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Social Relationships within Ecotourism Cooperation

Case of the ARK56 Network



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Term: VT23
Subject: Tourism Studies, Master
Thesis
Level: Advanced
Course code: 5TR40E*



Abstract

The inclusion of ecotourism into biosphere reserves to enhance sustainable development has increased the importance of tourism stakeholders' relationships. Therefore, this research aims to explore how the quality of social relationships among tourism stakeholders affects ecotourism cooperation in the Blekinge Archipelago biosphere reserve. This is accomplished by using social capital as a theoretical lens for conceptualizing relationships between ecotourism stakeholders. A qualitative case study of the ARK56 network has been conducted, incorporating 8 in-depth interviews with ecotourism operators in the Blekinge Archipelago biosphere reserve. The results indicated that the regional network ARK56 is essential for tourism operators since it provides a broad network of contacts and encourages cooperation among the members. It is argued that a good working relationship based on trust and reciprocity facilitates efficient cooperation within the ARK56 network and that a balance between bridging and bonding social capital was identified which contributes to successful cooperation.

Keywords

Social Capital, Cooperation, Ecotourism, Blekinge Archipelago, Biosphere Reserves



Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Marianna Strzelecka for all the valuable feedback you have provided and for guiding me in the right direction. This paper would not have been possible without your assistance and dedication throughout the entire process.

I would also like to express my appreciation to all participants for their time and willingness to share their experiences. Their contributions were crucial to the success of this thesis.

Additionally, I am grateful to Blekinge Arkipelag for allowing me to conduct my research and for all the resources and support I needed.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends for their encouragement and motivation throughout the process.



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1 Introduction

In 1971 UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) launched its Man and the Biosphere Program (MAB), which introduced the concept of biosphere reserves (Hoppstadius & Dahlstrom, 2015; Coetzer et al., 2014). To resolve the conservation and resource management problem MAB initially addressed three core themes including “conservation of genetic resources and biodiversity, international research and monitoring, and ecologically sustainable development” (Coetzer et al., 2014, p.83). Later, these functions were interpreted as conservation, logistics, and development functions, and biosphere reserves were created to achieve these utilities (Coetzer et al., 2014; Elbakidze et al., 2013). UNESCO designated biosphere reserves to facilitate international collaboration, allowing environmental problems and issues to be managed more effectively globally. All the established biosphere reserves may be considered experimental sites for sustainable development (Ishwaran & Persic, 2008).

In addition to bringing economic and social benefits to local people, biosphere reserves are valuable examples of sustainable development tied to conservation in their wider geographical region (Ishwaran & Persic, 2008). In essence, they serve as a model of creating sustainable relationships between man and nature, MAB together with biosphere reserves is recognized as an essential means to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2021, A; naturvardsverket, n.d.).

The increased biosphere reserves around the world are an indication of the program's value, and that it is a viable model for conservation and sustainable natural resource management (Cuong et al., 2017). Since this concept of biosphere reserves was first introduced, global awareness regarding



sustainable development has improved, and more reserves across the globe have been established (Ishwaran & Persic, 2008). In total, there are 738 designated biosphere reserves in 134 different countries (UNESCO, 2021, B), and nine of those biosphere reserves are found in Sweden (naturvardsverket, n.d.). Along with the development of sustainable development goals, social aspects have become more prominent, including education and community engagement (Reed & Massie, 2013). Since the emergence of The Seville Strategy in 1996, biosphere reserves began to function as platforms for exchange and experimentation and to integrate ecosystems and society as well. As a result of this occurrence, diverse stakeholders began to cooperate actively to achieve common goals, and dialogue and effective communication was implemented beyond national borders (Bouamrane et al., 2016).

A key component of the effort to enhance sustainability is the integration of tourism in biosphere reserves (Hoppstadius, 2019). A common type of tourism associated with biosphere reserves is ecotourism, with its central objective to provide local communities with opportunities that contribute to nature preservation and the well-being of the people (Hearne & Santos, 2005; Hoppstadius & Dahlstrom, 2015; Hoppstadius & Sandell, 2018). Ecotourism fosters nature preservation, education, and community engagement (Hoppstadius & Sandell, 2018), which all align with the goals of biosphere reserves.

Ecotourism relies on a variety of stakeholders (Fyall & Garrod, 2019), whose roles are crucial to ensure the sustainability of tourism within biosphere reserves (Bryd, 2007; Wegner et al., 2010). The regional, national, and local context of a biosphere reserve can play an important role in the implementation of ecotourism since sustainable development means different things to different groups of stakeholders (Hoppstadius & Sandell, 2018). Since ecotourism cooperation is an integral part of the study, it is essential to



investigate how tourism stakeholders perceive tourism and sustainable development in the biosphere reserve.

Cooperation is perceived to be central to sustainable tourism (Wegner et al., 2010; Baggio, 2011) because it enables crossing organizational boundaries and forming partnerships. Thanks to cooperation, stakeholders can deal with issues more holistically and comprehensively, and it enables management to gain support and bring operational benefits (Wegner et al., 2010). Moreover, cooperation is defined as a process of interaction between independent stakeholder groups in tourism. As part of the cooperation, stakeholders agree on norms, rules, and structures to address tourism-related regional development issues (Czernek, 2013). It is in this context that the notion of social capital becomes important. Social capital is generated from the relationships between individuals and in a cooperative and represents the capability of individuals to cooperate toward common goals (Rodriguez-Giron & Vanneste, 2019). Researchers have been interested in social capital because it promotes social trust. Trust between residents, institutions, and authorities is thus a crucial factor in developing sustainable tourism services (Nugroho et al., 2021). Hence, the notion of social capital is a useful lens to understand the significance of cooperation among ecotourism stakeholders within biosphere reserves and the role of trust in it.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Cooperation in Ecotourism

Cooperation is one of the foundations of successful ecotourism development (Baggio, 2011; Graci, 2013; Albrecht (2013). Literature suggests that for ecotourism to be effective it requires involvement from a variety of stakeholders that cooperates (Karnel, 2005). Ecotourism is the core economic activity for many of the world's designated biosphere reserves, which also raises awareness of the need to preserve nature and promote sustainable



development (Obradovic et al., 2021). In a few cases, ecotourism was even used as a justification to designate new biosphere reserves as part of a strategy to create jobs and protect the environment (Obradovic et al., 2021). Nevertheless, ecotourism must be developed in cooperation with residents, travel operators, and government officials (Obradovic et al., 2021) since cooperation is perceived as an important process for achieving sustainable tourism (Wegner et al. 2010). With the increased participation of stakeholders, it will likely enhance dialogue and cooperation in the planning and management of the biosphere reserve as well (Jaafar et al., 2021).

Cooperation can be a significant contributor to the development of more sustainable forms of tourism by creating social capital (Hall, 1999; Karnel, 2005; Graci, 2013). Social capital is regarded as one of the key factors of sustainable tourism (Wegner et al. 2010), for which cooperation is one of the foundational components. Social capital results from the actions and interactions among stakeholders, and the cooperation between them (Wegner et al. 2010). In a true partnership between tourism operators and local communities, cooperative efforts foster social capital, allowing for sustainable tourism to develop (Karnel, 2005; Graci, 2013). Two distinct aspects of social capital have been discussed in tourism development (Moscardo et al., 2017). One aspect of the discussion is how tourism operators and tourism development can make use of existing social capital in their destination. The other aspect discusses the impact of tourism on social capital, both positively and negatively. It has even been acknowledged that tourism organizations can increase social capital in conditions where there is equitable and diverse participation of community sectors, strong governance, motivation, and interest to generate local benefits through tourism (Moscardo et al., 2017).



