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## Article

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## Last chance tourism? Revealing true tourist motivations for visiting northernmost Alaska

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### ABSTRACT

A prevailing narrative about last chance tourism, in which tourists visit threatened destinations, has made headlines in recent years as global climate change impacts became increasingly visible with landscapes and species facing the threat of disappearing. Tourist experiences in the Arctic and community views of climate change adaptation are underexamined in the existing literature. We interrogated the narrative of last chance tourism through archival research and qualitative content analysis of interviews from Utqiagvik, Alaska to uncover tourist motivations and residents' perceptions of tourists themselves. Results found two key findings: (1) last chance tourism played little role in motivating tourists; and (2) residents' perceptions of visitor motivations were notably different from tourists' own professed motivations.

### 1. Introduction

Tourism is a burgeoning sector of the global economy helping facilitate rebounding growth following the pandemic while spurring debates around long-term sustainability and overtourism (Gavrilov & Kholosha, 2020; McClanahan, 2024). However, many tourist destinations around the world are simultaneously being reshaped by climate change (Gössling, 2002; Lenzen et al., 2018) with dramatic consequences for many of the most appealing elements attracting tourists to those locations (Abram & Lund, 2018; Lee et al., 2017). No region will be affected more than the Arctic where diminished sea ice threatens iconic species like the polar bear (Born, 2019; Rode et al., 2022), and undermines the long-term viability of Indigenous ways of life (Cunsolo Willox et al., 2014; Le Teno & Frison, 2021).

Last chance tourism is a phenomenon that derives from the changing reality of the Arctic in which tourists seek out species and environments adversely impacted by climate change to experience them before it's too late (D'Souza et al., 2023; Groulx et al., 2016; Lemelin et al., 2010). Whether last chance tourism is more beneficial by spurring economic growth or more detrimental by increasing pressure on fragile ecosystems remains subject to vigorous debate (Büscher & Fletcher, 2017; Müller, 2021). Arctic tourist destinations may also need to contend with long-term scenarios of what will follow when these last chances are gone and what "post-Arctic tourism" will resemble (Salim et al., 2023;

Varnajot & Saarinen, 2021).

Despite these concerns, there has been to date a lack of academic attention provided to tourist experiences in the Arctic and community views of climate change adaptation, although public awareness has increased (Lee et al., 2017; Saarinen & Varnajot, 2019). While tourism in Alaska is well-documented (Maher et al., 2014), fewer studies focus on the rural North Slope Borough and its hub, Utqiagvik. The North Slope Borough was home to a significant last chance tourism destination in the village of Kaktovik situated some 300 miles to the east of Utqiagvik. Last chance tourism in Kaktovik accelerated in 2004 when the United States Fish and Wildlife Services issued a grant to assist residents in purchasing boats used for polar bear viewing (Miller, 2019). This led to Kaktovik becoming the "polar bear capital of the United States" while struggling to cope with a massive influx of tourists (Nozari, 2017; Pemberton, 2018; Reid, 2017). The boom in polar bear viewing collapsed in 2021 when the federal government halted the issuing of commercial polar bear viewing permits (DeMarban, 2021; The Secretary of the Interior, 2021). Polar bear viewing in Kaktovik has remained frozen as of the publishing of this paper with little explanation provided to former guides (Akook Arctic Adventures, 2025). Similar to Kaktovik, Utqiagvik is home to a large colony of polar bears who frequent Point Barrow, are spending more time near the shore due to the loss of sea ice, and annually take advantage of the remains of bowhead whale carcasses left by local Inupiat hunters. Marketing for the town often promotes

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features with last chance associations, such as polar bear viewing tours (State of Alaska, 2024). Utqiagvik is both the economic hub of the North Slope Borough and the primary destination of most tourists visiting the region (North Slope Borough, 2014).

The research objective of this study investigates the social dimensions of climate change in the Arctic by examining stakeholder perceptions of the development of tourism and the motivating factors attracting tourists to the region to interrogate the prevailing narrative that last chance motivations drive tourists to areas with disappearing landscapes or endangered species. Last chance tourism as a phenomenon is well documented but has often been assumed by media and scholars to be a motivation in regions featuring disappearing species or landscapes. Using Utqiagvik, Alaska as a case study our objective was to understand the role of last chance tourism related to how stakeholder experiences and perspectives of Arctic tourism developed in the city. This study addresses significant research gaps including a lack of attention provided to tourist experiences in the Arctic and global issues including climate change adaptation (Lee et al., 2017) and need for further research on the role of last chance tourism in the Arctic (Varnajot & Saarinen, 2021). In addition, this study addresses gaps in the dearth of research investigating the view residents have of tourists themselves (Moreira Gregori et al., 2022).

## 2. Review of literature

### 2.1. Tourism motivations and impacts

The investigation of tourist motivations has a long history in tourism literature predating the last chance tourism phenomenon by several decades (Cohen, 1984; Fodness, 1994). Early tourism literature investigating tourist motivations largely focused on a Push-Pull Model examining psychological forces to explain travel (Dann, 1977, 1981; Gnoth, 1997). Push factors are those motivating a person to leave home, while pull factors are ones that make a destination attractive, and the two are often closely interrelated (Klenosky, 2002; Vareiro & Mendes, 2019). For example, tourists may be pushed to visit a last chance tourism destination by their desire for the prestige of having seen a disappearing species or they may be pulled there to learn about climate change. Destination image, including aspects of the natural environment subject to climate change, is also interconnected with tourist motivation (Suhud et al., 2021), such as how an equivalence between tourists' motivations and a destination's actual qualities may positively shape image (Beerli and Martin, 2004).

