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# Safety First: Unpacking Key Roles of Arctic Adventure Guides

Barbara Olga Hild
*University of Iceland*, boh19@hi.is

Betty Weiler Professor
*Southern Cross University*, bettyv.weiler@gmail.com

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# Safety First: Unpacking Key Roles of Arctic Adventure Guides

**Barbara Olga Hild**
University of Iceland
boh19@hi.is
**Betty Weiler**
Southern Cross University
bettyv.weiler@gmail.com

Building on past research on tour guides and guiding, this paper provides an in-depth examination of the safety management role of tour guides leading adventure trips. A review of previous literature identifies broad dimensions of tour guiding and, within these dimensions, specific guiding roles mainly in relation to communication. The current study's qualitative examination of experienced Arctic guides, however, illustrates how environmental conditions contribute to near misses and points to safety management as an adventure guide's fundamental role. The findings highlight the need for guide competence and certification and underpin recommendations for research in relation to guide education and practices in remote and extreme environments. Together these can facilitate enhanced tourist safety and high-quality tourist experiences on guided trips.

**Key Words**: tour guide, tourist safety, guide role, adventure tourism, arctic tourism

## Introduction

> *You start with a bag full of luck and an empty bag of experience. The trick is to fill the bag of experience before you empty the bag of luck* (Klimko, 2017:101)

Burgeoning interest in travel and diversification of tour activities on offer in polar regions together bring opportunities for revenue growth but also challenges to the tourism industry. Growth leads to higher demand for specialised and trained guides, who are charged with delivering high-quality experiences in order to sustain both the image of and demand for adventure tours that are exciting but also safe (Røkenes & Mathisen, 2017). This research examines, in particular, the role of risk management played by tourism industry frontline workers, in this case, arctic adventure guides. In our paper we define risk management as the facilitation of tourists' well-being and the prevention of and response to accidents on guided trips. In this paper we use the phrase 'managing risk' interchangeably with 'ensuring tourist safety' and 'risk management role'.

The paper critically reviews existing theories and past research on tour guides and guiding, particularly guides' roles (Curtin, 2010; Løvoll & Einang, 2021; Valkonen *et al*., 2013; Weiler & Black, 2015). While this research is extensive, the review highlights the need for and potential of context-specific studies for extending and deepening theory on the multi-dimensional roles played by the tour guide and, in particular, the role of managing tourists' safety. The current research focuses on the Arctic region as an illustrative example of the imperative of geographic / environmental context in understanding the skills and knowledge needed by guides to ensure tourist safety and manage risks. Given the inherent interconnectedness between human and the environment, especially the impact of the harsh environment on guide's risk management and decision making, this article makes a valuable contribution to the ongoing theoretical discourse on safety aspects of tour guiding.

The study population is adventure tour guides working in the Arctic and employed to manage groups of tourists on tours, typically in harsh, remote areas

including Greenland, Iceland, Northern Scandinavia, and Svalbard (an archipealago between Norway and the North Pole). The daily tasks of these guides vary depending on the spectrum of guided activities, the tour length and the location that together determine a broad range of day trips, multiday trips and expedition-style tours with differing levels of difficulty. Typical examples of guided adventure trips in the Arctic include glacier excursions, snowmobile driving, skiing, dogsledding and boat trips (Saville, 2022; Kaae, 2006; Kotašková, 2022; Varnajot & Saaarinen, 2021). By drawing upon the experiences of guides working in the Arctic region, we aim to examine their role in ensuring tourist safety in an environment that is dynamic and rapidly changeable, is geographically isolated, has limited infrastructure, and poses multiple constraints for performing rescues.

The data on travel to Arctic destinations indicates a growth industry – wild nature is attracting more tourists (Sæþórsdóttir *et al*., 2020; Saville, 2022), resulting in more jobs in the tourism sector – but provides little insight about the tourist's needs and expectations on guided tours, and the role of tour guides in meeting those needs, including their safety management role. The lack of availability of data from tour companies constrains capacity to understand the relationship between tourists' needs, what the industry offers, and tour guiding practices, including the issue of managing risks.

Previous research on polar tourism has identified guides' roles as including visitor behavior management (Mason, 2006), experience co-creation, managing expectations (Heimtun & Lovelock, 2017), environmental protection, and some studies have recognised the importance of tour guides' communication in harsh polar climates (Løvoll & Einang, 2021; Røkenes *et al*., 2015), but none of these studies unpack what these roles entail. A recent study on Icelandic risk management processes interfaced with the tourism sector suggests that

> *'both tourists and tourism employees have a limited understanding of risk and emergency protocols, and that safety of customers and the risk communication needs to be tailored to the needs of tourism sector, including guides* (Matti *et al*., 2022:1).

Research findings by Hanna *et al.* (2019) on the relationship between nature and human performance of those engaged in outdoor adventure tourism activities emphasise the significance of comprehending the vulnerable position of human in the 'battle against the natural environment' (p. 1361). To gain insights into the role of nature and its power, more research is needed on examining the human-nature relationship in outdoor experiences (Hanna *et al*, 2019). Thus, there is a need to drill down into the relationship between the environment and guides' responsibilities *vis-a-vis* ensuring guests' safety on trips (Bird & Gísladóttir, 2020; Matti *et al*., 2022; Andersen, 2022).

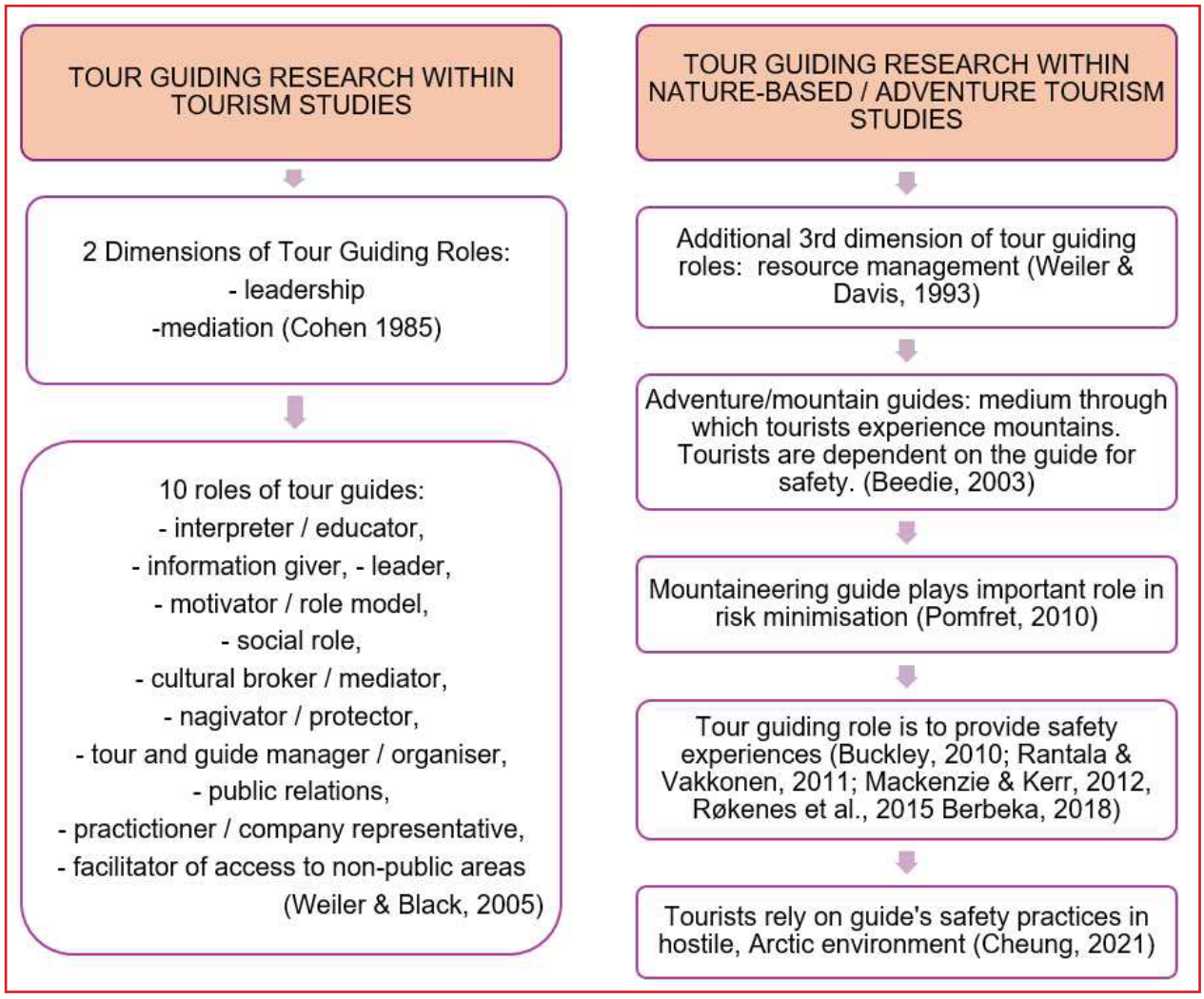
The current research seeks in part to address these knowledge gaps with the following objectives:

1. To examine the impact of the environment on tourist safety in the context of guided adventure trips, specifically the risks and hazards of guiding in the Arctic context.
2. To identify the actions taken by Arctic guides pre-trip and during tours to manage client safety and risk exposure.
3. To identify and explore current and potential mechanisms for enhancing guides' capacity to manage risks and client safety in this context.

## Review of Literature

Our review of research begins with existing theories and frameworks that capture the roles played by tour guides. The aim of this review is to illustrate that, although mentioned in the tourism literature (Wilks & Page, 2003; Aliperti *et al*., 2019; Page & Meyer, 1996), the risk management role of the guide has been largely neglected in research. To place our focus on risk management in context, then, this review begins with how the roles of tour guides have been conceptualised, beginning with the broad dimensions of tour guiding (Cohen, 1985; Weiler &

**Figure 1: Synopsis of Research on Tour Guiding Role Dimensions and Roles**




Davis, 1993), followed by elaboration of specific guide roles that have received the most research attention (Weiler & Black, 2005).

Studies on generic tour guiding have been paralleled by a somewhat distinct body of work on the roles of nature-based and adventure guides (see Figure 1). Together, these bodies of work inform the current paper's focus on the role of the Arctic adventure guide in managing tourist safety.

### *The Role of Managing Safety - as played by tour guides, contextualised in the bigger picture of the various roles that guides play*

Early studies on tour guiding by Cohen (1985) identified two main dimensions of tour guiding: leadership and mediation. Using these two dimensions, Cohen pointed to a number of roles associated with

(i) outer-directed leadership (e.g. navigating, providing physical access),

(ii) inner-directed leadership (e.g. entertaining the group, managing group dynamics),

(iii) outer-directed mediation (e.g. facilitating interaction with locals) and

(iv) inner-directed mediation (e.g. informing, interpreting).

With both dimensions being mainly associated with the communicative roles of guides, this work laid the groundwork for early tour guiding research to focus on communication – being able to direct, inform, entertain, interpret and facilitate interaction with host populations.

Concepts introduced by Cohen were at first mainly theoretical and lacked empirical testing but laid a strong foundation for further research on the guide's roles. Reviewing some twenty years of research, Black and Weiler (2005) identified the ten tour guiding roles most researched as

(1) interpreter/educator
(2) information giver
(3) leader
(4) motivator of conservation values / role model
(5) social role / catalyst
(6) cultural broker / mediator
(7) navigator / protector
(8) tour and group manager / organiser
(9) public relations practitioner / company representative
(10) facilitator of access to non-public areas.

The focus of research at that time and again a decade later (Weiler & Black, 2015) remained on the guide's communicative role, although more recent research shows some evolution in the roles played by guides, in part due to changing tourist profiles and expectations. Weiler & Black (2015) make a case for guides needing to develop new communication skills that involve listening and facilitating rather than just presenting and explaining.

Paralleling this research on the communicative role of guides has been research on the role of nature and adventure guides. First examined by Weiler and Davis (1993), the researchers extended Cohen's two dimensions (leadership and mediation) to include the dimension of resource management, specifically motivating and managing visitors' on-site behavior (Weiler & Davis 1993). This third dimension of managing what tourists do in the natural environment, driven in part by a focus on sustainability, opens up space for elaboration of the safety management role of the guide.

In differentiating between tourist guide and mountain / adventure guide, Beedie (2003) emphasises:

> *the risk on which adventure tourism is based is associated with hostile terrain in which tourist is dependent on the guide for safety, but in a crisis in the isolated location, he or she might have to summon their own resources (learnt from guides) to survive* (157-158).

Guides are now expected to provide both environmentally responsible and safe experiences (Buckley, 2009; Pomfret, 2011; Rantala & Valkonen, 2011; Mackenzie & Raymond, 2020, Røkenes *et al*., 2015; Berbeka, 2018), although limited research has been done to unpack the implications of the safety element of guiding, especially in the context of polar tourism.

In many aspects of their work, guides are placed in an intermediary position between the employer and the tourist (Nieto Pineroba, 1977, in Cohen 1985), and safety is no exception: their performance may at times be a balancing act between meeting the expectations of the employer and the tourist with due regard for the environmental context (Hild, 2023). Røkenes *et al*. (2015) focus ultimately on harnessing the guest-guide interaction, their findings highlight that the process of harnessing interaction needs to be aligned with minimalising guests' exposure to risks. Adventure guides' responsibilities seem to involve leading, mediating, and matching the context and client expectations (Weiler & Black 2015), while also ensuring tourist safety.

Based on the same principle, the Adventure Experience Paradigm introduced by Martin & Priest (1986) asserts that a peak adventure experience can only be achieved by balancing the participant's competence with appropriate risk exposure. The safety management role of guides is also mentioned by Rantala & Valkonen (2011) and Cohen (1985); but the nature and complexity of managing tourist safety has not been widely researched or adequately unpacked (Røkenes *et al*., 2015). This is in part because risk and safety management are highly context-dependent. If the guide's responsibility is to ensure tourist safety, it is crucial to investigate this safeguarding role in specific contexts. Identifying the influences and constraints on an adventure guide's risk and safety management performance

is a key research gap that the present study seeks to fill. A better understanding of this safety management role can underpin initiatives to support and enhance guiding practices through legislation, safety standards and tour guiding program curricula, all of which in turn can ultimately enhance the professionalisation of guiding.

### *Adventure Tour Guiding in the Arctic*

Limited research has examined in detail the guide's safety management role in any context, including the Arctic and the polar regions generally. This paper now turns to a focus on the Arctic context, as an ideal context in which to examine and unpack the safety role of guides.