1.1.2 Social Capital

For Putnam (1993, p. 2), social capital refers to “features of social organization, such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit”. It is also important to emphasize reciprocity, exchange, and connectivity in ecotourism cooperation (Garcia-Amado et al., 2012), and how ecotourism develops is increasingly influenced by social capital (McGehee et al., 2010; Musavengane & Matikiti, 2015). There are two forms of social capital: bridging and bonding social capital. These can be found within and outside a destination (Putnam, 1993). Bonding social capital refers to strong internal relationships such as among friends, family, and colleagues. Within a community bonding social capital enables cooperation and collective action. In contrast, bridging social capital entails maintaining an external social bond with members from other communities with similar socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds (Putnam, 1993; McGehee et al., 2010). By connecting local networks and groups outside the destination, tourism organizations contribute to bridging social capital. Through the development of public spaces that allow residents to interact and tourism experiences to take place, bonding social capital is enhanced (Moscardo et al., 2017). Ooi (2014) claims that bonding social capital comprises internal features within a group such as trust and reciprocity. Bridging social capital is characterized by open and inclusive networks that promote generalized reciprocity and a broader feeling of social identity. These forms of social capital have been recognized as essential components in the strategic planning of tourism destinations. These need to be balanced to prevent the residents of a community from becoming narrow-minded. Hence, social capital plays a significant role in the strategic planning of ecotourism since it considers stakeholders' views and their multilayered beliefs (Soulard et al., 2018).



1.1.3 Forms of Social Capital

Bridging and bonding social capital embrace three significant features, trust, reciprocity, and cooperation (Soulard et al., 2018), and these play a critical role in the development process (McGehee et al., 2010). When these features are strong within a community, opportunities for economic and community development, including tourism, can be taken advantage of (Soulard et al., 2018). Generally, trust is perceived as an underlying condition of social capital, and it is usually generated from regular activities such as positive cooperation, meetings of obligations, maintenance of support, mutual interdependency, and the willingness to be respectful to all parties. Trust and reciprocity between stakeholders involved in tourism development lubricates the cooperative aspect of social capital since everyone involved is confided in themselves, and has confidence in the cooperative (Moscardo et al., 2017; McGehee et al., 2010). The presence of these aspects in a community with high social capital will enhance its economic growth and capacity (McGehee et al., 2010), people are also willing to participate in collective activities, since they know others will do the same (Pretty, 2003). Communities with weak social capital will likely reduce the possibility of increasing these opportunities for the community (McGehee et al., 2010). Social capital is additionally comprised of networks, relationships, norms, and values shared by individuals, as well as social values (Moscardo et al., 2017).

Constant investment and cultivation are needed to maintain and grow social capital because of its fluid and dynamic nature (McGehee et al., 2010). As the existence of social capital in a community facilitate successful development and goal achievements, social capital becomes an essential resource (Widiartanto et al., 2022). Subsequently social capital can be an effective tool to understand local social relationships and cooperatives that exist within a biosphere reserve. It will then reflect residents' ability to cooperate within the community, in addition, it will also generate social solidarity, a feeling of



belonging, and active participation (Widiartanto et al., 2022). Social capital has three core functions within tourism development, which are information sharing, coordination of activities, and collective decision-making (McGehee et al., 2010). Firstly, it is crucial that those involved in tourism share information with one another. A tourism organization's ability to make correct marketing decisions depends on accurate and up-to-date information about the tourism market, which must be shared among all those involved in the industry. Secondly, for tourism to succeed, it's essential to understand that a destination includes accommodations, restaurants, and attractions that need to be coordinated and cooperate. The third key function is collective decision-making, which depends on a community's ability to resolve conflicts arising from trust, reciprocity, and cooperation. It is possible to create a cohesive tourism product that meets the needs of communities when tourism destinations work together and engage in collective decision-making (McGehee et al., 2010).

Cooperation is a crucial consideration in tourism since the tourism product depends on the cooperation's success among stakeholders (Cehan et al., 2021). Developing sustainable ecotourism in biosphere reserves can also be facilitated by multi-level ecotourism cooperation and by including local steward groups in the planning process. Through this process, a continuous exchange of information will be established (Schultz et al., 2007; Bouamrane et al., 2016). With increased participation and cooperation, the biosphere reserve is likely to gain greater social acceptance, ultimately increasing conservation efficiency (Coetzer et al., 2014), and because biosphere reserves can change the relationship between local stakeholders, and in turn impact the social dynamics of the local community (Abukari & Mwalyosi, 2020).



1.2 Knowledge Gap

In tourism, social capital is understood as a basis for community-driven tourism because it acts as a mechanism that push and pull people to become involved in the development of their community (Musavengane & Matikiti, 2015). Researchers addressed social capital as an influential factor for attractive ecotourism (Ridwan, 2018). For instance, scholars have studied the impacts it has on local communities and residents' knowledge and readiness toward tourism engagement (Widiartanto et al., 2022), and its role in facilitating collective action within biosphere reserves (Garcia-Amado et al., 2012). The interaction between social capital and tourism aspects in destination communities has been explored (Moscardo et al., 2017), as well as its role in local governance of sustainable tourism. Studies conclude that social capital is embodied in social relationships that foster cooperation for mutual benefits (Nunkoo, 2017). Therefore, it is necessary to explore social capital from a new perspective such as biosphere reserves, since sustainable development is a core function in these areas, as well as the local community. Researchers have also explored how social capital relates to biosphere reserves. By a social network analysis, social capital, decision-making, and collective action were examined in a rural forest community. As a result, it was concluded that continuous development is essential to the success of the network and its decentralization in the biosphere reserve (Garcia-Amado et al., 2012).

Additionally, in terms of biosphere reserve in Sweden, only a few studies have been conducted, and the focus has mainly been on the Lake Vänern Archipelago biosphere reserve (Hoppstadius, 2018; Hoppstadius & Sandell, 2018). Another study highlights the importance of identifying local interpretations of sustainable development since it might impact local implementations of sustainable development (Hoppstadius & Sandell, 2018).



Consequently, there is a lack of research concerning social capital and its relation to ecotourism cooperation in a local setting. Specifically, how stakeholders in the biosphere reserve cooperate and build social bonds as well as whether the designation of the reserve affects social relationships. Taking a closer look at social capital within the Swedish biosphere reserve is significant since it reveals the structure behind everything we do, think, perceive, or feel (Dewantara, 2020). Hence, there is a need to conduct research that explores the effects that social capital might have on ecotourism cooperation in a biosphere reserve. The chosen setting for this study is therefore the Blekinge Archipelago biosphere reserve.

1.3 Aim and Objective

To this backdrop of the previous section, the purpose of the following research is to examine how the quality of social relationships among ecotourism stakeholders affects tourism cooperation in the biosphere reserve Blekinge Archipelago. To that end, social capital will apply as a theoretical lens for conceptualizing relationships between ecotourism stakeholders. By looking into the social capital as a factor influencing cooperation for sustainable ecotourism in biosphere reserves, it might be possible to discuss how the designation of biosphere reserves transforms ecotourism cooperation. In addition, since the biosphere reserves provide a unique opportunity for biodiversity conservation and development to coexist (Cuong et al., 20217), one aim is to explore how stakeholders and organizations adjust to this context.

According to the theory of social capital, trust, and reciprocity foster cooperation among different stakeholders, since everyone involved believes in themselves and trusts others in the cooperative process (Moscardo et al., 2017; McGehee et al., 2010). Therefore, it is essential to identify social capital characteristics such as cooperation, reciprocity, and trust in ecotourism cooperation as it can assist in further understanding the quality of social



capital. As collective action is facilitated by social capital (Garcia-Amado et al., 2012), a further key aspect of this study is to explore ecotourism cooperation that exists within the Blekinge Archipelago biosphere reserve, especially in the ARK56 network. This will be done by analyzing different forms of social capital, which can provide an understanding of the particular cooperation and different social relationships that exist within. To accomplish this, the research will examine the following research questions:

How does the quality of social relationships among tourism stakeholders affect ecotourism cooperation in biosphere reserves?