More recent literature has focused on the Escaping-Seeking framework (Huang, 2021; Hvenegaard, 2012). This theory focuses on how tourists either escape challenging environments at home or seek rewarding experiences elsewhere with the former exerting greater influence on tourists in most cases (Dunn Ross & Iso-Ahola, 1991; Mannell & Iso-Ahola, 1987). Escaping-Seeking theory has been empirically tested with scholars arguing for its continued relevance in understanding tourist motivations (Šimková and Holzner, 2014; Wolfe & Hsu, 2004).

A number of less empirically studied models exist including the theory of leisure class, civilizing process theory, bioeconomic theory, and anthropogenic allee effect that respectively approach tourist motivations through status, changes to social standards, consumer demand for rare wildlife, and feedback cycles driving demand for rare species while simultaneously reducing the species' population (Hvenegaard, 2012). However, the most developed alternative is the Travel Career Pattern framework building on the earlier Travel Career Ladder framework to describe differences between more and less experienced travelers (Huang, 2021). The Travel Career Pattern theory distinguishes between more and less experienced travelers arguing that the motivations driving these tourists differ as a result. For example, more experienced travelers are more motivated by host-site involvement while those less traveled may focus on stimulation and recognition (Pearce & Lee, 2005). Whichever theory is selected, advocates of all agree that

tourist motivation directly influences the decision to travel to a destination (Botha et al., 1999; Kozak, 2002; Kozak et al., 2017) and is critical for developing destination marketing (Prebensen et al., 2013).

Perceptions of tourism impacts is an area of scholarly activity with nearly as long a history in the literature as tourist motivations (Ap, 1992; Belisle & Hoy, 1980; Sheldon et al., 1984). Environmental and social impacts are among those most important to understand for policy development and decision-making processes (Gill, 2014). Tourism is attractive to communities due to its ability to generate revenue and new jobs as a livelihood diversification/substitution strategy. This may prove essential to the survival of Arctic communities as traditional livelihood activities are threatened by global climate change impacts such as sea ice melt and seasonal disruption (Le Teno & Frison, 2021; Maldonado et al., 2014). But tourism is often a double-edged sword with environmental degradation, overwhelmed infrastructures, and loss of culture among the potential negative outcomes (Dodds & Salazar, 2021; Gössling, 2002). Many Arctic communities are poorly prepared or lacking financial resources to cope with major influxes of tourists (Hillmer-Pegram, 2016). This is a particularly pressing issue for indigenous communities in the Arctic where tourism has often been promoted as a panacea for economic challenges (Naylor & Hunt, 2021). Case studies investigating resident perceptions of tourism, while frequently focused on the United States, have often considered tourism in locations of the Lower-48 or Hawai'i but devoted little attention to rural Alaska (Allendorf, 2022; Huh & Vogt, 2008; Sharples, 2014). Studies of tourism have frequently focused on residents' perceptions without fully accounting for the views of tourists themselves (Moreira Gregori et al., 2022; Salee et al., 2022). Recent scholarship has investigated residents' perceptions of tourist image including tourist behavior, stereotypes, and contexts of high cultural distance (Qiu et al., 2023).

### 2.2. Last chance tourism

Scholars have often adopted the Push-Pull Model, Escaping-Seeking framework, or related concepts such as the theory of substitutability in their consideration of last chance tourism (Hindley & Font, 2018; Lemelin et al., 2012). Some scholars have noted the 'cognitive dissonance' that arises in tourist motivations to experience last chance tourism whereby the tourists understand the harm being caused by travel to disappearing locations but still travel to these sites nonetheless (Salim & Ravanel, 2023). Ambassadorship, or the idea that tourists visiting imperiled destinations will return home to promote environmental sustainability, has been promoted by some as a solution to these issues (Abrahams et al., 2022; Denley et al., 2020; Salim et al., 2023). Others question whether tourist motivations for last chance experiences can genuinely translate into ambassadorship or greater environmental awareness (Eijgelaar et al., 2010; Runge et al., 2020). The motivations of tourists engaged in last chance tourism remain under-investigated and additional research is needed (Denley et al., 2020; Lemelin & Whipp, 2019).

While some scholars illustrate awareness and comprehension of tourism impacts among last chance tourists (D'Souza et al., 2023), or an opportunity to develop awareness (Paiva et al., 2023), other studies have focused on the absence of recognition (Lemelin & Whipp, 2019). A particular lack of attention exists in understanding tourist experiences throughout the Arctic region (Lee et al., 2017). It has been suggested that should the worst predictions of climate change come to pass the region will need to consider what Arctic tourism will look like once the last chances to experience disappearing landscapes and species have passed, i.e. the nature of "post-Arctic tourism," and how this would impact tourist perceptions in coming decades (Varnajot & Saarinen, 2021).

Resident perceptions are of equal importance with areas that have been investigated including perceptions of host-guest relations, environmental and economic impacts, and contrasting values (González-García et al., 2022; Tse & Tung, 2022), such as how tourists and

residents place different emphasis on caves and forests in some European national parks (Telbisz et al., 2022). It has been noted that while resident perceptions are well studied, there are significant gaps in the literature including the view residents have of tourists themselves (Moreira Gregori et al., 2022) and how residents view last chance tourism in their communities (González-García et al., 2022; Varnajot & Saarinen, 2021).

