

GUIDE FOR EVALUATING AND DEVELOPING  
**ANIMAL WELFARE  
COMMUNICATION PRACTICES  
IN ANIMAL-BASED TOURISM IN FINLAND**

Animal species: Sled dogs, reindeer and horses



# Guide for evaluating and developing animal welfare communication practices in animal-based tourism in Finland

## Animal species: Sled dogs, reindeer, and horses

Over the last few decades, tourism has experienced continued growth, becoming one of the most important sectors in Lapland and other northern regions of Finland. Animals have played a considerable role in supporting this growth. Animal-based activities are not only very popular among tourists, but also one of the reasons for visiting northern Finland. Furthermore, animals such as sled dogs, reindeer, and Finnhorses have become an important branding element of Lapland and other tourism destinations in the North.

This document is one of four aiming to better guide the process of evaluating and communicating animal welfare in animal-based tourism activities in Finland. The focus of these documents is on three main animal species: sled dogs, reindeer, and horses. The documents are highly relevant at a time when animal welfare in tourism is being pushed forward due to consumer demand. While many tourists feel that close interaction with animals is an exciting way of spending a holiday, they also have become more aware of the negative impacts that tourism can have on animals. As a result, animal welfare is becoming a critical criterion used by tour operators to select their suppliers.

The document at hand focuses on the ways of communicating and promoting education on animal welfare in tourism. The document aims to help animal-based tourism companies evaluate and develop more comprehensive animal welfare communication strategies. Although animal welfare communication is company-specific, there are questions that most companies struggle with. For instance, Which communication tools to use? What content to share in social media? What kind of information to put on the website? What information is relevant for the customers? Rather than being exhaustive, this document offers some guidance on some of these crucial issues related to animal welfare communication. Furthermore, it helps companies increase the transparency of their operations and the visibility of the values shaping their animal welfare policies. At its best, it provides a good starting point for an animal-based tourism company to reflect on their way of communicating their business philosophy and how they make it happen in practice.

The themes and questions included in this document are the outcome of an action research process conducted in the project “Animals and responsible tourism: promoting business competitiveness through animal welfare”, which was funded by Business Finland under the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). In addition to public funding, 10% of the project budget was financed by 10 Finnish tourism companies: Lapland Safaris, Harriniva Hotels & Safaris, Ranua Wildlife Park, Arctic Reindeer, Arctic Husky Farm, Hetta Huskies, Lapland Husky Safaris, OFF-Piste Adventures, Polar Lights Tours, and Ruska Laukka. The project was implemented by the Multidimensional Tourism Institute (MTI), University of Lapland during the period 01.08.2016-31.07.2018. More information about the project can be found at [www.animaltourismfinland.com](http://www.animaltourismfinland.com)

In addition to the 10 companies co-financing the project, a wide range of animal welfare and responsible tourism experts took part in the action research process. The following experts were involved in the development of the document at hand: Vicki Brown (Responsible Travel), Mia Halmén (The Finnish Association for Fair Tourism), Tiina Kauppinen (Natural Resources Institute Finland, The Finnish Centre for Animal Welfare), Satu Raussi (Natural Resources Institute Finland, The Finnish Centre for Animal Welfare) and Kati Pulli (Finnish Federation for Animal Welfare Associations). This document is also supported by the study “Analysis of user-generated social media content related to animal-based tourism activities in Lapland” which was conducted as part of the “Animals and Responsible Tourism” project.

