandings and approaches described within the literature review and the ones of the chosen tourism operators in Nationalpark Thy. Due to the complexity of the concept, only a set of approaches has been included in this paper. The choice of content for the theoretical framework and the use of this in the analysis will be further elaborated in the methodology. Stating this, the following chapter concerning the theoretical framework will introduce a set of approaches to sustainable tourism development. Furthermore, it will also include a short description of its relevance to this specific thesis.

## Sustainability

The term ‘sustainability’ has emerged as a buzzword within tourism development discourses in the last decades. The increasing interest in environmental issues and concerns can be traced back to the 1960s and forward, where the social climate favouring tourism development was influenced by inequalities, oil leaks in the ocean, global divisions in politics, and growth debates in terms of consumption. Because the tourism industry has witnessed a massive growth over the last century, it is perceived as being a valid example of generating solutions in terms of economic, socio-cultural,



and environmental issues. These three dimensions of sustainability are also referred to as the Three Pillars of Sustainability, which will be further elaborated in the section “tourism and the three pillars of sustainable development”. The claim is based on the dominating presence of the industry in almost every part of the world. The social paradigm can be improved, e.g. facilitating employment and expand the capacity of the economy (Hatipoglu et al., 2016; Ellis & Sheridan, 2014; McCool, 2015; Connell et al., 2008). One of the more significant events in the history of the emergence of sustainability in tourism was the presentation of the Brundtland Commission’s report from 1987 stating that “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019b, p. 1553). The impact of the report can be detected in tourism development, where policy initiatives concerning sustainability were incorporated, and trends rose such as Ecotourism, Responsible Tourism, Community Tourism, and Green Tourism.

Furthermore, the tourism industry was recognised by the World Bank and the UNWTO, as being a valid candidate to promote and work with, respectively, poor and underdeveloped countries as well as the United Nations Millennium Goals and their successors the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG’s) (Saarinen, 2014; Purvis et al., 2019; McCool, 2015). The SDG’s were adopted in 2015 and is based on an ambition to promote sustainable development for both people and the planet. The agenda of sustainable development consists of 17 specific goals and 169 subsidiary goals aiming to eliminate poverty, reduce inequality, better jobs, and sustainable economic growth etc. Thus, recognising both social, economic, and environmental development in a joint effort to achieve and maintain results of sustainable development. Tourism is mentioned in three out of the 17 goals regarding economic growth, responsible consumption, and sustainable use of ocean and marine resources. Thus, recognising the importance of the tourism industry’s imprint on the destinations (Tourism in the 2030 Agenda, 2020).

Despite the incontestable evidence that the tourism industry has a significant influence on financial development, there are areas where the advancement seems to be lacking quite a lot. Examples of this could be the issue of distributing the resources fairly in the destination, so everyone is considered and not only more affluent constituents, as well as limiting government’s ability to develop tourism no matter the cost and with the sustainable paradigm in mind (Eizenberg & Jabareen, 2017). As mentioned above, it is a valid point that the industry is excellent in generating local economies and



creating job opportunities for the residents. Yet, one can question whether or not the destination and its community can benefit from a more general perspective. Ellis and Sheridan (2014) addresses this topic by stating:

“Ironically, the emerging products do not always manifest sustainable tourism’s original intent. For example, an ecological product might establish good market growth but if there are negative community impacts, it has not achieved sustainable tourism holistic benefits. Where projects are ecologically and socio-culturally appropriate, they might become untenable; struggling to sustain multiple expectations and therefore fail—which defeats the purpose” (Ellis and Sheridan, 2014, p.467).

The effectiveness of tourism planning and policy with sustainability as the agenda has been less effective, which also can be blamed on the lacking recognition of the industry’s importance in the sustainability processes (Hatipoglu, 2016; Connell et al., 2008; Ellis & Sheridan, 2014).

The development of sustainability within the tourism industry has also led to an increasing interest in the subject within tourism literature, where the concept has evolved and created a complex conceptual understanding. A result of this development can be found in the notion of ‘responsible tourism’, which has its foundation in that the industry has become responsible for a range of various influences and aims at both a local and global scale. The notion describes an approach in tourism to minimise the damage the industry creates and maximise the positive impacts in terms of the social and economic aspects. Responsible tourism encourages ethical and moral consumption among relevant stakeholders to achieve better conditions for the residents and the environment in the destinations (Saarinen, 2014). However, there seems to be a critique of how to distinguish the two terms of sustainable tourism and responsible tourism. Although the concept of responsible tourism is used as a particular type of tourism behaviour as well as corporate social responsibility, it is still quite comparable to the general idea of sustainable tourism, and thus hard to distinguish between (Saarinen, 2014; Hatipoglu et al., 2016; Sharpley, 2013). This multifaceted understanding of sustainability in tourism is causing an unclear meaning of what the concept entails, as well as how to operationalise it in practice. Hence, there is a consensus of sustainability being a term that is and can be understood from many different perspectives, which does not ease the struggle to find a commonly agreed-upon definition of it (Ellis & Sheridan, 2014).

Sustainability in tourism is, as mentioned above, quite complex in the sense that numerous types of tourism are categorised as “sustainable” in the literature. Hence, the following table should help to provide the reader with an overview of the terms and definitions used above:

<b>Sustainable Tourism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Optimal use of environmental resources that serves as a key element in tourism development, ecological processes and preserve natural heritage and biodiversity.</li> <li>- Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host, preserve their cultural heritage, traditions, values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance.</li> <li>- Ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed</li> </ul> <p>(Sustainable development, 2020).</p>
<b>Responsible Tourism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Refer to the development within the tourism industry that highlights the practices and principles furthering better conditions for people and the environment in host communities as well as for visitors in these places</li> <li>- Aims at minimising the less positive impacts of tourism by advocating for ethical consumption and production</li> <li>- Responsibility discourses have led to the increase in adapting corporate social responsibility in tourism stakeholders</li> </ul> <p>(Saarinen, 2014; Sharpley, 2013).</p>
<b>Ecotourism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Contributes actively to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage</li> <li>- Includes local and indigenous communities in its planning, development and operation, and contributing to their well-being</li> <li>- Interprets the natural and cultural heritage of the destination to visitors,</li> <li>- Lends itself better to independent travellers, as well as to organised tours for small size groups - Small-scale endeavour</li> </ul> <p>(Cater &amp; Cater, 2015).</p>

<b>Community-based Tourism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Involving locals in tourism development to their advantage</li> <li>- Locals have the control in terms of generating revenue from tourism to improve their conditions</li> <li>- Considering the state of the environment with respect for its capacity (Ruz-Ballesteros, 2011.)</li> </ul>
<b>Green Tourism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A more general categorisation for tourism activities that are part of the sustainable tourism development, where the activities are based on the harmony with the natural and sociocultural host environment</li> <li>- Types of tourist activities that advocate the improvement of the economic, social, and environmental conditions at the host (UNWTO, 2012).</li> </ul>

Table 1. (Summary of approaches to sustainable tourism development).

It is however important to stress that almost every type categorised as “sustainable” development in tourism somewhat overlap because of their close link to the general objectives of sustainable tourism development – thus causing the conceptual confusion in the literature (Sharpley, 2013; Saarinen, 2014). It should be noted that a more thorough discussion of the different approaches used in this thesis will be presented further down within this section

When talking about the word “sustainability”, efforts have been made to create awareness about its role as entailing both economic, social, and environmental aspects as mentioned above. However, often the word seems to be associated with the environment, and the issue of natural disasters being a consequence of an excessive lifestyle by humans. The discussions in media and the political sphere have shaped the public discourse by focussing on the unsustainable ways of life in the western parts of the world. In emerging economies such as China and India, the upcoming middle class gains better economic conditions – thus resulting in increasing levels of consumption. Natural disasters are becoming more frequent with more cases of droughts, heavy rains, and ice melting, which turn but also maintain the focus on climate change and sustainability (Eizenberg & Jabareen, 2017). Although the debate regarding sustainability has become broader, it seems that consumers still tend to relate sustainability with some environmental aspect. A study shows that when respondents were asked about which words they would describe sustainability with, a substantial part of them chose the words “environmentally friendly”, “natural”, “organic”, “green”, “recycle” and “renewable” as most similar

to “sustainability” (Kho, 2014). On the other hand, there was a low identification of more socially sustainable words such as “community”, “trust”, and “ethical”, which furthers the notion of people associating sustainability with the environment and climate change. The three-pillar model of sustainability has, however, been a solid factor in developing these paradigms and the essential correlation between them to achieve sustainable development. However, the contextual picture of the word needs to be broadened (Eizenberg & Jabareen, 2017).

To summarise, sustainability and sustainable development have become an essential variable in the literature. In the same way, it has also become essential for policy and regional progress as an approach to think about planning and development. The view on sustainability as important to incorporate into the tourism industry was, once and for all, emphasised in the Brundtland Report. The impact of the report can be seen in tourism development with regard to the incorporated policy initiatives concerning sustainability which can be argued caused for trends such as Ecotourism and responsible tourism to rise. Sustainability has become an important field of research for scholars and has thus appeared frequently in tourism literature over the last decades with a focus on limitations to growth and responsible tourism. It is thus visible in the numerous sub-concepts deriving from the overall notion of sustainability as one can see in the abovementioned table. Yet, because scholars have used the word rather loosely, the meaning of the term has unfortunately become somewhat vague and contested. In the following sections will provide more detailed descriptions on some of the more commonly known approaches within the sphere of sustainable development.

## Tourism and the Three Pillars of Sustainable Development

According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Tourism Organisation (WTO), tourism can be argued to pose a significant global and growing activity that enables development creates new jobs and economic growth etc. (UNEP & WTO, 2005). Nevertheless, it is also argued to affect environments as well as the culture and wellbeing of its host populations (UNEP & WTO, 2005; Candrea & Ispas, 2009). Stating this, the growth in the tourism sector enables more prosperity, but it also creates challenges as it may affect environments and local

communities negatively. In this case, UNEP and WTO (2005) argue that tourism should be managed with care not only to minimise its negative impacts but also to maximise its positive ones. An argument which is supported by other scholars as well (e.g. Lopez & Bhaktikul, 2018; Candrea & Ispas, 2009). Thus, "[...] all forms of tourism should strive to be more sustainable" (UNEP & WTO, 2005, p.2). In this process, the policymakers play an important role in the tourism development planning - thus emphasising a technocratic approach which focuses on measuring impacts in relation to tourism. To enlighten and help policymakers and other stakeholders develop more sustainable tourism, UNEP and WTO (2005) have developed a guide wherein they define the concept of sustainable development in a tourism context and come up with suggestions on how to approach this. The organisations stress that tourism as a sector can be beneficial, not only for local communities and their wellbeing but also for the environment, as it can help raise awareness about the environment and contribute to the conservation of it.

UNEP and WTO's (2005) definition is highly inspired by the three dimensions or pillars of sustainability, which consist of economic sustainability, social sustainability and environmental sustainability. Thus, when speaking of sustainable tourism development, it concerns the environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects, which is also known as the three dimensions or pillars. In this connection, UNEP and WTO (2005) stress that it is essential for policymakers and other stakeholders to find a suitable balance between these to ensure further or continue sustainability. WTO and UNEP (2005) are aware of the challenges in achieving this balance. Nevertheless, they argue that it is necessary to further develop tourism in a more sustainable direction. Scholars such as Candrea & Ispas (2009) and Lopez & Bhaktikul (2018) share this belief as they agree that one should take these three dimensions and the balance between these into consideration when working with sustainable tourism development. By doing so, Lopez and Bhaktikul (2018) argue that it becomes possible to look at tourism development in a broader sense and avoid only to have one focus area such as the one concerning economic growth. According to WTO, sustainable tourism can be defined as "[...] Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities [...]" (UNEP & WTO, 2005, p. 12). Nevertheless, the organisations note that there is no final and fully sustainable tourism. Instead, sustainable tourism should be something that we always strive for which it should be viewed as a continuous process of improvement. Thus, sustainable tourism development should meet the following criteria in a balanced manner:

<b>Economic pillar/dimension</b>	<b>Sociocultural pillar/dimension</b>	<b>Environmental pillar/dimension</b>
”Ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation”.	”Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance”.	”Make optimal use of environmental resources that constitute a key element in tourism development, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural resources and biodiversity”.

Table 2. (UNEP & WTO, 2005, p. 11).

In order to develop tourism in a more sustainable direction, it is necessary to include all stakeholders of relevance. Furthermore, strong political leadership should ensure that there is a wide set of participants in the planning and help these move forward together. Thus, strong governance, good inclusion and collaboration can be seen as helpful in the process of sustainable tourism development. Candrea and Ispas (2009) agree on the fact that successful sustainable tourism development requires strong political leadership, informed and included stakeholders who should be taken seriously. Thus, it is possible to argue that a good stakeholder collaboration is necessitated to successfully develop more sustainable tourism (Candrea & Ispas, 2009; UNEP & WTO, 2005). Nevertheless, as it has been mentioned earlier in this section, developing sustainable tourism is a continuous process, and according to UNEP and WTO (2005), one must monitor the tourism impacts consistently within this. Additionally, the tourists’ satisfaction level should still be high to which their tourism experience should be meaningful and introduce them to the importance of more sustainable tourism (UNEP & WTO, 2005; Candrea & Ispas, 2009).

While UNEP and WTO's (2005) approach to sustainable tourism development may be recognised and used by some scholars and tourism operators, it should be noticed that it has its critics as well. Amongst others, McCool (2015) believes that the concept of sustainable tourism development needs to be re-framed to fit the tourism-related challenges of the 21st century. Stating this, several scholars such as Higgins-Desbiolles et al., (2019b), Hall et al., (2010), and McCool (2015) do not believe that it would be possible for the different stakeholders to balance out the social, environmental and economic dimensions of sustainable tourism development or pillars. For this, McCool (2015) questions:

“How do constituencies differ in their preferences? Why? What about constituencies not yet alive [...] Economic feasibility is so dependent on short term market and financial conditions as to be counter to the long-term notion of sustainability as intergenerational equity. Social acceptance varies significantly across cultures and even within small communities, so we are confronted with the question: acceptable for whom?” (McCool, 2015, p. 218)

In this sense, McCool (2015) suggest that one should look at the world as dynamic and complex, whereto tourism should be seen as a component. Thus, according to him “[...] conceptualising tourism as one component of a social-ecological system, helps managers, practitioners and academics think more holistically about tourism [...]” (McCool, 2015, p. 219). The holistic approach to sustainable tourism development will be elaborated further down within the section *A holistic approach to sustainable tourism development*. Another scholar who questions the three dimensions or pillars of sustainable tourism development is Butler (2015). He finds that the environmental, economic and social dimensions should be valued equally problematic in more than one way. Firstly,

“[...] without economic viability the other two elements become irrelevant because tourism will not take place, or if it does, it will be short-lived because it will not make a return on investment and thus will not be sustainable economically (Butler, 2015, p. 224). Secondly, the “[...] more serious, error in the assumption is that it is a tribble bottom line. In reality, it is a quadruple bottom line with the fourth element being politics” (Butler, 2015, p. 224).

In this sense, one cannot ignore the importance of the economy in a tourism context. Nevertheless, according to him, the best way to develop tourism in a more sustainable direction would be to limit



the number of tourists, as this would lead to less impact. Nevertheless, Butler (2015) argues that in the end, the best way to secure sustainable development within a tourism context would be to limit the number of tourists, even though this may not be the most desirable solution for many of the stakeholders involved.

To summarise, the above-mentioned section introduces an approach to the concept of sustainable tourism development which includes the three Pillars or Dimensions of sustainable development. Within this, it is believed that the environmental, economic and socio-cultural dimensions all should be taken into consideration by policymakers and other stakeholders when wishing to develop tourism more sustainably. Furthermore, it is noted by UNEP and WTO (2005) that long-term sustainable development only can be achieved if a suitable balance between the three dimensions is established. As this section provides an insight into the three pillars of sustainability in a tourism context, it also poses an example of one way in which sustainable tourism development can be understood or approached. This approach to sustainable development constitutes a part of the theoretical framework of this thesis. It will be included in the analysis as well to see whether or not, some of the tourism operators in the area of Thy somehow share this understanding. If so, it would also be possible to examine how this way of understanding sustainable tourism development affects how they manage the tourism experience that they offer.

## Three Traditions of Sustainable Tourism

A common denominator in the studies discussing sustainable tourism development is the issue of growth, and how to approach its limitations to identify the options. Despite the disagreement on how to understand and use the idea of sustainability in practice, Jarkko Saarinen (2014) presents a table that captures the traditions found in the discourses regarding sustainability in tourism. It is, however, important to stress that Saarinens (2014) categorisation is only one way of presenting different perceptions of sustainable tourism found in the literature. Nevertheless, this table provides a useful and transparent insight into the slightly confusing world of sustainable tourism literature. The traditions are known as resource-based, activity-based, and community-based. These differ in terms of their approach and usability regarding the applied resources within the tourism industry. Moreover,

the traditions are created from the perspective of existing research considering destinations as the main area of focus. To this, he states:

“The traditions are characterised by different ideas on the nature of the limits to growth and different perspectives on these limits and how they can be known and defined. Although the impacts of tourism are increasingly global and operating in the whole tourism system (involving destinations, the generating regions of tourists and connecting routes), the main emphasis of past and existing research, management and policy activities has been largely based on the destination (i.e., local) level” (Saarinen, 2014, p. 4).

The following table outlines the main areas of interesting in terms of the three traditions.

	<b>Resource-Based</b>	<b>Activity-Based</b>	<b>Community-Based</b>
Origin/Manifestation	Carrying Capacity Model	Product Cycle (TALC)	Participatory Planning
Orientation	Environment (physical)	Industry	Community
Limits to growth	Objective/Measurable	Relative/Changing	Constructed/Negotiated
Resource and system view	Static	Dynamic	Dynamic/Static
Time scale	Long	“Now”	Short

Table 3. (Saarinen, 2014, p. 4).

A common denominator for all three is that the concept of carrying capacity has been considered because of its relevance in relation to understanding the limitations of growth and development. Despite its origin in the first part of the 20th century, Saarinen (2014) does not view it as an old-fashioned concept but argues for its usability today. Mostly, the concept is used in relation to sustainability-related issues in tourism research, which justifies its influence in the conceptualisation of growth and its limitations within the sphere of tourism (Saarinen, 2014). The foundation for the concept is still valid because the tourism industry to this day operates with the idea of determining a certain number of visitors being allowed into, for instance, a bay in Alaska. Hence, her argument about its relevance to sustainable tourism development.

Resource-based tradition:

When looking at the model, the first type of tradition is the resource-based tradition that focuses on the limitations of growth by measuring the capacity of a particular subject – in line with the concept of carrying capacity. Drawing on the natural science aspect, it will enable a more thorough identification of that specific number, which can determine how many tourists can visit a specific place without their presence harming the area as much as if this number grew. Furthermore, the resource-based tradition forces actors to rethink their activities in places with a limit that cannot be exceeded if they wish for growth. Hence, they have to prove that they can expand their business but without enforcing even more pressure on the environment and its resources. The growth is determined based on tourism impacts in correlation with an evaluation of resources and the condition of nature (Saarinen, 2014).

However, the challenge is to identify the individual influences from different actors or activities in a particular place: “Obviously, the challenges are how to define the original non-tourism conditions of the resources or how to separate the impacts of tourism from changes caused by other activities and natural or human-induced processes taking place the same space” (Saarinen, 2014, pp. 4-5). As the table indicates, the resource-based tradition is static in terms of how it views resources and systems, which clashes with the more general perception of the tourism industry being dynamic (Haraldsson & Ólafsdóttir, 2018; Beritelli & Laesser, 2017; Gunn & Var, 2002). The established limit to growth has, according to Saarinen (2014), become a disadvantage for the industry, since it does not coincide with the flexible nature.

#### Activity-based tradition:

The activity-based tradition mirrors the attempt to define and clarify the position of sustainability in tourism. According to Saarinen (2014) and McKercher (1993), this has to be done from the perspective of the industry and policymakers. This is especially important since tourism development does not work well with limitations to growth because of the industry’s dynamic nature. Hence, the activity-based tradition is identified as being industry-oriented, where the limitations of growth, in general, clashes with the aim of the tourism operators:

“These industry perspectives refer to an activity-based tradition of sustainable tourism. In contrast with resource-based sustainability, tourism actors do not primarily alter their behaviour based on the

static interpretation of the limits to growth: in order to grow, the industry and other related actors can, and quite often do, modify the environment for their economic development purposes” (Saarinen, 2014, p. 5).

The activity-based tradition believes that discourses in tourism development should be centred around the needs of the industry as an economic entity and the availability of its resources. Thus, arguing that specific tourist activities or the industry itself might have a limit as to growth and full capability (Saarinen, 2006.) As opposed to the resource-based tradition, activity-based does not solely focus on the limitations of resources and capacity in a destination, but rather the capacity of the tourism industry to facilitate growth. The dynamic nature of this approach becomes evident in the usage of the TALC model (Tourism area life cycle model) created by Butler (1980). The model shows the development of a destination from its start, the involvement and consolidation phases, and its stagnations phase. Thus, the growth in the tourism industry (the life cycle), and limitations in terms of the carrying capacity constitutes the dynamic nature. With the above-mentioned in mind, the activity-based tradition emphasises how the limits of growth can imply where and when a destination needs to modify its current offers or introduce new products to the market to achieve an increase in growth. Thus, to be able to grow and develop, the tourism industry and other stakeholders are forced to change the environment and rethink how to use their resources to facilitate their wishes.

Because of the tradition’s relativist approach, the industry or different sorts of activities can have different limits to their individual growth and various abilities to manage tourists and influences. The restrictions of growth are the particular alterations to activities, capacities, or products as well as tourism and its capabilities regarding growth. The non-growth notion is important since it suggests that the limitations of sustainability and the carrying capacity can be achieved and that alterations are necessary for tourism products of all sorts to promote the development (Saarinen, 2006).

Community-based tradition:

When comparing the resource-based and activity-based traditions, they seem to be somewhat contradictory in their approach to view growth and its limitations. The growing numbers of tourists every year and the development or modification of destinations seems to indicate that the limitations of the activity-based tradition, have not yet been reached. However, with this increase in numbers,

the resource-based view on growth limitations can likely be disregarded (Saarinen, 2014). In an attempt to find a solution to the challenges between the two above-mentioned traditions, several participation processes and models of governance have been applied to create the third tradition. These efforts can be identified as community methods in tourism research, where ‘community’ refer to both the host and other stakeholders involved in tourism (Mnguni., & Giampiccoli, 2017; Dangi., & Jamal, 2016).

The foundation for this tradition is the idea that the limitations to growth are socially determined, where other stakeholders are part of the decision on when and where to make the limitations, and not just the industry or actors representing the environment. The community-based tradition views sustainability as being the highest level of the determined impacts of tourism activity that can be achieved before it harms the space. It thus negatively influences the particular social, cultural, economic, environmental, or political host actors. These actors are important in this sense because they quite often have a valid power in terms of their knowledge about the chosen criteria for the specific limit (Saarinen, 2014). Consequently, power and knowledge serve as key variables in this matter:

“While tourism impacts exist in a physical reality (e.g., in resource-based world) outside human values and perceptions, in the world of meanings and human preferences, the question of whether these changes are acceptable or unacceptable depends on specific (societal and/or individual) values, attitudes, knowledge and priorities concerning the role and impacts of tourism” (Saarinen, 2014, p. 6).