### 3. Methods

The qualitative data presented in this paper resulted from unstructured and semi-structured interviews, as well as supplemental archival research. Full anonymity was provided to all interviewees and informed consent was provided prior to interviews. Ethical oversight of this project was provided by San Diego State University through their Institutional Review Board (Protocol #s: HS-2022-0065 & HS-2023-0069).

#### 3.1. Study site

Utqiagvik, known as Barrow until 2016 and still called that by many residents, is the political and cultural heart of the Iñupiat in Alaska (Fig. 1). The Iñupiat are the original inhabitants of this region and today comprise 54 % of Utqiagvik's population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Unlike many Indigenous peoples of the Arctic, the Iñupiat have significant control over oil wealth and whaling remains a central aspect of their culture (Bodenhorn, 1990; Sakakibara, 2020). A variety of marine and terrestrial animals that appeal to tourists are found in the North Slope region including caribou, walrus, and polar bears (Wildlife Management, 2024). In addition to acting as a political hub, Utqiagvik is a central gathering point for Iñupiaq cultural events and the preservation of Iñupiaq culture through institutions like the Iñupiat Heritage Center (North Slope Borough, 2014). Many Iñupiat remain deeply committed to practicing traditional subsistence lifestyles and honoring the Iñupiat Values that bind the community together (URS Corporation, 2005). The annual cycle of preparing for, hunting, and celebrating the bowhead whale harvest remains central to life in Utqiagvik (Miller, 2019). Alongside Deadhorse, Utqiagvik is the only North Slope community to receive commercial air flights greatly increasing its accessibility to visiting tourists. However, tourism is an underdeveloped part of the

region's economy with approx. 3 % of Alaska's tourists visiting the Arctic north (Destination Analysts, 2023).

#### 3.2. Unstructured interviews

Unstructured interviews with 9 tourists and 3 residents were completed in Utqiagvik, Alaska during the summer of 2022 (see supplementary data for interviewee demographics). An unstructured interview offers an exploratory approach to questions with the openness to pursue discussion into unplanned topics (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). Unstructured interviews may precede more structured approaches to provide a foundation for developing interview guides. Tourists and residents were selected through convenience sampling due to knowledge of Utqiagvik or proximity to tourist sites. This data was collected as part of a pilot study in Utqiagvik to establish a new research site and investigate the potential role of last chance tourism. Convenience sampling is a common approach when establishing a new research site due to the limitations of funding and time, as well as the lack of preestablished relationships in the area (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009; Teer-oovengadam & Nunkoo, 2018).

As part of the pilot study, tourists were asked three questions: (1) What drew you to Utqiagvik for tourism? What activities have you participated in?; (2) Was climate change a factor when deciding to visit Utqiagvik? If so, how?; and (3) Was experiencing the local culture and meeting local people a factor when deciding to visit Utqiagvik? If so, how? Residents were asked seven questions: (1) Has tourism in Utqiagvik changed over the last ten years? If so, then how?; (2) Have these changes in the tourism sector impacted daily life in Utqiagvik? If so, then how?; (3) Has tourism brought new economic opportunities for women to Utqiagvik? If so, what?; (4) Have changes in the tourism sector impacted your sense of safety and privacy as a resident, and if so, how?; (5) What impacts of climate change on the North Slope have you noticed, if any?; (6) Has climate change impacted daily life in Utqiagvik? If so, how?; and (7) Is climate change impacting Utqiagvik's tourism activities? If so, then how?

#### 3.3. Semi-structured interviews

Qualitative data collected from the pilot study was used to design interview guides for semi-structured interviews. An interview guide is