The various roles of Arctic guides have only been mentioned in a few studies. For example, researchers have noted the importance of trip planning and execution of activities (Karlsen 2022; Andersen & Rolland, 2018), providing an essential link between the tourist and local communities, as well as guides being indispensable figures in the process of regional tourism development (Burdenski, 2018). Studies related to safety matters are either generic or non-existent. The findings from research on risk management on guided trips in Iceland in relation to glacier and volcanic tourism highlight concerns about limited knowledge or lack of systematic strategies implemented by tour operators to prevent tourist injuries when new hazards or hazardous sites are identified (Matti *et al*., 2022; Bird & Gísladóttir, 2020).

Informed by Cohen's concept of the guide's leadership (pathfinder) role and given that the Arctic environment is unknown to most tourists and knowledge is difficult to access (lack of guidebooks, signposts), we argue that the work of a guide in the Arctic region needs to be underpinned by specific skills and knowledge to ensure tourist safety. Some literature has begun to explore the safety element of tour guiding in this context. For example, Furunes and Mykletun (2012:343) highlight that operator and guide competence is one of the crucial factors in reducing accidents. Røkenes and Mathisen (2017) state that a guide's knowledge and skills of real risk are crucial to construct safety adventure activities.

Berbeka (2018) explains that the unlikelihood of external rescue leads to a necessity of tourists to rely on guides, which can be perceived as an attribute of unique Arctic attractions. Cheung (2021:17), in studies on Arctic adventure tour guides highlights the

> *risk associated with the hostile terrain, in which the tourist relies on the guide for safety* ... [a] ... *highly dependent guest-guide relationship*

This points to the need for a skilled guide in managing tourist safety. In research on Arctic adventure guides' competencies, Hild *et al*. (2023) argue that technical, interpersonal, organisational skills together with situational knowledge are key competencies in ensuring tourists' safety on trips.

Overall, 'good guides are key to the success of a tour operator's business' (Berbeka, 2018:411). Given so, our research started by examining the impact of the environment on tourists' safety and explored the relationship between the environment in which guides work and their practices This research contextualises the Arctic as a central element influencing both the creation of the adventure experience and the place of practice (for guides). It investigates how the physical setting imparts significance to the responsibilities of 'Arctic adventure guides' in ensuring tourist safety, outlining previously overlooked safety dimensions within the conceptual model of a tour guide's profession.

## Study Context and Methods

As stated in the introduction, the current research examines the impact of the Arctic environment on tourist safety in the context of guided adventure trips, the actions taken by guides to manage risks and ensure tourist safety, and mechanisms to improve guiding capacity and practice. This section clarifies how concepts and terms are operationalised in the research, presents the study context, and details the study methods.

### *Terms and Concepts: Arctic Tourism and Arctic Safety*

Saarinen & Varnajot (2019) highlight that poor understanding and conceptualisation of Arctic tourism leads to poor policy making. Although they focus on how Arctic tourism phenomena can be framed and re-created, their point of poorly defined concepts is relevant to the current study on guides and tourist safety.

In our research we define Arctic tourism as land-based and cruise tourism activities, covering the following locations: Alaska, the Canadian Arctic, Greenland, Iceland, Northern Scandinavia, Svalbard, and the Russian Arctic. Even though tourism in the Far North Arctic can differ in types of activities (ship cruise tourism vs land-based tourism), they have many elements in common, including geographical features such as extreme weather and isolation, resulting in human capital issues, including lack of trained staff, or even a population large enough to handle the tasks (Maher *et al*., 2014:2).

In spite of the fact that much of the polar tourism literature focuses on rapid tourism growth and the need for more research and infrastructure to regulate the activities in the region, especially in the context of emergency response (Jóhannsdóttir *et al*. 2021; Kruke & Auestad 2021; Maher *et al*., 2014), there are no studies examining issues related to land based tourism and tourist safety in the polar regions. Arctic safety is defined by Albrechtsten and Indreiten (2021) as responding to the operational context of Arctic activities, such as harsh weather, remoteness, limited access to infrastructure and resources, lack of knowledge and experience from activities in the Arctic, and climate change. In this dynamic environment, local and situational knowledge emerges as a crucial element of assessment and decision-making by tour guides (Hild *et al*., 2023). While research has examined safety in the context of cruise ship tourism (Dawson *et al*., 2017; Huijbens, 2022; Jóhannsdóttir *et al*., 2021), a critical difference between operations is that cruise operators are required to follow strict maritime law, while there is a general lack of regulation for organised land-based tourism activities.

Tourist operators in Svalbard, Iceland and Greenland are not required by law to provide educated or experienced guides on trips, thus the saying 'everyone can be a guide until something goes wrong' (Hild *et al*., 2023) exemplifies a longstanding issue and the need to address responsibility over tourists' safety on guided trips. Consequently, this research focuses on guides working with land-based tourism activities, its features, and its challenges with respect to ensuring tourist safety. Hence, our findings add a novel angle to this generally neglected topic in academic literature – tourist risk and safety management in the Arctic.

### *Study Context: The Arctic*

With this study's focus on environment settings as a key determinant of the guide's roles, we use the Arctic environment (see Figure 2) as a lens to examine the concerns related to ensuring tourist safety on guided trips. Svalbard, Greenland and Iceland exhibit various characteristics some of which are found in other adventure tourism destinations. Remoteness, challenging climate and weather, and isolation are common to adventure activities such as mountaineering, diving and whitewater rafting in certain other geographical locations, therefore the current study may be applicable in those. At

**Figure 2: Figure 2: Map of the Arctic**


Source: https://www.beautifulworld.com/north-america/the-Arctic-circle/

the same time, the study location has a unique combination of factors – environmental extremes that are largely unfamiliar to tourists – together with rapidly growing tourism and lack of regulations on tourism operations. In addition, the islands under investigation are sparsely populated, and the rescue services are limited, due to distances and severe weather. Collectively, these create an environment where risk and safety management become an imperative and a priority for guides.

### *Study Methods: Data Collection and Analysis*

Our research data were gathered through in-depth interviews with guides working in Iceland, Svalbard, and Greenland. To obtain study participants, all companies operating in Greenland were contacted, but they were unresponsive to our request for them to invite their guides to participate in the study. As a result, we used convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling method that is often used in exploratory research (Neuman, 2014) on under-researched populations. In doing so, we were attentive to the importance of seeking input from a range of guides with varying backgrounds and levels of expertise. As Cheung *et al*. (2019) suggest the need for more cross-cultural perspectives in polar research to represent various standpoints, we were careful to include guides not only guiding different activities, but also representing various nationalities, levels of education, age and length of guiding experience (see Table 1). The minimum experience to qualify for an interview was considered 6 months of guiding.

By interviewing 15 tour guides based in Iceland, Svalbard and Greenland, working as guides but several also holding a variety of other positions such as guide manager, CEO in the company, company owners and government positions, we gained a diversity of viewpoints on the challenges associated with guiding in the Arctic and the guides' responses to those challenges.