One, however, has to remember that this tradition cannot make sure that the actors from the host destination and other actors outside, such as the industry, all find equal terms in arranging and developing processes. It is not given either that the actors in the host community can agree upon limits to growth as well, since they too have different priorities based on their individual wishes, and they are not always equally positioned, which further complicates the processes in growth limitation from a sustainability perspective (Saarinen, 2006).

To summarise, the three traditions of sustainable development provide an overview of the conceptual dimensions and relating discussions concerning sustainable tourism and development in the academic

literature. The three variables are concerned with the issues of growth and carrying capacity since these are two of the common denominators in sustainable tourism development. The resource-based tradition is concerned with conservation and emphasis on restricting the negative impacts from the tourism industry on a destination's environment through limits. The activity-based tradition revolves around the positive contributions that the industry can have on improving sustainable development. This is done by modifying the environment based on the demands from the industry as well as the available resources. The community-based tradition is based on the participation and communication of both the destinations, e.g. the community and locals and the representatives from the tourism industry and policymakers in order to determine the limits to growth. However, the community or host has a predominant role in facilitating sustainable development in their destination. It can be argued that the first tradition is based on a measurable approach, whereas the other two traditions utilise social constructions of sustainability. The above-mentioned is mainly because of the decisions regarding the acceptable balance between social and economic profits versus what nature can afford to lose. In the following section, de-growth will be discussed, as it is an approach to sustainable development. In relation to this case study, it will be investigated if some of the operators placed in or close to Nationalpark Thy consider some of these elements within their understanding of sustainable tourism development. Furthermore, it will be examined whether or not there are similarities between the content of the traditions and their ways of working with tourism.

## De-growth

Over the last century, the tourism sector has increased at a rapid speed. The development has caused an amplified focus on the economic aspect and somewhat neglected the environment and people. The capitalist paradigm is interesting in this matter since the development has been growth-oriented and caused by the exploitation of human and natural resources. In the late 19th century, the notion of de-growth was considered in relation to the creation of finding a more sustainable approach to development by separating it from industrialisation and modernisation (Andriotis, 2014; Desbiolles et al., 2019a; Ingham, 1993).

De-growth, also known as happy de-growth, sustainable de-growth, and fair de-growth, is seen as one of these new approaches. The concept of de-growth has only been introduced to tourism studies

within the last few years but has its origins in the ancient Greece where one of the first supporters was the Greek philosopher Diogenes the Cynic (Andriotis, 2014; Hall, 2009; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019a). The core idea of the concept works against the development of economic homogenisation, where destinations are converted into unauthentic places that share many similarities. The concept aims at providing an alternative to more leading paradigms such as capitalism and economism, and as a means to reach a post-development society (Latouche, 2009). De-growth, in relation to tourism, is often referred to as defining a development that seeks to downscale the activity and production, which is also the case with Andriotis (2014), yet C. M. Hall (2009) seems to approach the concept from a slightly different angle. He argues that de-growth is more related to the idea of “rightsizing” the development to achieve a more sustainable utility of the destinations since reductions are not consequently the only answer. Thus, there might be areas where the economic activity might have to be increased to create a sustainable development (Hall, 2009).

Hall’s (2009) idea of the concept seems to overlap quite well with the definition on de-growth presented by the participants from the first conference on the Economic De-growth For Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity in Paris, 2008. Here the paradigm of de-growth was determined to focus on the alteration from the unrestricted attempt to gain economic growth to the aim of “rightsizing” the economies both national and global, and in collaboration across borders:

“Progress towards de-growth requires immediate steps towards efforts to mainstream the concept of de-growth into parliamentary and public debate and economic institutions; the development of policies and tools for the practical implementation of de-growth; and development of new, non-monetary indicators (including subjective indicators) to identify, measure and compare the benefits and costs of economic activity, in order to assess whether changes in economic activity contribute to or undermine the fulfilment of social and environmental objectives” (Flip & Schneider, 2008, p. 318).

The issue is to achieve a notion of life being more important than the consumption of resources – thus emphasising that a change of the consumers’ mindset is needed to develop and improve sustainable development. The social change relies on both collective and individual actions and policies to achieve a fundamental change in improving human lives and in the preservation of the environment while having a healthy economy. The process of de-growth should then result in a sustained steady economy of the nations while having a mid-level balanced level of consumption (Flip & Schneider,



2008). Both Hall and the participants from the conference agree that there needs to be a targeted process of learning about sustainable ways of thinking in public debates and policies as well as more practical initiatives that encourage de-growth. Furthermore, they both agree that it is likely that one cannot only choose the option that Andriotis (2014) suggests by “downscaling” the activity in order to achieve a de-growth development since investments need to be made in order to improve conditions. One might argue that the approach about “downscale” can be related to the more global economic aspect of obtaining de-growth, whereas “rightsizing” is achievable on a national level. However, in the end, one could argue that both Andriotis, Hall (2009), and the conference work towards the same objective, which is to alter the way that the tourism industry is overusing the world’s resources which is destructive to the environment and the people in the destinations.

In academic literature, the concept of de-growth has been addressed a lot by scholars of various disciplines such as Levallois, (2010), Trainer, (2012), and Xue et al., (2012) etc. It has however hardly been touched upon in relation to tourism research, which also explains why some might see de-growth as a new concept that has not yet been fully explored in a tourism context (Andriotis, 2014; Fletcher et al., 2019). C. M. Hall (2009) argues that the tourism industry and the destinations often approached the issues in terms of policy solutions. Examples can be regulation of visitors, pollution taxes, and other sorts of environmental taxes, which should not be categorised as de-growth because it has not resulted in any significant change. However, it is not likely to find an easy solution to these issues regarding sustainability in tourism and the implementation of de-growth. Hence, it is not an option to limit people from travelling as it will likely result in complex political problems, as well as the consumption will be moved to other places or industries.

To summarise, the concept of de-growth can be argued to be an alternative to mainstream models of development, and in this thesis, it is used in a tourism context. The main idea of it is to oppose the increase of economic homogenisation of destinations as they are converted into similar places that neglect the authenticity. Thus, advocate for safeguarding the quality of life in a destination, where production and consumption are altered and eventually reduced. De-growth is, in tourism literature, referred to as a paradigm to downscale the production and activity of tourism in destinations to take control of the growth and into a smaller economy that can cope better from both a social and environmental perspective. In this thesis, de-growth has been looked at from two sides, as it was found that they were part of several discussion within the literature; downscaling and “rightsizing”.

Downscaling aims at reducing the activities and production of tourism-related products and experiences in order to secure the state of the environment in destinations. “Rightsizing”, on the other hand, favour a development that achieves a more sustainable utilisation of a destination and its resources. Still, there might arise situations where an increase in economic activity is necessary to produce sustainable development. However, scholars such as C.M. Hall (2009) argues that de-growth is not likely to become a reality if the consumers do not alter their behaviour in terms of travel. In relation to the aim of this thesis, de-growth will be used as a tool to analyse whether or not the operators believe there to be a link between sustainability and the number of visitors. Additionally, it would be interesting to investigate whether or not this is a current or future issue within Nationalpark Thy.

## A holistic approach to sustainable tourism development

As noticed within the chapter concerning the three pillars, McCool (2015) suggests that the concept of sustainable tourism development should be re-framed to fit and be more useful for the challenges and issues that the world faces today. Instead, it is argued that one should understand the world as a complex social-ecological matter and not just a replica of the past (McCool, 2015). Because of this,

“[...] we need to re-frame the issue of sustainable tourism much more explicitly with a focus on one specific characteristic of the complex social-ecological system embedding the search for sustainable tourism” (McCool, 2015, p. 215). Thus, within this context, McCool (2015) argues for a more holistic approach to sustainable tourism development.

Other scholars who support this statement include Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019b) who notes that one should look at sustainable tourism development from a more holistic point of view. According to them, the tourism industry needs to consider its impact not only at a local but also global scale because of its high use of - or dependency on resources. Because of this, they believe that it could be useful to understand tourism and sustainability from an approach, which focuses on systems thinking. Thus, “[...] it is not only the behaviour of individual parts or elements of phenomena that must be understood, but rather their orchestration and the recognition that systems are comprised of various

subsystems that work together to form integrated wholes [...]” (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019b, p. 1552).

According to McCool (2015), re-framing tourism as a part of a bigger complex and socio-ecological matter will help widen our understanding of how tourism impact and is being impacted in a broader context and make us aware of the uncertainties of the world. By understanding tourism from this point of view, it becomes easier for academics, managers and practitioners to look at tourism from a more holistically point of view. Several scholars agree that it is necessitated to move away from focusing only on a few things when planning sustainable development and instead explore more holistic approaches (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019b; McCool, 2015; Rutty et al., 2015; Macleod, 2010; Hall et al., 2010; Cater & Cater, 2010). Thus tourism should be viewed not as sustainable in itself, but as a part of sustainable development in a wider sense. One issue that Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019b) identify in narrow approaches to sustainable development is the big focus on the “green” environment aspects, which tends to move focus away from other equally important elements such as the economy and social aspects. Thus, it becomes evident that there are similarities between Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019b) ’s approach and the Three Pillars or Dimensions of Sustainable Development (UNEP & WTO, 2005). Even though Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019b) agree that all of the three dimensions should be taken into consideration when speaking of sustainable development, they also stress that finding a balance between these is rather challenging to which the concept has its critiques as well. Furthermore, the idea that social, economic and environment should be taken into consideration within a holistic approach to sustainable tourism development is also agreed by other scholars such as Macleod (2010), Rutty et al. (2015) and Cater and Cater (2010). In this manner, one could argue that the holistic system-based approach to sustainable development is more radical than the three pillars in itself because it considers the tourism industry as part of a wider socio-ecological context.

When planning tourism development, it is argued by McCool, (2016) that one must think critically and ask which questions they seek to answer concerning the development. It is further argued that “Messy situations not only require systematic processes that explicate fundamental assumptions and perspectives but also those that incorporate different value systems and types of knowledge” (McCool, 2016, p. 106). In this sense, managers should become aware of what they wish to attain, know its alternatives and additionally be aware of possible consequences (McCool, 2016). Thus,

when speaking of sustainable tourism development, it would be beneficial to conceive tourism as one part of a bigger and more complex system. For this, Macleod (2010) additionally argues that a holistic approach is necessitated and notes that because tourism is a part of a bigger world picture, it is also affected by external and uncontrollable factors. These include ones “[...] such as the world economy, climate change, political upheavals, international competition and the ever-changing demographics and desires of the international tourism market” (Macleod, 2010, p. 118). According to him “[...] the concept of sustainable tourism development remains a weak means of dealing with actual situations, where a strong grasp of local conditions as well as global circumstances is needed” (Macleod, 2010, p. 118).

According to Cater and Cater (2010), the challenge within sustainable tourism development is to reconcile the different, possible conflicting and polarized values and viewpoint which may be present amongst stakeholders while being aware of the fact that everything is in constant change. They advocate for a collective approach which is rather practically oriented with an emphasis on the involvement of local communities. Furthermore, the scholars suggest that because of its complexity, the development approach should be transdisciplinary as well as trans-sectoral (Cater & Cater, 2010). Thus, “Given the almost unparalleled complexities involved, it is obvious that it is necessary to draw on a range of disciplines in order to better understand the multiple contexts, issues and viewpoints [...]” (Cater & Cater, 2010, p. 68). Regarding approaching sustainable development, and more specifically, sustainable tourism development, from a holistic point of view, Hall et al. (2010) stress that the impact of tourism mobility should be included as well. Thus,

“Any understanding of tourism’s contribution to rural sustainability [...] needs to be able to account for both the environmental effects of tourism mobility as well as the potential social and economic impacts of any loss of that mobility in terms of infrastructure use and economic contribution” (Hall et al., 2010, p. 36)

According to Hall et al. (2010), development programs which focus on reducing environmental impacts such as CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are usually only understood at the level of a specific destination. Stating this, they do believe that more public transport infrastructure could be beneficial in terms of carbon reduction. Nevertheless, “[...] the focus of many rural development agencies on car and aircraft access, while perhaps initially appealing with respect to network connectivity, clearly creates

a major issue with respect to journey emissions and the overall contribution that tourism makes to sustainability” (Hall et al., 2010, p. 39). Thus, considering the environmental aspect of sustainability in a broader context.

To summarise, the above mentioned introduces scholars who suggest a more holistic approach to sustainable tourism development. Within this approach, it is believed that one must think of tourism as something which is a part of a wider socio-ecological system. Stating this, one should not only focus on the local but also the global context and be aware of the many ways in which tourism is connected within a wider system. In this way, conditions within the wider systems or contexts affect local tourism destinations in the same way as these may affect the broader systems. Stating this, one needs to keep this in mind when planning sustainable tourism development. Additionally, all of the relevant stakeholders should be included within the process, locals as well as regional etc. to which a good collaboration should be valued. Nevertheless, the complexity makes it difficult or even impossible to achieve fully sustainable tourism without any negative impacts. For this thesis, it will be examined in some of the tourism operators shares this view or at least include elements of it within their understanding of sustainability or implementation of sustainable initiatives.

Ending this chapter, the theoretical framework within this thesis focus on four different approaches to sustainable tourism development. These are the Three Pillars/Dimensions of Sustainable Tourism Development, the Three Traditions of Sustainable Tourism Development, De-growth and the Holistic Approach. Underneath these have been placed within a table to create an overview and present the main points.

<b>The Three pillars of sustainable development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- The economic pillar is concerned with the long-term economic situation that is beneficial to all stakeholders and aids in the fight against poverty in host communities</li><li>- The socio/cultural pillar aims at protecting the host, their customs and heritage.</li><li>- The environmental pillar serves as a protector of the host’s environment and its natural resources.</li></ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To further sustainability, there must be a focus on all three pillars and a balance between these. Within this process stakeholder collaboration and a strong political body is necessitated (UNEP &amp; WTO, 2005).</li> </ul>
<b>The Three traditions of sustainable tourism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Based Jarkko Saarinen's categorisation of perceptions found in sustainable tourism literature</li> <li>- The carrying capacity serves as a common denominator for all three</li> <li>- The resources-based tradition looks at a static approach where a limit is set of how many resources the environment can use on tourism</li> <li>- The activity-based tradition focuses on the TALC model with its dynamic approach to view a destination, and it is industry-oriented</li> <li>- The community-based tradition collaborates with the host and other stakeholders regarding the use of the destination's resources</li> </ul> <p>(Saarinen, 2014).</p>
<b>De-growth</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- An approach that works against the economic homogenisation of development</li> <li>- It is often referred to as downscaling activity and production, but also as an approach to "rightsize" development to achieve more sustainable ways</li> <li>- Hard to implement because of the continued increase in tourists' years after year</li> </ul> <p>(Andriotis, 2014; Hall, 2009).</p>

<b>A holistic approach to sustainability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Expanding on the three pillars of sustainable development</li> <li>- Look at sustainable tourism development from a more global perspective and understand that it is a part of a wider complex socio-ecological system</li> <li>- The industry should not only approach sustainability from its own perspective but understand its connections/relations to the wider world</li> <li>- Good stakeholder collaboration is necessitated in order to move towards more sustainability</li> </ul> <p>(Hall et al., 2010; Cater &amp; Cater, 2010; McCool, 2015).</p>
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Table 4. (Summery of Theoretical Framework).

As this chapter implies, there are many different ways in which one can understand and approach sustainable development in a tourism context. Nevertheless, some similarities can be found amongst several of the scholars as many of them seems to agree on the fact that there is no such thing as fully sustainable tourism (e.g. UNEP & WTO, 2005; McCool, 2015; Hall et al., 2010). In this sense, tourism should be considered as something that can be a part of sustainable development instead of it being sustainable in itself. Thus, tourism has the potential to contribute to the development of a better future in more than one way. Nevertheless, it can never be fully sustainable in itself.

The different understandings of and approaches to sustainable tourism development presented above will be used in the analysis to help answer the problem formulation. As the purpose of this thesis is to investigate different tourism operators approach to the concept of sustainable tourism development, it will be examined if some of the above-mentioned approaches or elements from these is present amongst the stakeholders in Nationalpark Thy. In this sense, it will be investigated whether or not there are similarities or differences between the content of the theoretical framework and tourism operators own understandings or approaches. Additionally, it will also be examined how the different tourism operators are placed in relation to one another. Stating this, these may not necessarily share one collective understanding of the concept but instead differ in their approaches. Lastly, it should be noted that there might be tourism operators as well that have not considered the concept of sustainable tourism development in relation to their tourism business. In order to provide an insight into other



scholars' findings on sustainable tourism development, the next chapter will pose a literature review which is meant to reveal different tendencies and widen our understanding of the topic.

# Literature review

## Introduction

As this thesis poses a case study that will examine tourism operators' perception of and approaches to sustainable tourism development and how they approach this, it would be interesting to investigate other scholars' findings on this topic. Because of this, a literature review will be included in addition to the theoretical framework. Thus, the purpose of this is to gain an insight into interesting facts and tendencies concerning tourism operators' perceptions and approaches to sustainable tourism development which can be found within other scholars' research. Case studies and research articles that somehow share similarities with this thesis have been valued for this chapter. It is, however, important to note that as sustainability is a complex matter, overlaps may occur across the sections as it is challenging to fully separate the content.

## Stakeholder understandings and implementation of sustainability

When talking about sustainable tourism development, Holden's (2010) study "exploring stakeholders' perceptions of sustainable tourism development in the Annapurna conservation area: issues and challenges" highlights several of the concepts pros and cons. Its point of departure is sustainable tourism development, where the use of tourism for this particular purpose is discussed in relation to Annapurna, Nepal. In this study, he argued, similar to Andersen et al., (2018), that the real take-off for sustainable tourism development is linked to the Brundtland report from 1987. For this, he mentions "the tourism industry and livelihood opportunities are typically dependent on the quality of the natural resource base, the concept of sustainable development would appear to have a strong resonance with tourism" (Holden, 2010, p. 338). The correlation between the tourism industry and protected areas can be traced back to the establishment of Yellowstone National Park as a means to create a recreational space with conservation as a primary function. Similar to the thesis area of interest, studies within the literature tend to focus on "comparison of stakeholder responses at a single

destination” (Poudel et al., 2016, p. 2). Examples of this can be Puhakka et al., (2009) and their study on local stakeholders’ perception on socio-cultural sustainability in a Finnish national park, or Imran et al., (2014) with their research on assessing the wide variation in stakeholder perception within the boundaries of the Pakistani Central Karakoram National Park. Haukeland’s (2011) analysis of Norwegian stakeholders’ opinion towards sustainable tourism development and management in Rondane National Park and Jotunheimen National Park is an interesting study to consider here. The main findings were, among other things, that the stakeholders generally supported the national parks and the aim to protect the environment as well as aiding the workforce in the local communities. The stakeholders emphasised that the brands associated with the national parks were of significant importance to their businesses and the value it provided in terms of marketing and branding. An interesting aspect is furthermore that the interviews responded positively to questions about their support of the parks function on the protection of the environment in the areas. Still, they simultaneously stressed that they thought that the areas should be used and that it would be a shame not to do so (Haukeland, 2011).

Another study that examines sustainable tourism development and stakeholders approach to this concept is introduced within the research letter *sustainability in coastal tourism development: an example from Denmark* (Andersen et al., 2018). More specifically, the background for this study was a pilot scheme project that was launched by the Danish government in 2014. Within this, the government decided to:

“open up for tourism development within the protected coastal areas. A pilot scheme project was launched to grant 10 projects exemptions from two specific laws restricting the development within the coastal zones, if they would otherwise adhere to Danish law” (Andersen et al., 2018, p. 1330).

Within this context, Andersen et al. (2018) decided to investigate how sustainability was communicated in the ten project proposals that were approved. Additionally, the purpose was to examine how these communicated approaches were similar to or different from academic understandings of the concept. For this, the three pillars of sustainability and sustainable tourism development (UNEP & WTO, 2005) were included (Andersen et al., 2018). Thus, according to Andersen et al. (2018) academics often include these as they believe that sustainable tourism development “focuses on long-term perspectives and defines economic, socio-cultural and

environmental issues as equally important in tourism development” (Andersen et al., 2018, p. 1329). Furthermore, Andersen et al. (2018) also gain inspiration from Hall et al. (2010) as they stress a need for the approach to be holistic.

The findings from the study showed that advanced understandings of sustainability within the different proposals were weak. Many of these made only little or no mentioning of environmental and socio-cultural aspects. Instead, the economic aspects concerning economic growth seemed to play an important role within all of the ten proposals, and according to Andersen et al. (2018), this economic discourse can be seen as a tendency within the tourism sector. The other aspects or pillars of sustainability (UNEP & WTO, 2005) seems to be forgotten or excluded within most of these proposals. Thus, within this case, there appears to be a difference between “how sustainability is communicated in new coastal development proposals by stakeholders in Danish tourism and the holistic approach to sustainability in academic discourse” (Andersen et al., 2018, p. 1333). Andersen et al. (2018) argue that a more holistic approach is necessitated in order to develop more sustainable tourism to which they believe that a strong government should be highly committed. The lacking guidelines concerning sustainable development were also mentioned as an issue since stakeholders are left with a rather vague idea of how to do tourism development (Andersen et al., 2018). Adding to this notion, “Sustainability should be addressed as a holistic long-term concept by industry developers and policy-makers who set the scope for tourism development, in order to create more desirable tourism futures for coastal and nature areas” (Andersen et al., 2018, p. 1334).

The suggestion that a more holistic approach to sustainable tourism development should be taken is shared by several scholars such as Holden (2010), Clausen and Gyimóthy (2016), Hall et al. (2010). Nevertheless, where Andersen et al., (2018) found that the tourism operators within their case study tended to focus on the economic aspect of sustainability, whereas another aspect seemed to gain more attention within Higgins-Desbiolles et al.’s (2019b) case. Their study investigated “which aspects of sustainability (economic, ecological and/or social) received attention in the literature on hospitality in restaurants and cafés, with a view to questioning how this might affect the knowledge and practice of sustainability in this arena” (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019b, p. 1551-1552). Thus, findings showed how most of the articles focussed on the ecological dimension of sustainability where to the amount that considered social and economic aspects as well were fewer. Stating this, the so-called “green” aspects seemed to be highly valued and well-considered in contrast to the other two

dimensions, and it can draw parallels to mainstream society because of consumers amplified focus on ecological products. According to Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019b), one needs to be aware of this issue when speaking of sustainability. For this, they state, “While environmental issues are very important to address in this sector, it is imperative that economic and social aspects, and also the holistic interplay of all aspects of the triple bottom line, are not overlooked” (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019b, p. 1575).

Considerations concerning environmental aspects of sustainability are also present within James et al.s’ (2020) case study on sustainability and cruise tourism in Iceland and Greenland. Nevertheless, as the investigated literature mainly seemed to focus on the “green” aspects within Higgins-Desbiolles et al.s’ (2019b) study, other aspects of sustainability were also valued and considered within James et al.s’ (2020) case studies. In this case, local stakeholders both considered economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects concerning the idea of sustainability and the cruise tourism within the areas. Exemplifying this, considerations on local economy included concerns about businesses being too dependent on the income from cruise tourism alone and negative impact on the local economy in terms of cruise tourists spending patterns. Nevertheless, the cruise tourists are also argued to have a positive effect on the local economy, as they arguably pose a market for local products (James et al., 2020). Within a socio-cultural context, sustainability is discussed in terms of increasing visitor numbers, amongst other things. Thus, it is argued that too many visitors may cause crowding and disrupt the local people, but on the other hand, some find it positive when the tourists bring more life to the cities. Furthermore, stakeholders in Qaqortoq emphasise how an increase in visitor numbers may help counteract outmigration amongst its younger people. One other concern that was present here was the issue with part-time employment related to the shoulder seasons (James et al., 2020).