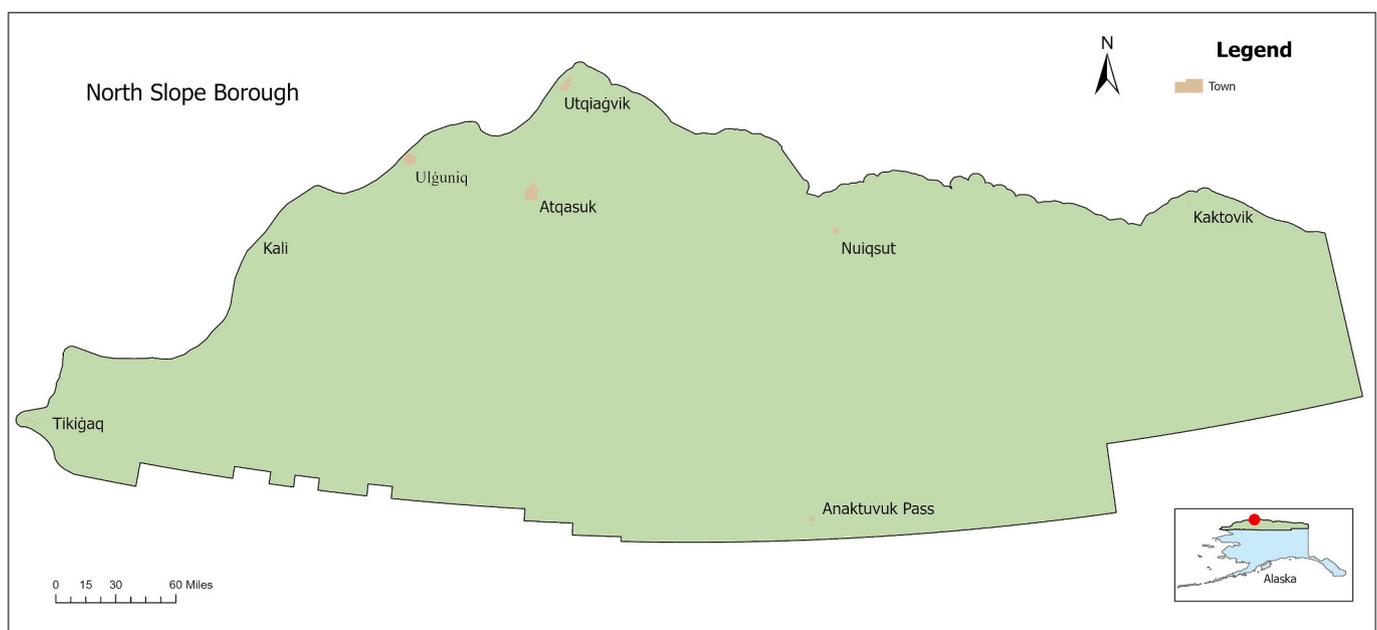


Fig. 1. Site map of the North Slope Borough, Alaska, USA.

used during interviews to produce “reliable, comparable qualitative data” (Bernard, 2018). Semi-structured interviews using the resulting guides were completed with 9 tourists and 26 residents during the spring of 2023, and with 1 additional resident interviewed during the summer of 2024, in Utqiagvik (see supplementary data for full interview guides). The below results focus on the collected data related to last chance tourism and tourist motivations. Tourists continued to be selected through convenience sampling with focus on proximity to both tourist sites and birding hotspots. The latter were identified using a choropleth map of the area generated on the popular bird watching website eBird. Residents were selected using snowball sampling taking contacts established during previous research as the starting point. Both convenience and snowball sampling techniques are useful when dealing with large populations where random sampling is not possible due to study limitations (Etikan et al., 2016).

### 3.4. Qualitative data analysis

All interview data was organized and analyzed using NVivo qualitative analysis software. A common technique used to analyze qualitative data is content analysis (Hay & Cope, 2021; Nunkoo, 2018). Qualitative content analysis involves an initial content analysis of text-based data that codes the text for themes. This is followed by a second, more exhaustive round of coding to reveal previously hidden themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009; Zavattaro, 2019).

Positionality emphasizes not only how a researcher’s background (e.g., gender, race, age, etc.) will impact their perceptions and interactions while conducting research, but also the need to understand a researcher’s motivations in launching a project (Johnson, 2015; Reich, 2021). This may also be understood in terms of whether a researcher is an ‘insider’ or an ‘outsider’ in relation to the participants (Shaw et al., 2020). Understanding positionality is particularly important when studies include Indigenous participants, as even basic concepts such as dialog norms may differ between researcher and participants (Buzinde et al., 2020). The authors sought to identify and better understand their positionality through development of a social identity map (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). Two of our scholars identify as White (Grafton & Quandt) and one as Asian American (Chu), positioning us as ‘outsiders’ in relation to Indigenous stakeholders and the majority population of our study site. Additionally, none of the researchers are residents of the study area. We acknowledge that our ethnic identities and ‘outsider’ status may have shaped the responses of stakeholders.

### 3.5. Archival research

Archival data may provide a temporal perspective as a complement to the contemporary data generated through interviews. For example, archival work and historical theory may serve a ‘political purpose’ in generating questions about our present (Kearns, 2007). Such a temporal lens is salient when considering pressing political issues such as climate change and its impact on society. In addition, it has been noted that archival research is an “under-utilized” method in the tourism literature (Nunkoo, 2018).

Archival work was completed at Tuzzy Consortium Library in Utqiagvik during the summer of 2022 and spring of 2023. Key documents housed at the library included the *North Slope Borough Visitor Profile* (1996), *North Slope Borough Comprehensive Plan* (2005), and *Soaring to the future: Barrow comprehensive plan 2015–2035* (2014). Some of these documents are rare and unavailable in digital form. Extensive notes were taken from these documents, as well as photographs of important figures and graphics. This data provided important temporal context to the data collected through interviews.

## 4. Results

In this study we interviewed 18 tourists and 30 residents in

Utqiagvik, Alaska between 2022 and 2024. Tourists hailed from a wide range of U.S. states and several European nations. Residents were demographically diverse with all major ethnic identities residing in the town represented (Fig. 2). Utilizing archival research, a broader understanding of historic tourist motivations in the North Slope Borough was considered to add temporal perspective into tourist motivations and experiences (Sem & Goff, 1996). Only a handful of other studies have considered tourism in the region with those mostly focused on economic development (Hillmer-Pegram, 2016; Sisneros-Kidd et al., 2019). Our objective was to investigate the prevailing narrative that last chance motivations drive tourists to areas with threatened species and vanishing landscapes. Clearly an important motivator in similar rural locations such as Kaktovik (Alaska) and parts of Canada (Groulx et al., 2016; Miller, 2019), our study reveals the need for a more nuanced understanding of last chance tourism. The results establish several key findings that challenge prevailing narratives of Arctic tourism and demonstrate the need for future research.

