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Political Corporate Social Responsibility in Small Tourism Business: The Case of a Finnish Sled Dog Kennel

This case study provides insights into the political engagement and actions taken by a Finnish family-owned sled dog kennel to address regulatory gaps caused by insufficient animal standards.

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Summary

Animal-based tourism companies operate as a sensitive ecosystem in which a poor season of tourism flows can lead to ethically questionable decisions regarding the lives of thousands of animals for the sake of cutting economic losses. In this case, we show how a husky kennel engages in political corporate social responsibility and activism to transform well-established industry values that are in conflict with their own. The core of the kennel's political agenda is to influence positive change in the tourism industry and ensure the ethical treatment of sled dogs as working animals. To that end, the kennel owner-managers use different activist strategies, such as introducing ethical sled dog practices, publicly addressing the regulatory gaps caused by outdated norms and regulations, and raising stakeholders' awareness of animal welfare issues within the dog sledding business.

A no-kill policy and an adoption programme for sled dogs are among the many initiatives that the kennel owner-managers practise on their own premises and that they want to be established as norms in the Finnish dog sledding industry. The motivation for their political activism emerges from the strong care relationship that exists between the owner-managers and the huskies in the kennel. The activist strategies and the motivation of the kennel owner-managers are key to overcoming the barriers to widespread ethical sled dog practices. Two of these barriers are the general lack of understanding of animal welfare issues in tourism and the resistance to change of mainstream kennels and institutional actors. It is through engagement in political activism and the sharing of (emotional/rational) knowledge that the kennel owner-managers want to raise awareness of dog sledding and the need for ethical consideration and greater responsibility among visitors, locals, institutional actors and other stakeholders.

The Value and Interest of the Case Study

Political corporate social responsibility can be influential in the case of a small tourism business. The strategies used are based on the values and practices of the company. This case demonstrates how a small animal-based tourism company can engage in political activism to influence industry practices and broader social goals. Indeed, considering that small tourism companies are often connected to regulatory gaps that lead to low responsibility standards within global tourism supply chains, they can play an influential role in addressing such gaps by spreading issue awareness, engaging in collective action and introducing more responsible practices.

In this regard, the case highlights opportunities to activate and induce positive change in tourism and more widely in society by emphasizing the importance of moving beyond an instrumental view of working animals towards their recognition as subjects with intrinsic value. Highlighting the notion of care and evoking feelings

of compassion through collaboration, partnerships and dissemination of information and education can, for example, lead to more responsible practices in the tourism industry and society in general.

Background

Political corporate social responsibility (CSR) refers to the engagement of companies in political action to address regulatory gaps caused by weak or insufficient social and environmental standards and norms (Wickert, 2016). Although there are numerous examples of large companies and their CEOs taking a political role to influence institutional and social change (e.g., de Bakker, 2012; Corvellec and Stål, 2019; Eilert and Nappier Cherup, 2020; Olkkonen and Morsing, 2022), there is a lack of cases illustrating the political engagement of small businesses (Wickert, 2016), in particular those operating in tourism (García-Rosell, 2022). Hence, the question that arises is how tourism companies, small ones especially, engage in political CSR. To answer that question, we turn towards the political role of a sled dog kennel in promoting more ethical dog sledding practices in the tourism industry in Finland. It is through animal welfare corporate activism that the kennel not only takes a stand on the treatment of sled dogs but also promotes societal change by influencing the attitudes and behaviour of the actors in its institutional environment.

The kennel is located in Finnish Lapland, which is the northernmost province of Finland and the European Union. With only 3.5% of the Finnish population and 30% of Finland's total area, Finnish Lapland is by far the least densely populated region in this Nordic country and a rapidly growing nature-based tourism destination. In 2019, the number of annual registered overnight stays in Lapland reached 3 million (Regional Council of Lapland, 2019). This Nordic destination attracts visitors from different parts of the world, particularly in the winter season, between December and March. Winter activities, such as viewing the Northern Lights, driving snowmobiles, visiting Santa Claus Village and riding reindeer sleighs and dog sleds, are popular among tourists. A recent study revealed that more than half of the tourists travelling to Lapland regard the winter landscape and animal-based activities as being among the main reasons to visit this tourism destination (García-Rosell and Äijälä, 2018). In particular, dog sledding and reindeer sleigh tours not only are the most popular activities but also have become institutionalized patterns and narratives that tourists follow in the production and performance of Lapland as a tourist destination (Bærenholdt *et al.*, 2004; Haanpää and García-Rosell, 2020).