To gain an overview of what responsibilities are associated with the guiding profession, interviewees were asked to reflect on their experiences. The interviews started with questions about entering the

**Table 1: Characteristics of Interviewed Guides**

| | Number of Guides | | Number of Guides |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | | **Guiding activities** | |
| Male | 11 | Hiking | 15 |
| Female | 4 | Glacier guiding | 10 |
| **Guiding Location** | | Dogsledding | 3 |
| | | Boat driving | 4 |
| Iceland | 6 | Boat driving (up to 12 pax) | 2 |
| Svalbard | 5 | Hunting | 2 |
| Greenland | 5 | White water rafting | 2 |
| Guides with cross-location work experience | 6 | Expedition skiing | 1 |
| | | Snowmobile driving | 5 |
| **Education** | | **Years of experience guiding** | |
| Svalbard Guide Training | 5 | 6 months – 1 year | 1 |
| Arctic Nature Guide, UiT | 1 | 1-3 | 2 |
| Boat Course (12 pax) | 4 | 3-5 | 3 |
| Avalanche Training | 8 | 5-10 | 4 |
| Hunting Guide Training | 2 | 10+ | 5 |
| First Aid Training | 15 | | |

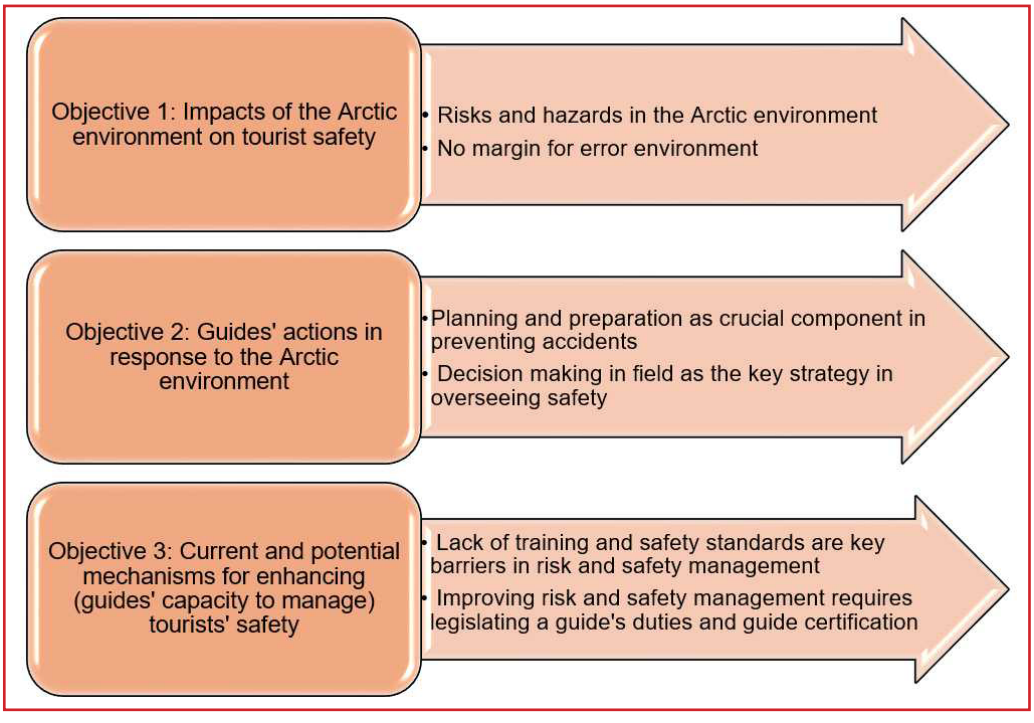
guiding industry, progressing through to topics such as education and training, to finally focus on safety in its broad context.

The interviews were undertaken between December 2020 and April 2022. Guides were invited to participate in the interviews by Facebook Messenger and email, with an outline of the project and signing of a consent form prior to data collection. The interviews with participants in Iceland and some Svalbard guides took place face-to-face, while those in Greenland and most from Svalbard were conducted online. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 2 hours. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed by the first author. To ensure anonymity of the guides, each interviewee was assigned a number.

Atlas.it software was used for coding and analysis. Coding took place in three phases: open coding (Neuman, 2014); axial coding and; assigning of key themes related to the objectives of the study - impact of the environment on safety, guide preparation / actions in response to these environment challenges, and mechanisms to enhance guides' capacity to respond to accidents. The interviews covered aspects including current issues related to Arctic guiding: guiding experiences and training; environmental conditions; accidents; risk mitigation strategies; legal aspects of guiding and; working conditions.

Some of the interview results support themes documented in previous literature. For example, interviewees noted that guides have to juggle multiple roles. Much previous literature has acknowledged that all guides do this, and that responsibility for client safety is one of the many roles of tour guides. Rather than reiterate this theme, the results of the present paper focus on the particular factors and features associated with managing risks and safety in the Arctic environment. Similarly, previous literature – particularly adventure tourism literature – acknowledges that tour guides need to maintain the tourist's perception of risk-taking while at the same time preventing or reducing the chance of injury. While this theme was evident in the results of the present study, we have chosen not to focus on this theme in the present paper. Instead, the results are organised around and focus on emergent themes that have not been examined in depth in previous research. Figure 3 illustrates the three study objectives and the corresponding themes

**Figure 3: Study Objectives and Themes Emerging from Research**



that emerged from the interview data. As shown, collectively the themes address the three study objectives as stated at the end of the introduction:

(1) the impacts associated with guiding in the Arctic environment,

(2) guides' actions to manage risks and tourists' safety, and

(3) current and potential mechanisms for enhancing (guides' capacity to manage) tourist safety.

## Findings

The order in which findings are presented follows the objectives of the study (Figure 3). For each of these three objectives – the impact of environment, guides practices, and current and potential mechanisms for enhancing safety – we report themes that emerged in the data, such as characteristics of the Arctic environment, the importance of planning and decision making undertaken by guides, and strategies that can help enhance safety on guided trips.

## Impacts of the Arctic Environment on Tourist Safety

### *Theme 1: Risks and Hazards Associated with Guiding in the Arctic Environment*

Participants elaborated on the impact of the harsh Arctic environment on their working conditions. Hazards related to the extreme weather conditions, such as cold temperature, high winds and low visibility were recognised as integral part of their work. Quickly changing weather and its severity as well as remoteness make the Arctic stand out in comparison to other guiding locations.

> *Everything is good until one small thing goes wrong and then it goes very, very bad* (Interview 10)

This is related to chain events that specify operations in the Arctic. Poor preparedness, lack of knowledge and skills in maintaining best practice, together with a changing working environment can lead to potential accidents. With limited search and rescue capacities (especially in Greenland) guides have genuine understanding of their workplace:

**Figure 4: Group of Students (to the left) Guiding on Icelandic Glacier**

Photo by Barbara Hild

> *What is the Arctic? It's, cold, wild and the weather changes very fast. So, if you're not prepared just for the change in weather, you can die.* (Interview 3)

Boat trips, including glacier front sightseeing, wildlife watching, traveling between settlements, as well as kayaking or stand-up paddle boarding are among the popular water activities in Svalbard and Greenland. Guides express their readiness in relation to self-reliance, understanding the geographical and infrastructure constraints of guiding in the Arctic. Strong currents, extreme weather events and calving glaciers were mentioned by interviewees as some of the most unpredictable factors; yet they must be expected at any time.

> *Sailing in Greenlandic waters is very special. When you're out there and you're alone, you know you can rely on nobody but yourself. You have to be self-sustained all the time. You need to be able to fix any problems. You need all kinds of safety, equipment and training in order to do it safely.* (Interview 3)

Guides know the risks taken when leading their guests.