### 4.1. Resident perceptions of tourism impacts

Of the 30 residents we interviewed, 67 % viewed tourism as having positive impacts on Utqiagvik. Reported positive impacts focused heavily on economic benefits for the community such as selling arts and crafts to tourists, guiding and other employment opportunities in tourism, and keeping local hotels in business. A significant number of Iñupiaq residents (as well as one Latina resident) described the positive role tourism played in improving Utqiagvik’s place image. As one Iñupiaq resident (R11) said, “it kind of exposes the people to like the real Arctic, not like the TV Arctic.”

Of the 16 Iñupiaq residents we spoke with, 75 % viewed tourism as having positive impacts. This was significantly higher than other ethnic backgrounds that were more evenly divided on the topic. Contributions to the local economy, including of Indigenous corporations such as the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation (ASRC), was a major reason for Iñupiaq positivity. As one Iñupiaq resident (R15) stated, “the ASRC owns Top of the World [Hotel], you know, it helps... with all that money coming in... keeps everything going around here.” Another Iñupiaq resident (R28) added, “It hasn’t really impacted me, um, but... it’s impacted local corporations.”

Not all residents had positive impressions of tourism in Utqiagvik. A number of residents described culture clashes with tourists who lacked understanding of traditional ways of life or behaved in disrespectful fashion. Sharing a story they had heard from a friend, one resident (R11) described how a tourist had recently thrown a tantrum when their tour guide failed to find a polar bear. On a second outing, the guide successfully located a bear only to have the tourist behave as if “he was crossing it off a list” with no apparent enjoyment from the experience. This incident was upsetting to both the guide and interviewee. Safety and privacy concerns were a significant issue for several interviewees. One resident (R1) described how, “two [tourists] came right into my yard and were looking in the window of my house,” echoing other reports of privacy violations in Utqiagvik (Hillmer-Pegram, 2016). One author (Grafton) observed a tourist taking photos of Iñupiaq children playing on the street in front of their home.

While the North Slope Borough administrative unit has traditionally adopted a cautious approach to tourism, noting the threat of cultural conflict and safety concerns (North Slope Borough, 2019; URS Corporation, 2005), the municipality of Utqiagvik has embraced tourism development as a goal for economic growth (North Slope Borough, 2014). Resident perceptions of tourism were more congruent with the former position. Of the 15 residents who shared a position on tourism development, 67 % either wanted tourism to remain at current levels or decrease in the future. Those in favor of less tourism noted culture conflicts with tourists. As one Iñupiaq elder (R17) said, “we’re not a zoo... if you were home and you had different people coming around your neighborhood just to look at your house and see how you live, how

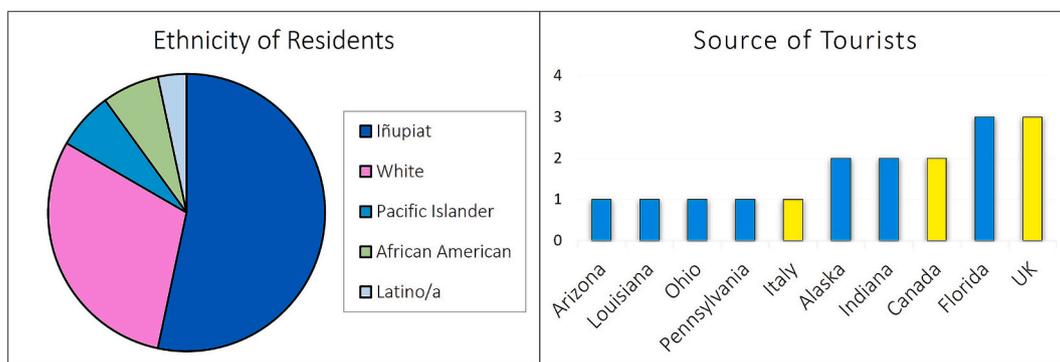


Fig. 2. Ethnicity of residents and source of tourists visiting Utqiagvik, Alaska.

would you feel?” All 5 of the residents supporting tourism growth were of Iñupiaq ancestry.

We asked residents about climate change impacts on local tourism as part of the interview guide resulting from earlier unstructured interviews. Of the 23 residents asked about this, 48 % reported negative effects on the local tourism industry (Fig. 3). Most notably, these residents cited decreasing accessibility to Utqiagvik as a result of canceled flights from increased fog. One resident (R17) described the situation, “We get fog a lot... We’ve got oceans on both sides.” Residents attributed the extra foggy days to climate change, describing how more open water resulting from less sea ice increased moisture in the air. An additional 35 % of residents perceived no impacts on tourism from climate change. One resident (R3) observed how climate change was unlikely to change Utqiagvik’s geographic position, noting that, “We’re still going to be at the very tip of the U.S. unless we go back to Russia, I guess.” Interestingly, of the four interviewees who viewed climate change having a positive role on tourism, all were of Iñupiaq heritage. These residents believed less sea ice would allow for additional cruise ships to visit or that new species of birds arriving in the region would appeal to birders.

#### 4.2. Two stories of tourist motivations

Assumptions made by residents about tourist motivations for travel to Utqiagvik significantly differed from the tourists’ professed motivations. Of the 21 residents who offered reasons for tourists visiting, more than half believed either birding (bird watching) or visiting the northernmost point in the United States were the primary motivators (Fig. 4).