This research gives new insights into the connection between the quality of social capital and cooperation in the context of ecotourism development in a biosphere reserve. It will illustrate how UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Program impacts social relationships in communities and tourism stakeholders within the biosphere reserve. The study will also provide a broader understanding of social capital's significance in ecotourism cooperation in the context of biosphere reserves.

1.4 Deposition

This thesis consists of seven sections, each of which presents fundamental information that contributes to the purpose of the study. In the first section, the topics of social capital and ecotourism cooperation in biosphere reserves are presented, and the identified knowledge gap, as well as the aim and purpose of the study. The next chapter will present a literature review of prior work of research, in particular in terms of social capital and how this concept has been applied in relation to ecotourism cooperation. Sustainable tourism development in biosphere reserves will also be addressed in the literature review. This will be followed by a representation of the theoretical framework of the study, including the notion of social capital and cooperation. These



concepts and theories will be reviewed regarding ecotourism in biosphere reserves. Thereafter, a methodology section will be presented, where the process of the study will be explained and motivated. The result of the study will be clarified in the next chapter, followed by a discussion and analysis chapter, including suggestions for future research. In the final chapter, the conclusion will be presented.



2 Literature Review

To provide a better understanding of social capital and its connection to ecotourism cooperation, the following section will provide a review of the past literature on the subject. First, to provide insight into how social capital has been studied in tourism development, followed by a discussion of how the concept influences ecotourism cooperation. Then a brief overview of ecotourism in biosphere reserves is provided to give a sense of the research context and to illustrate the importance of cooperating in such an environment.

2.1 Social Capital for Tourism Development

In tourism studies, social capital has been applied to explore its impacts on rural tourism destinations (McGehee et al., 2010; Ooi et al. (2014); Hwang & Stewart, 2017; Dai et al., 2021;), ecotourism (Jones, 2005; Musavengane & Matikiti, 2015; Ridwan, 2019; Widiartanto et al., 2021), its significant role within destination communities (Moscardo et al., 2017; Rodriguez-Giron & Vanneste, 2019), and in terms of strategic destination planning (Soulard et al., 2018; Knollenberg et al., 2018). Social capital is frequently referred to as the missing link in tourism development literature (Jones, 2005) since it is a concept associated with positive outcomes such as facilitating collective decision-making and the overall cooperation process within tourism organizations and communities (Coffé & Geys, 2007). Therefore, social capital plays an important role in fostering sustainable cooperation within tourism organizations. It is from this notion that a common understanding has evolved, and academics argue that social capital is a key factor in realizing sustainable tourism and that it is a key mechanism for tourism development in local communities (Rahmi et al., 2021; Widiartanto, 2021). In a recent study, Dewantara (2020) established that social capital was derived from personal relationships, civic engagement, social network support, trust, and cooperative norms. The impact of social capital in a community, on the other hand, is



explained by Widiartanto (2021), who found that the existing social capital has a socio-environmental impact, as ecotourism contributes significantly to preservation. Social capital can therefore be generated from different social interactions and affect the community in a sustainable way. For instance, that the community's ability to manage natural resources will be improved due to the features of social capital such as norms, rules, trust, and reciprocity (Widiartanto, 2021). As trust is a fundamental component of social capital, Bouças da Silva et al. (2023) explored the role of trust and trust-related elements in the formation of tourism networks. They found that a tourism network is a social system that is built on mutual benefits and trust as a core asset of social exchange. As a result of repeated positive interactions and the building of mutual gains, trust in the relationship gradually built over time, reinforced by the prospect of future business benefits or valuable business connections.

2.1.1 The Impacts of Social Capital on Ecotourism and Communities

Multiple studies agree that social capital plays a significant role in ecotourism development. For instance, Widiartanto et al. (2021) explains that social capital can foster cooperation among residents and coordinate ecotourism development in communities, and as Surjadi et al. (2022) elaborates, that if residents believe in social capital in their community, sustainability ecotourism will be enhanced as well. Similarly, Macbeth et al. (2004) and McGehee et al. (2010) highlights social capital as an approach to community engagement, and that it is important to understand the social capital in the community to facilitate tourism development. Even Jones (2005) and Musavengane and Matikiti (2015) discuss the role social capital has in community-based ecotourism. They both agree on the positive benefits that social capital can contribute to including affecting the continuous success of community-based ecotourism and increasing the ventures of ecotourism.



Although studies have integrated social capital in different forms of tourism contexts and its importance to development, the quality of social capital has not been explicitly explained in terms of ecotourism cooperation. However, there is one study conducted by Ridwan (2019), who explored social capital quality in relation to ecotourism, professional environmental management, and poverty. By conducting qualitative and quantitative research, the study found that the quality of social capital was reflected through participation, cooperation, mutual trust, and a sense of responsibility for environmental sustainability.

Furthermore, various researchers have implemented social capital as a tool for examining tourism from various perspectives, for instance, it has been applied as a theoretical framework for examining sociological processes related to tourism (Ooi et al., 2014). There is general agreement that strong social ties and trusting relationships among residents contribute to tourism support in communities (Hwang & Stewart, 2017). This can be explained by the fact that social capital is made up of two distinct components, bonding social capital and bridging social capital, which has gained a lot of academic attention. Likewise, Mascardo et al. (2017) consider tourism as a tool for bridging social capital, as they claim that through its ability to connect local groups to other groups outside the community tourism can generate bridging social capital. The importance of bridging social capital in tourism development can be seen in this context. It is also highlighted that civic engagement is a crucial factor, and Hwang and Stewart (2017) clarifies that residents who belong to social groups and networks can positively influence other citizens' behavior within tourism networks. The quality and quantity of connections with other residents were also important factors for residents who participate in tourism development.



Overall, social capital has a central role in residents' collective action in tourism as the collective performance enhances its social capital. Despite the benefits associated with social capital in tourism development, McGehee et al. (2010) stresses that small tourism companies have the potential to either benefit or suffer from social capital. While they do argue that social capital is beneficial to communities and tourism, they also point out that it can be unfavorable for small businesses. They mean that the concept can create constraints rather than opportunities, and tourism development will be limited by a lack of creativity. In this regard, Ooi et al. (2014) asserts that different social capital levels have different consequences. Communities with high levels of social capital will feel a sense of belonging and commitment to one another, as well as foster a sense of solidarity within the community. There is a risk that individuals outside of this community will experience a feeling of being left out due to the strong bond among the community members. Relatedly, Musavengange and Matikiti (2015) highlights the importance of levels of connectedness, quality, and quantity of social relationships in a community. Therefore, social capital needs to be integrated into society and utilized in social interactions to generate benefits for society as a whole (Dewantara et al., 2020).

Additionally, to reduce residents' sense of inability and support their active participation in sustainable tourism, Ooi et al. (2014) suggest that community governance and tourism should be more inclusive and open, and this will facilitate transparency in decision-making. In this regard, it becomes evident that social capital is an essential factor in terms of sustainable tourism development and residents' engagement in a community, and the literature is limited to citizens' and tourism agencies' roles and contributions to social capital. A similar approach can be taken by Rahmi et al. (2021), who means that the use of social capital can enhance tourism resources and serve as a driving force for the industry's growth. As well as establishing positive



relationships within the community, they emphasize the importance of trust in establishing an organization that contributes to the social capital structure and enhances the network between those groups. Therefore, Rahmi et al. (2021) concludes that it is essential for the tourism industry to consider social capital in the development process.