Environmental issues mentioned by stakeholders within James et al.s’ (2020) study concerned the high number of cruise passengers and fear of accidents that may impact the nature and wildlife within the areas negatively. Stating this, the environmental concerns related to sustainability were mainly expressed by stakeholders within the Icelandic city. Here, “In general, there was consensus that most local stakeholders wanted to develop tourism in a way that limited negative environmental impacts” (James et al., 2020, p. 11). These findings can be argued to contradict the results that Andersen et al.,

(2018) found in relation to coastal tourism in Denmark since there was a lack of focus on environmental and socio-cultural issues within these.

## An imbalance between the pillars - different stakeholder interests

A common finding in research on sustainable tourism development is examples of an imbalance between different pillars to which it is further emphasised that a more holistic approach is absent (e.g. Holden, 2010; Ong & Smith, 2014; James et al., 2020). According to Holden (2010), it is no surprise that the tourism industry is categorised as having a dynamic structure, where the likelihood of long-term security as a tourism stakeholder is often not achievable. Because of the inability to provide security, in the long run, the community in Annapurna decided to shift more of their attention onto agriculture, since they argued that this industry would provide a more solid foundation for a sustainable future. The locals, in this case, were found to favour the economic dimension over the other two, as they are highly depended on an income to support their families. Without the support of a destination's local community, sustainable development is often hard to implement (Holden, 2010; Joppe, 1996).

Holden's (2010) finding is reinforced by Ong & Smith (2014) with their study on perception and reality of sustainability by stakeholders in Sihanoukville in Cambodia. They found that the general idea of sustainable development was supported by local stakeholders, however, "Where notable differences in perception arose, it was often linked to the group's mission or self-interest that influenced the views of these stakeholders. With environmental and resource management, private sector stakeholders were cost sensitive in their business operations" (Ong & Smith, 2014, p. 274). Thus, prioritising the economy. Stakeholder perception of sustainable tourism development is not always the same as the actual situation, where to it opposes one of the key principles of the concept. With the lacking trust in the outcomes of sustainable tourism development combined with the potential control loss of resources, and security problem, these three issues oppose the very idea of conservation, social improvement, and community collaboration (Holden, 2010; Ong & Smith, 2014).

The inability to provide economic security is, according to Dabphet (n.d.) and his study on stakeholders and the implementation of sustainable tourism development in two rural areas in Thailand, a rather common concern among especially local stakeholders. In this case, he too found an imbalance between the different pillars, as the local stakeholders found it difficult to participate due to a lack of knowledge concerning sustainable development. Dabphet (n.d.) argues that knowledge and guidance were important variables in securing the support of local forces because they needed reassurance before they relied their business on sustainable development initiatives that were somewhat unknown in terms of financial and practical implementation.

With the above-mentioned in mind, one could argue that Holden's (2010) study agrees with the argument presented by Andersen et al., (2018) concerning approaching sustainable development holistically. In the case of Annapurna, the stakeholders were mainly focussed on their financial situation in terms of the viability of tourism in the future and investments, which Andersen et al., (2018) argued is a common denominator in the industry. The holistic paradigm seems reasonable to discuss, as one could argue how the perceptions of sustainable tourism development in Annapurna does not take equal consideration for the other two pillars similar to what Andersen et al., (2018) discovered in the above-mentioned study. The study by James et al., (2020), which has been introduced earlier within this chapter also found common characteristics between the two destinations they examined and other similar case studies as well as more context-specific issues;

“In both destinations, economic and socio-cultural impacts were most commonly mentioned, with environmental sustainability apparently a lesser concern. Furthermore, environmental and socio-cultural sustainability were seen in opposition to economic sustainability rather than in a holistic way” (James et al., 2020, p. 14).

The findings furthermore showed that the stakeholders tended to place emphasis on trade-offs regarding various impacts within the local area. The stakeholders' relation to the various types of tourism in the areas were also seen to have an effect on their conceptualisation of cruise tourism sustainability.

## Heterogeneity within stakeholder groups

Another common characteristic found within sustainable development literature is the perception of local communities as a homogeneous entity. One study that addresses this subject is Clausen and Gyimóthy's (2016) *Seizing community participation in sustainable development: pueblos Magicos of Mexico*. Within this, they examine how a local community were included within a sustainable development process. According to them, the Mexican development programme, called Pueblos Magicos, aimed to revitalise rural or remote areas through cultural tourism. An important participant within these processes was argued to be the local communities because it was believed that these had to be included to make the development sustainable (Clausen & Gyimóthy, 2016). Nevertheless, both Clausen and Gyimóthy (2016) and Andersen et al., (2018) critically note that the 'touristification' of the local culture impose a growth logic and market preferences which is often seen within sustainable tourism development contexts.

Clausen and Gyimóthy (2016) based their case study on the town of Alamos. Within this, the local community that was to be included within the development planning consisted of five different groups of stakeholders. These included: "the Mexican elite, the transnational North American group, local Mexicans workers, Mexicans working in tourism (the majority collaborating with the North American community), and the city administration. (Clausen & Gyimóthy, 2016, p. 323). Findings from this showed that there were two suggestions on how to generate growth through tourism within the area. Thus, the Mexican elites suggested to facilitate growth by tourism development in terms of infrastructure and conditions etc. for the local community.

On the contrary, the North American entrepreneurs argue in favour of expanding the city's tourist attractions as well as enhancing the visibility of the Mexican culture, e.g. traditional events. Furthermore, it seemed to be challenging for these parts to compromise "as each vision seemed to be rooted in incompatible social and political understandings of sustainability or how to obtain a common wellbeing for the community" (Clausen & Gyimóthy, 2016, p. 323). As a conclusion, Clausen and Gyimóthy (2016) stress that one should not perceive a local community as a homogenous group. A local community should not be understood as one that is either against or for specific development initiatives. Instead, such communities consist of different stakeholders with different relationships to one another and different understandings of sustainability, which is an important



notion that should be taken into consideration when working with sustainable development. Thus, “It is therefore necessary to differentiate actor participation or influence in terms of their power networks and positions in various geographical, economic and cultural constellations” (Clausen & Gyimóthy, 2016, p. 325).

Similar to Clausen and Gyimóthy (2016), Lindberg and colleagues (2019) also favour the perspective of stakeholders being viewed as a heterogeneous group. They argue that tourism stakeholders often have different agendas when it comes to the development of a destination. These agendas are typically based on individual needs and wants as “[...] Stakeholder complexity increases with the attentive foci brought into the development process, including sustainability, social welfare and business profits” (Lindberg et al., 2019, p. 1279). The three traditions of sustainable development seem to further the argument made above since the resource-based tradition and the activity-based tradition represent two different groups of stakeholders (Saarinen, 2006). They respectively have two different approaches to view sustainable development, as the first favours the protection and conservation of nature and culture, whereas the latter has a tourist-centric approach (Saarinen, 2006, & Lindberg et al., 2019).

Furthermore, Clausen and Gyimóthy (2016) stress that one should focus more on informal citizenship practises and mobile actors. For this, it is suggested that one should take on a more nuanced approach to be able to conceptualise the ‘liquid’ communities and enable a better outcome in terms of development (Clausen & Gyimóthy, 2016). In this way, one could argue that Clausen and Gyimóthy (2016) calls for a more holistic approach to the concept of sustainable tourism development in terms of complex networks, relationships and connections outside the destination, in the same way as scholars such as McCool (2015) and Hall et al. (2010). The aspect of stakeholder heterogeneity is also one of the findings that James et al., (2020) identified in their study on stakeholder perception of sustainability in Greenland and Iceland. Here, it was especially stakeholders in the destination in Iceland that had different opinions on whether or not the visitor number was an issue for the local community. Some favoured fixed limits to the number of tourists that could come inland and other thought adaptations would be appropriate to consider since they did not recognise an urgent problem. Thus, emphasising the problematics that can arise when deciding on policy-issues and the future of sustainable development in destinations.

## Uneven power relationships

For sustainable tourism development to be implemented, several scholars agree that the participation of the destination stakeholders serves as a key variable (Byrd, 2007; Holden, 2010; Andersen et al., 2018; Ruhanen, 2007). According to both Byrd (2007) and Briassoulis (2002), it is vital to incorporate stakeholders into the entire process of planning in terms of sustainable tourism development. Especially because many of these shareholders' livelihoods depend on the influx of tourists. This issue can also be found in the case by James et al., (2020), as they identified how the stakeholders power-relationships impacted the development. Here, the cruise ship operators power and interests played a dominant role within the development. Within this context, stakeholder perceptions on sustainability issues moreover had an impact on their contribution to the collaboration processes regarding the management and regulation of cruise tourism. The above-mentioned was especially evident in terms of prioritising the local economic progress as well as their disposition to regulate the areas of cruise tourism (James et al., 2020).

Holden (2010) identified a general tendency of lacking commitment by the stakeholders to further sustainable development. He further discussed how these stakeholders were more attentive to the negative impacts of tourism in the shape of out-migration from the area. Thus, the sustainable development in terms of improving locals' livelihoods has, in Annapurna, resulted in lodge owners advising their children to move away from the area to larger cities to get more advanced education and job opportunities. A similar study by Ioannides (1995) on tourism planning in Akamas, Cyprus found that lacking involvement and later uprising against the government on the establishment of a national park. In this case, it was caused by local stakeholders because they did not feel that they had a voice in the development process of the area and that they were bypassed in general by the government.

The above-mentioned is also identified by Haukeland (2011) in his study on stakeholder perception of management on national parks in Norway. This was especially an issue in Rondane National Park, where local stakeholders and their interest felt bypassed by the management of the park. Decisions about the rules and regulations of the area were decided without any real interference from the local community. This resulted in decisions that are of no use to the businesses and regulations that conflicts with the latter (Haukeland, 2011). Similar to this finding, some stakeholders within James

et al.s' (2020) and Clausen and Gyimóthy's (2016) study also emphasise how they felt relatively powerless within the development processes of their destination. For this, Clausen and Gyimóthy (2016) include Schneider and Yüksel et al. as they suggest that power relations, interest and resources should be taken into consideration within the development process as well. Thus, within Alamos, inequalities in terms of power were found between the different members of the community. Different groups bargained on behalf of the named community whereby they gained the opportunity to promote their different priorities in terms of development, which may then be supported by national funds. Thus, emphasising the policy implications in development processes and the challenges in uniting all stakeholders (large and small).

Similar to the studies mentioned above, Høyer's (2010) findings revealed how different power and interests had an impact on sustainable tourism development in two different destinations placed in respectively Norway and Switzerland. Within this case, the attempt to adopt a more sustainable net of transportation to reduce the volume of transport by tourists and limit the environmental impacts from the industry proved to be complicated. This led to only minor positive results in terms of national and international tourists travelling by auto- and aero-mobility. Høyer (2010) found that one of the main obstacles to accomplish this was the absent endorsement from the transport sector, which he argues is a key variable of the tourism industry to improve this field (transport). Hence, different interests among stakeholders will most likely always be an issue when discussing sustainable development, which the research on the area can testify to (Hopkins, 2008; James et al., 2020; Clausen and Gyimóthy, 2016; Lindberg et al., 2019).

In the above-mentioned literature review, the aim of the section has been to display and discuss the literature surrounding sustainable tourism development. The literature within this focus area has proven to be rather comprehensive. However, four common themes have been identified. The three pillars of sustainability are usually present within most studies and emphasised as valuable tools in the analysis of sustainable development. Nevertheless, scholars pointed out that the attention of stakeholders was not given to all aspects of the pillars, or simply excluded from the work of the stakeholders, which created an imbalance. The literature also revealed that stakeholders have different approaches as to view sustainable development, which makes it challenging to gain a transparent view of the link between stakeholder perception and sustainability. In some cases, scholars identified how the authorities fail to look at different stakeholders as a heterogeneous group. Especially the

local stakeholder, who often have an agenda of their own, tend to struggle with their involvement and requirements in a development process, since they are seen as a homogeneous group/cluster, and thus bypassed to some extent. Lastly, uneven power-relationships were identified, and as the development of sustainability in destinations rely on stakeholder involvement to be successful, this issue has been researched frequently.

# Methodology

## Philosophy of science

As it has been mentioned in the introduction, *this thesis poses a case study that focuses on different operators that work with tourism in and around Thy Nationalpark. More specifically, it seeks to investigate the different operators' understandings of sustainable tourism development as well as the way they implement this within businesses or institutions.* An important consideration related to research studies concerns the philosophy of science, because the researchers' position within this context reflects how these understand the lived world and hereby also approaches the study (Kvale, 2007; Ormston et al., 2013). As this thesis seeks to investigate understandings and implementations, the data for the analysis were collected through interviews with the different participants. In this context, Kvale supports the above-mentioned statement regarding the importance of the philosophy of science as he stresses:

“Research interviews have not been developed from any specific theory or epistemological paradigm. We may, however, post hoc invoke theoretical and epistemological positions to understand the knowledge produced in interviews” (Kvale, 2007, p. 20).

Within this thesis, an interpretivist approach has been taken, as it is believed that human interpretation of the social world plays a key role in our understanding and hereby also the knowledge that we pose (Ormston et al., 2013; Kvale, 2007). Thus, our knowledge of the lived world is based on our understanding which emerges from our individual reflections. These are affected by given conditions and circumstances in our lives. In this sense, people may perceive and interpret reality differently. Because of this, one should not only consider how the tourism operators interpret the concept of

sustainable development within this thesis but also the role of the researcher within this context (Ormston et al., 2013). As the data was conducted through interviews, it can be argued that these pose an interchange of views between the interviewee and the interviewer (Kvale, 2007). Within this context” Knowledge is produced by exploring and understanding the social world of the people being studied, focusing on their meanings and interpretations” (Ormston et al., 2013, p. 12). Here, the researchers’ interpretations play an important role as well and in this sense, it should be understood that reality becomes affected by the research process (Kvale, 2007; Ormston et al., 2013). Stating this, it is believed that” Social reality cannot be captured or portrayed ‘accurately’ because there are different (and possibly competing) perceptions and understandings” (Ormston et al., 2013, p. 12). In this sense, a reality does exist, but it can only be accessed through the interpretations of individuals (Ormston et al., 2013). With this in mind, the interpretivist stand will be taken into consideration within the context of this study. The following section will introduce a more thorough explanation of the data collection and explain how the data will be processed and use used within the analysis.

## Data collection

### Semi-structured life-world interviews

For this thesis, a focus is placed on different tourism operators and their perception of, as well as approaches to, sustainable tourism development within Nationalpark Thy. In this sense, it can be argued that this thesis concerns people and thus, seeks to investigate how these understand the concept of sustainability from their own perspective. In order to gain knowledge and hereby also data for the analysis of this case study, an interview approach has been chosen as it is believed that this would allow the tourism operators to explain their understandings and implementations in own words. Stating this, the data collection gains inspiration from Kvale (2007) amongst others as he notes:

“[...]. Through conversations we get to know other people, get to learn about their experiences, feelings and hopes and the world they live in. In an interview conversation, the researcher asks about, and listens to, what people themselves tell about their lived world [...]” (Kvale, 2007, p. 1).

More specifically, the interviews conducted for this thesis were semi-structured life-world interviews. Within this, the knowledge gained will be interpreted through the interaction between researchers and

the different tourism operators. Thus, it is acknowledged that the findings will not only be affected by the interviewees' own interpretation of the concept of sustainability but also the researchers of the collected data (Kvale, 2007). Adding to this notion, the semi-structured life-world interview can be understood as "[...] an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena" (Kvale, 2007, p. 8). As there is a purpose with the interviews in terms of collecting specific data, a specific approach and technique will be necessary. Thus, explaining why it is called a semi-structured interview (Kvale, 2007). Stating this, preparations including considerations on interviewees, interview questions and ethics etc. will be made before conducting the actual interviews. The considerations concerning approach and technique will be elaborated within the following sections of this chapter.

#### Interviewee recruitment

As mentioned in the first part of this chapter, this research explores stakeholders' understanding regarding sustainable development both in terms of their own business but also from a more general perspective. As mentioned in the introduction, the tourism operators have been chosen because they either 1. offer these experiences, which takes place within the borders of Nationalpark Thy. 2. incorporated products or produce from the national park, or 3. are located at the edge of the park. Furthermore, all of the tourism operators are situated in Thy and can be argued to have a close connection to the area. In the first stages of choosing respondents, various groups of tourism operators within the established focus area were identified. After considering the necessary limitations to this thesis, two groups were chosen; operators offering either nature experiences, or food experiences. The reason for this choice was based on an assessment of what sort of experiences were offered to tourists and visitors on respectively Visit Thys website (Velkommen til Visit Thy, 2020), the national parks own website (Nationalpark Thy, 2020), and a more general search on google.

Area	Restaurants/cafes in Thy	Restaurants/cafes in or near Thy National Park	Restaurants/cafes advertise their use of produce/products from Thy National Park	Operators offering nature-based experiences in Thy National Park
<b>Total</b>	59	24	9	13

Table 5. (Approximate numbers of restaurants/cafes and businesses offering nature-based experiences in and around Nationalpark Thy, Grønmo and Kvorning, 2020).

It was identified that nature and food served as the more dominant players in the experience-scape within the area, which provided the incentive to explore these two groups of operators. These two groups of operators are characterised by their presence in or close to the national park where they each in their own fashion facilitate different experiences in nature or the shape of food. Experiences with a historical context such as the different museums both indoor and outdoor were considered as well. However, the final research on this group revealed a challenge as several of the operators were rather small, and many of them are run by Museum Thy – thus limiting the options in terms of individual operators. It was noted that there was an option to obtain data from a wider variety of operators in the area. Still, it was decided that focussing on nature and food experiences served as a sufficient opportunity to explore the subject of interest. Also, because it would be interesting to see if there is any similarities or differences between their understandings of sustainability or how they work with it. Additionally, it was decided to incorporate a few interviewees who all have knowledge about tourism in and close to the Nationalpark Thy. The basis for this choice was to gain background knowledge about the tourism industry and its visions for sustainable development in the area. Interviewees included Thisted Municipality and Thorbjørn Stenholm, who will be introduced in the section on interview profiles. Thus, this group of participants can provide another layer of knowledge regarding the subject to the data collection.

In terms of contacting the different interviewees, the choice to look at their website and Facebook page to see if they had stated how they wished to be approached and from what channels of communication. Selecting how the interviewees preferred to be contacted individually was deemed the most suitable approach to increase the chances of a quick reply and hopefully an agreement. Almost everyone was initially contacted via email, and a few of the replied fast. However, as the



corona crisis became a reality in March, the replies from the approached interview candidates, unfortunately, subsided. As a result, it was decided to send a message via their Facebook page, or make a call, which was relatively successful. Yet, some restaurants which were found relevant in relation to this thesis, politely declined our request because they were too affected by the lockdown resulting from the corona crises. This was understandable, but it made the process of finding interviewees more challenging than first anticipated. There were furthermore a few possible interviewees who were approached but without success in terms of final replies. However, the total number of interviews conducted was 13, where 11 of them offered either nature or food experiences. It is, however, important to note that the reference 'tourism operators' ought to be understood in a broader context. Thus, working with tourists is not necessarily the only focus area for all of the operators such as Thisted Municipality, Naturstyrelsen Thy, and the Nationalpark Thy. They nevertheless all have some sort of relevance to the tourism industry in Thy and the park. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that several of the operators mention that they prefer to talk about visitors instead of tourists, as they find it difficult to define what a tourist constitutes (Appendix, transcriptions).

#### Sampling method - a purposive sampling

From this perspective, a purposive sampling method, as the research is done on possible participants have not been conducted randomly. Purposive sampling is one of the more well-known sampling methods within qualitative research. Within the sphere of purposive sampling, one can find several subcategories of sampling, such as Snowball sampling. The concept of purposive sampling centres around the idea to sample participants with a strategic approach, where the chosen participants are deemed appropriate to use in terms of their applicability to the asked research question (Bryman, 2012; Punch, 2014). The sampling strategy is important in purposive sampling, since "the researcher will want to sample in order to ensure that there is a good deal of variety in the resulting sample, so that sample members differ from each other in terms of key characteristics relevant to the research question" (Bryman, 2012, p. 424).

The chose to focus on obtaining a wide selection of tourism operators who fitted the criteria mentioned above. Examples of such criteria have been that the operators had to have a close relation to Nationalpark Thy in terms operating within the borders of the park or used products from the park

as one of the main features of the experience they offer. Their offers furthermore needed to be centred around a concept that could be qualified as a nature-based experience in the Park, or a food experience with strong ties to the park. Thus, having the research question in mind throughout the entire sampling process to ensure this variety of data within these two different categories. The purposive sampling process also seems relevant to discuss in relation to this thesis and the method for obtaining data, since the criteria for including or excluding tourism operators have been decided quite early in the process. This is one of the characteristics for this sampling method, as “The researcher needs to be clear in his or her mind what the criteria are that will be relevant to the inclusion or exclusion of units of analysis (whether the ‘units’ are sites, people, or something else)” (Bryman, 2012, p. 424).

Snowball sampling is part of this particular sampling strategy, and it was used in this study because of the type of business interesting for this thesis. As the name suggests, this method uses informants to refer to other possible participants in relation to the purpose of the research area and its criteria (Morgan, 2008). As mentioned above, snowball sampling is a part of the purposive sampling method, and it is a convenient approach to find suitable candidates among the interviewees’ circle of contacts that shares the same characteristics as the interviewees themselves. According to Morgan (2008):

“The typical process for a snowball sample begins with interviewing an initial set of research participants who serve as informants about not only the research topic but also about other potential participants” (Morgan, 2008, p. 2).

It deemed that this method could potentially become of value to the data collection regarding possible tourism operators who had not previously considered. During the interviews, the interviewees were asked if they could recommend people whom they thought could be relevant to contact regarding the aim of the research. By using this method, a few operators were identified to qualify in terms of the criteria stated above. However, some interviewees referred to people who had already been interviewed or contacted, as well as people who were found to be non-eligible for this study. The latter can be argued to be a common risk when utilising the snowball sampling method as well as the possibility to find participants who turn the data into a biased sample of the two groups of operators (Morgan, 2008). Nevertheless, because of the challenges to find operators, who were willing to participate in an interview after the eruption of Corona, the snowball method allowed to find a few suitable participants to contact and add to the data collection.

## Interview guides

As the data collection for this thesis is based on semi-structured interviews, an interview guide for each group was prepared (Appendix, interview guides). Interview guides are a common tool to use in this type of interview since it ensures a consistency in the coverage of specific questions that have to be asked in order for the interview to be relevant for the study (Kvale, 2007; Bryman, 2012). With the usage of these guides, the interviewer provides the respondents with the option to both answer the questions but also talk about something additional to the subject in questions. However, the interview guide enables the interview to return to the original path of the interview with the main questions. Because of the semi-structured nature of the interview, the interviewer can respond and act with a flexibility that can provide additional information than first anticipated. This flexibility is also visible as “questions may not follow on exactly in the way outlined on the schedule” and “questions that are not included in the guide may be asked as the interviewer picks up on things said by interviewees” (Bryman, 2012, p. 469). This has especially been beneficial during several of the interviews for this thesis, since it was necessary for interviewer to ask questions that were not written in the interview guide, to clarify, for instance, vague answers and explanations for various sorts.