This was followed by viewing wildlife, experiencing Iñupiaq culture, and viewing the northern lights. As one resident (R28) said, “You know, they all come up to see the wildlife, birds, animals.” Residents frequently distinguished between birding and viewing wildlife, which they discussed as distinct activities. Four residents interviewed suggested last-chance tourism as a motivation, such as the resident (R23) who missed that, “probably there’s a lot of number of people worried about excessive change due to climate... [who] would want to come and see it before it all changes before your eyes, you know?”

On the other hand, of the 18 tourists we spoke with, experiencing Iñupiaq culture was the primary reason given for travel to the community (Fig. 4). As one tourist (T9) noted, “I was very interested in the whole community, how they lived, and the people.” Several tourists added that the Iñupiat Heritage Center in town had been an attraction in this regard. Iñupiaq culture was followed by visiting the northernmost point in the United States, experiencing the Arctic, and birding.

Utqiagvik’s accessibility was another significant factor for tourists that failed to garner mention from residents. In a region of Alaska with no road access, Utqiagvik is one of just two towns with commercial air travel available. Being the hub of such an isolated region of the United States had undoubtedly contributed to Utqiagvik’s exotic place image in the minds of tourists we spoke with. As one tourist (T8) described their decision-making process: “Staying somewhere domestic, even, but at the same time you feel like you’re out of the country. I mean when you almost pretty, practically are.”

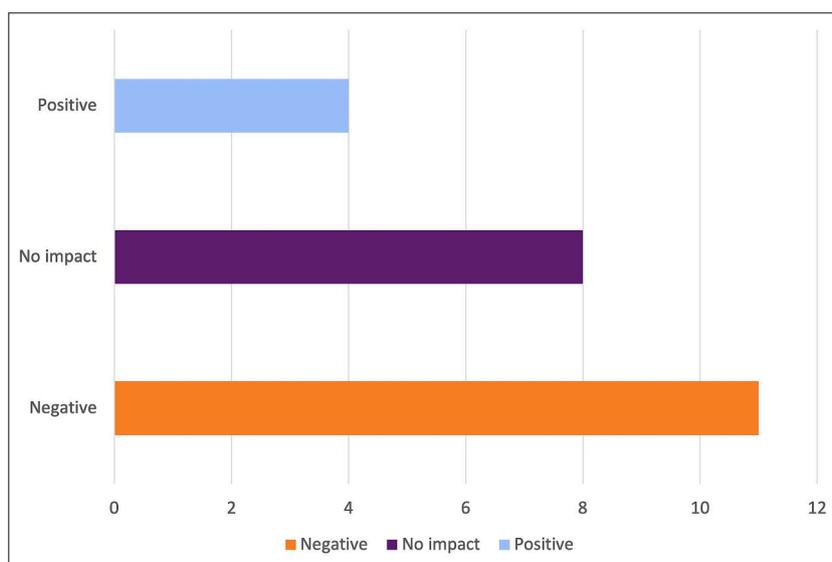


Fig. 3. Resident perceptions of climate change impacts on tourism in Utqiagvik.