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# 1. Webpage

- **In your webpage, do you provide photos of**
  - the physical surroundings of your company?
  - the actual preparations for the animal-based activities?
    - » For example, getting animals ready for tours/rides, the staff interacting with the animals and participating in their daily chores.
  - the activities as they take place?
    - » Photos from the rides/tours, customers engaging in the activities.
    - » To create a realistic picture of the activities provided, it is important to provide not only photos of the animals themselves (separated from the operations and humans) – even when it is important.
    - » For example, in case of horses, the companies can add pictures of horses in the stables and in paddocks and fields for the customer to get a better understanding of how the immediate environment of the horses looks like.
  - the animals themselves?
    - » individual animals, individuals with different appearances, animals in groups/with their ‘house-mates’, animals at work, animals at play and leisure time activities, animals in their accommodations.
  - Remember that even though you would share photos of the animals through social media channels, not everybody uses Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. Acknowledging that, a selected set of photos provided on a more stable website gives an idea of the life on the farm. Through your website, you can then encourage visitors to learn more about the animals in your other information channels.
- **Do you provide detailed information about the content of your animal-based activities on your webpage?**
  - The selection of rides/tours/activities.
  - What is the content of the activity? How long does it last? What is the route like? If stayed overnight, where do the customers, staff, and animals reside and rest? If applicable, what type of experience does the level of the activity require from the customer?
  - Tip! You can have basic information about the activity listed (type of the activity, duration, level of expertise required, area, number of participants, information about the guide, the price) on the first introduction page of your selection and have a second, more detailed information page that can be accessed by clicking the chosen activity.
    - » Some people might be put off if they think that they are required to read 20 pages before it actually comes to the tours. Some people actually want to know every detail. Make sure you cater to both types of guests.
    - » For example, from the basic information > detailed info package of the tours, see Exploring Iceland <https://www.exploringiceland.is/exploring-iceland-on-horseback.html>
- **In addition to written text, do you provide photographs from your activities?**
  - Remember the power of pictures! In addition to providing basic information about the length of the tour and what is included, the introduction would be more informative with photographs of the activity, the animals, the landscape, etc. And what about using videos to enrich your site?
  - Some inspiration can be found here: <https://www.exploringiceland.is/short-riding-tours.html>, <https://www.exploringiceland.is/comfortable-rides.html>

- **What about using video interviews with customers that have visited your farm as part of your communication plan?**
  - See, for example: <https://www.exploringiceland.is/the-7-wonders-of-south-iceland.html>
- **Do you provide access to additional information of animals and their welfare/responsible tourism/other, offered by a 3<sup>rd</sup> party, by including direct links to your webpages?**
  - For example, for people interested in gaining more information about reindeer, a link to Reindeer Herders' Association website <https://paliskunnat.fi/reindeer/> is of relevance.
  - Another example: in the horse tourism business, Exploring Iceland describes the Icelandic horse in their webpages using text and pictures and provides a link to the Horse Breeders Association of Iceland. For further information, see: <https://www.exploringiceland.is/the-icelandic-horse.html>



## 2. Social media

- **Do you use social media tools to make the everyday life on the farm visible?**
- **Which social media tools does your company use? (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, other?)**
- **Who is responsible for posting/updating the company's social media channels as well as other communication on social media on behalf of your company?**
  - One possibility could be to designate one person or a team to be in charge of the social media content to make sure you provide coherent and thus easily approachable communication.
  - Being updated on social media primarily concerns your own company's social media sites, but also (even though it demands more time), other relevant discussion sites, where people could, for example, share their experiences of their holidays, which include animal-based activities like TripAdvisor.
  - Reacting to enquiries or other relevant conversations on social media is a central part of today's way of communicating. Reacting promptly to social media discussions is meant both to avoid the circulation of negative experiences or rumors based on possible misunderstandings and to use it as a method of learning. Taking part in social media discussions can be key to developing your business operations in the future.
- **How do you decide what kind of information should be posted on social media?**
  - Why not arrange a regular practice for this, such as a common coffee break every week, during which, you deliberately discuss your plans/ideas for communication? In case you have several people posting content on social media, a common plan for information sharing helps avoid excessive posting that can have a negative effect on the consumers or lose important information in the 'jungle'. The time spent planning may prove its worth in the future.
- **Do you have a social media policy for your employees when it comes to posting company-related social media content?**
  - Are your employees encouraged to freely post about their work at the company and with the animals? Or do you recommend that employees not post things about their work/the company and instead keep their social media channels related only to their personal life?
  - The policies considering employee work-related social media usage depend on many things such as the size of the company, regulations possibly coming from third parties (such as travel agencies), the number of employees, the overall spirit in the company (is the staff close with each other? is there a relationship built on trust between all members of the staff?).
- **Do you have a common policy for how to react to publicly available, negative feedback regarding your operations?**
  - Unfiltered feedback is a central feature of, for example, Facebook and TripAdvisor.
  - One central action is to provide a rather quick reply to the person giving the feedback – yet, what is even more important is the very content of your reply and its consistency with other communication from your company! Think carefully: what do you want to communicate to a customer or another person interested in your company in this particular situation?
  - Keep a correct tone in your response, thank for the effort to write about your company, be honest and humble in your answer, and provide the facts needed to correct any possible misunderstandings or take the negative experience as a positive possibility for learning and development of your activities.