In light of this, this study proposes the notion that social capital is an important resource for tourism development and that social ties, such as bonding and bridging social capital, determine and enhance ecotourism operators' ability to develop tourism. In cooperatives and organizations, social capital is regarded as a central feature, while social cooperatives are constructed through norms, reciprocity, and trust (Saz-Gil et al., 2021). Although there have been many studies on social capital including bonding and bridging social capital in tourism, few studies have considered the possible effects of operating and cooperating in a biosphere reserve. The above literature indicates that there is a lack of literature in the field that explores the quality of social capital in ecotourism cooperation within a biosphere reserve. Hence, the quality of social capital should be more fully recognized in terms of ecotourism cooperation and how a biosphere reserve might influence ecotourism actors' cooperation. Consequently, the importance of cooperation in ecotourism and its connection to social capital will be further explored in the following section which will also examine past literature of bonding and bridging social capital.

2.2 Social Capital and Cooperation in Tourism

2.2.1 Cooperative Benefits

There is a growing interest in cooperation in tourism, but there are relatively few theories that can explain and support the cooperation that occurs in a tourism context (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2006). However, a common notion is that tourism actors must coordinate and cooperate extensively due to the fragmentation of the tourism industry (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2006; Czernek,



2012), and it is necessary for the different cooperative efforts to coexist (Zee & Vanneste, 2015). Cooperation between public and private stakeholders is also beneficial because it enhances the destination's competitive position (Czernek, 2012). Among the most important aspects of a network is cooperation (Jones, 2005), and past research has focused largely on the benefits associated with cooperation (Wondirad et al., 2020). There are several benefits associated with tourism cooperation, which Zee and Vanneste (2015) highlights. Firstly, there has been a fundamental change in destination management due to a new destination governance system. Secondly, there are advantages for tourism firms who participate in cooperative networks, for instance, it creates value and social capital, through inter-organizational learning and knowledge sharing. Thirdly, Zee and Vanneste (2015) suggest that it is the relationship between the organizations that results in competitive advantage and benefits. The fourth benefit is that cooperative networks can increase the resilience among stakeholders who are involved in the network, and there is a greater chance of developing innovative products and policies.

Cooperative networks and social capital have been applied in earlier research to understand group dynamics and the actors who constitute them. A cooperative network is believed to be made up of intentional agents who are motivated by economic and social factors. The actors in these networks are also influenced by the relationships they form within them (Bock & Macke, 2014). In addition, cooperation has been analyzed in different aspects and perspectives. For instance, cooperation can be examined through diverse levels such as on local, regional, national, and international levels. Cooperation can also be viewed as a static and dynamic concept, which includes challenges that cooperation is faced (Czernek, 2013). For instance, Pesämaa and Hair Jr (2008) explored how trust and reciprocity influence cooperative commitments, and these attributes were found to be related to inter-organizational commitment, however, the relationship was distinctive.



They found that it is interpersonal commitment that facilitates the relationship between trust and inter-organizational commitment, and reciprocity is directly related to inter-organizational commitment and not supported by interpersonal commitment. Comparably, Rodriguez-Giron and Vanneste (2019) studied social capital at the destination level and demonstrated that social capital can either positively or negatively mobilize other resources toward achieving common goals. In addition, the researchers found that tourism operators recognize the importance of developing cooperative initiatives and making resources available through networks, trust, and collective actions rather than acting independently to achieve their development goals.

2.2.2 Building Social Capital through Cooperation

Two types of social capital are typically referred to when analyzing cooperation. As noted above, bonding and bridging social capital describe different social ties between stakeholders that have been utilized to describe social relations in terms of cooperation in different contexts. Jakobsen and Lorentzen (2015) explored innovative cooperation through the use of bridging and bonding social capital. They found that cooperation with strong bonding social capital consists of similar actors who have their businesses in the same location. Whereas, bridging social capital was stronger among actors who had a long geographical distance between those within the cooperative. Tichá and Farsari (2020) found that tourism destinations with a high level of bridging social capital are more willing to develop and are more interested in tourism development, whereas tourism destinations with low levels of bonding social capital are less likely to develop. These two assessments of social capital indicate the importance to identify the level and quality of social capital within a destination. As Widiartanto (2021) clarifies that it is an important mechanism for promoting tourism in local communities and as a facilitator for tourism development.



As stated by Agnitsch et al. (2006), it is vital to maintain a balance between these different types of social capital since they might result in different outcomes. Although, Claridge (2018) argues that the preferred type of social capital is bridging social capital and that bonding is perceived as less valuable. The major risk with strong bonding capital is that members within a group may create such a strong bond between themselves that those outside the group will be totally excluded from the group. Despite these different aspects of the positive and negative outcomes of social connections, Van Staveren and Knorringa (2007) argue that weak social connections are not a negative issue. Since they mean that the weakness of bridging social capital becomes the strength. Similarly, Agnitsch et al. (2006) assert that as a result of the same social relationships that facilitate and enhance reciprocal economic exchanges among members of a group, outsiders are indirectly limited by them. One can argue that neither type of social connection is a negative form of social capital since it might depend on which operational level of the cooperation or network

That social capital facilitates collective action and cooperation in tourism has been also recognized by Payne et al. (2011), Oh and Bush (2016), Hwang and Stewart (2017), Czernek-Marszalek (2020), and Llonas et al. (2021). For instance, Oh and Bush (2016) stresses the role that social capital has in cooperatives and claim that it is organized and conducted through networks. Strong and weak social ties reflect and form the attributes of cooperation. They explain that the social relations for newly established cooperation might be informal, open, and diffuse, whereas stronger ties will grow from more frequent integration, leading to formalized, closed, and dense social relations. It is agreed that social capital plays an important role in the success of cooperative efforts by removing barriers to cooperation throughout the process of cooperation.



In addition, Llonés et al. (2021) explored how bonding and bridging social capital contribute to collective action. There is a direct relationship between these forms of social capital and collective action. The process of achieving mutual benefit is easier for groups that have gained bonding social capital, whereas bridging social capital enables engagement with external groups. In this sense, Hwang and Stewart (2017) address social capital in rural tourism, where they examined the collective actions in communities in South Korea. In particular, they emphasized bridging social capital, and it was discovered that an individual's effort to be more involved in tourism activities increased when they had a good relationship with a tourism development official.

Wagner and Fernandez-Gimenez (2009) investigated how group characteristics affect social capital. Their findings indicate that new cooperative efforts are most likely to be successful when individuals have never worked together before. They also possess significant social capital as a result of a high level of trust, reciprocity norms, and quality network connections. A community-based cooperation group has also been found to have certain group attributes that are related to its level and development of social capital, which is influenced by group interaction outcomes. Wagner and Fernandez-Gimenez (2009) means that interactions within a cooperative group may have a greater impact on building social capital than the duration or frequency of interactions, the variety and number of participants, and their associated beliefs and values.

Moreover, there is a growing awareness in the literature that cooperatives are a significant element of tourism destinations, and that social capital plays a key role in fostering cooperation in tourism. However, research on social capital in cooperation is focused on the general tourism destination and its stakeholders. Less attention is paid to a destination's social relationships among tourism stakeholders, and what drives different kinds of social



relations. Although bonding- and bridging social capital have been acknowledged, it is less recognized within ecotourism cooperatives. Taking this into consideration, the intent is to explore in greater detail how bonding and bridging social capital are brought about through ecotourism cooperation and to identify the mechanisms by which these types of relationships are made possible. As a result, the following will address the development of sustainable tourism in biosphere reserves as well as the importance of fostering cooperation among various stakeholders in the biosphere reserve.