More than 50 kennels and around 10,000 sled dogs work in the tourism industry in Finnish Lapland. Although these kennels are small companies employing between 4 and 20 people, they generate millions of euros in annual revenues for the entire region (García-Rosell and Äijälä, 2018). The majority of sled dogs in Finnish Lapland are Alaskan huskies – a mix of different northern breeds chosen especially for their pulling skills. The dogs live in outdoor kennels and on running circle chains in populations that vary from a dozen to 500 dogs per company. As working animals, most of these sled dogs spend their lives in the creation of tourism experiences by taking visitors on a ride in the pristine wintery landscape. Sled dog rides range from short (0.5–2 km) to medium length (10–40 km) or even multi-day rides (2–8 days). Sleds are pulled by a group of four to six dogs depending on the size and weight of the driver and passenger(s). During these rides, tourists have the opportunity to drive a sled and lead their own team of huskies (Fig. 1).

In Finnish Lapland, the working life of a sled dog is on average 10 years. Usually, these working animals run safaris from the age of 1 to 2 years until they are between 8 and 11 years old. Some dogs retire earlier and some later depending on individual factors such as their physical abilities, like their strength and mobility, and psychological factors, like their motivation and drive (Majuri and Koljonen, 2018). When the sled dogs reach their retirement age, their future depends on the practices of the kennels in which they live. Some huskies will move to less demanding tasks, such as being cuddled or photographed by tourists, and some will be adopted, while the majority will be euthanized. In fact, according to the Finnish Animal Welfare Act, a dog may be killed, even though there is no serious reason for this, by a veterinarian administering a lethal substance, using gas or shooting it in the brain (the last option can also be chosen by the owner of the dog or an authorized person holding a firearm permit) if this causes an immediate loss of consciousness and death (Majuri and Koljonen, 2018).

The retirement practice through euthanasia is one of the main ethical issues driving the political activity of the kennel discussed in the case at hand. Indeed, its owner-managers would like, among other things, to make no-killing policies common practice in this particular animal-based tourism business context. Another issue of ethical concern addressed by the kennel is the lack of physical activity for the dogs which is common during the low season or snowless periods. As a family-owned business operating all year round, the sled dog kennel offers a range of summer and winter activities, such as dog sledding tours, visits to the kennel and walking with the dogs. Nevertheless, the operations of the kennel are highly seasonal, with a strong focus on the winter period. Since its establishment in early 2000, the owner-managers of the kennel have been committed to developing



Fig. 1. Dog sledding in Lapland (courtesy of a husky tour guide).

their business in a responsible and sustainable way. Nevertheless, for them, as for many other small business entrepreneurs, the seasonality of tourism has represented a challenge for their business operations as they rely not only on human workers but also on animals, which, in comparison with human staff, cannot be laid off during the low season. Indeed, animals still need food, care, exercise and human attention when visitors are absent.

By engaging in animal welfare activism to improve the lives of sled dogs working in tourism, the kennel shows by example that small tourism businesses can engage in political action and influence institutional change (García-Rosell, 2022). The kennel pays the utmost attention to enhancing the standards and norms that regulate one of the most popular animal-based tourism activities in Northern Europe. What are the strategies used by the kennel to put forward its political agenda? What is the motivation of the kennel to promote more ethical sled dog practices? What are the barriers faced by the kennel when engaging in political action? These three questions will be addressed next.

Strategies for Political CSR

The kennel owner-managers rely on several strategies to change the ethically questionable animal welfare norms and dog sledding practices in the Finnish tourism industry. One of the strategies is the development and institutionalization of ethical sled dog practices in their kennel. By being among the first tourism kennels to introduce a dog walker, they were able to provide their dogs with a regular exercise plan during the summer months and keep them fit for the winter season, as Excerpt 1 indicates. The dog walker is electrically powered and is divided into several sections where one single dog or several dogs can be placed (see Fig. 2). Despite the divisions, there is a space that allows dogs with a faster pace to change sections in the walking direction. Despite the dog walker being automated and having several different settings, dogs are never left unattended. Although the dog walker practice was initially regarded with suspicion within the dog sledding business, kennels later became more receptive to the idea and some even started adopting the practice on their own premises.