> *You know that you're walking on a crevasse.* (Interview 1)

They also understand the uncertainty that is associated with risk assessment and decision making:

> *I was coming back one day, there was a fog and I kind of went a little too close to these huge crevasses. And I stepped into it with one leg and rolled over. And then when I looked down, I couldn't see the bottom. I turned around and I remember seeing the rest of my group. I was the first one on the rope and I just realised that everybody else was standing in that crevasse. I was petrified that we were just going to be sucked in. But I was able to get out and then go back another route. So, you know, it is quite dangerous and not always a hundred percent sure.* (Interview 9)

Even though, some of the challenges might be universal across guiding in the rest of the world, hazards associated with certain types of tourism (such as glacier guiding or skiing) together with factors such as extreme weather events, lack of infrastructure, and limited help from the outside, make for a uniquely risky guiding context. Guides mentioned that the rapidly changeable environment, especially in relation to longer trips and therefore longer exposure to unexpected changes, played the biggest factor in their preparedness approach: the need to be self-sufficient in the remote Arctic environment.

### *Theme 2: There is No Room for Error when Guiding in the Arctic*

Lack of statistics on accidents and near misses in polar adventure tourism makes it difficult to address the challenges related to the harsh environment in which guides operate. The commonly recognised threat by guides was any kind of injury that meant immobility for an individual or a group for extended time, leading to the possibility of hypothermia. While waiting for evacuation can take hours or days, deteriorating weather affects the way guides assess a participant's vulnerabilities in a harsh environment. Even though glacier walks, hiking and snowmobile trips were described as the most exposed to small injuries, the link between an incident becoming an accident was explained:

> *I think broken legs, things like that will be considered life-threatening. Cause you can't move; you will eventually die.* (Interview 13)

Some incidents, such as blisters on a guest's heel due to too small shoes during a Greenland crossing trip that lasted 3.5 weeks, was described as:

> *extremely painful, uncomfortable, leading to possible infection and just pretty bad.* (Interview 8)

While small incidents can have a high impact on a guest's well-being and safety, guides mentioned that a guide's negligence to assess the impact of the environment in relation to the activity can also have severe consequences. Most interviewees mentioned guests not following the guide's instructions as a cause of accidents. The importance of ensuring good

**Figure 5: Snowmobile Guiding on Svalbard**

Photo by Barbara Hild

communication with the guests was stressed by a number of the respondents:

> *I think that the biggest issue is people getting wet, losing people or failing to give proper instructions. One of the things that you can do wrong is giving instructions without making sure that the instructions are understood. And then you'll probably see that. And then you suddenly see there are four guests instead of six on the top of the glacier, in total white out. That means two people on two snowmobiles just perished on that trip and that's not acceptable.* (Interview 3)

Questions about safety responsibilities often led to guides acknowledging their overall responsibility for a guest's wellbeing, while being aware of limitations:

> *guests cannot free themselves from their own responsibilities.* (Interview 10)
>
> *They hire us to lead the trip. We show them how, but they have to do it themselves'* (Interview 5, talking specifically about driving snowmobiles).

This highlights the dilemma which guides face, that there is never an absence of danger when leading trips in the Arctic wilderness.

> *I mean, if you are traveling to Iceland's highest peak, you rope everyone up, the weather is good and then just a crevasse breaks under one of the customers. I mean, you know that you're walking on a crevasse. And you know of the danger and the customer might just twist or break an ankle or something like that, just because his crampon cuts wrong … You have to understand that as soon as you go into adventure guiding or something like that, there's always a risk of accidents.* (Interview 6)

Even though risks associated with certain types of activities in combination with the harsh environment (changing weather and terrain features) were mentioned as difficult to minimise, guides recognise their influence on risk and safety management by their own decisions. While humble regarding their understanding of the extreme environment, they acknowledge the importance of their knowledge and skills to help them in their decision making.

## Guides' Responses to the Arctic Environment to Ensure Tourist Safety

### *Theme 3: Pre-trip Decision-making is Crucial to Managing Risks and Tourist Safety.*

One of the interviewees described guiding as:

> *Sharing a place, a dangerous place where people would not go themselves and you have the skill to bring them safely.* (Interview 8)

This underlines the responsibility that comes from guests when relying on a guide's decisions. To be able to manage risks, guides take preventive and responsive measures by planning the trip, executing the plan, and changing the plan according to ongoing conditions, evaluating both the environment and the condition of the guests. Most of the companies implement measures such as safety introduction talks, signing waivers or limited predetermined route selection to enhance the tourist's safety behavior and their acknowledgment of their own responsibility while participating in the activities that involve risk and potential harm. Despite these procedures, guides act as mediators between guests and companies, both when it comes to meeting their expectations and implementing safety practices. Interviewees mentioned that the entertainment aspects of guiding, including story-telling and knowledge sharing, can always be compromised, while the safety dimension cannot:

> *You can tell the people whatever they want, they will not remember. But safety is number one. Safety for the clients and your own safety.* (Interview 7)

> *It is more important to bring home a healthy, unhappy client versus not to bring home a well-informed client. When we are guiding 50, 60,000 people a year on a glacier, part of course is always luck, but part is also taking your job seriously, and to train guides.* (Interview 11)

The majority of guides openly discussed the challenges of making decisions in unknown conditions and shared the opinion that if the guide doesn't feel safe, he/she shouldn't be pushed to go out. The phenomenon of feeling unsafe was related to deteriorating environmental conditions (weather,

**Figure 6: Safety Training for Adventure Tour Guides on Svalbard**


Photo by Barbara Hild

route, quality of snow, ice, ocean waves) or guests' lack of ability to continue the trip as planned. The decision to cancel a trip is primarily based on the challenging environment and the need for reliance of the group on the guide, rather than solely relying on the guide's own capabilities to assess and manage the risks if he was on his own.

### *Theme 4: Tourist Safety Relies on Guides' Decision-making in the Field*

While the companies sell pre-designed trips, it is often a guide's task to facilitate the trip according to current conditions. Tourists' safety relies on a guide's decisions made in the field. While most procedures are designed to meet the expectation of both the company and the guest, overseeing tourists' safety and wellbeing is the key duty of the guides.

The environmental conditions frequently mentioned by guides are often intertwined with considerations of time and group management. Many accidents reported by guides were primarily attributed to their insufficient knowledge in effectively reading and communicating with their group under time pressure, often in conjunction with challenging environmental factors.

While discussing the near-misses, incidents and accidents that the responders went through in their careers, several interviewees mentioned 'I shouldn't have done that, I wouldn't do it again.'