Thus, the interview guides were made based on getting the right kind of data from the perspective of the research question. The specific questions were made based on the theoretical framework, where especially with the concept of sustainability, the three pillars of sustainability, and de-growth in mind. It was important to write the interview guides in an everyday language in order to facilitate a solid dialogue, where the questions and their meaning were likely not to be misunderstood. This approach was deemed to be the safest way to do the interview guide since the theory can seem quite intricate if one does not have a pre-understanding of it (Kvale, 2007). Based on this, the interview guides were sent to the interviewees the day before the interview without themes to avoid any confusion that might have affected their answers.

The outline of the interview guides was to divide the questions into themes or different categories to create a structure, where it could identify which questions were based on different sections of the theory. Thus, ensuring that the main theories were incorporated into the guides. The questions were furthermore made with the intent to avoid too many yes, or no questions, as they not informative enough. The ones that did end up as this type of question were supported with a sub-question that

would elaborate the response to ensure sufficient data. Nevertheless, they should be observant when the dialogue reached these particular questions. The remaining part of the questions was mostly made with interrogative pronouns in an attempt to produce a comprehensive and personalised response. (Kvale, 2007). The interview guides all share consistencies in relation to questions, as they are all created based on the same research question. Though, variations could be found, since the structure and content of the questions differed slightly depending on which group the interviewees were part of. All the guides were written in English first and then translated into Danish since every interviewee is Danish and they spoke or wrote in Danish during the correspondence beforehand.

Another important consideration when developing the interview guides was the interaction with the interviewees. According to Kvale (2007), this ought to be at the forefront of doing interview guides, since the interaction poses as an essential variable in the final result in terms of quality of the data. However, once more, the Corona crisis had quite an impact, since the ability to meet and conduct the interviews face-to-face but instead via Skype or phone call. Despite the unfortunate way of collecting the data, a casual atmosphere attempted to create a pleasant atmosphere hoping that the situation surrounding the digital contact became too dominant. The interview guides began with a small introduction and the main purpose of this thesis without informing too much to impact their answers. The interviewees were also asked to introduce themselves and their business and their work with tourism in Nationalpark Thy. At the end of every interview, the interviewees were asked if they had any elaborations on previous questions, or if they wanted to add something to the conversation. Thus, attempted to create a comfortable vibe for the interviewees as well as obtaining new information and aspects of the research, which had not previously been considered (Bryman, 2012; Kvale, 2007).

## Recording

During the period of collecting data, recording the information obtained in, for instance, interviews is a part of the data process. This can be approached in several different ways such as voice recording, manually writing everything down, or by videotaping the interview (Punch, 2014; Parcell & Rafferty, 2017).

For this thesis, all interviews were voice recorded either by using phone recorders in relation to skype interactions, and a recording app when conducting the interviews via phone. It is important to

emphasise that the interviewer asked permission to record the conversations before the interviews were initiated, which every interviewee consented to. The recordings served as essential tools afterwards, since it enabled the researchers to analyse every bit of information and detail given to us during the interviews. The margins of uncertainty and error about what was said were truly minimised because of the ability to listen to the recording several times. Thus allows for more thorough scrutiny of the material (Bryman, 2012). The transcriptions of the interviews were, of course, also made a lot easier, and is something where Kvale (2007) emphasises the usability and convenience of recording one's interviews. The recordings also enabled contact and interaction with the interviewees, where eye contact and actively showing interest in what is said. Thus, trying to ensure that the interviewees felt comfortable and listened to. One could argue that the above-mentioned was especially important considering the alternative situation of having to conduct the interviews via a phone call or skype. Using voice recording devices has several advantages than taking notes manually, since "it (a) allows the researcher to concentrate, listen, and respond during the interaction and (b) provides a verbatim account of the interaction that is more holistic and objective than note taking. Therefore, audio and video recorders are most frequently used in interview or focus group settings" (Parcell & Rafferty, 2017, p. 4). In relation to this, the researchers were, of course, aware of the challenges concerning noise disturbances and technical issue, which could influence the result of the interviews (Kvale, 2007).

### Conducting the interviews

As a consequence of the Corona crisis, the researchers have been forced to alter their method of conducting the planned interviews. Considering the situation, Skype and phone calls seemed to be the best and safest solutions. Skype provides a platform where researchers have the opportunity to communicate with people who are far away yet still relevant to incorporate into one's research. The physical boundaries that would otherwise be fatal for the creation of a study are now possible because ones do not have to travel to your interviewees or the other way around. Thus, the tool provides a liberty, where the distance between relevant actors of such as study is not a hurdle anymore (Lacono et al., 2016). This method furthermore serves as a valid tool when one is not able to do face-to-face interviews. Because a Skype call can provide video, one can have an alternative form of synchronous interaction in terms of hearing and seeing the interviewees in the other end. This is often important since the visual part of an interview can allow researchers to detect any expressions of puzzlement or

misunderstandings, which can then be picked up on and solved (Bryman, 2012). One might even argue that video calling serves as the best alternative of face-to-face interaction, is not possible.

From the perspective of this study, Skype has made it possible to collect the data that was needed to begin the analysis and finish in time despite a continuation of the national lockdown. However, there can be challenges using Skype, since one can risk that the interviewees do not know how to use the software or if they even know what it is. Researchers are also not able to make eye contact or read the body language of the interviewees to the same extent as if the interaction took place physically, and the interviewer cannot be sure to have the same success in creating a pleasant atmosphere (Krouwel et al., 2019). Lastly, this method of communication can be tricky, as “technical difficulties may create a loss of intimacy. If, for, example, the connection is lost during an emotional conversation ‘this creates an abrupt feeling in the interview that is hard to move forward from’” (Lacono et al., 2016, p. 6). Problems with the internet were experienced and lost the connection to it during an interview, which then had to be continued using a phone call. In general, the skype interviews went well and resulted in a data collection that can be considered to be of good quality.

During the stages of conducting the interviews for this study, phone calls were used. Several of the interviewees preferred to use a phone call because some were not comfortable with Skype or did not know how to use it, and others simply wanted to do the phone call. Similar to the choice to be skype interviews, the Corona outbreak is the reason behind the decision to do interviews over the phone. As with any other method of data collection, interviews over the phone both have advantages and pitfalls, which will be addressed below. In the academic world, using phone calls for interviews has previously been mostly associated with quantitative research, but it has become quite normal to use this method of data collection within the sphere of qualitative studies (Drabble et al., 2016; Hughes, 2008). Conducting interviews over the phone is not considered to be the most obvious choice in terms of data collection, since face-to-face meetings between interviewees and interviewer often result in data of high quality, depending on the situation concerning the research subject. From the perspective of this thesis, this method was not chosen as the priority, but in this case, it is a necessary decision to make to obtain the data. When doing interviews over the phone, there are some logistical advantages that are worth noting. From a practical perspective, there is a convenience for the interviewees, since they can sit at home in a safe environment while doing the interview, as well as flexibility in terms of planning. The researchers can also benefit from this method of data collection since one does not

have to travel to do the interviews as well as the ability to get access to people that one is not able to meet within a given situation (Dabble et al., 2016; Hughes, 2008).

There are, however, several pitfalls that one needs to be aware of (Drabble et al., 2016). Hughes (2008) points to the length of the phone interviews tend to be shorter than face-to-face interviews because there is not the same interaction and communication between the interviewee and interviews. The interviewer can risk that the interviewees answer with brief and sometimes vague responses, and one, therefore, has to be aware to have them elaborate on questions that are not fully answered, or needs clarification. A good relation between the interviewer and interviewee can sometimes be lost, since “it can be difficult to build up trust and rapport, as well as gain the full attention of the participant” (Hughes, 2008, p. 3). Luckily, the subject of this study has not been considered a sensitive topic, which does not require as much trust as other, more delicate issues.

It has, however, been important to do the interviews via Skype, since it was considered to be the option that best resembled a face-to-face meeting when having to choose between skype and phone call. Based on this, the interviewees were not initially given the choice of the phone call but only a Skype call, which was an attempt to conduct the majority of the interviews via the latter. If they for some reason did not wish to use Skype, they would be willing to be interviewed via a phone call. In the following section, the limitations regarding the use of both Skype and phone interviews will be elaborated in relation to this study.

#### Transcriptions and coding

In order to get an overview of the amount of data collected in the interviews and create the best conditions to start the analysis, and transcribe all the interviews. Transcriptions of an interview are valuable, since “The goal is to capture what was said during the interview but also may include how participants talked (i.e., paralanguage and interactive features)” (Parcell & Rafferty, 2017, p. 4). The transcriptions of the interview for this thesis enabled the utilise the data for the analysis and discussion in relation to descriptions and quotes. The reader is better suited to understand the wider context of a paragraph or section if accurate quotes and descriptions from the interviews are incorporated. As mentioned in the section about interview guides, the interviews were conducted in Danish. As a result, the transcriptions were done in English. There are, however, challenges connected to translation,



since words and meanings can be lost in the process. According to Kvale (2007), this is both in terms of translating from one language to another as well as from oral to written words. During the process of transcribing the interviews, the choice to leave out certain parts of the conversation that was not relevant for the aim of the interview, and thus the research question. This was a deliberate choice as there were several instances, where the conversation turned away from the topic in question. Examples of this could be personal talks about previous jobs of the interviewees, or education - thus, conversations that are not relevant for the aim of the thesis. All of the transcriptions were collected in one document and can be found within the appendix for this thesis (Appendix, transcriptions).

During the process of writing a qualitative-based study, it is beneficial for the structure of the analysis to use a systematic approach to manage the data collection, which enables an overview of the results from the semi-structured interviews (Glaser, 1995; Kvale, 2007; Bryman, 2012). Hence, coding has been applied in terms of sorting the material to find common themes and other significant findings for the analysis and discussion. After every interview was transcribed, the data were coded thematically to find the themes mentioned above or new ones that may be relevant for this thesis. Thus, making it possible to explore new understandings of approaches to sustainability. It is, however, important to note that the themes may overlap as the data might indicate different things at the same time.

#### Ethical considerations

According to Kvale (2007), “ethical considerations permeate interview research” (Kvale, 2007, p. 8). In relation to this, he states that “[...] interview research is saturated with moral and ethical issues. Ethical problems in interview research arise particularly because of the complexities of ‘researching private lives and placing accounts in the public arena’ [...]” (Kvale, 2007, p. 23).

As this thesis concerns people and the interviews provide an insight into their personal lifeworld, it is acknowledged that ethical considerations should be taken into account in relation to the preparations of the interviews and the use of the data. Even though the interviewers have a specific purpose with the interviews, one still needs to respect the interviewees within the process as well. Thus, a balance between the interest of the interviewers and ethical respect for the integrity of the interviewees should be in place (Kvale, 2007; Punch, 2014).

As mentioned earlier, the interviews were conducted over Skype or through phone conversations where to these were taped so that it would be easier to remember and use the content later. For this part, the interviewees were asked if it would be okay for them that the interviews were taped. Additionally, they were asked how they preferred to be referred to within the thesis (INTERVIEW GUIDE). By doing so, consents from the interviewees were secured so that the interviews could be taped and used for the thesis. Furthermore, this also enabled the interviewees to say no if they felt uncomfortable about the situation and come with suggestions or objections to how the data were to be handled. In this way, it became possible for the interviewees to secure a level of confidentiality if this was something that they wished for. Stating this, making the interviewees feel comfortable about the situation was important not only because it may affect the quality of the data but also because it is an act of human respect. Amongst other things, introductions of the interviewer and the co-researcher were given along with a short presentation of the study. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the study presentation was made quite brief to avoid that this would have a greater impact on the results of the interviews. Thus, an effort was made in order to create a positive experience for the interviewer as well as the interviewee (Kvale, 2007).

As the thesis includes data of personal human value, ethical considerations should also concern the protection of these data. For this, the recordings and the transcriptions are saved in a safe place where to no one else has access. Furthermore, these will be deleted when the thesis is finished and handed in. For this, Kvale (2007) additionally stress that “The confidentiality of the interviewees needs to be protected and there is also the question of whether a transcribed text is loyal to the interviewee’s oral statements” (Kvale, 2007, p. 24). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the interviews have been taped and will be transcribed to ensure that the statements, which will be used within this thesis, are as close as possible to the spoken words of the interviewees. Even though this may secure high credibility, it is acknowledged that small mistakes may occur when the interviews are transcribed. Stating this, the analysis will represent not only the interpretations of the interviewees but also how these are interpreted by the interviewers. Nevertheless, the spoken words of the interviewees will be at the centre of attention throughout the analysis where to it is believed that these will provide an interesting insight into their worldview and perception of sustainable tourism development.

## Applying the theory within the analysis

For the analysis, the theoretical framework will be included as a helping tool in the search for answers to the problem formulation. As the purpose of this case study is to examine tourism operators approach to sustainable development within a tourism context, the theoretical framework poses suggestions to ways in which these may understand and approach the concept. More specifically, the approaches to the concept that has been described include the Three Pillars/Dimensions of Sustainable Tourism Development, the Three Traditions of Sustainable Tourism, De-growth and the Holistic approach. It will be examined within the analysis if there are similarities or difference between the commonly known approaches to sustainability and how the different tourism operators understand and work with the concept. When doing so, it is acknowledged that there is a possibility that some of the stakeholders do not consider sustainable development in relation to the experiences that they offer or their approach to the tourism development within the area. If this were to be the case, this would nevertheless still be an interesting finding. Furthermore, it is also possible that some of the tourism operators have other approaches to the concept than the ones introduced within the theoretical framework.

Stating this, the theoretical framework of this thesis does not include all of the different definitions of sustainable tourism development, which can be found within the literature. This is due to the complexity of the concept of sustainable tourism development, including its many different definitions (McCool, 2015; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019b). Thus, for this thesis, a focus has been placed on a set of definitions that are commonly used and found within the research literature. As mentioned above, it is understood that there might appear other approaches to the concept as well amongst the tourism operators within this case. Additionally, it is not only the understanding of the tourism operators but also how they choose to approach this within their businesses that will be examined. In this sense, it is not only the understanding of the concept in itself but also the implementations that are suggested within the theoretical framework that will be useful in relation to the analysis. By including these, it becomes possible to conduct an even more thorough analysis wherein there will be a lot of data and information to compare and discuss in the search for answers. Hereby, the theoretical framework will be a useful tool which is meant to help us create an understanding of the different tourism operators in Thy Nationalpark and their interpretations of sustainability as a concept in relation to tourism. In this sense, it is acknowledged that the findings

may include many and different answers as one's understanding of the lived world is affected by one's own interpretations.

## Limitations

During the process of writing the thesis, several challenges came to light and have resulted in limitations as to the content and design of this study. One of the major issues has been the outbreak of the Corona crisis, which has had implications for, not only the thesis but for everyone. Based on the consequences of this virus, the course of the data collection became quite problematic, as it was difficult to find enough participants who wanted to be interviewed. It is understandable since many were busy with trying to deal with a situation, where their income was severely affected, and some had just sent almost every employee home. Moreover, another consequence became apparent, as it turned out to be challenging to get replies from potential interview candidates. Some did not react on the first step of reaching out to them, for instance, via email, and others initially agreed to participate but were unsuccessful in reaching any further communication with them. Thus, complicating the timeframe for conducting the interviews since new candidates had to be contacted. From this perspective, time has been a limit in relation to the amount of data that could be collected under the circumstances.

As mentioned previously, the situation with the Corona crisis resulted in an alteration in terms of conducting the interviews. Initially, the interviews were to be conducted face-to-face with the interviewees. Since this often results in rich data because the interaction between interviewer and interviewee is more natural. However, because of the circumstances, the interviews were conducted either via a Skype meeting or a phone call. The latter has certain challenges to its usability in terms of interviewing since the length of a phone call is often shorter than face-to-face meetings. This form of interviewing has furthermore made it challenging to pick up on facial expression such as puzzlement if the interviewee struggled with a question. As this observation is impossible, it might be the case that various signs were not caught which could have improved the responses if addressed (Bryman, 2012). In general, there is a risk of obtaining data that might be less "rich" than the interviews done via Skype, since the level of engagement between the interviewer and the interviewee is low (Bryman, 2012).

## Interview profiles

### Oh So Quiet – Pia Skammelsen

Pia Skammelsen is the owner of the business Oh So Quiet, and she offers hikes in Nationalpark Thy, where the visitors walk from summerhouse to summerhouse over a three-day span. The concept is to offer a hiking experience where the one does not have to stay the night in tents after cooking your dinner over the fire and without any bathroom facilities. The routes are carefully picked to secure a certain quality regarding variations in nature one passes and the summerhouses they stay in. All the practical aspects of the hike are taken care of since one does not have to go grocery shopping, or clean the place when one leaves, so one only has to pack a small backpack and enjoy the experience.

### Thy Hike – Maria Vangsgaard

Thy Hike is owned by Maria. The concept is a three-day hiking trip in Nationalpark Thy for people who have a busy life, and who wishes to challenge themselves while at the same time clearing their heads. The hiking route enables the hikers to experience what the park can offer in terms of nature from Lodbjerg lighthouse and to Nors Sø – roughly 55 kilometres. Almost all the food is prepared outside, and the sleeping arrangement is a tent. Thus, this concept is based on a more primitive idea of a hike than the concept at Oh So Quiet above.

### Friends of Cold Hawaii – Martin Falslev Andersen

Friends of Cold Hawaii is an association located in Klitmøller that manage the brand Cold Hawaii and the activities associated with it. Klitmøller is famous for having some of the best conditions for surfing, and the place has been the host for surfers since the seventies. Cold Hawaii is one of Thisted municipality's strongest brands with water activities as its main product. Once a year, the association hosts the Cold Hawaii games, where championships of various sorts are combined with activities for locals and visitors for example biking and walks in the national park as well as water activities. The brand of Cold Hawaii are used for different surf shops and surf schools in Klitmøller and further down the coast, but they are separate from the work of the association.

### Lone Lærke Krog - Lærkely

Lone Lærke Krog is the owner of Lærkely Horse Hotel and Shelter Camp, and she established it in 2009 after she found that it was not any offer in Thy where one could ride over a few days without the inconvenience of preparing everything yourself. Based on this, she founded her business right at the border of Nationalpark Thy, where tourists both rider, hike, or bikers can stay with good facilities, shelters, and pens for the horses. The tourists sleep in the shelters and cook dinner over the fire, and beverages and breakfast can be bought as well. Lone collaborates with Birger Eskildsen and Annette Skou, other operators who also offer horseback riding. They facilitate a three-day trip on horseback in Nationalpark Thy.

### Stutteri Korreborg

Stutteri Korreborg is a local stud farm for Icelandic horses in Thy, located close to the borders of Nationalpark Thy. In addition to breeding horses, the owner offers horseback rides to tourists, who wish to see the nature in Thy, especially the national park. He offers two-four hours rides, an all-day ride, or a three-day ride, depending on the wish of the tourists. He collaborates with two other horseback ride operators in Thy and Stenbjerg Kro.

### Naturstyrelsen Thy – Morten Brown Stummann

Naturstyrelsen Thy serves as a political organisation that manages the state-owned land in both Thy, Mors, and Hanherred. Amongst other things, they also offer a range of different activities in, e.g. Nationalpark Thy. Examples of this are the facilitation of hiking and mountain bike tracks, and guided tours. The latter has the objective to disseminate knowledge about nature and the wildlife to visitors and tourists, who wishes to learn more about the nature in Thy.

### NaturmadThy – Mie Buus

NaturmadThy is founded by Mie Buss, who lives in Thy. The concept is for visitors to experience the nature in, for instance, Nationalpark Thy, and what it can offer in terms of edible plants, berries, and various mushrooms. Mie Buus is the guide on these outings, where she educates the customers in

how to find the edible food, and cook with them. The natural pantry in the park frames the core of the concept, where the aim is to get the visitors to use it more as well as teaching them how to preserve the environment to be able to enjoy these resources in the future.

#### Vesterhavsscafeen – Per

Per and his wife own Vesterhavsscafeen in Vorupør with The North Sea, Nationalpark Thy, and Cold Hawaii as their neighbours. The location of the dinner place is in one of the hotspots of Thy, especially in the summer, where the small coastal town is packed with tourists and visitors enjoying the area. For Per, the dinner place intends to offer a cosy ambience, where everyone can come and enjoy good food and have a good time.

#### Stenbjerg Kro – Stefan

Stenbjerg Kro is located in the small coastal town of Stenbjerg, and the director is Stefan, who just recently succeeded his mother, who ran the place for three decades. The aim of the inn is to offer a range of delicacies with local products and produce from Nationalpark Thy. One cannot find a typical Danish inn menu since both Stefan and his mother saw the opportunity to make use of the national park to do a menu reflecting the latter. The concept is not only based on the park and the local community but also to have as much organic produce as possible.

#### Hotel Thinggaard – Michael Thinggaard Madsen

Hotel Thinggaard is a hotel and restaurant located in the small town of Hurup in southern Thy and close to Nationalpark Thy. Michael started the hotel in 2004 and has since developed it from being a former railroad inn and missionary hotel to a place where one can get a gourmet experience from the restaurant or a place-bound stay with for instance golf, spa, or surf as the focal area of that particular stay. The aim of the restaurant and the specific accommodation is the care for the visitor with locally inspired food and experiences that takes its point of departure in Thy and the National Park.

#### Thorbjørn Stenholm



Thorbjørn Stenholm works as a business consultant with a focus on sustainable development, and a few years back, he worked with business development in Thy and the national park. He was hired to identify potentials in terms of sustainable business development, which he further aided in initiating together with other members of the steering committee. His focus area was among other things, in and around Nationalpark Thy by considering sustainability and the parks natural resources.

#### Nationalpark Thy – Else Østergaard Andersen

Else Ø. Andersen is the head of the secretariat in Nationalpark Thy, which she has been since the foundation of the park in 2009. The role of the institution in the park's tourism sphere is not as dominant, as one would think. Still, Else and her team facilitate different initiatives to further the dissemination of knowledge surrounding the national park.

#### Thisted Municipality

From Thisted Municipality, a representative from the department of trade was interviewed. According to him the role of Thisted Municipality in terms of tourism in Nationalpark Thy is to help facilitate different projects and initiatives such as the new dissemination centre in Vorupør and “vildmakrsdage” and “Trædestens projektet”. The contribution of the municipality stretches from strategic work to aiding in the development, and financial support.