Fig. 2. Dog walker (courtesy of José-Carlos García-Rosell).

The dog walker keeps our dogs fit, happy, and healthy. During the summer months we want to do as much as we can with our dogs. After working season in winter our dogs have developed an amazing endurance and they are in great shape. If we would stop running them when summer hits, it would be very frustrating and also not very healthy for the dogs. (Excerpt 1, social media post).

Other ethical policies adopted by the kennel are related to the retirement practices concerning its huskies. In this regard, the kennel has put in place a no-kill policy and an adoption programme for dogs unable or unwilling to work due to their age, physical condition or personality. As one of the owner-managers states in Excerpt 2, the dogs deserve a full life, a stimulating living and working environment and, when the time comes, a good retirement.

These dogs deserve the best and I'm going to make sure that they are as happy as they can be. And make sure that the dogs are taken well care of, that they are safe, that the pups get trained ... that the dogs do exercise and because they work hard their whole life that they get rehomed and a well-earned retirement. (Excerpt 2, interview).

Contrary to preconceived and normative ideas against rehoming, sled dogs can be fantastic companion animals outside kennels (The Striders Adventure, n.d.; University of Lapland, 2022). Considering that sled dogs working in tourism are constantly in contact with people, they are suitable for rehoming as they are fast learners and able to adapt to new situations. Nevertheless, rehoming is not the only available option as a dog's future depends on its character and preferences. For example, the kennel keeps some of the retired dogs as teachers for the training of the younger dogs, while other retired huskies just enjoy their retirement years on the kennel ground, taking regular exercise in the running fences without having any specific occupation (The Striders Adventure, n.d.).

In addition to informing people about the nature of these animals through its website and social media channels, the kennel emphasizes educating tourists about ethical sled dog practices as well as providing this information on-site (Beuttner, 2022). As it is stated on the kennel's website, "we promote animal welfare to educate our guests as well as improve the living conditions for working dogs" (Excerpt 3). By educating their customers and website visitors, they hope to encourage tourists to ask questions about the welfare of the sled dogs of other kennels that they may visit. Indeed, although thousands of people follow the kennel on social media, many of its followers may end up visiting another kennel in Finland or another Nordic destination. Considering that package holidays are still a big part of tourism in Finnish Lapland, tourists do not usually have the possibility to ask for the services of a particular husky kennel. Therefore, education and promoting animal welfare literacy can put pressure on more conventional kennels; as public awareness increases, so too do the ethical expectations of tourists (Fennell, 2022). Hence, tourists become not only better informed but also more vigilant about the treatment and the living and working conditions of sled dogs (Beuttner, 2022).

Another strategy deployed by the kennel is the persuasion of its key stakeholders, which can support and facilitate change in the dog sledding business. For example, by establishing a collaboration with the local university during the COVID-19 pandemic, the kennel took a leading role in the development of animal welfare criteria and their integration into a Finnish ecolabel. Although most of the work to create the criteria was completed as part of two large projects focusing on animal welfare in tourism, it was through the kennel's persistence that the final steps towards the Finnish animal welfare criteria for sled dogs were taken (Katainen, 2023). The academic-practitioner collaboration that led to the implementation of the animal welfare projects and the final development of the animal welfare criteria for sled dogs contributed to creating a bond between the researchers at the local university and the sled dogs working in the tourism industry in Finnish Lapland (García-Rosell, 2022). Indeed, the researchers started to take a more active role in improving the working conditions of sled dogs, as indicated in the excerpt below.

It was because of [kennel X] that we started applying for project funding. Without their idea and insistence with the topic, we would never have come up with the idea of studying sled dogs ... The project and the close work with the entrepreneurs and the animals have definitely created a strong connection with the topic. The project ended years ago and I'm still giving time to the cause, helping to develop ethical guidelines and animal welfare criteria. I don't see myself as an activist, but I am highly motivated to improve the working condition of the huskies and support a no-kill policy. (Excerpt 4, field notes of the first author).