> *As a glacier guide, you're basically a risk manager and there are certain lines where you shouldn't cross because the risk is higher than let's say, the reward. But that's something you only get with experience. Unfortunately, that's not something that someone can teach you because as a guide, you are thinking for yourself. (Interview 9)*

Asked what competencies are crucial in making safety decisions, interviewees often placed the importance of a guide's technical abilities below situational leadership:

> *What's very important is to never forget at the end of the day the technical abilities are not a very important issue when compared to decision making. It's the decisions you take, they are the most important.* (Interview 8)

One example from an interviewee included taking the decision of not going on a steep slope on a day of avalanche danger, despite the guide's own technical ability to ski the terrain:

> *Because there's a difference: you could be a great mountaineer, but a horrible guide.* (Interview 2)

Understanding guests' eagerness to participate in a thrilling but unsafe experience, together with being able to read guests' expectations and mental and physical ability, was summarised by the same interviewee:

> *I mean, if you can't deal with people, you can't be a guide, but you can still be a great mountaineer.* (Interview 4)

Turning around when the terrain is too difficult, when the guests are getting cold, or the weather turns bad is always a guide's decision based on his / her assessment and experience. The capacity to harness the lessons learned from experience is not calculated in years of guiding, but in an ability to make the right decision in the field:

> *Ten years of guiding doesn't make you a better guide. It just makes you maybe a better talker, you know, the storyteller.* (Interview 1)

One of the interviewees stated that the position of the guide as decision-maker doesn't come with ease, explaining:

> *Safety judgment, it's based on experience, it's not your position as a guide or the owner of the company.* (Interview 15)

This respondent further elaborated on whether the financial loss and the reputation of the company should be taken into consideration by guides when calling off the trip. The guide as the key figure representing a particular company is in difficult position of balancing between fulfilling expectations from the guests and the company they are working for, while simultaneously matching their own

**Figure 7: Guide Looking at the Glacier Front in Svalbard**

Photo by Barbara Hild

knowledge and making decision according to variable conditions. Despite this challenge, their responsibility stands above the company's liability, even if the company decides to hire untrained guides. Reflecting over court cases in adventure tourism, one of the guide and company owners pointed out the burden of consequences in relation to a guide's decision-making in field:

> *If I hire someone that doesn't have the proper training, it is still his responsibility not to do something that he hasn't got the training for. That's the kind of demand that the court system has, you do not guide people in the mountain terrain as a professional getting paid without taking the responsibility. Even though you don't have the full training, you are still responsible for your actions.* (Interview 8)

One of the interviewees illustrated guides' judgment as comparable to the job of a bus driver, as many guiding jobs include transportation where guides drive guests to the location. Even if the road sign allows the driver to speed up, if the road conditions are wet and slippery, and an accident happens, the driver will be charged for not acting according to the conditions. Similarly, a guide's decision-making in the field consists of skills and experience, whether they possess or lack experience and / or training. While lack of recognition of guides' duties and their competence remains unsolved, interviewees recognise the importance and repercussions of decision-making:

> *I mean, getting to the point. A long time ago a message was written down for us on the company wall: our job is not to get the client to the summit; our job is to get the client home.* (Interview 15)

## Current and Potential Mechanisms for Enhancing [guides' capacity to manage] Risks and Tourist Safety

### *Theme 5: Lack of Safety Standards and Training are Key Barriers in Risk Management.*

In better understanding the parallel between the harsh environment and the likelihood of incidents, guides were firm in making a definite link – the more severe the weather (including increasing wind or deteriorating visibility increasing the chance of accidents), the more responsibility on a guide's shoulders. Previously mentioned 'relying on themselves' positions guides as first responders with their knowledge and skills as essential tools in saving tourists' lives in case of accidents. Training and standardisation remain an eagerly discussed topic as a mechanism for enhancing guides' capacity to manage risks in the field.

**Figure 8: Guided Skiing Trip on Svalbard.**
Safety point, it is important to include rifles and signal flares for polar bear safety. On Svalbard it is required to have undertaken rifle training in order to carry a rifle

Photo by Barbara Hild

The prevalent issue mentioned in interviews was the link between lack of certification and various safety practices, but also the lack of standardised training available to the guides. While certification such as the *International Mountain Guides* are recognised across climbing, mountaineering, and skiing professions, working as guide in the Arctic requires versatile knowledge and skills, often hard to combine in one training program that would fit all. Guides highlighted the need for standardised training, allowing guides to share knowledge and practices between companies.

The paradox of unrecognised training standards leads to the practice of assessing the previous experience of the guides in the hiring process. This was mentioned as time-consuming and problematic with regard to its validity, where the employers need to rely on a guide's resume and description of previous experience rather than standardised assessment done by experts in the field. As the industry has remained unregulated for a long time, the guiding community consists of guides with extensive experience, as well as freshly educated guides just starting their career and building their experience base.

> *In Greenland we don't need anything to buy a weapon, because most Greenlanders grow up hunting, it's in our culture, we've learned it since we were children. We know how to drive boats because everybody is sailing in Greenland and everybody is hunting and fishing, so why would we need any license for it, it's part of our own culture. The thing is that in modern Greenland there are many young people who are not part of this hunting and fishing society. For the people who grew up with it, it would be easy to pass the exam, but for the people who haven't done it before, they need to learn it first.* (Interview 8)

A few interviewees mentioned the importance of keeping their skills current and their knowledge up-to-date, suggesting that this should be regularly assessed by third parties. Most cited minimum requirements, including first aid, navigation, or group management as necessary conditions to entering the guiding industry. While a situation where 'anyone who can hold a gun can guide in Svalbard' was not unheard of, education enriched by experience was specified as the most pivotal for a guide's risk management practices. Most interviewees used examples of various strategies including self-education in areas such as

- making a logbook and writing the weather patterns to learn what to expect;
- attending avalanche courses and training;
- learning how to read the guests;

The respondents wish to be taken seriously and recognised as professionals in their occupation. Even though known fatalities related to guided trips appear to be very low, guides mentioned their surprise in that regard. Guides from Iceland represented two discourses on that matter: the low number of accidents was explained by good practices in the companies (mentioned by the owners of the companies), vs a combination of general luck (described by one of the interviewee guides as disappointing):

Researcher: *Are you surprised by the small number of accidents?*

Interviewee 9 (glacier guide): *A little bit. ... that's maybe a harsh thing to say, because of the amount of untrained guides that have been able to walk through this terrain and then just walk back. No problem. It's very easy. So that puts experienced guides and all the training that we have done, all the investments, in kind of nothing.*

All guides expressed their concern regarding the growing tourism in the Arctic and the growing trend of an unskilled workforce entering the industry:

> *I think, we need to see how the concerns are developing about land tourists. I guess we need to see some accidents unfortunately before that is really a concern.* (Interview 14, Guide from Greenland)

### *Theme 6: Improving Safety Management Requires Legislating a Guide's Duties and Guide Certification*

The interviewees expressed their interest in the recent movement of the guiding community towards certification with a hope to establish sound risk management at work, as well as increase the quality of guiding. The need for certification is often associated with tourism expansion periods, when meeting the demand for specialised/certified guides is challenging for the companies:

> *It was just that anyone who could hold up a paddle well, got work. I was just getting phone calls when they had big groups, and I realised quite quickly that not a single guide or safety kayaker in that group even had first aid training, none. There's something seriously wrong here, but that was just how it was in those days.* (Interview 1)

Such practices were seen in the glacier guiding industry at its recent peak, 2016, in Iceland, where the standards for guides entering the industry were lowered to fulfill the demand for guides. Those practices were not unusual in the Svalbard community, but the cause of lack of standards for them was mainly due to the high turnover in the guiding community in general.