2.3 Sustainable Tourism Development in Biosphere Reserves

2.3.1 The Purpose of Biosphere Reserves

There has been an increased interest in analyzing biosphere reserves from several different perspectives, such as what they contribute to and shapes the effectiveness of biosphere reserves (Ferreira et al., 2018), from a legal framework perspective (Elbakidze et al., 2013), how biosphere reserves contribute to sustainable development (Kraus et al., 2014), and the attributes that result in successful or unsuccessful reserves (Cuong et al., 2017). As explained by Hoppstadius and Dahlstrom (2015), globalization, mobility, and transport all affect societies and contribute negatively to social, environmental, and economic sustainability. Biosphere reserves, and how sustainable tourism is linked to them, are therefore of interest. In varying scales, each biosphere reserve may be considered an experimental site for sustainable development (Ishwaran & Persic, 2008). As stated by Kraus et al. (2014), biosphere reserves have three functions to achieve sustainable development. Firstly, to “conserve ecosystems and genetic resources, secondly, support research, monitoring, and education, and thirdly, foster sustainable development” (Kraus et al. (2014, p. 164). As well as that, biosphere reserves are divided into different zones, each serving a distinct purpose (Kraus et al., 2014), and land usage and access restrictions determine the zones within biosphere reserves as well (Coetzer et al., 2014). It is through these zones that these three functions are carried out.



A core area is a restricted protected area that preserves landscapes, ecosystems, species, and natural variations. Buffer zones surround the core area, and within this zone activities involving ecological practices, such as scientific research, monitoring, training, and education, are conducted. A transition zone surrounds the buffer zone and includes a range of economic and human activities that promote eco- and socio-ecological sustainability (UNESCO, 2021, C).

Furthermore, Hoppstadius and Dahlstrom (2015) explain that a biosphere reserve is an ideal place to explore ecotourism and sustainable development since it focuses on sustainable development and experimentation. Hence, ecotourism is a common type of tourism that is applied in biosphere reserves (Hoppstadius & Sandell, 2018; Mondino & Beery, 2109) since the aim is to generate sustainable development. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has conducted five elements that characterize ecotourism. According to Hoppstadius & Dahlstrom (2015, p.12), these five elements are:

- Nature-based tourism wherein the main motivation for tourism is the experiences and enjoyment of nature and culture in natural areas.
- Ecotourism features educational components.
- Ecotourism is usually, but not always a small-scale local operation with few tourists.
- Ecotourism strives to make as little negative impacts as possible on both the socio-cultural and natural environment.
- Ecotourism assists the protection and conservation of natural areas by generating economic benefits, creating jobs, and spreading knowledge about natural and cultural resources.



Accordingly, the elements of ecotourism are in line with the purpose of biosphere reserves, and this kind is known to benefit local communities by creating educational opportunities that support sustainable development of the environment, sociocultural, and economic domains (Hoppstadius & Dahlstrom, 2015). As a result, further research is needed to identify which attributes may contribute to the success of ecotourism cooperation and to investigate the social relationships within these networks as they operate in a biosphere reserve.

2.3.2 Sustainability in Biosphere Reserves

The co-production of sustainable development requires cooperation between stakeholders, tourist participation, and resident involvement. This, in turn, will prevent negative developments, and ensure that local stakeholders are aware of the sustainability goals (Hoppstadius & Dahlstrom, 2015). A significant component of enhancing sustainability is integrating ecotourism into biosphere reserves, which in turn contributes to their success (Hoppstadius, 2019). This was something that Mondino and Beery (2019) found in their study as well. Through cooperation among diverse groups and networks, ecotourism contributes to positive outcomes, such as encouraging cooperation between stakeholders, and by allowing participants to share their challenges and problems, richer solutions and assessments can be achieved. According to Kraus et al. (2014), sustainable development should be taught to local stakeholders including residents, tourists, and entrepreneurs while taking ecological and economic factors into consideration. Furthermore, Cuong et al. (2017) elaborates that in addition to stakeholder engagement, other attributes such as resource distribution, monitoring, and evolution, are also a requirement for successful tourism development in biosphere reserves. For instance, the involvement of stakeholders will increase social acceptance and support, which ultimately leads to improved management of the biosphere reserve.



Implications of tourism development in biosphere reserves have also been acknowledged in the literature. For example, Lyon et al. (2017) analyzed stakeholders' dialogues regarding tourism development and found that political distinctions between stakeholder groups and unequal power relations will likely undermine sustainable development in a biosphere reserve. Hoppstadius and Dahlstrom (2015) inserts that since sustainable development is fluid and ever-changing, the conditions in unique individual locations can have a significant effect on the processes of sustainable development. Hence, implementing tourism within a biosphere reserve must be conducted effectively to achieve balanced and sustainable development. It is also agreed that sustainable tourism is a key part of biosphere reserves. Hoppstadius and Sandell (2018) found that an ecotourism network was designed with the purpose to increase sustainable development in the biosphere reserve. By focusing on local lifestyles among small tourism businesses, the network of ecotourism operators could contribute to the sustainability of the tourism industry. Lyon et al. (2017) explain that this is likely to occur since ecotourism stakeholders have an emotional connection to the region's natural environment and the diverse communities.

In conclusion, social capital has been studied in the past from two main perspectives. One perspective examines social capital in terms of organizations, and the other examines its role in tourism. In tourism literature, social capital has been used to examine how it influences citizens' and tourists' interaction, and tourism entrepreneurship, for example. Hence, several themes can be identified in connection to social capital, ecotourism cooperation, and biosphere reserves. Firstly, many scholars agree that social capital has a central role in ecotourism, and communities, as well as being a mechanism that fosters cooperation. Secondly, many studies have discussed successful attributes of cooperation and biosphere reserves and their contribution to sustainable development. With this in mind, the literature on biosphere reserves is limited



to sustainable tourism development, stakeholder engagement, and ecotourism contribution to sustainability in biosphere reserves. In turn, there is less focus on social relationships within cooperation in biosphere reserves and its relation to tourism development. Therefore, this research will contribute to the literature about social capital and ecotourism cooperation by providing insights regarding social relationships within ecotourism cooperation in a biosphere reserve.



3 Theoretical Framework

The success of a biosphere reserve depends on cooperation between different stakeholders (Cuong et al., 2017). This can also be said for ecotourism, where stakeholder cooperation is perceived to be an important factor (Wondirad et al., 2020). While many believe that such tourism can contribute to sustainability, there are still a few that questioned tourism's potential contribution to achieving sustainable goals. Cooperation has emerged as one of the most significant barriers to ecotourism, given the actors diversity and competing interests (Wondirad et al., 2020). The success of cooperation can be explained by social capital, a resource derived from social relationships (Sözbilir, 2018; Musavengane & Kloppers, 2020). Buys et al. (2007) asserts that “social capital is a key indicator of a community’s capacity and readiness to successfully handle change by drawing on its “stocks of social capital that can determine the likely success or failure of environmental and sustainability initiatives” (p.289). Rivera et al. (2018) emphasize that considering its ability to foster development, social capital has become a useful analytical concept and policy tool for local development. Based on the foregoing, the essence of cooperation in ecotourism will be assessed, as its significance to successful tourism organizations, as well as the importance of social capital in determining the effectiveness of cooperation. Firstly, Putnam’s theory of social capital will be conceptualized including his notion of bonding and bridging social capital, which are different forms of social relationships.

3.1 Social Capital

Social capital concerns the effects of human connectivity and sociability on individuals and society as a whole (Tzanakis, 2013). It was Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam who shaped this notion in the literature about social capital by providing different perspectives and by defining it in different ways (Lyon, 2000; Musavengane & Matikiti, 2015). According to Bourdieu, social



capital is a resource that arises from social structures, while Coleman defines it as a function of social structures that generates benefits (Burt, 2000). The theory of social capital was influenced later by Robert Putnam. Putnam based this formulation of social capital on Coleman's theoretical principles (Putnam, 1993; Poder, 2011; Tzanakis, 2013). Their mutual understanding concerned trust, and they believed that it is built on informal norms as well as a strong personal relationship, leading to cooperation and more efficiency (Poder, 2011; Tzanakis, 2013).