This was possible through academic research on sled dogs in relation to responsible tourism and cooperation with different organizations interested in supporting more ethical sled dog practices. One concrete result of such collaboration was the creation of a set of animal welfare criteria for sled dogs – the first of its kind in the Nordic countries (University of Lapland, 2021). Although the owner-managers of the kennel themselves invested their time and expertise in the development of the criteria, their main achievement was to persuade their key stakeholders to work towards the agenda and to acknowledge it as a critical aspect of responsible tourism development in Lapland.

Motivation for Political CSR

The motivation of the kennel owner-managers to engage in political CSR was exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was particularly harmful to husky kennels in Finnish Lapland (García-Rosell, 2020). Due to the travel restrictions implemented during 2020 and 2021, the kennel remained without clients and the regular income needed to cover its operating costs. Although reducing the kennel population through culling would have been a possible and legal solution to cut the running costs, the owner-managers of the kennel decided not to do so and thus searched for other possibilities to navigate through the difficult times. To cover the kennel's expenses, they relied not only on their own savings and sponsorship but also on the help of local agribusiness actors, government financial aid, customers buying husky tours in advance and volunteer workers (All About Lapland, 2020; Kostner, 2020).

The decision was based on the ethical principles and practices already guiding the kennel's operations before the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the owner-managers of the kennel are among a group of forward-looking kennel owners who, over the years, have actively been advocating for a no-kill policy and the provision of all-year-round regular exercise for sled dogs in Lapland (García-Rosell, 2022). Advocacy has taken place through stakeholder engagement, internal policy development, lobbying and raising awareness among other initiatives that help to attract attention to their cause. The political action taken by the kennel is informed by the moral position of

its owner-managers, who criticize the political status quo on ethical grounds and use that critique to justify and demand change (Branicki *et al.*, 2020; Eilert and Nappier Cherup, 2020). In this sense, their political action is guided by a sense of justice and welfarist ethical views that justify animal work as long as it is free of cruelty and mistreatment (Beers, 2006). Nevertheless, as Excerpt 5 shows, the welfarist perspective of the owner-managers is not purely instrumental but strongly based on the special emotional relationship that exists between them and their dogs (García-Rosell and Tallberg, 2021; García-Rosell, 2022; Tallberg *et al.*, 2022). Acknowledging the role of emotional care relationships in the moral position taken by the owner-managers directs our attention to a notion of care that focuses on the welfare, protection or enhancement of their sled dogs' lives (Noddings, 2003) (Fig. 3).

Our mission is to let our dogs be the best dogs they can be. And to make sure that all of them have a full and fulfilling life and career. The dogs that are born in our kennel are part of our family and we are going to be responsible for these dogs their whole life. (Excerpt 5, media interview).

The same emotional care relationships drive the motivation of the owner-managers to act as influencers in the Finnish tourism industry and thus change the practices of dog sledding businesses. Indeed, as Excerpt 6 indicates, they not only care for their own animals but also have a sense of responsibility, care and respect for other sled dogs working in tourism (Tallberg *et al.*, 2022).

And if we can do that [referring to the promotion of ethical dog sledding practices], then mainstream kennels will have to adapt and most likely whatever happens at the end of that adaption, their dogs will have a better life than before, or at least I hope they will. So, our actions can actually contribute to the general welfare of dogs in Lapland. (Excerpt 6, interview).

Hence, the owner-managers of the kennel use their time, resources and social capital to raise awareness as well as induce change in a business sector that has traditionally regarded animals as having instrumental rather than intrinsic value (García-Rosell, 2022). In that sense, this case works as evidence of how political action to demand changes in a particular industry and society, in general, emerges in situations in which values are in conflict.



Fig. 3. Sled dog puppies (courtesy of José-Carlos García-Rosell).

Barriers to Political CSR

After discussing the strategies used by the kennel to induce change in dog sledding practices and the motivation of the owner-managers, we draw attention to some of the barriers that they have faced in their political engagement over the years. When the owner-managers of the kennel started to advocate for better animal welfare practices, they could not gain any support due to a lack of public awareness. Despite Finnish Lapland's boast that it is a leading tourism destination in relation to sustainability (Regional Council of Lapland, 2019), nobody in the industry thought of animal welfare as an important aspect of responsibility in tourism. The working conditions and treatment of sled dogs were (and are at the moment of writing this case) literally taken for granted and neglected as an important aspect of responsible tourism policies. Thus, the welfare of these tourism working animals was not explicitly considered in any local, regional or national tourism strategies. Despite the progress towards greater responsibility and increased public awareness of the issue as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism policy in Finnish Lapland remains clearly focused on enhancing human welfare and rights through tourism development while ignoring the impact of tourism activities on the welfare of sled dogs and other animals (Sheppard and Fennell, 2019). This lack of awareness was also present in the local university, which has a long history in education and research on responsible tourism. As the university researchers did not have a clear understanding of the issue, they were not able to frame it within a responsible tourism discourse. From this perspective, a lack of animal welfare literacy and knowledge about dog sledding and its ethically questionable practices can be viewed as a passive barrier preventing change towards more responsible standards and norms (Fennell, 2022; Fennell *et al.*, 2022).