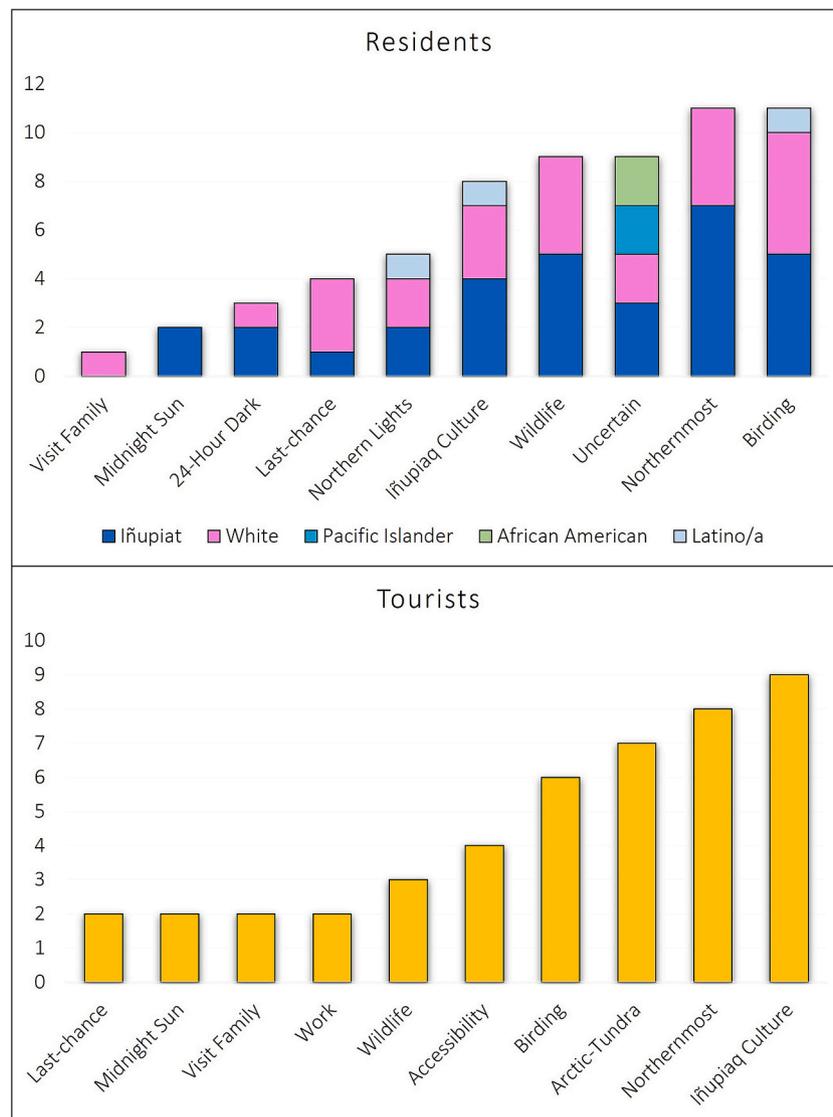


Fig. 4. Resident and tourist perceptions of motivations for visiting Utqiagvik. Resident columns display the ethnicity of respondents.

### 4.3. What last chance tourism?

We found that climate change and last chance viewing opportunities played little role in motivating tourists visiting Utqiagvik. Of the 18 tourists we spoke with, only 11 % reported climate change influencing their decisions to visit the region. Interviewee T17 was explicit about his last chance aims, noting “that you kind of feel like you have to get up here while you still can, before things change too much... change what makes this area so special for wildlife.” Another (T16) added their desire “to see with our eyes ... the differences” resulting from climate change.

Yet, last chance motivations were in a clear minority. Many tourists stated that climate change played no role in their decision-making process when choosing Utqiagvik as their destination. As one tourist (T4) observed, “Not saying that we don’t think it is a factor, but I don’t think it was a factor for our decision to come here.” Another (T13) stated, “No... it’s a personal thing. I’ve been interested in polar regions my whole life.” Others appeared surprised by the question. As one tourist (T9) described climate change when planning for her family’s trip, “yeah, it wasn’t a factor. I don’t remember coming across it really, like in research.”

Importantly, this scarcity of last chance motivations was not the result of deficient awareness of climate change among tourists visiting the region. Tourists we interviewed were unanimous in expressing

strong understanding of climate change issues regardless of age or home location. One younger tourist (T17) recalled spending “a lot of time doing stuff in classes related to that,” a sentiment echoed by several other interviewees. A senior tourist (T13) had a similar starting point describing his lifelong journey studying climate change and ecological threats beginning with a book by the biologist Paul R. Ehrlich in the 1970s. He had remained “painfully aware” of climate change since that introduction and continued to “feel trapped” whenever contributing to greenhouse gas emissions in a significant way. Other tourists described “a lot about it on the news” (T10) or gaining experiential evidence of climate change, such as viewing retreating glaciers elsewhere in Alaska (T16). One tourist (T15) described the opposite effect from last chance tourism: “It gave me hesitations about whether I should fly here, yes.” Our interviewees were not shy about sharing their thoughts on climate change and were clear that it had not positively influenced their travel choices.

## 5. Discussion

For more than a decade there has been a prevailing narrative in scholarly literature that last chance tourism is a key mover of tourists globally (Dawson et al., 2011; Lemelin et al., 2012; Miller, 2019). This narrative has extended into the media both through destination

promotion and journalistic reporting (Ibekwe, 2024; Johnston, 2024; Rellihan, 2024). If this phenomenon is in fact ubiquitous, it is critical to understand given the implied ethical ramifications and potentially destructive act of engaging in last chance tourism (Hindley & Font, 2018; Markowitz & Shariff, 2012). Previous studies have focused on globally recognized destinations with little consideration given to rural areas of lesser media attention (Kucukergin & Gürlek, 2020). Our results challenge this narrative, finding that tourists visiting Utqiagvik did not express last chance motivations. Instead, a wide range of other experiences and activities motivated people to travel to the region. It should be noted that other researchers have found a willingness among tourists to openly confirm last chance reasons for travel, (Salim & Ravanel, 2023; Stewart et al., 2017) leading us to conclude that this was not the result of hidden motivations due to an unwillingness to openly admit to last chance tourism.

Utqiagvik is a classic example of a peripheral destination with an historically marginalized Indigenous population, an economy centered on resource extraction, and low annual tourism (Cheer et al., 2022; Cooper, 2023). The broader North Slope region has long been characterized by a core-periphery relationship with southern Alaska, notably evident during the tundra rebellion (Finegan, 2015; Gladden, 2001). Many marginalized, rural tourism destinations have these peripheral characteristics in common (Hall, 2015). The results of this paper are therefore significant in understanding other peripheral destinations around the planet.

It is possible that the results were shaped by the demographics of tourists interviewed. Previous literature found that tourists motivated by last chance reasons were often international visitors (Salim et al., 2023). In keeping with the literature, 1 of the two tourists who expressed last chance motivations for visiting Utqiagvik had traveled there from Italy. However, of the 18 tourists we spoke with, one-third were international visitors. If last chance motivations were significant for Utqiagvik, it begs the question of why none of the other international visitors cited this as a reason for their travel. As described above, tourists were unanimous in expressing high awareness of climate change as a global issue but did not link this line of thought to their travel destination. The ethnic background of residents may have played a more significant role in shaping perceptions with Inupiaq interviewees being unique in their positive outlook regarding climate change impacts on local tourism, support for tourism growth, and overall view of tourism in the community. These sentiments are consistent with the Inupiat Values found prominently displayed around Utqiagvik that include compassion, respect for nature, humility, and avoidance of conflict among others (North Slope Borough, 2019).