# Analysis: Understanding and implementing sustainability

## The complex world of sustainability

As it has been mentioned earlier within this thesis, this study seeks to investigate *how operators working with tourism in and around Nationalpark Thy understand and implement the concept of sustainable development within their business*. For this, findings from the data revealed some commonalities amongst the different operators as several seemed to focus on themes concerning; A Wider Perspective; Including the Local Society and Culture; Protecting the Environment; Approaching Sustainability via Choices of Materials and Products; The Economic Aspect. Nevertheless, the findings still showed some similarities with the literature on the subject as it too revealed a complexity in terms of understandings and approaches (e.g. UNEP & WTO, 2005; Saarinen, 2014; Hall, 2009; McCool, 2015; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019a). Even though all tourism operators are familiar with the concept of sustainability, some describe how they find the concept rather complex in terms of meaning. Exemplifying this, Per from Vesterhavscafeen mentions “Sustainability... I think it is a difficult term because I don’t quite know where and how to start” (Per, Vesterhavscafeen) to which Lone Lærke Krog from Lærkely describes the concept as “a fluffy term” (Lone Lærke Krog, Lærkely). In this sense, working with sustainability in a business may not be as easy as it may seem to which, Thorbjørn Stenholm argues that “it is important to know that sustainable solutions are challenging to work with as it is very complicated” (Thorbjørn Stenholm).

Furthermore, the data revealed that several of the operators seem to be aware of their own interpretation of the concept as they explain how they approach sustainability within their business (e.g. Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike; Pia Skammelsen, Oh So Quiet; Stefan, Stenbjerg Kro; Stutteri Korreborg). Amongst others, Stefan from Stenbjerg Kro emphasise “from my point of view, sustainability is when you use the elements to get a balance” (Stefan – Stenbjerg Kro) to which he also notes that the meaning of social sustainability deepens on how you personally understand the word social. Thus, some of the tourism operators mention that they are aware of the three pillars of sustainable development (UNEP & WTO, 2005) to which some focus more on some dimensions than others (e.g. Nationalpark Thy; Thisted Municipality) while others did not know these by name (e.g.

Per, Vesterhavscafeen; Birger, Stutteri Korreborg, Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike). Within these cases, many do not necessarily work with a specific approach where to they instead tend to use their common sense and approach it in a way that seems natural for them. Nevertheless, most of the tourism operators in this study, work with elements or themes that could be argued to fit into the three dimensions but their awareness of this seem to differ (e.g. Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike, Else Ø Andersen, Nationalpark Thy; Morten Brown Stummann, Naturstyrelsen Thy). Additionally, other themes or focus areas seem to be present as well, which emphasise the complexity of sustainability that has been mentioned by scholars such as Saarinen (2014), Hall (2009), McCool (2015) and Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019b).

As there seem to be different ways of approaching the concept, so does the amount of effort that is put into a sustainable development vary from one operator to another. In relation to this, personal values and professional possession in terms of job etc. also seem to affect the ways in which the concept are approached in nature and food experiences that are offered (e.g. Morten Brown Stummann, Naturstyrelsen Thy; Michael Thinggaard Madsen, Hotel Thinggaard; Martin Falslev Andersen, Friends of Cold Hawaii; Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike). As an example, Morten Brown Stummann from Naturstyrelsen Thy stresses that they usually follow Skovloven in which they consider social, economic and environmental sustainability. Nevertheless, as their job is to manage the state-owned nature areas and provide outdoor activities for people within these, using and protecting the nature in the right way is highly important for them (Morten Brown Stummann, Naturstyrelsen Thy). On the other hand, Thisted Municipality primarily works with economic sustainability in relation to tourism businesses, as they wish to create growth within the tourism sector (Thisted Municipality). Thus, when speaking of sustainability it can be argued that there is a connection between their job position and how they prioritise between the different dimensions. Adding to this notion, Andersen et al.'s (2018) study which also concerned danish tourism operators' approach to sustainability revealed that advanced understandings of the concept were weak, to which the economic aspect seemed to be highly valued on the contrary to other elements of sustainable development. For this, Andersen et al. (2019) argued that a more holistic approach was necessitated in order to move towards more sustainability. Furthermore, Holden (2010) also noted that locals tended to look at sustainable development from a rather individual perspective.

Continuing on this, the awareness of how sustainable approaches may be included within the offered experiences seemed to vary as well. Thus, while some operators state that they think a lot about how their business or institution actively operates in terms of sustainability (e.g. Morten Brown Stummann, Naturstyrelsen Thy; Else Ø. Andersen, Nationalpark Thy; Michael Thinggaard Madsen; Hotel Thinggaard), others describe how some of their “sustainable approaches” come more naturally to them (e.g. Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike; Pia Skammelsen, Oh So Quiet). In this way, it once more becomes clear that there are individual differences in terms of how they relate to the concept. Stating this, the above-mentioned helps emphasise that one needs to look at each one of these tourism operators and try and understand sustainability from their point of view. As mentioned in the first part of the section, the interviews revealed some commonalities such as a focus on themes concerning; A Wider Perspective; Including the Local Society and Culture; Protecting the Environment; Approaching Sustainability via Choices of Materials and Products; The Economic Aspect. Within these sections, sub-themes have been identified and will thus be elaborated. These will pose the structure of the following analysis, which will provide a more in-depth insight into the above-mentioned complexity of sustainability. Within this, the purpose will be to investigate how the concept is understood, valued and approached by the different tourism operators within and close to Nationalpark Thy.

## A wider perspective

When discussing the concept of sustainability, the understandings of it are many and differ depending on who and how you ask. Within this context, themes which could be argued to fit into a wider perspective also appeared amongst the spoken words of the operators to which the following two sections seek to introduce. The themes include discussions on tourism mobility as well as considerations regarding growth and development in relation to the concepts of sustainability.

### Tourism mobility

As the operators were asked where their visitors come from and how they travel to their offered experiences, it is mentioned by several that many of their visitors are Danish or Germans who mostly travel by car. Some also travel by bike, foot or public transportation but these do nevertheless not pose as the majority of the visitors (e.g. Per, Vesterhavsscafeen; Lone Lærke Krog, Lærkely; Mie Buus, Naturmad Thy; Pia Skammelsen, Oh So Quiet; Michael Thinggaard Madsen, Hotel

Thinggaard; Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike). Within this context, several of the operators do consider the aspect of transportation in relation to sustainability, to which negative impacts on the environment in terms of CO<sub>2</sub> emission and solutions for this were discussed (e.g. Else Ø. Andersen, Nationalpark Thy; Pia Skammelsen, Oh So Quiet, Morten Brown Stummann, Naturstyrelsen Thy; Stefan, Stenbjerg Kro). Thus, some of the operators hereby consider sustainability in an environmental context wherein they think of how tourism may have a negative impact (e.g. UNEP & WTO, 2005; Saarinen, 2014; McCool, 2015). Additionally, one could argue that the transport-impact awareness somehow implies elements of a holistic approach to the concept of sustainability, as they consider their local business within a wider and more complex context (e.g. McCool, 2015; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019a). Even though several operators are aware of how their visitors' way of travel may affect the environment negatively, many still believe that this impact is rather small. For this, it is emphasised that taking the car is more sustainable than taking the plane. Thus, Per from Vesterhavsscafeen mentioned:

"Well again it is about whether or not it is okay for you that the Germans drive in their car to Vorupør, is that sustainable? What level should we discuss it?... I actually think that the tourists coming to Vorupør come by car... they don't fly, so in a sense that can be sustainable... I think" (Per, Vesterhavsscafeen).

His statement is supported by other operators such as Lone Lærke Krog from Lærkely and Pia from Oh So Quiet, who also emphasise how it is better not to fly. Furthermore, it is argued that their type of business includes a rather environmental friendly way of moving around within the national park, to which there is only a little or no pollution in terms of CO<sub>2</sub> (e.g. Stutteri Korrebrog; Lone Lærke Krog, Lærkely; Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike). Stating this, Lone Lærke Krog from Lærkely stress, "I know people are driving to get here but they get around on horses so I think it is a rather small footprint that we are responsible for" (Lone Lærke Krog, Lærkely). Adding to this notion, Else Ø. Andersen from Nationalpark Thy describes how they actively try to make people aware of more sustainable choices in terms of transport:

"We do think that the best way to experience the national park is by foot or bike so in this sense the sustainable transportation opportunities are the best ones. Most of the tourists within the area come

here by private car, but we do try to make people aware of how they can get to the national park by using public transportation” (Else Ø. Andersen, Nationalpark Thy).

For this, she further stresses that moving in a slower pace provides the visitors of the national park with an even better experience (Else Ø. Andersen, Nationalpark Thy), a statement that is supported by Pia Skammelsen from Oh So Quiet and Maria Vangsgaard from Thy Hike. The above-mentioned cases indicate how the operators take the impact of tourism mobility into consideration, in the same way as it has been suggested by Scholars such as Hall et al. (2010). Thus, here one could argue that elements of a more holistic approach to sustainability are considered because a wider context of the visitors’ way of travelling is included (Hall et al., 2010; Rutty et al., 2015). Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that the operators do not define their business as fully sustainable, to which one could question if it would be a possible goal to achieve.

Pia skammelsen from Oh So Quiet also consider how her visitors travel to get to the national park and her offered hiking experiences. Within this case, she agrees that certain solutions are more sustainable than others. Still, she believes that sustainable solutions are becoming more and more valued by the visitors as well to which she finds it important to meet their needs (Pia Skammelsen, Oh So Quiet). Stating this describes:

”With my business, I can feel that I have entered the tourism industry in a climate-conscious time. I have an offer for especially Danish people means that they can avoid airplanes... like a climate aspect where you don’t have to travel by air to come here, which does not put as much strain on the climate. So there is something with transport that I think is important and maybe more important in the years to come because we have been used to travel across the globe and I doubt that this can continue if we have an ambition to reduce the CO2 emission” (Pia Skammelsen, Oh So Quiet).

For this, it is of her belief that more people will travel less and in shorter distances to which many Danes will find it more relevant and interesting to explore Danish nature. Thus, her business is capable of meeting the need of these whereby flight as an example would be avoided (Pia Skammelsen, Oh So Quiet). Within this context, one could argue that Pia Skammelsen from Oh So Quiet and Else from Nationalpark Thy combine the idea of sustainability with responsibility and ethical considerations as well. A statement which somehow also fits Morten Brown Stummann from Naturstyrelsen Thy’s statement as well as he defines their work as “responsible management” instead

of sustainable as such (Morten Brown Stummann, Naturstyrelsen Thy). Within these cases, there is an awareness of the industry's impacts on the environment, amongst other things and a wish to minimise these (Saarinen, 2014). Within this, then it is acknowledged that the business somehow depends on other businesses and resources as well to which it also affects the environment etc. on a wider scale in terms of possible pollution etc. (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019a; McCool, 2015; Andersen et al. 2018). Interestingly these cases seem to differ from the ones that are described by Holden (2010), as he found that there was a lack of commitment amongst the local stakeholders to further sustainable development.

On the contrary to Pia Skammelsen from Oh So Quiet, Maria Vangsgaard from Thy Hike have made a little guide wherein people can read how to get to Thy with flight or train in. In this way, one cannot argue that she is actively working against making people fly. Still, she does nevertheless mention that most people travel by car where to some people choose to fill up the space in their cars with other participants so they can drive together (Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike). Nevertheless, Maria Vangsgaard still considers the environmental aspect of sustainability. She agrees not only with Pia Skammelsen from Oh So Quiet but also Morten Brown Stummann from Naturstyrelsen Thy and Lone Lærke Krog from Lærkely (Pia Skammelsen, Oh So Quiet; Morten Brown Stummann, Naturstyrelsen Thy; Lone Lærke Krog, Lærkely), who all emphasise how people may begin to travel shorter distances and explore their backyards.

Thus, it becomes evident that there is an interest in sustainable development in terms of environmental aspects amongst these operators. Nevertheless, there might be a slight difference in how and to what degree they work with this in their business or institutions. Within this context, Saarinen (2014) notes that views on tourism impact may vary to which people's opinions may be many and different. Thus, "the question of whether these changes are acceptable or unacceptable depends on specific (societal and/or individual) values, attitudes, knowledge and priorities concerning the role and impacts of tourism" (Saarinen, 2014, p. 6). Furthermore, one must also consider to which degree it is possible and reasonable for the individual business or organisation as they might have other aspects of importance that they have to work with as well. Exemplifying this, Morten Brown Stummann from Naturstyrelsen Thy describes that they do not consider themselves holy as they are aware of how cars burn petrol. Nevertheless, he emphasises that it is difficult for people to move around the area otherwise because there is a lack of public transportation and electric buses etc. (Morten Brown



Stummann, Naturstyrelsen Thy). Stating this, he does they do work on more responsible initiatives such as better access to nature:

”we are also trying to connect Naturstyrelsen’s areas to some of the coast towns. The idea here is that you do not have to drive to the forest areas but instead you can walk or bike there. This is also done to enhance the green aspect of the outdoor life so you do not have to drive five km in car to get there” (Morten Brown Stummann, Naturstyrelsen Thy).

Thus, once more, an environmental aspect is taken into consideration. The above-mentioned section indicates that there is an awareness concerning the mobility/transportation aspect amongst several of the stakeholders. Within this context, they are aware of how their visitors’ plane and car-travels etc. may pollute, to which some actively works on create more sustainable or responsible travel options for their visitors. Here the travel aspect somehow reaches outside the local destination of Thy and Nationalpark Thy to which tourism manifest as a part of a wider and more complex system as it is argued by scholars such as Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019b) and McCool (2015). The issue of mobility in relation to transport is something that can become difficult to touch upon in a rural area like Thy as it can become difficult for tourists to get around because of the larger distances. Within this context, it is mentioned by Hall et al., (2010) that taking steps towards down-scaling the ability to move around with either car or bus can impact the community and the economy negatively. Stating this, reducing carbon emissions may have a positive effect on the environment, but as it may affect the local economy and community negatively. Hence, it would most likely not result in overall sustainable development.

Furthermore, Høyer’s (2010) study on mobility in Norway and Switzerland found that a reduction of destinations volume of transport is rather challenging. By offering alternative solutions such as increasing the options for public transport or make private parking expensive, the effect will only marginally have an impact on the volume of tourists travelling by plane or car. If such an effect were to be possible, policy implementations would have to reach beyond the tourism industry and into the transport sector. Thus, complicating the matter.

## Growth and development

Another variable that is considered by the operators concerned growth and development. In this context, the number of visitors is discussed, and here the operators are generally quite in agreement that Nationalpark Thy does not currently have a problem with too many visitors. Here, the idea that too many visitors would cause an issue in terms of sustainability can be linked the idea of a carrying capacity in the same way as it has been mentioned by Saarinen (2014).

Exemplifying, Michael Thinggaard Madsen does not see a problem with the number of visitors at the moment, as “I think that there is room for a lot more tourists, if we look at number for overnight stays in Thy when there are not that many compared to other known places like Blokhus, Løkken, Skagen, so I think there is room for a lot more tourists in Thy” (Michael Thinggaard Madsen, Hotel Thinggaard). Maria Vangsgaard shares this view, as she states; “I do not really have any thoughts concerning this. Well, at least I am not concerned that there will be too many. No matter if I am off on my own or if we are doing Thy Hike I have never experienced that it was too crowded” (Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike). Both Michael Thinggaard Madsen and Maria Vangsgaard are not alone with this opinion, other operators such as Martin Falslev Andersen from Friends of Cold Hawaii, Lone Lærke Krog from Lærkely, and Mie Buus from Naturmad Thy do not recognise an issue with overcrowding at the moment. There are however a few examples of operators who believe that a limit might be beneficial if the park were to be affected by too many visitors in the future (e.g. Pia Skammelsen, Oh So Quiet and Michael Thinggaard Madsen, Hotel Thinggaard). Thus, a common denominator is the balance among visitors and the well-being of the environment, where it is believed that there is enough space for its visitors at the moment. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there is an unlimited amount of space either.

If one looks at the quotes above, one could argue that they seem to move towards Hall's (2009) argument about “rightsizing” the growth in terms of the environment combined with the tourism industry. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, there are two main approaches to view de-growth, where for instance Andriotis (2014) favours the idea of setting a limit that makes sure that the scale of production and activity do not spiral uncontrollably. On the other hand, Hall's (2009) argument is about achieving sustainable development in the “right” manner in order to preserve

tourism development, sustainable development, and protection of the environment. This can be done by thinking more broadly about how the development can be optimised without increasing the strain on the environment, which might require a need to invest more capital even though that can seem contradictory to some. Thus, resulting in a sustained steady economy with a balanced consumption that has been “rightsized”. An example of this can be Else Ø. Andersen from the secretariat of Nationalpark Thy, who states; “I remember that when we made the first plan for the national park someone said that the number of visitors should not exceed 1.5 million and maybe that is where we are today, but we are very unsure. Nevertheless, we also have a report, which says that if you plan it wisely it can handle even more” (Else Ø. Andersen, Nationalpark Thy). The emphasis she places on having to plan the development of the park wisely indicates that she finds it important to manage the plan right to secure the well-being of the park if more visitors were to become a reality in the future.

Thus, one could argue that this opinion also leans more towards Halls (2009) argument about “rightsizing” than Andriotis’ (2014) about setting a limit. Despite a few examples of operators who talk about a limit to growth in terms of development in the visitor number, they stress that they do not see it as a necessity yet. According to them, it should only be an option if the environment becomes so strained that such a limit would relieve this situation. Pia Skammelsen from Oh So Quiet touches upon some of the elements from Hall’s argument regarding “rightsizing” of growth, since she advocates for tourists to obtain a better understanding of how to behave more sustainable when being a tourist. This is also something that Pia emphasises when asked about the development and growth of the park’s visitors; “I don’t think it to be problematic but more of a quality if they are careful with the nature. I think it is good for the area but also to create a more holistic image and understanding of the environment and nature for the guests” (Pia Skammelsen, Oh So Quiet). It is nevertheless important to note that there is no recent count of how many visitors the park actually has. For this, it is further emphasised by some of the operators that they do not have enough knowledge on this issue to provide a qualified answer (Martin Falslev Andersen, Friends of Cold Hawaii; Pia Skammelsen, Oh So Quiet; Michael Thinggaard Madsen, Hotel Thinggaard).

With the above-mentioned in mind, one could argue that there are placed a lot of emphasis on the environmental aspect when discussing the development of the park and possible impacts in the future. The findings can thus be argued to fit the purpose of the resource-based tradition by Saarinen (2014) since the operators place their focus on the future level to which the park can handle, which resembles

the carrying capacity mentioned in this particular tradition. Stating this, the resource-based approach could be argued to be challenged within this context as well, as it might be difficult for the operators to “separate the impacts of tourism from changes caused by other activities and natural or human-induced processes taking place the same space” (Saarinen, 2014, pp. 4-5). This notion is supported by Else Ø. Andersen from Nationalpark Thy (Else Ø. Andersen, Nationalpark Thy). Furthermore, the resource-based tradition is challenged by scholars such as Haraldsson and Ólafsdóttir (2018), Beritelli and Laesser (2017) and Gunn and Var (2002) as they criticise how resources and systems are viewed as something static within this. Instead, they can be argued to support scholars such as McCool (2015), Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019a) and Hall et al. (2010) as they believe that the tourism industry should be seen as dynamic.

One could, however, argue that there seems to be a difference in the way that they think about limits to growth. Exemplifying this, Mie Buus and Stutteri Korreborg appear to focus a lot on the carrying capacity of the environment on the contrary to operators such as Thisted Kommune as well as Thorbjørn Stenholm, who argue in favour of developing the tourism industry in the area. The activity-based tradition is thus found to be present since the two above-mentioned operators advocate for improvements. For instance, the lacking options for accommodation as well as the expansion of the shoulder season. Thus, one could argue that both resource- and activity-based approaches seem to be present amongst the stakeholders. In this context, one could question whether or not these two traditions might clash in the future because of increasing visitor numbers (Saarinen, 2014).

## Including the Local Society and Culture

One thing that many of the tourism operators mention as important or relevant in relation to their business or work is the local aspect (e.g. Else Ø. Andersen, Nationalpark Thy; Michael Thinggaard Madsen, Hotel Thinggaard; Lone Lærke Krog, Lærkely; Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike; Thisted Municipality; Morten Brown Stummann, Naturstyrelsen Thy). Within this, many either incorporate the local society or culture of Thy and the National Park within their business or development planning, which many believe could contribute to more sustainability. Thus, this part of the analysis will focus on: Including local produce or products, Working with local people, history and culture,

Including local residents within the decision making and development processes. Furthermore, some also find it important to create or enhance local pride and help attract visitors to the area of Thy. The importance of including local society and culture in relation to the concept of sustainability is also something that has been mentioned by scholars and tourism organisations as well (e.g. UNEP & WTO, 2005; Saarinen, 2014; McCool, 2015). Amongst others, UNEP & WTO (2005) notes that one should “Respect the sociocultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance” (UNEP & WTO, 2005, p. 11). For this, they further note that the inclusion of local stakeholders plays an important role in terms of sustainable tourism development. Nevertheless, UNEP & WTO’s (2005) approach to sustainable development is only one out of many that include the local aspect as an important element (e.g. Saarinen, 2014; Cater & Cater, 2010) in the same way as, e.g. responsible tourism (e.g. Saarinen, 2014; Sharpley, 2013; Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2011). According to Clausen and Gyimóthy (2016), one should not perceive a local society or community as a homogenous group. Instead, it should be seen as consisting of different smaller groups and individuals with different relationships to one another as well as different understandings of the concepts of sustainability (Clausen and Gyimóthy, 2016).

Continuing on this notion, it should be understood that, as with the concept of sustainability, the idea of “including local society and culture” can be seen as a complicated matter. Thus, it can be argued to hold different meanings and values for different people. Within this case, it is acknowledged that what is understood by the different operators is affected by their own interpretations as well.

#### Local produce or products

One thing that is mentioned by many of the operators, when speaking of sustainability, is the inclusion of local products or produce within their businesses or institutions. Exemplifying this could be the argument that buying local products supports the local economy as well as the preservation of the local culture and history. Many either use produce that they grow or harvest themselves or buy produce and products from other locals whom they hereby support. Within this context, the sustainable aspect could be argued to fit into an economic dimension as it supports the local economy from a long-term economic perspective. Thus, an income-earning is ensured for other local/local businesses (UNEP & WTO, 2005). Furthermore, the involvement of locals within the tourism businesses could also be seen as a community-based approach as the locals are included and benefit

from tourism as well (Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2011). Exemplifying this Per from Vesterhavsscafeen describes:

“The fish we use, we buy in Hanstholm because that is where we get the best fish, and all that we can buy in our community, we obviously do, but it is not like we can only sell steaks from Gyrup. It is the same with our ice crème that we get from Premier Is in Thisted because it is from Thy and it is, in my opinion, the best in the world, so I think about where I can support...if I can buy it locally, I do... no doubt about that” (Per, Vesterhavsscafeen)

Hereby, Per from Vesterhavsscafeen does not only value the use of local produce because of its quality and taste but also because he supports other local business as a customer. In the same way, Michael Thinggaard Madsen from Hotel Thinggaard also includes local produce within the food experiences that they offer. For this, he mentions that until recently “the way we have worked with sustainability, that is in terms of the local produce” (Michael Thinggaard Madsen, Hotel Thinggaard). The idea, in this case, was to include produce from areas nearby where it also became possible to tell its story. Even though the local aspect was the initial approach to sustainability at Hotel Thinggaard, Michael Thinggaard Madsen also notes that they are working on implementing new sustainable initiatives to improve their business even more in terms of sustainability. In this context, he further notes that inclusion of local produce also helps create a brand awareness which may be beneficial for others and hereby one can help each other out (Michael Thinggaard Madsen, Hotel Thinggaard). Adding to this notion, he describes:

“I am the chairman for Regional Madkultur Thy (Regional food culture Thy) where we are restaurants, hotels, and manufacturer that collaborates in promoting local produce and brand awareness to it. Here we help each other across our network. But I will say that there is a strong collaboration between every business in Thy” (Michael Thinggaard Madsen, Hotel Thinggaard).