The concept of social capital is found in several geographical levels including communities, countries, and their structural effects on development, which Putnam named the stock of social capital (Putnam, 1993; Portes & Landolt, 2000; Agnitsch et al., 2006). As a stock resource, the value of social capital increases over time, which does not depreciate with use, but rather grows with it. Several factors influence social relationships, and these factors contribute to the stock of social capital. These factors include trust, social norms, and network dynamics within a social group (Putnam, 1993; Mohan & Mohan, 2002). Putnam (1993) describes stocks of social capital as “tend to be self-reinforcing and cumulative. Successful cooperation in one endeavor builds connections and trust – social assets that facilitate future cooperation in other, unrelated tasks” (p.4). Further, he believed that cooperation between individuals can be facilitated by social capital (Putnam, 1993) and that it could be analyzed across national, regional, and international borders as a collective trait. In addition, social capital is derived from the social relationships that produce benefits for both individuals and communities (Musavengange & Matikiti, 2015). Besides trust, norms, and networks, the traits of reciprocity and cooperation are also fundamental features of social capital (Poder, 2011; Tzanakis, 2013; Gelderblom, 2018; Xu et al., 2020), and based on Putnam's hypothesis, collective action requires these characteristics in order to be effective (Putnam, 1993). By participating in a variety of community and



associational activities, common norms and networks can be developed, leading to dispositions toward trust. Therefore, a common notion is that social capital results in positive benefits, and that it is either a resource on an individual level or a social resource, and social relationships are highly valuable (Mohan & Mohan, 2002; Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009). Social capital also plays a key role in the performance of individuals and organizations since it can generate positive effects.

Furthermore, Putnam outlines the individual level of social capital and regards the concept as the set of horizontal relationships between individuals whose networks and associated norms contribute significantly to their productivity (Foley & O'Connor, 2013). In essence, social capital is a function of human behavior in the way that it seeks to uncover the fundamental structure that underlies all of the activities, thinking, perceptions, and feelings of human beings (Dewantara et al., 2020). He also placed a great deal of emphasis on the relationship between organizational cooperation units, as they provide an essential source of trust within a society (Putnam, 1993). He believed that it is within these organizations that people learn the habits of cooperation which are “essential lubricant for democratic political action and an economically prosperous society” (Gelderblom, 2018, p. 1312). In a group with strong social capital, cooperative efforts will be more likely to succeed, and activities that may negatively affect the group will be avoided (Musavengange & Matikiti, 2015).

As social capital is believed to be stemming from social relationships and cooperative efforts (Surjadi et al., 2022), there are two different types of social ties such as horizontal and vertical ties. The type of social ties that develop most frequently determine the state of a community. Horizontal ties are those that link actors with equal power and are formed within voluntary associations. It is within these horizontal relationships such as local relations in voluntary organizations that social capital is generated. Consequently, it is through these



kinds of ties that norms of reciprocity emerge, which in turn generates trust, exchange, and collective involvement (Poder, 2011). According to Claridge (2018), vertical ties are associated with weaker social ties. Granovetter (1973) describes this as a network of weak ties, for instance between acquaintances who have strained relationships. Poder (2011) further explains that “the contribution of weak ties network is to facilitate the connection between various of strong ties, and to make it possible to diversify and increase the sources of information, which one would be inaccessible in the absence of weak ties networks insofar as the majority of the networks are articulated around strong ties and tend to be made up of people with similar characteristics” (p.345). Consequently, weaker ties are significant in enabling actors to access resources held by individuals with higher authority (Poder, 2011). Essentially, social capital is a concept that emphasizes that social bonds and norms are necessary to communities and people, and these bonds facilitate cooperation among them (Pretty, 2003). Social capital, in this sense, can either function as a bonding mechanism or as a bridging mechanism in communities (Tzanakis, 2013; Murzyn & Dzialek, 2013).

3.1.1 Bonding and Bridging Social Capital

Bonding and bridging social capital are valuable to socioeconomic development and for improving living standards and quality of life (Murzyn & Dzialek, 2013). Cofre-Bravo et al. (2019) asserts that “bonding capital refers to the trusting and cooperative relationship between members of a network who are similar in a sociodemographic sense, with thick trust, dense multiple networks with strong ties, generally informal cooperation, and long-term reciprocity” (p.55). Thus, bonding social capital is comparable to closed networks of homogeneous groups and entities, and can consist of strong ties and personal trust between families and friends as well (Murzyn & Dzialek, 2013). Claridge (2018) explain that friendship is a common bonding social capital due to that these kinds of relationships are formed between individuals



who share certain characteristics or interests. It is human nature to turn to friends when in need since they believe they are the ones who are closest to them. Friendships can also be a bridging relationship in cases where people of different cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic backgrounds, or ages may interact in this manner, leading to access to information and other groups or individuals they were previously unfamiliar with. An example of a bonding relationship from a spatial perspective would be relations within a community, in which people feel a sense of belonging and where strong relationships are formed from daily interaction over some time (Claridge, 2018). Accordingly, it is possible for organizations to possess bonding social capital as well. When employees feel a sense of belonging and share a sense of identity, social capital can be found within and between the organization's members. In this case, most employees within the organization are connected via exclusive, inward-looking relationships. Furthermore, there are many benefits associated with bonding relationships, including the fact that it provides a fundamental resource to people from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, and ensures that norms and trust are in place so that cooperative action can be undertaken (Claridge, 2018).

On the other hand, bridging social capital refers to the connections which unite people across a cleavage that tends to divide society, including race, social class, or belief. Bridging social capital is defined as an exchange of social relationships, often between individuals sharing similar interests and goals but identifying differently on a social level (Claridge, 2018). This type of social capital also refers to the connections between dense cooperation and coordination networks, and this type of network is characterized by more formal cooperation, thinner trust, and looser ties (Cofre-Bravo et al., 2019). Accordingly, Claridge (2018) and Adler and Kwon (2002) highlights the benefits of bridging social capital. From their perspective, it consists of an enhanced capacity to acquire information, access power or gain a more



prominent position within the network, or an increased capacity to recognize opportunities. Hence, bridging social capital can serve as a social lubricant and a tool for social leverage by facilitating advancement (Putnam, 1993; Claridge, 2018). This, in turn, leads to an increase in tolerance and acceptance of different cultures, values, and beliefs as a result of interactions with individuals of diverse backgrounds. Bridging also allows people with different interests to exchange information, ideas, innovations, and agreements among diverse groups and makes it possible to access resources and opportunities that otherwise would not be achievable (Murzyn & Dzialek, 2013; Claridge, 2018). Van Staveren and Knorringa (2007) claims that weak social ties are not a negative issue due to that they argue that the weakness is the strength of bridging social capital. There is no strong social stigma associated with leaving or switching to another social relationship when the bonds between the parties are weaker.

Bridging social capital can be primarily achieved through the formation of partnerships outside of one's social groups. By attending events, joining associations, action groups, or sporting groups, or by becoming a member of an industry association, there is an opportunity to establish meaningful relationships with new actors which will result in bridging social capital. Through membership in organizations that represent society as a whole, social capital can be bridged most effectively (Claridge, 2018).

Bonding and bridging social capital can result in different outcomes for both the individual actors and the cooperative, so it is important to develop a good balance between these two types to ensure a positive outcome. Negative effects may arise, for example, if the bonding social capital is less than the bridging social capital (Agnitsch et al., 2006). However, in the context of social relationships, bonding social ties may result in negative outcomes such as exclusion since the relationships among similar individuals are characterized by stronger social ties (Gelderblom, 2018). As Agnitsch et al.