Another barrier faced by the kennel was the resistance to change of other kennels that were not willing to change their practices. The owner-managers of such kennels are satisfied with the present animal welfare regulations and the current status quo of dog sledding in Lapland. They justify well-established practices like euthanasia on the basis of the belief that sled dogs are working animals and nothing else and therefore are unable to adapt themselves to a life outside the kennels. In other words, sled dogs are supposed to live and die as working animals. Likewise, they see the animal welfare advocacy of the kennel illustrated in this case as a threat to their well-established business models as the suggested changes could increase their operational costs. For example, introducing new kennel practices, such as an adoption programme and an increased amount of summer exercising, may require them to hire additional staff and revamp the kennel premises. These beliefs and attitudes contribute to their rejection of the new information, knowledge and practices that question established dog sledding principles based on instrumentally informed human-animal relationships for the sake of economic success. Moreover, strong conflicting attitudes towards the keeping and treatment of sled dogs create polarization and a lack of consensus, which in turn hinders the adoption of more ethical sled dogging practices (Eilert and Nappier Cherup, 2020).

Conclusions

Despite being small tourism companies, the political engagement of husky kennels, such as the one illustrated in this case study, can have a considerable impact on the industry. Indeed, through their everyday practices and activism, they influence the surrounding institutional environment and contribute to incremental changes in the sled dog practices in the Finnish tourism industry. By acknowledging and publicly addressing the regulatory gaps caused by outdated, insufficient social and institutional norms, the kennels' actions have contributed to raising awareness of the working animal welfare issue among different stakeholders. Moreover, the political engagement of husky kennels, like the one described in this case, has helped to establish multi-stakeholder partnerships and create a collaboration that has contributed to the institutionalization of new policies. For example, the collaboration with the local university, research organizations, ecolabelling organizations, local authorities, non-governmental organizations and other ethical husky kennels, among other stakeholders, has helped to develop and implement a set of animal welfare criteria that can be used to conduct ethical audits in Finnish kennels (University of Lapland, 2021). This practice has not only contributed to acknowledging ethical husky kennels but also encouraged mainstream kennels to improve their practices and become more responsible.

As the case used here indicates, the source of motivation for political CSR was based not on its instrumental value but on the emotional care relationship that kennel owner-managers shared with their sled dogs (García-Rosell and Tallberg, 2021; Tallberg *et al.*, 2022). Documenting and sharing not only their company's good operational practices but also a narrative of a sound human-animal care relationship – for example, via social media – hold the potential to evoke caring relations and empathy to be realized in actions more widely in society. As care (including feelings such as worry and compassion) for tourism animal workers builds up among Finnish citizens, local communities and international tourists, the norms of the industry are prone to be questioned and thus

succumbing to changes towards more ethical and responsible kennel practices. This case shows that political CSR and activism play an important role in the tourism industry as a driver of more ethical standards and responsible business practices.

Although small tourism companies differ significantly from global tour operators in terms of organizational characteristics and financial resources, the case at hand demonstrates that, in general, small tourism companies can also influence their business environment and facilitate the changing of attitudes and behaviour towards an issue. However, multi-stakeholder collaboration is needed to leverage their political engagement. It is through collaboration that these companies can increase public awareness about the issue and legitimize it within their institutional context. In line with other studies (e.g., Eilert and Nappier Cherup, 2020; Olkkonen and Morsing, 2022), this case shows that political CSR is a complex process that requires many resources (e.g., financial, time and social), commitment and long-time engagement. Finally, the case describes how political CSR can be an integral part of a company and its business model. From this perspective, political engagement is not a one-time event but a process guided by moral values and materialized through the daily routines and practices of the organization.

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