When asking what local produce they use, Michael Thinggaard Madsen mentions Bakkedal, Beer from Thisted Brewery, Thy Whiskey, local cattle, local berries and Klosterhedens Vildt amongst others. The local produce is used when it makes sense for them to include it and within their business, the story behind seems to play an important role. Thus, it is stated “We use eggs from the local producer called Karsten Bondemand (Karsten the farmer), and on our breakfast table we have a little

story about that at the eggs” (Michael Thinggaard Madsen, Hotel Thinggaard). The focus on supporting local businesses and hereby also their economy is quite interesting when comparing with Higgins-Desbiolles et al’s (2019b) study. Thus, even though they also mention how produce and the green aspect seems to play an important role for restaurants and cafes, they found that the socio-economic aspect was often neglected—something, which does not seem to be the case here. The use of local produce is, however not solely about financial support, but also the preservation of the local history and culture, which will be elaborated further down.

Maria Vangsgaard from Thy Hike, Lone Lærke Krog from Lærkely, Pia Skammelsen from Oh So Quiet, and Mie Buus from Naturmad Thy also join the above-mentioned actors in the same way as Martin Falslev Andersen from Friends of Cold Hawaii and Stefan from Stenbjerg Kro. As the concept of sustainability was discussed in relation to Thy Hike, Maria Vangsgaard describes “I also thought about it in terms of local power which I use a lot. All our food, produce and so on are, as much as possible, organic and from Thy” (Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike). Thus, they see supporting local economy and preservation of local history and culture as a way of acting sustainable. The focus on the economic dimension can be argued to fit the ones of Andersen et al’s (2018) study as this also revealed how stakeholders often considered the economic aspect of sustainability in relation to their businesses. Nevertheless, an interesting aspect here is the fact that the operators within this thesis think of economic sustainability in terms of supporting the local society to which they also focus on others than themselves. Within this context, similarities can be found between the values of some of the above-mentioned operators and the ones mentioned in the literature on sustainable tourism development. Exemplifying this, UNEP & WTO (2005), Saarinen (2014), McCool (2016) and Cater & Cater (2010) all argue for the importance of including locals and supporting the local economy to develop a more sustainable form of tourism.

#### A socio-economic element

In Naturmad Thy, local produce is considered highly important as it plays a key role within her nature and food experience (Mie Buus, Naturmad Thy). Not only does she use plants, wild berries and mushrooms from the area of Thy and the National Park within her business, but she also buys local produce. These are used within a buffet that she offers her visitors when they are walking in the National Park as well as they are offered in her café where she also sells homemade jams, jellies and



salts etc. (Mie Buus, Naturmad Thy). Thus, one could argue that her business somehow depends on the natural resources that can be found within the area (Holden, 2010). In this way, she gathers a lot of the elements for her food experiences on her own. Additionally, she also notes how she cooperates with local businesses as well as she also buys produce or products from these. Here, Mie Buus from Naturmad Thy states how she is a part of a local network in which they help promote local produce from the area. In this way, there seem to be some quite strong similarities between Naturmad Thy and the above-mentioned businesses in terms of their use of local produce and products. Furthermore, Mie Buus mentions that she cooperates with the local socioeconomic business called Elmelund where to she describes:

“I cooperate with Elmelund, but I am a small company that mostly rely on my own workforce. Elmelund helps me with the gathering because it takes a lot of time, so I have to get somebody to gather some of the produce I use. Another benefit for me to use Elmelund is that they can gather various mushrooms and onions that I can preserve and then use later in my cooking”. (Mie Buus, Naturmad Thy).

For this, she adds that it is decided by Naturstyrelsen Thy, what and how much they are allowed to collect but she emphasises that the collection of plants and berries etc. within the park is done in a sustainable way (Mie Buus, Naturmad Thy). From this, it can be understood that Mie Buus from Naturmad Thy considers the idea of sustainability in more than one way. Thus, as one thing she considers how the use of local produce may support local businesses and the local society but additionally she also notes how the collecting of plants, berries and mushrooms should be done in the right way. Within this case, she considers the environmental aspect and believes that there is a specific way in which one should behave to comply with the capacity of nature.

The socio-economic business Elmelund is also mentioned by Else Ø. Andersen from Nationalpark Thy who furthermore notice that they also find it important to include the local business community in their work. She mentions that they sometimes cooperate with Elmelund to which she also stresses that several businesses do the same. Here, she argues that the employees at Elmelund benefit from this in the same way as the restaurants, as “This has made it easier for places such as Stenbjerg Kro because they do not have to go out and collect by themselves” (Else Ø. Andersen, Nationalpark Thy). Within this case, the cooperation with the local socio-economic business can be argued to enhance a

sustainable aspect in more than one way as a more social perspective is considered as well. A statement which is supported by Thorbjørn Stenholm as he describes;

“We established Thy Naturkraft, a socio-economic business that works with young people that are having difficulties and therefore find it hard to take a normal education. Within this, they use this opportunity to go out and pick up berries and plants in the nature as a tool to increase the life quality of the young ones, because many of these have issues with abuse and find it difficult to get up in the morning. So they use the nature to work with life quality, help prepare the young ones for future jobs and to make them feel proud of who they are. ... that they pick up berries and plants means that the restaurateurs only have to order these products from Thy Naturkraft. Otherwise, they would have to pay and chef to do it and he is expensive on the contrary to Thy Naturkraft” (Thorbjørn Stenholm)

From the above-mentioned, it is possible to draw lines between the theoretical framework and the words of the operators. Thus, several scholars and organisations argue that the local aspect plays an important role within a sustainable tourism development (e.g. McCool, 2016; Cater & Cater, 2010; Saarinen, 2014; Sharpley, 2013; Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2011). Exemplifying this, one should include the local people and businesses and make sure that these will benefit from tourism development as well. Thus, ways of doing this include supporting the local economy, considering the well-being of the local community, cooperation with locals. The importance of including local stakeholders is also mentioned by Byrd (2007) and Briassoulis (2002), who note that many of these livelihoods may depend on the influx of tourists. A statement that is supported by the findings from Holden's (2010) case study on sustainable tourism development in Nepal. For this, one should also respect these and consider tourism in a wider perspective in terms of where produce and product are made and transported from etc. (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019b; Hall et al., 2010; Saarinen 2014). Thus, it is important to note that the local systems are also a part of a wider global system, whereto it would be relevant to consider sustainability more holistically. It should be mentioned that this does not necessarily mean that one could call tourism sustainable as such, as sustainability is a complex matter which may be difficult or impossible to fully achieve (e.g. UNEP & WTO, 2005; Butler, 2015; Hall et al., 2010).

Including the locals in decision-making and development processes

Another element of local inclusion mentioned by several of the operators in the interviews concerns the inclusion of locals within decision-making and development processes within and close to the national park (e.g. Else Ø. Andersen, Nationalpark Thy; Morten Brown Stummann, Naturstyrelsen Thy, Thisted Municipality). In terms of sustainable tourism development, this is also something that is mentioned as important by, for instance, Macleod (2010) McCool (2015), Holden (2010) and Ruhanen (2007). Within this section, giving the local people a voice of their own and an opportunity to come up with suggestions in terms of development will pose as examples on how this is done by operators who have a relation to Nationalpark Thy.

The public sector

One person that mentions how they find it important to include the locals is Else Østergaard Andersen from Nationalpark Thy. She mentions that they do not work with tourism development in the same way as a tourist organisation would do, but that they include the locals within their park plan which they have to make every sixth year (Else Østergaard Andersen, Nationalpark Thy).

“In this plan, there are established public phases. It means that, when opening around like this, it is 12 weeks where everyone can put forward ideas and suggestions for the next plan for the national park and the objective that we have. These suggestions from the public are then included into the process of the board's own work in the area. When this plan has been drafted it is put forward into a hearing, where people can express their opinion of it, and does the answers from this hearing result in a re-drafting of the plan, then it will be sent out into another hearing [...] the law of the national park states that we have to involve the locals in the running and development of the park, and we have been very serious about that in Nationalpark Thy” (Else Ø. Andersen, Nationalpark Thy).

Within this case, Nationalpark Thy takes the locals, and their opinions into account where to an effort is made to meet their need as well, in the same way as it is suggested by Candrea & Ispas (2009) and UNEP & WTO (2005). One nevertheless has to take a critical stance to this type of statement from actors such as the National Park's secretariat and Naturstyrelsen Thy itself, since it is a common issue, within empirical studies, that local stakeholders tend to feel that their perspective is being ignored. Haukeland's (2011) study on stakeholder perception on sustainability within two Norwegian National

Parks identified a key issue in locals feeling bypassed by the managements of these parks, which created an imbalance in the power relations. James and colleague had a similar experience when talking to local stakeholders in Iceland and Greenland, where they felt somewhat powerless in some situations in relation to decisions regarding cruise tourism and the bigger and more influential stakeholders like the cruise line companies (James et al., 2020).

Continuing on this, Else Ø. Andersen describes how the inclusion of locals and their businesses can be viewed as a more sustainable approach to development where to she also stresses that a big part of their workforce consists of volunteers of which some are locals (Else Ø. Andersen, Nationalpark Thy). Viewing the inclusion of local as an important variable within a sustainable development process exemplifies a value that is shared by scholars such as Byrd (2007), Holden (2010) and Ruhanen (2007). In the same way as Else Ø. Andersen from Nationalpark Thy, Morten Brown Stummann from Naturstyrelsen Thy also stress that they wish to include the locals within their work. For this, he mentions that they include the locals in meetings and create nature experiences together with them to which he describes:

“It is obvious that we need have a good relationship with people up here and we also put an effort into explaining why we act as we do – in order to create a good understanding that hopefully leads to mutual respect. For this, we use News Medias, Facebook and so on and through this, we try to create a good relationship with the citizens. We do also include the locals and provide them with a nature dissemination, include them in public meetings to enhance a good collaboration with the locals. We have also had many partnerships with locals, such as civic associations, who amongst other things create facilities within the areas, which may be beneficial for their towns as well” (Morten Brown Stummann, Naturstyrelsen Thy).

Here, similarities can be found between how Nationalpark Thy and Naturstyrelsen Thy value and include the locals in their decision-making or development processes. Nevertheless, Morten Brown Stummann from Naturstyrelsen Thy mentions that they sometimes have to say no to suggestions because they need to consider the environmental aspect in relation to sustainability as well. Within this case, Naturstyrelsen Thy could be argued to put an effort into meeting the needs of the locals and inform them in the same way as Nationalpark Thy where to they show them a certain respect. Nevertheless, Morten Brown Stummann from Naturstyrelsen Thy emphasises that they have to

prioritise the well-being of nature whereto they sometimes have to say no to ideas. Within this case, one could discuss whether or not there is a balance between the three pillars of sustainable development (UNEP & WTO, 2005). However, Morten Brown Stummann from Naturstyrelsen Thy does not stress that they strive to achieve this balance as such. Here, scholars such as McCool (2015) and Butler (2015) could be included within this discussion as they question whether or not this balance is possible to achieve. Stating this, a case study by Clausen and Gyimóthy (2016) revealed that including locals in the development process were rather challenging, as different interest were at stake amongst various stakeholders. The Mexican elites favoured to facilitate growth by improving infrastructure and conditions for the local community. At the same time, the North American entrepreneurs wanted to expand the city's tourist attractions and enhance the visibility of the Mexican culture (Clausen & Guimóthy). Here, they argue that local communities should be viewed as consisting of many different stakeholders with different interests, values and relationships to one another, which makes it difficult to meet the needs of all.

On the contrary to the above-mentioned, Thisted Municipality does not work a lot with the development of the national park as such - neither in terms of the tourism aspect. Nevertheless, they do put effort into supporting and helping local businesses placed within or close by the national park (Thisted Municipality). The spokesperson from the municipality describes:

"I can mention one project that the municipality is in charge of within the boundaries of the park and that is the project "vildmarks dage" that deals with the trading based on the national park which has been a bit hard to get the full potential out of this park in terms of tourism and other sorts of trade as well as increased revenue in the area" (Thisted Municipality).

For this, it is argued that the locals are being taken into consideration and included within the development. Thus, the purpose is to help local businesses develop and med maintain a steady revenue. Thisted Municipality also involves locals and businesses in their strategic work with Vorupør and Klitmøller, as "we have hosted four meetings with the aim of getting the residents own ideas as to the development and informing them about our ideas for the areas. So, we have tried to combine the residents own ideas with the commercial ones" (Thisted Municipality). Within this context, they have also interviewed local businesses to get their perspective on the commercial development but with this said they do mention an interest in working even closer together with the

national park itself. Thus, as it is now “The process of it has been run a bit separately in terms of the park itself, the municipality and the tourism association” which is something that they would like to work more on (Thisted Municipality). Here, if one were to follow the suggestions that are made by several scholars, this would be a good idea, as a good stakeholder collaboration is believed to be crucial for more sustainable tourism development. Within this case, local businesses and citizens should be considered as relevant stakeholders as well (e.g. Ong & Smith, 2014; UNEP & WTO, 2005; Clausen and Gyimóthy, 2016; Saarinen, 2014). Nevertheless, this does not mean that fully or final sustainable development will be achieved. Instead, it can be seen as an improvement towards the better (e.g. Butler 2015; UNEP & WTO, 2005).

#### The private sector

Other local operators also mention that they somehow listen to, include or have included other locals, institutions or businesses in their decision-making or development processes (e.g. Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike; Pia Skammelsen, Oh So Quiet; Mie Buus, Naturmad Thy). Stating this, Pia Skammelsen from Oh So Quiet and Maria Vangsgaard from Thy Hike both mention the importance of the local network and emphasise how their good relationship with other locals residents, businesses or institutions have been a great help especially when they started their businesses. Exemplifying this statement, Maria Vangsgaard from Thy Hike emphasise that she has a good cooperation with Naturstyrelsen Thy and Nationalpark Thy, to which she further describes:

“Thy is an amazing place to start a project because [...] if you tell people a little bit about your idea and go for it then there is a really big network up here. It also helps if you come from Thy yourself because there is a lot of local businesses that is willing to help you” (Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike).

Thus, Maria Vangsgaard emphasises how including the local community can be a great help in terms supporting and giving advice etc. Nevertheless, in terms of sustainability and tourism development, she also shares a concern as she believes that people find it rather challenging to develop a business that operates within the national park. Here she describes:

“But it is also a bit difficult for us because we wish to provide our guests with an experience of being as close as possible to the nature and this requires a big set-up every time. Because of this, we need help because there are so many restrictions and rules that you need to follow when working in a national park and these make it challenging to get the permission to run a tourism business in the nature” (Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike).

In this sense, Maria Vangsgaard finds it important to protect the nature. Still, she believes that the restrictions sometimes limit development possibilities for others, a consideration that is shared by Stefan from Stenbjerg Kro as well. Within this case, one could argue that an unequal power relationship has a saying in relation to different values and interest that the operators possess in the same way as it has been mentioned by Clausen and Gyimóthy (2016), Butler (2015), and James et al. (2020). Thus, the power that Naturstyrelsen Thy possess helps protect the environment, but it does also pose a challenge for other operators as it creates restrictions for them. It is again relevant to draw on the study by Clausen and Gyimóthy (2016) since it shows the problems with different agendas among the stakeholders. Power relations were often not equal and stronger stakeholders tended to win in the particular dilemmas, which the scholars found to oppose the very idea of sustainable development (Clausen & Gyimóthy, 2016). The case study thus aligns with the theoretical framework, since sustainable development can only be achieved if resources and interests are equally distributed among the relevant stakeholders.

As a final notion for this section, Thorbjørn Stenholm mentions the importance of including the locals within development plans. In terms of sustainable business development, he describes that for the development to become successful, you have to engage and respect the local community. Thus, “You need to take small steps at a time and to have respect for the people that have lived within the area for generations – and then you also have to acknowledge that you may not have a finished agenda. Things go in the direction where there is energy” (Thorbjørn Stenholm). The above-mentioned emphasise that several of the operators consider and value the inclusion of other local businesses and residents in their work. Nevertheless, it provides an insight into the challenges of this approach as different interest and values as well as the power-relationship may affect the degree to which it becomes possible to satisfy and include all equally.

Including the local history and culture

#### *Storytelling and dissemination*

Besides including local produce or products, and include the locals in decision making and development processes, several operators also mention how they somehow include local history and culture through storytelling and dissemination etc. (e.g. Michael Thinggaard Madsen, Hotel Thinggaard; Else Ø. Andersen, Nationalpark Thy; Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike). Amongst other



things, several of the businesses and institutions emphasise that they like to tell stories about the area of Thy, Nationalpark Thy, its residents, and the local produce/products as a part of their offered experiences (Michael Thinggaard Madsen, Hotel Thinggaard; Lone Lærke Krog, Lærkely; Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike; Mie Buus, Naturmad Thy; Stefan, Stenbjerg Kro). Exemplifying this, Michael Thinggaard Madsen from Hotel Thinggaard mentions:

“Well, until recently and the way we have worked with sustainability, that is in terms of the local produce. That is more or less the only thing we have worked in this regard like with things that are in the community, not necessarily in terms of organic but it is more about it being nearby to tell a story behind it” (Michael Thinggaard Madsen, Hotel Thinggaard).

For this, he further describes how he is chairman for the association Regional Madkultur Thy wherein they “are restaurants, hotels, and manufacturer that collaborates in promoting local produce and brand awareness to it” (Michael Thinggaard Madsen, Hotel Thinggaard). Storytelling as a market communication tool is also mentioned by Stefan from Stenbjerg Kro as he stresses, “The produce is local and it is how we market ourselves... like what you get here is, as a rule, something you can get in the park. The mushroom we grow ourselves and the rest we buy, but in general we use the local community” (Stefan, Stenbjerg Kro). Within this case, Storytelling, nature and culture dissemination is also believed to improve the experience and satisfaction of the visitors as well as it is believed to be beneficial for the nature as well (Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike; Stefan, Stenbjerg Kro; Mie Buus, Naturmad Thy).

Continuing on this notion Mie Buus from Naturmad Thy also hopes that her dissemination regarding the National Park will provide people with a good experience and she hopes that people will take in the new knowledge and use it. For this, she mentions “I hope that the knowledge that I possess and communicate out regarding plants and the ways in which these can be used [...] is something that the visitors takes in”. Thus, here one could argue that there is a similarity between what is said by Mie Buus from Naturmad Thy and the findings from Higgins-Desbiolles et al. 's (2019b) case study which showed that there was a big focus on “green” aspects of sustainability within the world of food experiences. Else Ø. Andersen from Nationalpark Thy and Morten Brown Stummann from Naturstyrelsen Thy also emphasise that they find it relevant and useful to include storytelling or dissemination of the nature and culture of the national park and the surrounding areas of Thy. Within

this context, Else Østergaard Andersen from Nationalpark Thy describes: “We think that when one read the law of the national park there is a link to what is perceived as sustainable development since the Brundtland report, so we work with the nature and the cultural history as something that needs to be preserved” (Else Ø. Andersen, National Park Thy).

For this, volunteers of whom many are locals play an important role as they help inform visitors about Nationalpark Thy, its nature and its cultural history through storytelling and dissemination at visitor centres etc. Furthermore, Else Ø. Andersen additionally stresses “we have broadcasted national park TV for ten years now with two new episodes every week concerning the nature, cultural history and so. In recent years, both TV Midtvest and TV2 Nord broadcasted our TV, but it has also made its way to southern Jutland, Zealand, and Bornholm” (Else Ø. Andersen, Nationalpark Thy). Within this case, storytelling and dissemination are not only viewed as sustainable in the sense that it may attract more visitors which could be viewed as helpful for locals businesses. It also believed to help preserve the local cultural history where to it also holds a value for the locals. In this sense, one could argue that they fit UNEP & WTO’s (2005) definition of the economic and socio-cultural dimension. Interestingly, these findings somehow differ from Andersen et al. ’s (2018) study, which focused on Danish tourism operators approaches to sustainable tourism development. The operators’ suggestions to tourism development made only little or no mentioning of environmental and socio-cultural aspects. Instead, their main focus was placed on the economy (Andersen et al., 2018). It is, however also possible that the attraction of visitors will have an unsustainable effect if the area gets overcrowded and the environment will be negatively impacted. Thus, the balance between the financial gains of tourism resulting from the accommodation of a demand, and the carrying capacity of a destination and its resources.

#### *Branding and Local Pride*

The storytelling plays an important role in relation to the market communication according to Michael Thinggaard Madsen; “I am the chairman for Regional Madkultur Thy where we are restaurants, hotels, and manufacturer that collaborates in promoting local produce and brand awareness to it” (Michael Thinggaard Madsen, Hotel Thinggaard). Within this context, elements that are often connected to Thy is used within the storytelling and branding of local produce which helps to promote local businesses etc. (Michael Thinggaard Madsen, Hotel Thinggaard). This inclusion is mentioned by Martin Falslev Andersen from Friends of Cold Hawaii as well since they use their brand to make

people aware of the place and its potentials whereto they like to support local businesses as well. He defines Cold Hawaii as a valid and good brand that helps create a positive awareness of the area and increase the sale of local products (Martin Falslev Andersen, Friends of Cold Hawaii). Thus, these approaches could be argued to include sustainable aspects as they can pose as a helping hand for the local businesses and their economy as well as they help show forth and preserve elements of local value.

Operators such as Else Ø. Andersen from Nationalpark Thy and Per from Vesterhavscafeen both emphasise that brands such as Cold Hawaii and National Park Thy have helped create an awareness and change how people view the area of Thy. Several of the operators furthermore argue that they experience a sense of local pride within the area that seems to be positively affected by the National Park and its surrounding areas etc. (e.g. Else Ø. Andersen, Nationalpark Thy; Morten Brown Stummann, Naturstyrelsen Thy; Thisted Municipality). Amongst other things, Morten Brown Stummann from Naturstyrelsen Thy mentions how the nature can be seen as beneficial for Thisted Municipality as well as it makes people want to move to the area. Thus he states:” It also makes people move up here and then it provides a feeling of pride within the area” (Morten Brown Stummann, Naturstyrelsen Thy). This statement is supported by Else Ø. Andersen from Nationalpark Thy, who stress” I sense that people from Thy are very proud of where they come from nowadays. Many young people want to move back to the area again” (Else. Ø. Andersen, Nationalpark Thy). Within this case, there is a difference between what seems to be happening in the area of Thy and in Holden’s (2010) case study. This example identified a lack of commitment amongst local stakeholders to further sustainable development. Instead, local lodge owners feared the negative impacts of tourism and advised their children to move away from the area, and into the larger cities whereto there were better education and job opportunities (Holden, 2010). Thus, one could argue that the development may have had a more positive impact on the local community in Thy. Nevertheless, there might still be challenges in terms of tourism in the area and its national park as well.

Continuing from this, Thorbjørn Stenholm who has worked with sustainable business development in relation to Thy and its national park emphasise that local culture, history, values, and pride played a central role within this development (Thorbjørn Stenholm). For this, he further describes: “What succeeded in Thy was not my achievement, it was the achievement of many actors and the time as well. But they succeeded in re-branding the area of Thy in terms of creating a sense of pride.