The anticipated growth of tourist activities in Greenland in the coming years, a country with limited rescue capabilities, places local and situational knowledge as crucial in managing risks and tourist safety, directly affecting the destination image , setting high expectations for guides. Discussing safety standards, a guide from Svalbard mentioned slow change in recognising safety awareness as an important step, both for guides and companies:

> *Even over the 20 years that I've been here, there's nothing new - maybe the geography, the scale, sea ice, climate changes, more avalanches. There has been also a kind of direction into more risk assessment at every (guided) site by the companies. And before this was like, well, I always drive Todalen, because it was never going to be an avalanche danger there. And suddenly there is a large danger. So I think there's been a*

**Figure 9: Unregulated Tourism in Iceland.**
Self-called volcano guide industry emerged after the recent volcano eruption in 2021. Search and Rescue member at back.

Photo by Barbara Hild

> *direction also towards more precautions. It's more dangerous having the responsibility to be a guide.* (Interview 12)

Even though most interviewee guides see certification as obligatory, they often emphasised that ensuring tourist safety is not about the certificates itself, but a guide's competence. All interviewee guides advocated for establishing guiding as a regulated profession, with equal importance for recognition of training and experience from the field. Until now, safety thinking has been present across the companies, best practice is being used as the approach for field operations. However, increased traffic in the region and the increased likelihood of accidents appears to be awakening the industry to lay foundations for the standardisation of safety practices. Interviewee guides commonly expressed their frustration, pointing to the government lacking the understanding of what is happening on the ground and the hesitancy to implement changes including the guide's voice into the discussion on developing certification.

At the same time, interviewee guides understand the complexity of the task, that establishing certification is not without pitfalls:

> *The problem of certification includes many challenges: who should certify, who should be certified and what should be included into certificate schemes.* (Interview 12)

Common suggestion by responders was for respective governments to introduce operating standards to

prevent the situation where third-party organisations create standards, education or certificates that favor only some, but not all operators. It was questionable who should be involved in the certification creation, as most local stakeholders in the Arctic have close ties with decision-makers, due to size of the communities. Yet, it is important that the policy-making process includes guides' knowledge and opinions, as they are the experts with experience on guiding in the terrain and facing safety issues. While discussion about guiding standards remains inconclusive and the guiding profession remains unregulated, interviewee guides expressed their concerns regarding the Arctic tourist's safety paradox:

> *Tourist safety it's a huge concern of mine because we don't want Greenland to have a bad reputation as being a place where you die. You need to come here and experience the wilderness and have the feeling of almost dying. But you're not allowed to get even close to the dying.* (Interview 13)

While those speaking on behalf of companies appeared more optimistic about the standards and the progress of improving their operational safety within their organisations, interviewee guides with a background of guiding for many companies were less optimistic about the actual status in the field. They often felt reluctance towards the approach of raising safety standards from the decision-makers, not only from the companies, but also at the governmental level:

> *So, as far as it's not a law, the companies won't be willing to invest into better guides or better training.* (Interview 8)

## Discussion

This study has drawn on previously established literature in the field of tour guiding, while exploring existing practices, with an aim to fully understand the complexity of guiding roles. Our research does not reject existing literature discourse - the study focus was to advance prior research by examining current practices particularly in the Arctic tourism context. By doing so, our study acknowledges and supports roles established by Cohen (1985), Weiler & Davis (1993), Weiler & Black (2005), Røkenes (2015), Rantala & Valkonen (2011), Buckley (2009), and Cheung (2021), while highlighting and deep-diving into the critical role of Arctic guides as safety managers. Using the study's three objectives as a structure, the following discussion links the current study findings to the literature.

### *Impacts of the Arctic Environment on Tourist Safety*

Guides working in the Arctic described the impact of the harsh environment as key in their safeguarding role, which corresponds with Furunes & Mykletun (2012) research on guides' roles. This indicates that the activity itself is not always difficult, but clients rely on guides' expertise to find their way through the glacial landscape or mountain terrain. By focusing on the context of Arctic guiding, we explored how a particular environment affects guides' practice in the field. The impact of extreme weather conditions and isolation while in the field corresponds to limited ability for external support, positioning guides to play the key role in accident prevention and response. Similar patterns can be found in research on mountain guides, where exposure to the elements and isolation demands a high level of self-sufficiency at work (Beedie, 2003; Berbeka, 2018). Findings from the current study suggest that both guides and guiding companies are aware of this, yet research concludes that the lack of formal recognition of their role can negatively impact on tourist safety.

### *Guides' Responses to the Arctic Environment to Ensure Tourist Safety*

Analysis of interviewee responses indicates their awareness of the leadership role that they have on trips and guides' acceptance of responsibility for guest safety during trips. Understanding and taking responsibility was evidenced in both a proactive approach that includes pre-trip training, planning and preparation as a preventive strategy in mitigating accidents, as well as taking responsibility for decision-making once in the field.

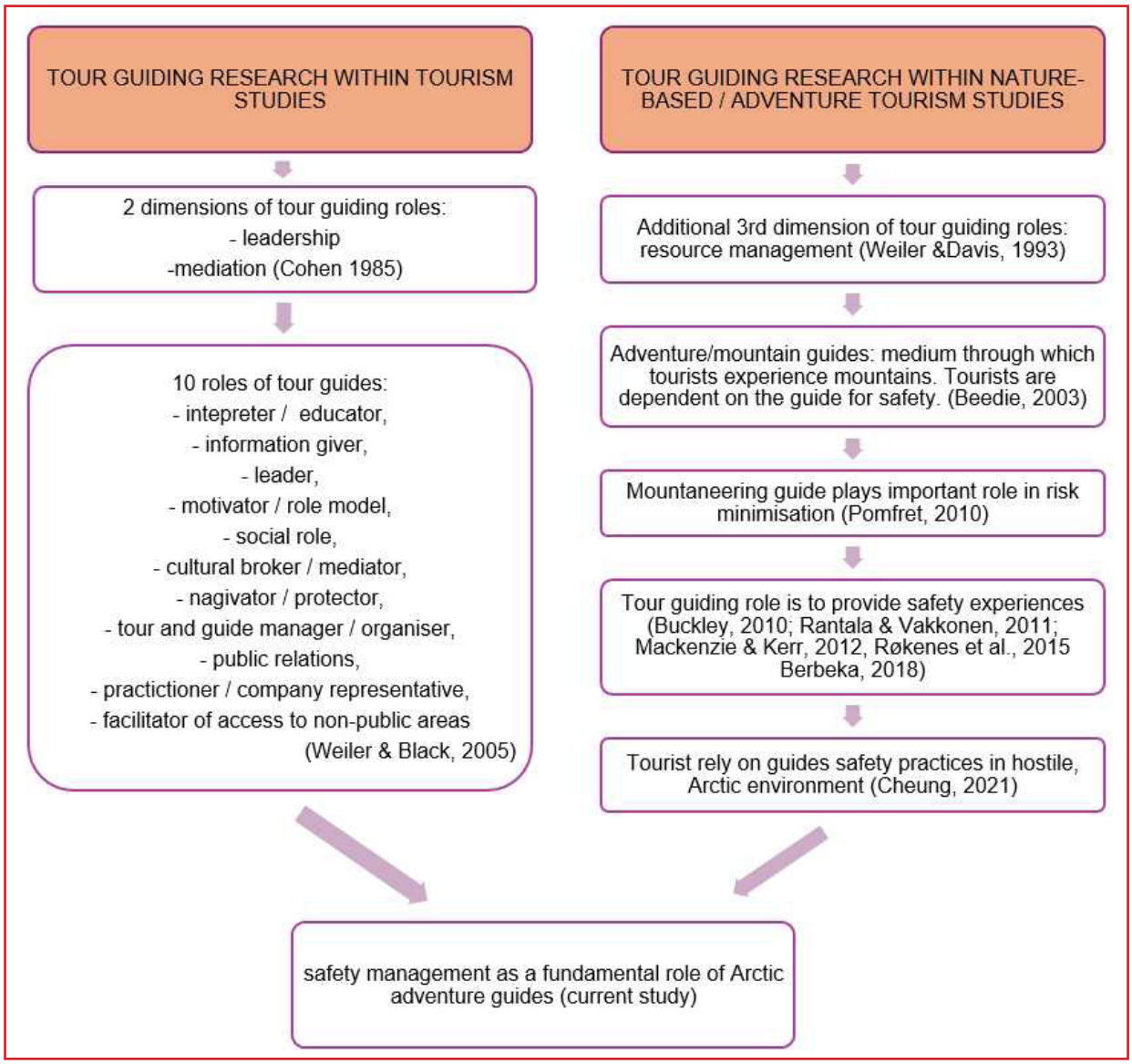
Many guides mentioned that even though not all accidents on adventure trips can be avoided, a guide is expected to act as a mediator between environmental hazards and tourists, to prevent accidents from happening. Interviewees described this mediating role between the physical environment and expectations from companies and clients as a guide's leadership role. The difficulty of leadership has been mentioned in other research, where a difficult part of a guide's job is

