



THE BARENTS WORKING GROUPS  
ANNUAL REPORT 2020

Name of the Working Group: **Joint Working Group on Tourism (JWGT)**

The current Chair and the Chairmanship period: **Hilde Bjørkli, Northern Norway Tourist Board, 2020-2021**

## **1. Priorities of the Chairmanship**

### **Rotation of National Chairmanship**

Norway has taken over the chairmanship in the BEAC in October 2019 and the chairmanship of the JWGT was shifted from the Regional Council of Norrbotten in Sweden (Monica Lejon) to Northern Norway Tourist Board (Hilde Bjørki).

The Barents Euro-Arctic Region, despite of difficulties and travel restrictions introduced in March 2020, has still a great potential to be even more attractive destination for international tourists. Tourism is very important especially in sparsely populated areas, where it is sometimes the only one bringing income.

The attractive but fragile arctic environment, natural phenomena and cultural diversity are the key factors attracting tourists to the Barents region. Sustainability is especially important when facing the challenges caused by the climate change, which is considerably affecting tourism industry.

### **The Mandate of the JWGT for 2018-2021**

The development goals of the mandate are

- stimulating competitiveness of the Barents tourism/visitor sector
- inspiring to innovate more in tourism products, travel concepts and services on offer
- enhancing tourism quality, sustainability, skills and education, and use of digital solutions
- influence to increase better cross border mobility
- increasing sustainable tourism demand by delivering experiences that meet the client's expectations and motivations for travelling.

## **2. Meetings (meetings held, main topics and outcomes of the meetings)**

The Working Group met once in June 2020. The meeting was held online using Teams. In the meeting the JWGT Chair presented how COVID-19 affected tourism sector in Northern Norway. Other members presented the situation with COVID-19 also in Finnish and Russian Barents Regions and measures to support the tourism entrepreneurs, as well as recovery plans for tourism industry. Also, Karelia CBC funded project TourSME between Kainuu and the City of Kostomuksha was presented in the meeting.

The JWGT Chair also took part in the meeting of the WGEC in June with a presentation on the status of the tourism industry in Northern Norway.

## **3. Other activities (projects, events, programmes etc.)**

### **Sustainable Nature Tourism**

All WG members were invited to the webinar on Sustainable Nature Tourism on 25 November, organized by the Working Group on Environment.

## **4. Results of the year (decisions, new initiatives, improvements)**

### **Contributions to the Update of the Action Plan on Climate Change (APCC)**

WGE Chair started the process of updating the APCC, which is expiring in 2020. All WG Chair, including the JWGT Chair were invited to the CSO Meeting on 9 December, the update process was presented in detail. The first kick-off meeting for the WG Chairs will be held in January 2021, followed by several workshops. The aim is to adopt the 3<sup>rd</sup> version of the APCC in the BEAC Ministerial Meeting in Autumn 2021.

### **Tourism Quality and Sustainability Programmes, Labels and Criteria in the Barents Region**

The JWGT has produced during the Swedish Chairmanship two informative “one-pagers” that categorize labels. The brochures are based on the inquiry of tourism quality and sustainability, made by Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, and published on the Barents Cooperation website to be communicated further to customers and companies.

### **E-visas in 2021**

According to this initiative, it is expected that Russia will introduce electronical visas all over its territory, including Russian Barents regions, in February 2021. E-visas will be valid for single-entry travels of up to 16 days. The cost for e-visa is expected to be not more than 50 USD.

## **5. Youth involvement (how has the working group included young people or worked with youth issues during the year)**

Youth representatives have been invited to participate in the traditional Discover Barents Photo Contest in the end of 2020. The contest is organized by the BRC Chair Region Västerbotten.

## **6. Evaluation of the work (What went well, what needs improvement)**

Covid-19 hit hard on the tourism industry in the region in 2020, especially bringing down cross-border tourism compensated with some growth in the numbers of domestic tourism. The scope of the Joint Working Group on Tourism remains to be on the Sustainable Tourism. Organizing webinar on Sustainable Nature Tourism in cooperation and with participation from other WGs is a good model to follow in the future activities.

### **Planned activities for 2021**

- Online Meeting is planned in the end of January aiming at benchmarking experiences in recovery measures during and after pandemic. A follow-up meeting could be arranged preliminarily in June
- One issue for the WG to follow is the plan of Russia to introduce single-entry e-visas from February 2021, as it may have positive impact on the cross-border tourism in the Barents region (including business tourism)
- There is a need to update the Mandate of the JWGT by the end of the year, as it ends in 2021