- If the person continues the negative discussion, make it clear that you have provided the information you find important to share in this situation. For further discussion, you can encourage the person to be in touch through more mutual ways of communicating (for example, providing your contact e-mail address).
- Remember that getting defensive will most certainly make you look guilty!
- **In case of Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, do you promote the possibility for a customer to share information about their experiences by creating and promoting #hashtags?**
  - Using and promoting hashtags in these social media channels is an effective way to reach out to potential customers and a wider audience. Thus, hashtags are an effective marketing tool. They are also a good way to establish dialogue between customers themselves and with other parties involved in the topic of animal-based tourism and to help them to find each other through social media.
  - For inspiration in using hashtags deliberately as a marketing method, see for example <https://socialmediaweek.org/blog/2017/09/effectively-use-hashtags-social-media-marketing/>.
  - Remember that as is the case in any marketing and communication, proper planning and trying out a new marketing method requires time and effort. Be realistic about this – do you consider there is time and people available to make it happen?
- **Do you use Trip Advisor as a communication channel?**
  - Trip Advisor works as a central channel to achieve customer-based information about travel destinations and also for people not involved with Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. If your company has not already been reviewed by a TripAdvisor user (learn more about this here: <https://www.tripadvisor.com/TripAdvisorInsights/n2691/get-your-business-tripadvisor>), consider listing your company on TripAdvisor through a request (information about this is provided in the given webpage).

### 3. Communicating through photographs and bios: going to details

- **In your communication channels, do you provide photographs from different times of the year (both from your company premises, the animals, and the staff taking care of the animals)?**
  - Through photographs and added text, you are able to share what the annual life cycle of the animal in the farm includes and looks like, as well as what the staff members do in the farm outside the season.
- **Do you only use photographs of your own animals in your own communication channels and marketing material?**
  - This is to ensure the creation of a realistic vision of what the customers are about to see an experience on site (in contrast to, for example, a Disney-image with fluffy Siberian huskies).
- **Do you use photographs of animals in all their versatility, such as small and big reindeer, horses with different looks, animals with different colorings, dogs that are skinnier and more 'sporty' and those that are bigger in size?**
  - Remember that your photographs and all types of communication work as an educational tool. Pictures can contribute to the pre-experience of your customer before they visit your premises.



## 4. Other information in communication channels

- **Do you provide introductions/stories of individual animals in your webpage or in other communication channels to raise awareness of your team?**
  - Many times, animals are referred to as being work colleagues or family members by the people working with them; make sure that you communicate it to the customers and other audience as well! Perhaps the most effective way to do this is through introductions/stories of the animals on your website, where everybody can find them and which will not get lost in the social media stream.
  - As you know, different animals and different personalities require different types of care and comfort, so share it to the people looking for information about your animal maintenance.
  - If you have retired animals living in the farm, you could tell their stories as well! What is their life like in the farm after their most active years?
- **Do you provide introductions/stories of the staff on your webpage or in other communication channels?**
  - How long have the staff members been working in the farm? What is their story for coming to work in the company? Do they come back year after year? Who is the staff member with a longest history? What about the owners? Who are they? Let the stories be available to the audience!
  - Providing some introductions allows you to share the expertise and experience of the staff/team, as well as to create a sense of connection, when the customers arrive to the site and meet the people and the animals.
  - One good example of an introduction of the guides: <https://www.exploringiceland.is/exploring-iceland-guides.html>
- **Do you provide information about the seasonal practicalities of recruiting?**
  - Through staff introductions, you have the possibility to openly talk about your staff distribution as both permanent/long-term staff and seasonal staff and, thus, educate people about the nature of this particular tourism business and how things work.
  - This is also a great place to describe your staff training practices – what do they include?