Because of this, people began to see a lot of potentials in the national park instead of limitations and then we could use this Thybo pride and begin to work with more concrete business development” (Thorbjørn Stenholm).

Thus, according to Thorbjørn Stenholm, they managed to change how people viewed the area of Thy and enhance a sense of local pride to which new development potentials became visible. He agrees with Byrd (2007) as he emphasises that successful sustainable development cannot happen without interest and support from the locals (Thorbjørn Stenholm). Within this context, one could argue that there might be a connection between this re-branding and visibility of potentials and the enhanced pride that is mentioned by Else. Ø. Andersen from Nationalpark Thy, Morten Brown stummann from Naturstyrelsen Thy and Thisted Municipality. As Thorbjørn Stenholm defines the work as focusing on a socio-economic aspect in terms of sustainability, one could additionally argue that there is a socio-cultural (UNEP & WTO, 2005) element within this work as well. Hence, the re-branding helps embrace and preserve local cultural, historical and environmental aspects as well. The focus on storytelling as a tool of promoting sustainability seems to align with Dahlén et al.,s’ (2010) argument about constructing a controlled narrative in relation to the brand. According to them, this will enable the consumers to get a better and more specific understanding of the brand and obtain a personalised perception of it. Hence, it can be a vital tool in the attraction of guests in a time where studies suggest an amplified focus on sustainability because of its position as a rather big trend (megatrend) within tourism and request from the consumers.

## Protecting the environment

Findings from the data revealed that several stakeholders emphasise the importance of protecting the environment when discussing sustainability. Different ways of approaching this became evident, but two themes seemed to be common denominators among the operators; Ideas about nature as untouched and Perceiving rules and restrictions as a sustainable approach. As mentioned in the theoretical framework as well as the literature review, the environmental aspect is in a trinity with the socio-cultural and economic aspect (UNEP & WTO, 2005; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2019a; Ellis & Sheridan, 2014; and Saarinen, 2014). Nature has a central role in a wide variety of definitions concerning sustainability, for instance, Ecotourism, Responsible Tourism, and Green Tourism.

Ideas about nature as untouched

The preservation of the nature and environment we live in tends to be one of the first things that are mentioned when asked about how they view or perceive sustainability. Mie Buus from Naturmad Thy is an example as she states; “I care about the nature and think that we should use it responsibly” (Mie Buus, Naturmad Thy) and “I think about it when I am out because the plants I communicate is edible like there is a lot that is gathered in larger quantities without any problems... but there are some like cranberries that grow more delicate places, where one has to think about not harming the nature by bringing too many people” (Mie Buus, Naturmad Thy).

From this, it can be understood that people ought to use the nature responsibly, which she is doing herself in the experiences she offers to the visitors. When she is out in Nationalpark Thy, she considers where she can take her guests to gather certain plants in accordance with what is responsible. Maria Vangsgaard from Thy Hike is likewise concerned about the environment both in terms of how she perceives it herself but also how she incorporates it into her business. Within this case she mentions that caring for the environment is a natural thing for her to do, and she expects the same from guests; “Most of all I think it shows in the way that we communicate with our guests as we inform that we expect that they take responsibility – that they are grown-ups and that they clean up after themselves” (Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike).

Similar to the first two examples mentioned above, Morten Brown Stummann from Naturstyrelsen Thy also places emphasis on the environment when asked about how he understands and perceive sustainability; “The way in which we think about sustainability usually concerns the outdoor activities that we offer. In this case, the outdoor activities that we provide should not damage the nature more than necessarily” (Morten Brown Stummann, Naturstyrelsen Thy). He is cautious about how they define their way of managing the area where to they choose to speak of their approach as responsible area management (Morten Brown Stummann, Naturstyrelsen Thy). This may be done to avoid creating misunderstandings or different interpretations which characterises the complexity of sustainability. The organisation tries to avoid sensitive areas where for instance cranes breed when placing new mountain bike tracks or hiking trails. This is also the case with Naturstyrelsen Thy’s collaboration with other operators since they try to control how these actors use the area to make sure that they are used properly with the state of the nature in mind (Morten Brown Stummann, Naturstyrelsen Thy). Despite the emphasis on the environmental element of how Naturstyrelsen Thy

view and incorporate sustainability, one could argue that this stance might not be very surprising considering the work they do. As the name suggests, it is their job to make sure that the area that is owned by the state in Nationalpark Thy are responsibly protected.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that Naturstyrelsen Thy is also a business that has to consider that they might need to comply with plans and decisions made from above since it is a political body with also an economic aspect to think about. One could, however, argue that Naturstyrelsen Thy seems to be trying to manage this, as Morten Brown Stummann states: “So we try to design the management of our areas so that we can create nature and offer outdoor activities in a good quality while also earning money” (Morten Brown Stummann, Naturstyrelsen Thy). Thus, attempting to make optimal use of the environment in which they operate and at the same time considering the preservation of the nature in this planning and facilitation of different activities. When considering the above-mentioned, one could argue that the operators follow the criteria of the environmental pillar, and thus meets the requirements set by the UNEP and WTO in terms of environmental sustainability. The part about ethical and moral consumption is interesting to discuss especially in relation to Maria Vangsgaard from Thy Hike and Mie Buus from Naturmad Thy. They both talk about consumption as being an important consideration in terms of how they run their business. Thus, their approach can be argued to be rather similar to the description of Responsible Tourism in terms of its environmental aspect (Saarinen, 2014). It is, however, important to have in mind that this manner of behaviour might also qualify with other branches of the concept of sustainability such as sustainable tourism and Ecotourism because of the similarities they all share (Saarinen, 2014; Hatipoglu et al., 2016; Sharpley, 2013).

On the other hand, one could argue that these quotes mentioned above add to the discussion presented by Kho, 2014 and Eizenberg & Jabareen, 2017 about the tendency to see the environmental pillar being something that many both consumers and businesses tend to place a bit more emphasis on than the remaining two pillars. It is interesting to see how the environment is mainly the first thing that is mentioned when the operators were asked about how they perceive sustainability and how or if they implement some aspects of into the individual experiences. One could argue that this finding also makes it relevant to draw on the study by Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019b). Here the scholars found that the literature concerning hospitality in restaurants and cafes, in general, paid more attention to the ecological aspect of sustainability than the two others. Thus, supporting that this specific tendency

found within the data is not something uncommon within the tourism industry when talking about a more general perception of sustainability.

Perceiving rules and restrictions as a sustainable approach

A second cross-cutting theme that can be identified within the data is the focus on the respect of the general guidelines and decisions as environmentally sustainable. Examples of operators who pointed to the above mentioned are for instance; Stutteri Korreborg, Thy Hike, Mie Buus, and the secretariat of Nationalpark Thy. Along with the above-mentioned theme, abiding by the rules and regulations set by various actors such as Naturstyrelsen Thy is another common statement, the operators mention in terms of how they both perceive the concept as well as how they implement sustainability. Stutteri Korreborg is one example of the above-mentioned;

“well I do because I am an outdoor person myself so get think a lot about that, which is also why if we cannot treat and use the nature properly then we don’t have an environment to ride in. It is important that I am aware of it because if there are places that needs some peace and quiet for the next three months, then we will not go there. This could be nests from cranes and sea eagles... like I am flexible. It is no trouble for me to make another track to avoid stepping on something” (Stutteri Korreborg).

The above-mentioned quote suggests that Stutteri Korreborg places a lot of emphasis on respecting the guidelines of the more delicate places, and the necessity for these particular areas to remain undisturbed for a while. One could argue that this way of approaching sustainability with both the aim of protecting the environment by respecting the rules concerning different places as well as the financial perspective in combination seems to link both to the environmental pillar as well as the financial one (UNEP & WTO, 2005).

The first part of this description about ensuring viable and long-term operations is especially interesting in terms of Stutteri Korreborg since he argues that one has to protect the nature if one wants to keep using it along with continuing to have an income from one’s business. Thus, if Stutteri Korreborg and the other operators using the National Parks areas do not respect the regulations set by for instance Naturstyrelsen, then their guests might not be able to see as many cranes of sea eagles



in the future. According to Candrea & Ispas (2009) and Lopez & Bhaktikul (2018), it is important for the success of sustainable development that the three dimensions are looked upon as a trinity. In this case, it can be argued that Stutteri Korreborg focuses on the environmental pillar in combination with the economic one. Else Ø. Andersen from National Park Thy shares the same view as Stutteri Korreborg, as she states:

“we work with Naturstyrelsen that owns  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the park and with local landowners on where we can primarily guide people so they get the nature-based experiences but do not disturb what they attempt to see. It could be the cranes that would fly away before people get to see them, so it is all about coordinating these tracks to both preserve the experience but making sure that the cranes come back next year to lay their eggs... like not doing unnecessary harm” (Else Ø. Andersen, National Park Thy).

The quote suggests that the rules and regulations set by Naturstyrelsen enable Else Ø. Andersen and her team to advise the guests on where to go in the park. The secretariat also has a declaration or law that takes its point of departure in the Brundtland Report, and thus what is perceived as sustainable development. This declaration set out some regulations in terms of the development of the park's tourism, and what should be focussed on in this instance (Else Ø Andersen, National Park Thy).

All of the above-mentioned operators can be found to focus on the aspects concerning the maintenance of ecological processes as well as the conservation of the nature. What separates the three operators is the perception about environmental sustainability. For this, Stutteri Korreborg takes this approach further by including the economic pillar into his opinion about the guidelines of the park. This is interesting because one could argue that this suggests that he adds a holistic layer to his perception of the matter, which aligns with the argument made by several scholars. The argument that the three pillars are not enough to focus on if one wants to develop tourism more sustainably is also mentioned by several scholars (Butler, 2015; McCool, 2015; Ruttty et al., 2015; Hall et al., 2010). From this perspective, one could argue that Stutteri Korreborg agrees with McCool (2015) as he emphasises the importance of looking at sustainable development from a long-term perspective. Without doing this, one can risk that one's revenue will be negatively impacted in the future. One could furthermore argue that this mindset is important, since Nationalpark Thy is one of the biggest

tourist attractions in Thy (Thorbjørn Stenholm; Else Ø. Andersen, National Park Thy), and if the environment is not taken proper care of, then it is not beneficial for the future of tourism in Thy.

The underlying principle in this section is however interesting to discuss since the actors seem to rely on the guidelines set by legitimate actors, for instance, Naturstyrelsen. Thus, this legitimacy is used as a measurement for the operators when talking about sustainability in terms of the environment as this serves as a mark of responsibility. Nevertheless, the question of whether or not this can be argued to be sustainable can be discussed. Stating this, the idea of following the law and relevant legitimate actors might be an important aspect to consider because of the trust these operators place on actors such as Naturstyrelsen. The references to the guidelines, as a sign of sustainability, is conceptualised in relation to the environmental-frame set by relevant actors. A similar problem is found in the study by James et al., (2020) since they found that policymaking in terms of stakeholder perception regarding sustainability issues was important in terms of collaboration and regulation of cruise tourism in Iceland and Greenland. The scholars found that the stakeholders saw environmental sustainability from the perspective of a stated carrying capacity and the already existing environmental rules and regulations (James et al., 2020). As a final notion for this section, the above mentioned could be argued to imply that there is a tendency amongst operators who offer nature-based experiences. Thus, all seem to value the idea of environmental sustainability. In these cases, there appears to be a coherence between their occupation and the aspects they consider in relation to sustainability. Stating this, it is important to note that the operators offering food-related experiences also considers environmental issues. However, these operators tend to place more emphasis on other sustainable dimensions such as the socio-cultural as it has been mentioned earlier.

## Approaching sustainability via choices of materials and products

Two cross-cutting themes that were identified during the interviews were their tendency to focus on alternative solutions and materials as well as the perception of organic and local products as sustainable. Examples of this include choices of alternative energy sources, use of local fodder and organic products etc. which will be elaborated along with academic studies in the following section.

## Alternative Solutions and Materials

A common denominator that has been identified in the data is the choice to convert to alternative energy. One of these is Stefan from Stenbjerg Kro, who has, for instance, focus on the inn's energy consumption. Opposite to Per from Vesterhavscafeen, who also chose an alternative energy resource for branding purposes (Per, Vesterhavscafeen), Stefan from Stenbjerg Kro reasons his choice of energy on a more personal value. Unconventional types of energy supply have been an area where he has made an active decision to invest in a water heater, and thus bypass the cheaper conventional type of energy:

“A lot of the initiatives like the solar cells are in principle a good thing, but it is not something that you can save money on. But in terms of my own philosophy, then it is the right thing to do. For example, when you are a business owner, the electricity is cheaper than for private people, and then it is simply not affordable to get these solar cells, so we have a water heater instead ... but it is not something that we make money on, it is a one-time amount, and then we might get off a bit cheaper in the long run” (Stefan, Stenbjerg Kro).

In the above-mentioned quote, Stefan from Stenbjerg Kro has made a deliberate choice to choose a source of energy that might not be the best suitable idea seen from a financial standpoint since it is slightly expensive compared to other more conventional types. The water heater and the accompanied solar thermal collector have been purchased on the basis of his own standpoint in terms of sustainability and the measures that one can take individually to further sustainable development. He finds it natural to take the above-mentioned approach more on ideological reasons than financial gains, as he argued that the more sustainable choice was not necessarily the best economic decision. Thus, one could argue that this quote represents an example of a business who has made a trade-off between the economic aspect of his business and the “greener” choice in terms of energy because he believed it to be a better solution in terms of becoming more sustainable. It is, however, an interesting issue since he might improve the environmental aspect of this business. Still, one could argue whether or not this will oppose the very idea of a balanced relation between the, for instance, the three pillars in terms of the business economic sustainability.

This stance is somewhat contradictory to the literature, where case studies such as both Holden's (2010) and Andersen et al., (2018) since they concluded that investments in sustainable development were highly dependent on the financial gains when local stakeholders were approached to help further sustainable development. For Stefan from Stenbjerg Kro, the economic aspect does not seem to have been vital when he invested in greener energy. One could, therefore, argue that the environmental variable outweighed the economic side of things despite its implication on his economy and its level of sustainability. Understanding sustainable choices as more than an ideological standpoint can be argued to become valuable for a business such as Vesterhavscafeen. Visitors are likely to respond positively to an establishment that considers the environment by using a "greener" form of electricity (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019b). Therefore, for Per from Vesterhavscafeen to perceive this measure of using wind-generated electricity as an approach to obtain a bit of publicity can be argued to become quite valuable.

Similar to especially Stefan from Stenbjerg Kro, Stutteri Korreborg see sustainability as a rather natural thing to consider both personally but also in terms of the business. Stutteri Korreborg has found an alternative and arguably more sustainable approach; "Sustainability in terms of my horses and the feeding is a big cost obviously, and here I have different agreements with farmers on land that are not farmed, where we pasture the field and bring the grass home. So, we do not use production-land to feed the horses so that must be some sort of sustainable thing... like we use our horses as nature management because we get the horses to forage in these lands" (Stutteri Korreborg). With the above-mentioned quote in mind, one could argue that this operator has found a happy medium where he can save money on feeding the horses as well as finding the produce close to home, which is also a good deal for the farmers whose lands are managed. Thus, scholars such as Mol and Spaargaren (2007) might say that the approach taken by Stutteri Korreborg regarding the fodder of his horses is an example of ecological modernisation on a small and local level. This can be argued because of the way that it can be linked to sustainability both environmentally, socioculturally, and financially (McManus, 2007).

With the ecological modernisation, the concept, amongst other things, focus on the "the modernist values of rational thinking and the application of knowledge to problem solving" (McManus, 2007, p. 2), as well as being a concept that attempts to prove that economic growth and environmental responsibility can coexist rather cost-efficiently (McManus, 2007). According to both Both Mol and

Spaargaren (2007) and McManus (2007), this should not be viewed as a validation of the concept because of the lacking efficiency in terms of resulting in sustainable development. They further argue that for this concept to work, there has to be some sort of technological wonder leading to this sustainable development. To a certain extent, this example can be argued to have a link to the concept of ecological modernisation if one looks at it from Mol and Spaargaren (2007) argument and place it in a small scale and simple context of sustainable development.

Economically, Stutteri Korreborg saves money on horse fodder and transportation as he simply has to either harvest the hay and get it back to the farm or take his horses to the fields that are less than a kilometre away. This arrangement is also in the interest of the farmers, as they get to keep their subsidiary schemes and do not have to worry about managing the fields themselves. Thus, providing economic benefits to both parties as well as contributing to the local community in terms of helping each other. Furthermore, the business makes optimal use of the natural resources that are available in the area and help to preserve it by allowing a more natural management where the horses control the vegetation in the fields than if machines were to cut the grass. One could thus argue that it could be the case as this particular area of Stutteri Korreborg seems to comply with the more general ideas about the concept of sustainable tourism development. It could, however, be discussed to what extent the ecological modernisation automatically means that his fodder is actually sustainable or better than conventional fodder.

Other operators such as Maria Vangsgaard from Thy Hike and Mie Buus from Naturmad Thy also focus on the choice of material in terms of their business. Exemplifying this, they ask their visitors to bring their own tableware (Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike; Mie Buus, Naturmad Thy), use biodegradable products and avoid paper materials as much as possible (Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike). Stating this, Maria Vangsgaard has a clear standpoint on this subject which is the approach to do marketing. She has made a deliberate choice to keep her marked communication online to avoid utilising resources on producing material such as brochures etc. She states: “I do not print 100 of posters and postcards for the market communication. Everything is online, the only thing I do it sending out is tickets, but the reason for this is most of all to provide a more personal greeting instead of sending them an email they have to print out themselves. These are also made from recycled envelopes and sustainable print” (Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike). As the quote suggests, Maria chooses the do without these materials, as she does not wish to produce more than necessary when

there is the option of using the online sphere to reach her audience as well as for advertising. Nevertheless, when she makes use of materials in terms of physical tickets, it is important that the sustainable aspect is considered and thus having the tickets and envelopes printed on paper that is produced under the “right” conditions.

At the surfing association in Klitmøller Friends of Cold Hawaii, sustainability is also on the agenda when it comes to what they use of materials and products. This is particularly evident in terms of what products they allow to use their brand and name. It is important for the association that their brand is used responsibly, which is also why they are reluctant to give permission to such use to businesses that does not fulfil certain criteria that are sustainability-oriented. An example of this could be “[...] for instance a jewellery store in Copenhagen that might get their jewellery from China I guess with the brand attached to it... so that is not something that we endorse at all” (Martin Falslev Andersen, Friends of Cold Hawaii). On the other hand, the association supports the local brewery, since some of their beers are made with ingredients from Nationalpark Thy, and has thus been allowed to name these beers Cold Hawaii. One could argue that the difference between the two examples and the goodwill towards the local brewery and not the business in Copenhagen is the foundation for the product that Cold Hawaii will lend their name to. One could argue that the brewery’s beers represent locality and local produce, whereas the jewellery imported from China represents products whose quality is unknown as well as the conditions the products have been made under. Thus, the transparency in terms of their criteria varies quite a bit, and because of this, they see it as more sustainable to choose the local business.

When considering the theoretical foundation, one could argue that this opinion provides a rather holistic approach to view sustainability. By taking this stand on what sort of businesses can use their brand, they consider the impacts that it can have in terms of the products way from production to consumer. Hence, looking at this situation within a broader context of not only getting one’s brand exposed to possible consumers. According to both Higgins-Desbiolles (2019a) and McCool (2013), such an approach contributes to seeing sustainability in a broader perspective, where not only one’s own world is important but also other businesses and industries that are affected by such as decision. Thus, the operators would need to consider other aspects of these products and materials in relation to where these are from, how they are produced, and transported etc. when working with sustainable initiatives. It is, however, interesting how the environmental pillar seems to dominate when

addressing the operators' perception in terms of use of materials. As mentioned in the theoretical framework and the literature review, it is very common to see studies that find this particular issue. Both in terms of consumers but also among stakeholders such as the operators within this thesis. As both Higgins-Desbiolles (2019b), Eizenberg & Jabareen (2017), and Kho (2014), consumers are becoming more aware of sustainability and sustainable initiatives, but some tend to associate sustainability with the environmental aspect. Nevertheless, this tendency of associating the environmental aspect with sustainability is not an uncommon situation when one looks at the literature. One could argue that this furthers the critique of the usability of the Three Pillars of Sustainability since the concept of sustainability is often not considered equally between the pillars (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2019b; Andersen et al., 2018).

### Perceiving organic products as sustainable

Another interesting theme that emerged from the data was the tendency for some operators to focus on organic and local products when asked about how they perceive and incorporate sustainable initiatives into their business. Hotel Thinggaard is one such example. Thinggaard Madsen and his team are now in the process of being certified with Den Grønne Nøgle, and this focus can be found in different types of materials and produce in the restaurant as well as the hotel. He states:

“It is everything from the way we use...what sort of chemical cleaning detergent we use but also what we buy energy wise... we have to buy green electricity and that is... you need to have a goal of how much organic food are used in the kitchen and beverages, and you need to sort your waste and provide the guests with the ability to also sort their waste, and we are not allowed to have bottled water anymore” (Michael Thinggaard Madsen, Hotel Thinggaard).

Thus, the certification of Den Grønne Nøgle has been part of the hotel's process of becoming more sustainable in the way that they utilise materials and what kind of materials they can have, according to Michael Thinggaard Madsen. The result of this is a range of different choices such as fewer chemicals during the cleaning procedures, more organic produce and products as well as converting to a greener type of electricity. From his perspective, Michael Thinggaard Madsen has gradually moved towards a more sustainable running of the hotel and restaurant, which one could argue is the case if one looks at the materials and produce that are preferred. Within this context, organic produce is associated with sustainability, but linking organic products with the concept is highly contested by



several scholars such as Born and Purcell, (2006); McCool, (2015). This can be an example of the “local trap”, which will be discussed at the end of this section. For instance, one cannot claim organic oranges to be sustainable when it has been transported from Brazil to Denmark.

On a slightly different note, the issue of sustainability is not something that Pia Skammelsen from Oh So Quiet actively thought about when she started her hiking concept. However, it has always been important for her and the concept that the food served during the hikes is organic, or at least as much as possible. After identifying her target, she found that the organic aspect of her concept seemed to quite important to this segment, which strengthened and also validated her choice of produce, for instance, the meal boxes from Aarstiderne (Pia Skammelsen, Oh So Quiet). With the above-mentioned in mind, the organic paradigm that has revealed itself through the quotes can be argued to be a cross-cutting theme in this study. It is interesting to see how operators such as Hotel Thinggaard, Oh So Quiet, Stutteri Korreborg, and Mie Buus tend to focus on organic produce when asked about sustainability from both a general perspective but also in terms of the experiences they individually offer.

It is an interesting aspect to consider since one could argue that just because products and produce are marked as organic, they might not necessarily be sustainable. Not many operators mentioned that they considered the background for the produce or products. Hence, the way from production to consumer did not seem to be something they thought about or at least not in relation to the interview. However, one could argue that organic products align with the environmental pillar in the sense that no chemicals should have been used on, for instance, produce. Thus, buying organic will then help to preserve the natural biodiversity, since no pesticides should have contaminated the area around this produce. There are however still aspects of transport, production, and social issues that one might not know about, which can possibly conflict with the other pillars if they cannot be fitted with the organic product or produce. This is nevertheless not an unfamiliar theme identified in data. As stated in the theoretical framework, associating the organic aspect mainly with the environmental pillar, is no surprise. Both Kho (2014) and Purvis et al. (2019) argue that this situation is very common, and this is one of the issues that contribute to the conceptual confusion.