(2006) explain, “the same social relations that enhance the ease and efficiency of economic exchanges among community members implicitly restrict outsiders” (p.38). The advantage of bridging social capital is, however, that it will allow individuals access to more resources, and they will be less dependent on others, thereby reducing many costs.

In the presence of both forms of social capital, people will receive optimal outcomes (Agnitsch et al., 2006; Claridge, 2018). However, there is a common perception concerning bonding and bridging networks. Bonding networks are perceived as being less valuable, whereas bridging ties within networks is considered to be the most preferable form of social connection. Although bonding ties are exclusive and strongly structured, they provide crucial support in spite of these negative outcomes (Claridge, 2018). In terms of bridging social capital, there are fewer negative outcomes, for instance, Claridge (2018) asserts while it may advance innovation, it may also lead to collusion, price fixing, and corruption.

3.1.2 Bonding and Bridging Social Capital within Communities

The concept of social capital is viewed as a foundation in a community since it facilitates the solution of problems and helps the community become more independent and able to tackle and overcome external challenges (Nugroho et al., 2021). When it comes to forming community relationships, Agnitsch et al. (2006) shared that bonding and bridging social ties are necessary, but they have different functions within the community. Claridge (2018) stresses that in urban areas, there is a tendency for bridging social capital to be strong and bonding social capital to be weak, while in rural areas there is a tendency for bonding social capital to be strong and bridging social capital to be weak. However, in spite of this, a community cannot be defined simply by the bonding or the bridging of social capital; it must be seen as an integration of both (Xu et al., 2020).



According to Agnitsch et al. (2006), the concept of embeddedness and autonomy can be used to describe the bonding and bridging of social capital within communities. The concept of embeddedness is a form of bonding social capital and occurs among members of a group that is closely interconnected and dense. Autonomy refers to bridging social capital and involves establishing connections between groups or establishing connections that give access to non-community groups. In order for a community to benefit from social capital, people from different groups within it must have strong social ties of trustworthiness and positivity. Without these strong connections between different groups, only one would unity benefit from the social capital, and not the community as a whole (Agnitsch et al., 2006). It is believed that bonding and bridging social capital are critical for collective action in a community, as well as to ensure the success of community development. Larsen et al. (2004) claims that strong social ties and higher social status within a community increase the likelihood of residents taking collective action.

Moreover, it is essential to have the ability to combine both embedded and autonomous relationships, which is required to resolve the multiple collective action difficulties involved in coordinating developmental results. These social ties are essential because embedded social ties are needed but a scarce condition for long-term development, and in addition to the benefits, autonomous social ties are required to balance the costs of embeddedness. Through bonding social capital, the commitment is formed, and it is through bridging that the ability to act is created, and it is possible to act cooperatively for the good of a community when both bonding and bridging social capital are present (Agnitsch et al., 2006). Communities can also become more integrated through bonding social capital, which will result in more sacrifices and a greater sense of cooperation among residents (Murzyn & Dzialek, 2013).



As Xu et al. (2020) highlights, community sustainability requires recognizing and managing social capital's potential negative consequences. Among the negative outcomes of social capital are disagreements among community members, erosion of privacy, and power imbalance within communities. Agnitsch et al. (2006) stresses that in the case of a weak social tie, it will be important to try to strengthen the other. Therefore different strategies for enhancing community action and sustainability depend on the level of social capital.

As social capital incorporates trust, information sharing, collective action, and network, it is a multidimensional notion. Xu et al. (2020) clarifies that in a community, trust is the expectation members have that others will act in accordance with their good intentions. When residents trust one another, they will be able to communicate more effectively. Trust is a crucial component of social capital, seeing that trust is at the core of social interactions and cooperation within a network and the fact that it will improve the quality of a network as well. Further, Xu et al. (2020) asserts the idea of information sharing refers to the exchange of critical information between parties that contributes to cooperation and facilitates access to a broader range of resources. The importance of what is exchanged can be determined by a number of factors. How and when information is shared, as well as the quality and content of the information, are several vital factors. Since sharing information facilitates community and tourism development, sharing information is regarded as a valuable tourism resource. By obtaining sufficient and reliable information about tourism, actors within the industry actors identify new opportunities and evaluate the feasibility of their new ventures. Collective actions are defined by Xu et al. (2020) “as actions taken by members of a group to further their common interest” (p.3). Larsen et al. (2004) enlightened that individuals will take collective action if they have strong social ties. The establishment of social relationships can increase one's



performance and create more opportunities to grow as a result of collective action. Through collective action, communities can be more effective when dealing with local issues as well. Another consideration is that mutual trust and the quality of existing social networks determine the effectiveness of collective action.

Furthermore, Oh and Bush (2016) stresses the importance of social capital within a community and declares that cooperative governance can be enhanced by the characteristics of social capital. In a community, it represents fundamental beliefs, goals, and cooperative readiness, making it difficult to pursue collective action without it. They further explain that it is possible to simplify network activities that improve the flow of information and resources among different units. In addition, the development of social capital will facilitate the achievement of collective objectives by building a strong sense of mutual trust. Since a community consists of residents with diverse cultures and values, the high level of social capital will be mitigating any disagreement and inequalities as well.

3.2 The Essence of Cooperation in Ecotourism

Ecotourism cooperation can be defined as voluntary actions where independent stakeholders participate in an interactive process using shared rules, norms, and structures to work together and make decisions on tourism-related issues (Czernek, 2013). In order to be a successful tourist destination, it must demonstrate an integrated offer that incorporates the value of multiple entities while offering a unique experience for its visitors (Costa & Lima, 2018). As tourism operators have integrated into cooperation and networks, it has resulted in flexibility, sharing of marketing information, innovation, other networking opportunities, development of resources, and exchange of knowledge among stakeholders. In order to mobilize information and resources among tourism businesses and to promote cooperation between



them, networking is crucial (Ramayah et al., 2011). The importance of cooperation in ecotourism is further addressed by Zee and Vanneste (2015), who argue that it facilitates competitive advantages and access to valuable resources. Costa and Lima (2018) elaborate on the significance of cooperation, pointing out that it is crucial for the development of infrastructure, improving visitor satisfaction, and improving destinations' competitiveness, as well as ensuring visitor safety and security. Through such cooperation, economic growth and social welfare can be reconciled while at the same time respecting environmental considerations. Cooperation initiatives can also facilitate the planning of tourism activities more comprehensively and efficiently (Costa & Lima, 2018).

Tourism stakeholders that are involved in cooperation have often different operative environments, cultures, social capital, and priorities that are to a great extent independent, heterogeneous, and geographically distributed. It is through cooperation that actors can accomplish compatible and shared goals based on the knowledge that they can achieve more together than they can individually (Jones, 2005). It will also enable a balance between competition and cooperation, which is beneficial for both individual actors and the destination since they can maximize their performance. Additionally, trust and reciprocity are key to creating a successful tourism network (Zee & Vanneste, 2015). Furthermore, the success of the cooperation depends on several factors, including power, trust, interdependence, reciprocity, transparency, commitment, genuine participation, and accommodativeness (Wondirad et al., 2020). The determinants of cooperation can be comprehended by a variety of factors and circumstances such as situations, events, objectives, features, and individual ability. These factors will additionally determine whether cooperation is needed, which process to be followed, and potential outcomes as well. An analysis of the cooperation determinants can be conducted in four ways: as a precondition for cooperation, a crucial factor for the successful



development of cooperation, a factor for the effectiveness of cooperation, and key personal capabilities required for managing tourism cooperation (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2006; Czernek, 2013). These determinates serve as preconditions for the interactions within cooperation between independent entities through their competitive, technical, socio-cultural, economic, task-related, or diplomatic influences. In addition, economic conditions, technical advancements, and emergencies all influence the possibility of working together for a common goal. Both public and private entities have similar reasons for cooperating, but their purposes and resources may differ. A public entity might be able to gain a better understanding of local concerns, while a private entity will earn profits (Czernek, 2013).