> *to work with proximity to their clients, in unpredictable natural environments ... adventure tour leaders will typically make friends with clients.* (Mackenzie & Raymond, 2020:2)

This puts pressure on guides to balance between the role of trip choreographer and risk managers just to name few.

A guide's knowledge and leadership skills can be tools in reinforcing safe behavior and reducing possibilities of injuries on trips, which is consistent with Bentley *et al.*'s (2010) conceptual model of operator's perception of risk factors for adventure tourism accidents. According to this model, the interaction between two or more factors (here:

**Figure 10: Guiding Roles Research Review**
**(Revised version of Figure 1 - including Guides' Safety Management Role**



Arctic safety factors and / or a guide's competence / practice, and / or legislation of duties / safety standards) is the most important aspect, as the presence of any single factor alone is insufficient to produce an accident risk.

Failing to give appropriate instructions, keeping control of the group, and making decisions summarise the guides' awareness of the impact of the harsh Arctic environment, where consequences of inadequate planning or poor decision making can be critical for tourists' safety.

### *Current and Potential Mechanisms for Enhancing (guides capacity to manage) Risks and Tourist Safety*

With increased concern on tourist safety and higher demand on guided services, more specialised knowledge is needed to facilitate guests' experiences, but to do so, the guide's expertise needs to be valued, i.e. acknowledged and required (for instance in hiring processes).

These findings are consistent with the literature indicating that specific elements of the environment (such as weather, remoteness), even in other geographical locations, possess common threads in influencing tourist safety (Becken & Wilson, 2013; Jeuring & Becken, 2013; Matti *et al*. 2022). The pending issue remains the lack of mutual dialog on recognition of competence among the guides and decision-makers in the industry.

Even though the guides commonly agreed on the concept of certification and standardisation in the guiding profession as a form of legal necessity implemented from the government in one way or another, they expressed concern about the complexity of such a task: who, how, what and by whom guiding legislation would be initiated and implemented. Finally, the guides reecognise their responsibility for tourist safety because they consider themselves competent and professional in sharing the challenging environment with guests visiting the Arctic. This corresponds with research on mountain guides where the responsibility encompasses ensuring the well-being of clients and dealing with issues of safety resulting from physical dangers associate with the wild terrain (Beedie, 2003). Hence, guides strive to be recognised as competent knowledge sources on contributing to tourism development strategies, including guide certification and standardisation of procedures.

The results from our studies complement and extend the existing research in the field of tour guiding and, in particular, tourist safety and the guide's role. We conclude that tour guiding involves overlapping roles, namely tourist behavior management, storytelling, path finding, and experience creation, while facilitation of the above can only happen if a guest's safety is managed (see Figure 10).

## Conclusions

This paper adds to our understanding of a neglected area in both tour guiding research and adventure tourism research: tourist safety on guided trips with a focus on the Arctic region. Adventure guides working in Arctic regions are directly impacted by the challenging environment, hence their knowledge and skills need to be recognised as essential in ensuring tourist safety. According to the guides participating in the research, the nature of the guide's job lies between maintenance of tourist perceptions of risk-taking while minimising the impact of the hard and dynamic environment they are seeking to explore and experience. Adventure tour guides maneuver between various roles, but the primary one is to manage risks and ensure tourist safety. By giving recognition to a guide's knowledge and responsibility on guided trips, we highlight guides' importance and the need for giving them equal status in further discussions of planning strategies, standards establishment, training recognition, as well as potential law enforcement in tourism policies in the Arctic.

While adventure tourism is constantly discussed in terms of risk mitigation, our study reveals that the recognition of adventure guides' role and establishment of career paths for guides can impact on improvements in safety standards, increasing

tourists' safety, as well lead to improved quality of guiding. In the research we examined adventure tour guides in the Arctic, where the impact of the environment is crucial in defining a guide's responsibilities, hence, similar issues can be found in other adventure guiding activities where the harsh environment has impact on tourists' vulnerability to hazards.

Even though the Arctic environment makes some of our study findings about a guide's work and their responsibilities less generalisable, our study rationale, methods and many of the findings are highly relevant to guides working in other remote areas. The commonalities of being a remote island with limited resources, affected by extreme weather events, make our findings applicable to other places facing similar issues in other geographical regions, such as Antarctica and other remote locations.

With the aim to address the neglected dimension of safety in guiding literature, our research demonstrates the need to recognise and further deconstruct the safety management role of guides in other contexts. By using an exploratory approach, we attempt to explain different parts of the tour guiding profession, while strengthening the dialog between guides and industry, including the educational sector, policymakers and researchers.

Using the previously mentioned model by Bentley *et al*. (2010) where any single factor alone is insufficient to produce an accident risk, further research should aim to address the relationship between two or more stakeholders as essential in enhancing strategies for managing tourists' safety in the Arctic. Those challenges should be addressed both locally and across the region. We advocate involvement of stakeholders, such as training providers, tour operators, emergency preparedness and government representatives in research seeking to address similar objectives, especially considering the context of growing tourism and destination marketing strategies. Using other qualitative methods, such as focus groups, follow up studies could advance our findings addressing objective 3, mapping current mechanisms for enhancing (guides' capacity to manage) tourist safety. Knowledge exchange between various stakeholders is crucial in exploring possibilities for collaboration, involvement and integration of advancing research on tourists' safety in the Arctic.

Arctic safety is a multi-dimensional issue, multifaceted and interdisciplinary in nature, requiring comprehensive and integrative methodologies. Exploring the safety role of guides from the perspective of Arctic visitors could advance our research findings and provide better understanding of the relationship between the guides' practice and tourists' expectations.

Future research may seek to explore how guides ensure safety out in the field by using mixed method design (participant observation, surveys) to supplement our research findings. We encourage researchers to explore guiding practices in other remote locations, to address the need for recognition of guiding as a specialised occupation where specific knowledge and skills are essential in ensuring tourist safety. Finally, there is a need to explore how safety competence is developed and evaluated in guide training programs to enhance safety knowledge creation and to share best practices.

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