It, however, seems that the operators mentioned above might be part of the tendency called the ‘local trap’ that have become visible within both the food but also the tourism industry (Born & Purcell,

2006). According to the two scholars, “*The local trap* refers to the tendency of food activists and researchers to assume something inherent about the local scale. The local is assumed to be desirable; it is preferred a priori to larger scales. What is desired varies and can include ecological sustainability, social justice, democracy (Born & Purcell, 2006, p. 195). Hence, the focus of the ‘local trap’ can, for instance, be ecological sustainability, democratic references, and the quality of the food in question. It is an interesting term to discuss in relation to the operators’ tendency to refer to organic produce as a sustainable choice. This is also the case with the section about the focus on local food and produce, which from the perspective of the ‘local trap’ is not necessarily sustainable. With the operators’ tendency to refer to their organic and local products by labelling it sustainable, one could argue that they do not think about the issue from a holistic perspective. By referring to these two types of products, the operators automatically assume that the labels’ local’ and ‘organic’ are valid, and in their case, they assume it to be sustainable.

According to Born and Purell (2006), food needs to be looked at more broadly, since “a local food producer is not essentially better than a global food producer, especially a global food producer who might be making real, systematic process in terms of clean food and fairtrade” (Albala, 2015, p. 912). Thus, it corresponds well with the holistic argument made by Higgins Desbiolles (2019a) and McCool (2015). Thus, the operators seem to perceive that organic products and local products as sustainable - both from an environmental perspective as well as a social one. This argument is consistent through the interviews when asked about implementation of sustainable initiatives. It is framed as one of the reasons why they implement the organic and local products into their experiences, but the holistic perspective does not seem to be part of this mindset.

## The economic aspect

According to scholars such as Butler (2015) and Ruiz-Ballesteros, (2011), the economic aspect arguably plays an essential role within sustainable tourism development as a part of a wider perspective. Stating this, different considerations concerning the economy are made by several operators within the interviews. Nevertheless, it can be discussed how much they seem to value this in terms of their own business. A second theme that became evident during the coding was the focus on expanding the shoulder seasons in Thy to enable a steadier economy.

Is the economy considered as an important variable?

During the period of the interviews, the economy is discussed by several operators in relation to tourism in the area of Thy and the national park (Ellen Ø. Andersen, National Park Thy; Martin Falslev Andersen, Friends of Cold Hawaii; Michael Thinggaard Madsen, Hotel Thinggaard; Lone Lærke Krog, Lærkely etc.). The topic is often brought up when they talk about receiving funding and grants or the background for their businesses. Pia Skammelsen from Oh So Quiet is an example of the above-mentioned since she has received funding to help her concept;

“I have been part of Tourism X, where I got some soft-funding to test the concept and also competent feedback from research on Aalborg university as well as the University of Southern Denmark but also from Danish Coastal and nature tourism. Like it has been really valuable in my journey. I have also been part of Innofounder Experienced at the Innovation Fund which is a program for soft-funding. My salary is covered for a year and then I get funding for development. I am also part of a VIP concept, where companies with potential for growth are offered subsidies for external support” (Pia Skammelsen, Oh So Quiet).

Similar to Pia, Maria Vangsgaard from Thy Hike has also received funds with the intent of serving as a promoter for creating better conditions for her business “I have received some different funds from Thisted forsikring and Feriepartner amongst others [...] and then I have participated in Tourism X, which is a part of Dansk Kyst og Naturturisme” (Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike). Others such as Michael Thinggaard Madsen, Stefan from Stenbjerg Kro, Mie Buus from Naturmad Thy, and Lone Lærke Krog from Lærkely have also received funding, so this is a general theme that can be applied to a lot of the interviewees. However, Per from Vesterhavsscafeen has not been part of any development initiatives, which is also the case with Stutteri Korreborg. The latter started his business because there was a need to find another way of getting an income. When the financial crisis in 2007 happened, a consequence for Stutteri Korreborg was the necessity to find another way of getting an income, which resulted in the horseback rides, since “as a stud farm you were drowning, so you had to do something else that would bring in a revenue” (Stutteri Korreborg).

With the above-mentioned in mind, it could be discussed whether or not the necessity for funding is an indicator of the degree of sustainability in terms of the businesses. How economic sustainable is a

business if there is a need for additional capital of some sort to support the future running of the business? For operators such as Michael Thinggaard Madsen and Stefan from Stenbjerg Kro, they received funds a while back and is doing well today. On the other hand, for start-ups like Thy Hike and Oh So Quiet, it can be argued that they might need financial support to find a foothold in the tourism industry in Thy and because they are in the second year of running. They might not be as sustainable financially, as the other operators like Hotel Thinggaard or Stenbjerg Kro who possess seniority. At the moment, due to the corona crises, it might be difficult to “ensure viable, long-term economic operations” (UNEP & WTO, 2005, p. 1) at least for some of the operators.

It is clear that the operators think about the economy in terms of their individual positions. Still, they rarely mention it in relation to the concept of sustainability, which might indicate that this is not an aspect that they directly associate with the concept. Thus, the perception from the operators seems not to include the economic aspect of sustainability as much, which deviates from the general understanding of the concept among scholars (e.g. Butler, 2015; Hall et al., 2010; Ruddy et al., 2015). The operators' answers are mostly concerned with environmental and socio-cultural issues, which was a bit surprising. With the theoretical framework and literature review in mind, it was believed that the economy was something that the operators would bring more into play. One could argue that the economy of a business is an essential variable in its existence, and especially if one addresses sustainability theory. Here it poses as a third of the trinity in the Three Pillars of Sustainability (UNEP & WTO, 2005), a key issue in the discussions about de-growth (Hall, 2009; Andriotis, 2014), and the three traditions (Saarinen, 2014). When looking at other studies revolving around stakeholders, and the concept of sustainability, the study by Andersen and colleagues is interesting. They found that more advanced understandings of the concept were rather weak and that the focus was drawn to the economic aspect and made no meaning of the environmental as well as the socio-cultural aspects (Andersen et al., 2018). According to them, this is a tendency that is not unfamiliar to the tourism sphere in general.

In the studies carried out by respectively Ong & Smith (2014) and Holden (2010), they concluded that the economic aspect was also a dominating factor here. It is rather interesting to look at the above-mentioned studies and then the data retrieved from the operators interviewed for this thesis since they do seem to perceive sustainability as being concerned with the environment as well as the society. Still, the economy is rarely mentioned in the first few questions concerning the concept. Thus, this is

quite the opposite of the studies in the literature review. It is, however, important to point out that there is a fundamental difference between the actors mentioned in this thesis and the ones that are referred to in the studies by both Ong & Smith (2014) and Holden (2010) since the latter is likely to rely more on tourism as they are situated in lesser developed communities than Denmark.

### Expansion of the seasons

Lastly, the emphasis on expansion the shoulder seasons was found to be interesting seen from sustainable tourism development context. For the tourism industry, the seasons outside the peak season is often challenging in terms of a constant flow of revenue. An expansion of the shoulder season would, according to several interviewees, be an asset for the operators' economies as well as the general state of the tourism industry in Thy. The focus on the issue is emphasised when the interviewees were asked about the future of Nationalpark Thy and its tourism, and the economy seemed to be more prominent here in terms of development and increasing the visitor's number. Maria Vangsgaard from Thy Hike is one of the operators who mentions the shoulder seasons; "we wish to have a base so that we can expand the season in spite of the weather and hereby also develop it into a full-time business. So, you have a roof over your head and so that you can create good experiences for visitors without needing summer weather" (Maria Vangsgaard, Thy Hike). Thus, points to the fact that her business would benefit from expanding the seasons in terms of being able to have Thy Hike as her fulltime job. Currently, she relies on the months in the summertime, since she does not have a base for her business now. Thus, forces her and the guests to be outside all the time. With this in mind, one could argue that being able to use the shoulder seasons would bring about a better economy as she is able to spread out her activities. Thus, the financial situation of Thy Hike might become more sustainable because of the expansion, which would create better conditions for a viable business with more long-term operations. The seasonality of many tourism businesses in Thy was also an area that Thorbjørn Stenholm placed emphasis on when he worked in Thy. To this, he states;

"many of these rural areas that also pose tourist destinations are challenged both in terms of competences and in terms of jobs – because there is a lot of seasonal jobs. This means that there are places where it can be very difficult to create an actual business development. This is also the reason

why many of the tourism businesses and the destination companies are working on expanding the shoulder seasons” (Thorbjørn Stenholm).

From Stenholm’s perspective, the desire to extend the shoulder seasons is likely reflected by the challenges that the area has in terms of having continuous business development. Thus, focus on the potentials for growth and create the foundation for this to happen. Nevertheless, there has to be a collective agreement among the different stakeholders before it is likely to become a reality. However, research on the topic has concluded that it is difficult to achieve. Again, the study by Clausen and Gyimóthy (2016) is appreciated to draw on as well as the study by Lindberg et al., (2019), since both concluded that the different interests and power relationships pose a challenge for successful sustainable development. Else Ø. Andersen from National Park Thy also advocates an increased focus on the shoulder season, since she argues that it makes sense seen from both a financial perspective as well as an environmental one;

“Tourism can be many things, and some tourism development highly concerns increasing the number of visitors by building more accommodations. Here I could maybe be considered as the” devil’s’ advocate” as I say; come on, the summer cottages are only fully booked two weeks a year, but we do have things to experience all the around the year. So, maybe one should consider expanding the season a bit instead ... so we actually get more visitors a year without having to build more” (Else Ø. Andersen, National Park Thy).

For Else Ø. Andersen, the idea of extending the shoulder seasons would mean that the summer cottages in and around Nationalpark Thy might get a bigger occupancy instead of the two weeks in the summertime, where they are fully booked. Thus, provide the opportunity to spread out the activity of tourism in Thy a bit more. The above-mentioned would arguably enhance the economic sustainability of the park and the area around since the revenue from the summer cottages would be longer and more stable, which is what economic sustainability is focussed on. Else furthermore argues that such an expansion would prove beneficial for the environmental sustainability since there would not be the same need to build more summer cottages in the areas of Thy that are overbooked and overcrowded in the two weeks of the summer. Widening out the seasons would hopefully spread out the occupancy of the cottages, which would also be beneficial for the owners of the cottages as they would be getting a steadier stream of rent. Per from Vesterhavscafeen shares the above mentioned.

The demand for the seasons would, in general, be rather beneficial for the entire economy of the tourism industry in and around Nationalpark Thy, as this would likely create a steadier stream of revenue, which would enable them to obtain a better and more stable economy - also from a long-term perspective.

Environmentally speaking, Else argues that the pressure on the occupancy of the houses as well as the nature would be relieved and there would become a more balanced economic activity in these areas. This would furthermore not require new construction of houses and the businesses in the area would gain activity for a longer period of time than merely in the high season. According to the Cater and Cater (2015), expanding the shoulder season is generally a topic that is discussed across tourism destinations in Europe. This because it is not an uncommon phenomenon that destinations struggle to cope with the pressure in the high season, but lacks economic revenue on the other seasons of the year. To incorporate an extension of the shoulder season would, according to Cater and Cater (2015) be cost-effective for destinations, and will help to mitigate the issue tourism activity mostly happening in the high season.

Nevertheless, despite the good predictions made by Cater and Cater (2015), one might be inclined to agree with Thorbjørn Stenholm and his argument about the necessity of relevant stakeholders to agree to approach the expansion of the shoulder season. From the perspective of the data, it is a common belief that this expansion would be a benefit both for the economy of the tourism industry but also the environment of Nationalpark Thy. Thus, the data has revealed that the operators did not seem to focus as much on economic sustainability as first anticipated. Areas that were addressed in relation to this subject were funding and grants aimed at furthering the different operators' businesses. Expansion of the shoulder season was however found to be a common denominator among several of the operators that can be linked to both economic and environmental sustainability. But in general, the economic aspects were not mentioned much in relation to the concept of sustainability.



## Discussion and Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, the aim of this thesis is to investigate *how operators working with tourism in and around Nationalpark Thy understand and implement the concept of sustainable development within their business*. In this case, the theoretical framework, the literature review and collected data pose the content for the above-mentioned analysis. Findings within this have revealed a complex world of different understandings and implementations associated with the concept of sustainability in a tourism context. Thus, supporting other scholars' findings on this topic (e.g. McCool, 2015; Saarinen, 2014; Hall et al. 2010). Stating this, several operators express how they find the concept somewhat confusing to which some work more actively on implementing sustainable initiatives than others. Only a few, however, mention that they are familiar with scientific knowledge on the topic. At the same time, many seem to be highly affected by their personal values and interests in terms of what they focus on within their business or institution. Within this case study, the local operators appear as a heterogeneous group similar to the case studies conducted by scholars such as Clausen and Gyimóthy (2016) and Lindberg et al. (2019). Stating this, Lindberg et al. (2019) argued that stakeholders in their study had different agendas for development. Here, individual needs and wants concerning subjects such as sustainability, business profits and social welfare played an important role to which it is possible to argue that this could be the case in Thy as well. Nevertheless, some similarities are found amongst several of the stakeholders, too, as the concept of sustainability is discussed in relation to tourism. The three dimensions of sustainability that has been defined by UNEP and WTO (2005) is found to be present within this context. However, it can be argued that there is a difference in how these are prioritised amongst the operators. Additionally, not all operators know these by definition, but one could argue that they all somehow incorporate different elements of these within their understanding of sustainability.

The issue of mobility is touched upon by several operators in relation to sustainability and the tourism in Nationalpark Thy, but more specifically in a local context. This is also a variable that has been identified in the literature since the tourism industry and transport sector coexist and is hard to separate. Høyer's (2010) study on transport and sustainable development found that minimizing the tourism industry's footprint in terms of transport is nearly impossible if not the transport sector wants to alter as well. In the data, the stakeholders generally recognise the issue of transportation as a culprit

in the tourism industry. Still, some argue that the footprint from their guests is not that great compared to other actors in the industry. Arguments about tourists taking fewer and short flights as well as taking vacations within the Danish borders are also suggested to alter the transport patterns in the industry. However, the complexity of sustainability seems to be relevant here, as it can be argued that transportation is something that causes confusion in terms of facilitation in Thy because of the large distances, which supports the argument by Hall et al., (2010) about the difficulty in implementing sustainable initiatives regarding transport in rural areas.

The carrying capacity is arguably a key component in many conceptualisations of sustainability (Saarinen, 2014; James et al., 2020; Andriotis, 2014). Stating this, the carrying capacity and the Three Traditions of Sustainable Tourism and Growth concerning the resource, activity, and community-based traditions (Saarinen, 2014) are some of the approaches that can be discussed in relation to the development of tourism within Nationalpark Thy. Thus, similarities between these and several of the operators can be found within the data. Interestingly, in terms of Nationalpark Thy, the carrying capacity is not something that seems to cause great concern. Overall, only a few mention the potential for limiting the visitor numbers' if need be in the future. This is somewhat similar to Haukeland's (2011) study on two Norwegian national parks, as he did not see any particular indication that stakeholders saw the level of tourism as an issue. It is interesting to see how the operators such as Thisted Municipality argues in favour of more tourists, as they believe that the environment can cope. In this instance, one could discuss how this is an example of activity-based tradition since sustainability is seen as a need to improve the tourism sector in the destination of Thy. Whereas, the resource-based activity is found to be the more dominating feature in how the operators refer to growth by means of discussing a limit if necessary in the future. Despite the representation of the two traditions, a common consensus is that the carrying capacity has not yet been reached to their knowledge. It has however been noticed that there are different ways of thinking about limits to growth since many operators refer to the guidelines set by Naturstyrelsen Thy about how many guests the operators can take to a specific area. On the other hand, others base their argument on what they see when they are in the park.

Including the local society or using the right materials were also mentioned by many of the operators when discussing sustainability. Within these cases, it was emphasised how the use of local produce or products helps support the local economy to which one could argue that there is a focus on

economic sustainability. The importance of creating a market for the local products to ensure economic sustainability is also mentioned by stakeholders within James et al.s' (2020) case studies. Interestingly, there seems to be an interest in supporting other businesses where only a few mention the importance of improving their own economy, which is rather contradictory to for instance Andersen et al.s' (2018) study. Furthermore, several operators argue how they help promote the local produce and products by using them within their offered experience. Other themes that were present within this context included the use of specific types of energy and organic products. Here, alternative sources of energy are viewed as sustainable by some operators, as well as organic products. Thus, emphasising sustainability that concerns the environment. Drawing on the literature about sustainability, valuing the environment and "green aspects" is found as common within Higgins-Desbiolles et al.s' (2019b) study, which focuses on restaurants and cafes. Nevertheless, inspired by scholars such as Born & Purcell (2006), one could question if local and organic necessarily equals sustainability.

Some of the interviewed operators can be argued to agree with scholars and organisations (e.g. UNEP & WTO, 2005; Holden, 2010; McCool, 2015) as they too argue for the importance of the inclusion of local stakeholders within decision-making and development process. Examples of how this is done can be found both within the public and private sector. Nevertheless, one could argue that there is a difference in the ways this has been approached. Thus, the private businesses seem to help each other through guidance and advice, whereas the public institutions include locals within some of their meetings where to it becomes possible for them to come up with suggestions etc. One could question to what extent the locals have a saying in terms of final decisions to which stakeholder and power interests could be relevant to consider. Thus, several case studies reveal how uneven power-relationships may impact sustainable development negatively, to which different interest and values pose a challenge (e.g. Haukeland, 2011; Clausen & Guimóthy, 2016). Exemplifying this, Haukeland's (2011) case study stress how some stakeholders felt relatively powerless during the process of destinations development. Some operators placed within Nationalpark Thy or close by did find it challenging to have tourism business in the area, as it was challenging to run the businesses because of the regulations and restrictions they have to follow. Hence, one could argue that there is an imbalance between some of the business and institutions in the area. Here the environmental aspect of sustainability seems to be prioritised higher than others, such as the economic aspect.

The findings furthermore suggested that the operators emphasise the socio-cultural sustainability in using the local history and culture as a means of storytelling to both preserve and communicate about Thy, as well as a tool to attract visitors to the destination. In this, one could initially identify all three pillars, since the preservation of the culture is present, knowledge about nature and how to protect it is disseminated, and the attraction of tourists would enable an economic gain. Haukeland (2011) touches upon this, as stakeholders in Rondane National Park saw the brand of the park as a valid tool in bringing guests to the area, which helped preserve their local traits and provide jobs to the community. One, however, has to approach this argument with caution, since the increase in visitors can lead to overcrowding and pressure on nature, which can then cause an unsustainable development. The balance between the pillars of sustainable development will most likely be challenging to find (Hall et al., 2010; McCool, 2015), and thus underlines the complexity of the concept.

The environmental pillar was, along with sociocultural one, more frequently mentioned when discussing sustainability, which, according to the literature is not an uncommon tendency (Eizenberg & Jabareen, 2017; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2019b). One finding relating to the economy was the focus on expanding the shoulder season to, for instance, remedy the overcrowding in Vorupør and Klitmøller during the summer times. According to several operators, this will secure a steadier stream of revenue to the locals, and the occupancy on the existing summer houses will be spread out along with the pressure on the environment. This is an interesting observation since it seems to combine the economic aspect with the social, and supports the finding from Greenland that showed how the short season was an issue in relation to jobs and making a living (James et al., 2020). Although this lesser emphasis on the economic pillar is present, it contradicts several findings from case studies such as Andersen et al., (2018) and Dabphet (n.d.) where this was a major issue.

Thus, the findings showed the prioritisation among the operators is mostly placed on the nature and the social aspect of sustainability and less on the economy, which is contrasting as literature sees a high emphasis on among stakeholders' financial situation. Hence, case studies by Andersen et al., (2018) and Dabphet (n.d.) are worth mentioning since especially economic security along the development process were found to matter. It is, however, interesting to see how there seems to be a noticeable pattern that emphasises the difference in how the environmental aspect was referring to. Some operators talk about it from a more personal perspective based on their own philosophical values. In contrast, others refer to the wellbeing of nature as a necessity for their business to have a

working foundation. Hence, a difference in how they see environmental sustainability and its value, which support the findings from, e.g. Holden (2010) and Ong & Smith (2014), where stakeholders perceptions differed and often represented their own interest. Another finding that was deemed interesting was how several operators refer to the guidelines set by operators such as Naturstyrelsen. Thus, understanding environmental sustainability in a local context and partly through the eyes of Naturstyrelsen Thy, which serves as a mark of responsibility. A similar situation can also be detected in the study by James et al., (2020) since they found policymaking to have a recognisable influence on stakeholders perception of sustainability issues.

The findings suggest that the different understandings of sustainability were partly affected by what the type of experience that the individual operators offer. This tendency further seems to affect how they work with the concept within their business or institutions. It can be argued that the operators do not, in general, express a holistic view on sustainable development in terms of their presence in the park as well as the tourism industry's impact outside the destination. Nevertheless, a few examples show a wider understanding as they include several aspects on the environment, the economy and the socio-cultural aspect. Here, some do consider transportation impact and choice of products etc. The findings are similar to the argument made by Saarinen (2014) on the rather scarce studies that show a broad view and understanding of the concept. One might also be inclined to think that the complexity of the matter plays a key role in this outcome where trade-offs between the different pillars seem to be the case. It is possible to argue that the lacking examples of holistic representations among the operators imply that they conceptualise the concept of sustainability from a local point of view. The data do indicate that knowledge about how to work with sustainability is lacking, which might indicate why there is an abundance of examples on more manageable solutions to improve sustainability within the businesses. The legitimacy of being a national park could be argued to impact how the operators understand and work with sustainability within their businesses or institutions. Exemplifying, the operators in and around the park are affected by the rules and regulations of the area, as these can limit the possibilities of development. One could question if and how it would be different if the park were not assigned to these rules and regulations. Nevertheless, as this thesis has exemplified, there are several examples of how the operators identify benefits from the national park because of its nature, status, and brand etc.

As the discussion suggests, the overall conceptualisations of sustainability among the operators vary. The main findings in this context are the focus on supporting the environmental and socio-cultural pillars and to a certain extent, the economic pillar in terms of improving the local economy. For some, the environment is referred to in terms of considering the state of it and following guidelines on movement and behaviour in the park. Others focus on the inclusion of the local community (history and culture) as well as the use of local and organic products in their experiences. It, however, seems that the environmental perspective is slightly more common among nature-based experiences, and the socio-cultural more among food-related experiences.

Additionally, several operators consider supporting the local economy as a sustainable initiative. There is, of course, examples where both restaurants that talk about the environment, and vice-versa. Yet, there seems to be a tendency to focus on sustainability from the perspective of the different types of tourism that the operators work with. The findings from this thesis suggest a need for clarification on the concept of sustainability, as there seem to be several conceptualisations of the subject as well as confusion about how to implement it in practise/reality. The different focus areas of the operators, along with the confusion about the concept, can pose implications in terms of policy and more general sustainable development. One might argue that additional knowledge regarding sustainability will help the operators navigate along with a joint effort among the relevant operators and institutions (Dabphet, n.d.; Andersen et al., 2018).

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