## 5. Communication on site: customer service and education

- **Do you provide educational information to the customers about the animals and how to behave before the departure/during the tours/after the tours? In your experience, what practice works best for you?**
  - Providing information about the animals as part of the activity and service, the company is acting responsibly, as it is already answering questions many customers would possibly like to ask but might not have the courage to do so. Alternatively, the company might share new information about the animals that the customers are not aware of and do not have the possibility to ask about.
  - The topics of information sharing can include the training of animals, how they are taken care of on a daily basis, breeding, nature or personality, stories about the animals in the farm, history of the breed(s), etc.
  - For example, with sled dog activities, the guides can tell the customers about the behavior of the dogs upon departure and explain in detail why the dogs are not allowed to be touched or petted during this particular phase of the activity.
- **What about other educational information such as taking care of the surrounding environment and communities – do you provide it?**
- **Are you prepared for customer groups who do not speak/understand English in a way that would guarantee that the information shared is fully comprehended? In what ways?**
  - Consider using videos (subtitled in the customer group's native language whenever possible) to share information about the animals and the activity about to take place, including practical instructions on how to behave with the animals.
  - Teaching and using hand gestures during preparations for and at the time of the activity (and if needed, with the help of pictures to illustrate the meaning of the gestures).
- **Do you give instructions to the customers in a quiet location before heading to the place where the animals are ready to start the activity (this especially concerns sled dog activities)?**
  - As every company has their own way of giving instructions, the importance of a well-planned, well-structured, and well-organized guidance is to be emphasized.
- **Do you have a particular person(s) in charge of responding to customer e-mail or phone enquiries in a convenient timeframe? Do you take into consideration the time allocated to this in your work schedule planning?**
- **Do you welcome customer questions regarding any notions they have of your business, that is to say, are you open for questions and happy to answer them? What types of experiences do you have of this matter?**
- **Do you strive to deal with and go through possible problems during the activities in the presence of customers whenever possible? In addition to dealing with the issue, it is important to have a system of how to communicate to the customers what has been done to correct the situation.**
  - Dealing with problems in the presence of customers enables the clarification of the situation at hand and prevents customers from leaving the company with unsolved issues that might have a negative effect on their overall experience of your company.
  - Transparency empowers the customers, as they are able to know what is going on and, for example, in the case of an injury taking place with an animal, what is going to happen and who is going to treat the animal and when.

- **Do you stick with an honest and straightforward guidance of customers during the activities to guarantee animal welfare and customer safety in every circumstance, without exceptions?**
  - This notion relates to the company experiences of having to be tough and determined when guiding customers, if there is any risk to the welfare of the animals and/or customer safety, even if it would at first be considered as being 'rude'.
  - Here, providing information about what is to be taken into consideration when guaranteeing animal and customer safety both before and after the activity is of great importance to avoid misinterpretations.
- **Are the customers allowed to familiarize themselves with your daily notes board with information about the animals, their working schedules, feeding and drinking records, etc.?**
  - Keeping these daily notes available to customers is an easy way of committing to transparency and educating customers about the daily life in the farm.

## 6. Communication with third parties

- How do you organize the visits of third parties in your site? Do you invite travel agencies and tour operators to visit, or are the visits more or less regular by the third party themselves?
- Are the visits in accordance with the actual customer experience?
  - Creating a realistic experience of your services enables third parties to know what they sell!
- In addition to the customer experience provided to the third party, have you considered organizing a specific animal welfare session during their visit for educational purposes? Would you take initiative for this to happen?

## 7. Additional practices

- **Do you take part in a dialogue with other companies within your destination and share good practices when it comes to animal welfare?**
  - Consider leading by example! This requires sharing what you have learned and growing as a whole movement, not just as an individual business. Animal welfare is not just the concern of a single animal-based tourism company but of the entire sector.
- **Have you visited other companies and taken part in their service offerings (by openly benchmarking them) to create a common ground to develop your businesses in the future?**
- **Do you promote discussions on animal welfare with your local destination marketing organizations and tourism companies not directly involved in animal-based tourism? Animal welfare is not just the concern of animal-based tourism companies but of the entire destination.**