Indigenous communities of the Arctic, frequently unacknowledged, are often negatively stereotyped rather than recognized for their appeal to tourists (Müller & Viken, 2017). Reflecting these attitudes, archival research revealed that the only prior study of tourist motivations in the North Slope Borough did not ask tourists about Inupiaq culture and community in the region (Sem & Goff, 1996). This makes it impossible to know for how long Inupiaq culture has played this role in local tourism. Several studies have noted how tourists perceived the Arctic as isolated “wilderness” resulting in the commodification of local cultures (Holmes et al., 2016; Müller, 2021). Our study suggests a more nuanced understanding among tourists visiting Utqiagvik. With heightened exposure of Inuit culture in recent popular media such as *The Terror* (2018) and *True Detective: Night Country* (2024) it is likely this will remain a primary driver to the region in the near future (Ava, 2024).

Little attention has been paid to how residents perceive tourists visiting their home with most scholarship focused on the economic and environmental impacts of tourism (Moreira Gregori et al., 2022). The existing research exploring how residents view tourists themselves has looked into perceptions of tourists’ economic and environmental impacts, contrasting values, and host-guest relations (González-García et al., 2022; Telbisz et al., 2022; Tse & Tung, 2022) but not tourists’ motivations. Our study did not set out to fill this research gap, but more

than two-thirds of our interviewees offered their opinions on tourists’ motivations for visiting Utqiagvik unsolicited. Comparing residents’ perceptions of motivations to tourists’ own professed reasons for travel was revealing of how these stakeholder groups may misunderstand each other. Destination managers and policy makers should take note to ensure their beliefs about tourist motivations are not based upon incorrect assumptions. Given the importance of residents’ attitudes for sustainable tourism development (Nunkoo et al., 2013), future research is merited.

Experiencing the Arctic was a surprising omission from resident perceptions considering Utqiagvik is the hub of the Arctic region in Alaska and well north of the Arctic Circle. Recent studies have found ongoing “Arctification” taking place in regions such as the European North as the term “Arctic” encroaches on areas previously unaffiliated with the region (Marjavaara et al., 2022). Residents we spoke with did not make strong associations between Utqiagvik and the Arctic. However, tourists often referenced these links. One tourist (T15) noted how they had, “always wanted to come to the Arctic,” with another (T14) describing their desire “to see the high Arctic.”

The community of Utqiagvik appeared divided as to whether tourism was a net positive or negative. This is a common dynamic within Indigenous communities where tourism is an established or developing force (Viken & Müller, 2017; West, 2008). Interestingly, even though a majority of residents viewed tourism positively, only a minority wanted to see tourism growth in the future. This raises concern as to the disconnect between residents and local leaders advocating for more tourism in the city government.

## 6. Conclusion

Last chance tourism is an oft discussed motivation for tourists visiting locations home to disappearing landscapes or species (Denley et al., 2020; Paiva et al., 2023; Salim et al., 2023), but this study has challenged the prevailing narrative by showing how last chance tourism was not a significant motivator for tourists in Utqiagvik. Utqiagvik is a peripheral destination sharing traits with many rural tourist towns found in the circum-Arctic region (Cheer et al., 2022) including the presence of threatened marine mammals, thawing permafrost, and diminishing sea ice. Yet, this study found little evidence of last chance tourism motivating tourists to visit Utqiagvik. Of far greater importance for most tourists was experiencing Inupiaq culture and visiting the northernmost point in the United States.

This study uncovered a disconnect between what residents thought motivated tourists to visit Utqiagvik and the professed motivations tourists’ themselves provided. This indicates a potentially significant misunderstanding in the community about the drivers of tourism with implications for tourism growth and the shaping of destination image. Planners and policy makers in Utqiagvik and the North Slope Borough should consider three key recommendations: (1) how the destination image of Utqiagvik and the North Slope may focus greater attention on Inupiaq culture and the existing opportunities for tourists to respectfully interact and learn from the community; (2) that a majority of residents may not want tourism growth in the community and that plans for tourism development may prove counterproductive; and (3) in light of this, whether developing additional ways for tourists to interact with Inupiaq culture is in the best interests of the community. Future case studies in other parts of the Arctic are called for to establish the prevalence of Indigenous culture as a motivator for tourists visiting the region.

As with any academic undertaking, this study faced limitations. Convenience sampling enabled the authors to interview a significant number of residents and tourists in a relatively short time frame. However, the resulting data may not be representative of the broader populations of those living in and visiting Utqiagvik (D’Souza et al., 2023). This is particularly true in the case of tourists since all interviews were carried out during warm months, often under the Midnight Sun (24-h of

daylight), when a majority of tourists visit the town. As a result, absent from our study are those tourists seeking out the experience of 24-h of darkness or traveling to see the Northern Lights.

There is no question that last chance tourism is motivating people to visit Arctic destinations, but the results of this study call for a more nuanced approach to understanding tourist motivations in such a complex region facing immense environmental change. As those most affected by tourism, it is critical to understand how residents perceive the motivations of the tourists visiting their home. As environmental change accelerates in the Arctic, future studies investigating these topics will be critical to understanding tourism in the northernmost places of the planet.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Daniel Grafton:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Amy Quandt:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Vena Chu:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Methodology, Conceptualization.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annale.2025.100183>.

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