Ecotourism cooperation is further influenced by a variety of factors. Czernek (2013) identifies several key factors that contribute to successful cooperation including personal and interpersonal qualities, the capability to adjust to new situations, and organizational and operational factors. Among the qualities necessary for developing personal qualities are leadership, identity, vision, honesty, openness, and active listening. The organizational factors include the stability of employment throughout the cooperation and the competence of the personnel, a flexible approach to financial accounting, and a suitable meeting environment and support from the management (Czernek, 2013). In addition, stakeholders need to recognize that they are interdependent, perceive that benefits will be accumulated for all participants, and possess the ability to convene and form a cooperative reference group that ensures the strategic plan is followed (Czernek, 2013). Personal capabilities are a crucial factor as well while managing tourism cooperation (Lemmetyinen & Go, 2009). Costa and Lima (2018) stress that tourism cooperation allows destinations to combine their natural, cultural, and social characteristics since they are the result of cooperative efforts amongst a wide range of industry stakeholders. By establishing a shared set of values, where all parties involved contribute to the



common purpose of economic, social, and environmental sustainability, it is also possible to reduce competitiveness and form partnerships between public and private stakeholders (Costa & Lima, 2018).

Although, Wondirad et al. (2020) explains that among the major barriers to ecotourism realization is the lack of cooperation efficiency. Hence, they further point out the advantages of efficient stakeholder cooperation in ecotourism development. The advantages include “facilitating the sustainable development of ecotourism through reconciling ecotourism plans with other economic development programs, devising comprehensive solutions, enhancing plans feasibility, promoting discussions, communications, and negotiations among ecotourism stakeholders, and boosting trust and mutual understanding between stakeholders” (Wondirad et al., 2014, p. 3). A major aspect of ecotourism cooperation is to create a win-win situation, which Costa and Lima (2018) argues that an organization that meets the expectations of its customers must also be able to generate wealth for its stakeholders. Hence, to ensure that everyone is able to benefit. Another aspect of ecotourism cooperation is the qualities of trust and commitment, which are also critical for the success of cross-organizational relationships. Saz-Gil et al. (2021) elaborates that trust and cooperation are fundamental pillars of cooperatives and that social capital is the primary characteristic, and bonding and bridging social capital can be generated by cooperation as well.

3.2.1 Bonding and Bridging Social Capital within Cooperation

The level of social capital within a community influences organizations and cooperatives, so the key to building social capital in a community is to engage local residents actively and willingly within a participative community (Claridge, 2004). Consequently, if there is a high level of social capital within a community, there will also be a strong level of trust, so that information and knowledge will flow more freely, and cooperation will be more feasible (Saz-



Gil et al., 2021). In cooperatives, social capital can be created through repeated exchanges of face-to-face interactions, which are made easier by geographic distance (Claridge, 2004). There is often a strong bond of friendship between cooperative members, and it is more common for members to rely on relational contracts than on formal regulations, which means that sanctions are less likely to be imposed, thereby giving trust significant importance. Nevertheless, the growth of a cooperative is limited by the importance of trust between its members (Saz-Gil et al., 2021).

It is through cooperation that individuals become connected to certain others, resulting in a network of independent social exchanges. As a result, people become trusted exchange partners who can provide resources and support when necessary. So by socializing with particular members outside the cooperative or a network, the members will build trust and are more likely to have opportunities to increase social exchanges among themselves. The development of mutual trust requires reciprocity in an environment where norms are enforced, and free riders are discouraged. In such an environment, members tend to extend favors to one another since they are aware that they will eventually be reciprocated (Oh et al., 2004).

A cooperation is often characterized by a people-oriented approach, with an open, democratic organizational structure, encouraging its members to build links and bridges with other social networks, both within and outside the organization and the community (Saz-Gil et al., 2021). Based on these notions, cooperation will generate both bonding and bridging relationships. According to Saz-Gil et al. (2021), the mutual ownership and independent management of cooperatives are two of the components that contribute to the creation of bonding social capital. Bridging social capital can be generated as well, as long as they are operating in accordance with the principle of inter-cooperation with other associations. Cooperatives are known to be strongly rooted in the local



community because their members are residents of the area in which they operate. Consequently, as cooperatives promote strong, long-term relationships with local suppliers and clients as well as with other cooperatives and social organizations, they are more capable of producing bridging social capital.

In this regard, social capital plays an important role in the success and efficiency of cooperatives. The effectiveness of cooperation depends on its ability to generate both bonding and bridging social capital simultaneously. Bridging social capital enables cooperatives to access and share valuable information, and to archive common goals. This form of social capital will also enable members to be inclusive and gain an advantage (Claridge, 2018). Whereas bonding capital may function as social support among cooperators, as the relationship is based on strong and exclusive ties. However, bonding social capital carries the risk of members within a cooperative becoming too exclusive, thus excluding those outside the cooperative (Claridge, 2018). A cooperative must therefore maintain a good balance between bonding and bridging social capital in order to achieve maximum efficiency (Agnitsch et al. (2006).

3.3 The Role of Social Capital in Ecotourism Cooperation

The relationship between social capital and cooperation can be perceived as a two-way relationship (Saz-Gil et al., 2021), and according to Xu et al. (2020), tourism development can increase social capital within a community, as well as affect social capital both negatively and positively. Social capital can even be enhanced through the establishment of local tourism organizations since tourism is associated with several benefits. For instance, social capital can be increased when many interests are represented, strong leadership is in place, and there is a desire to use tourism efficiently and effectively (Xu et al., 2020).



In terms of different forms of social capital, tourism can contribute to bridging social capital in a community by connecting local groups to networks outside their local area. Tourism experiences that are developed around community values and traditions can also support bonding social capital by developing public spaces for social interaction among residents (Moscardo et al., 2017). Further, Hwang and Stewart (2017) explain the importance of social capital and cooperation in tourism, and the interconnection between those in a community. They argue that the level of social capital in a community plays an important role in explaining residents' collective actions in tourism as well as enhancing the social capital in a community.

Moreover, community engagement is a key element of ecotourism development (Wildan et al., 2016), therefore the level of social capital within communities can play a significant role in the success of cooperative initiatives in ecotourism (Saz-Gil et al., 2021). The building of trust within ecotourism cooperation involves positive interactions, meetings of regularity and liability, mutual interdependence and reciprocity, and respect for all involved (Moscardo et al., 2017). Bouças da Silva et al. (2018) explain that trust facilitates the exchange of resources and information between tourism companies and enables them to cooperate. The reason for this is that people perceive themselves as less vulnerable to opportunities since they expect their business partners to behave in a positive manner in the future. This is in line with Putnam's definition of social capital, as trust, norms, and networks are the main features that enable cooperation (Putnam, 1993; Tzanakis, 2013; Poder, 2011; Gelderblom, 2018). As cooperatives aim to achieve common goals and objectives through activities such as exchanges of information, resources, and responsibilities (Camarinaha-Matos & Afsarmanesh, 2006), the variety of interactions and how social relations evolve within cooperation can be explained by an understanding of the different forms of social capital. It is



possible to understand and identify the quality of social capital on the basis of cooperation, by analyzing local ecotourism operators and their relationships.

Accordingly, social capital is necessary for ecotourism, because actors in ecotourism have direct contact with the community and its residents as sustainable ecotourism agents. Wildan et al. (2016) argues that developing social unity through ecotourism is a sign of social strength resulting from community energy. In this sense, the social strength itself refers to the extent to which social capital elements are found in a community, and in turn, the strength of social capital will determine the success of ecotourism cooperation. Moreover, Xu et al. (2020) assert that social capital has many comparisons with tourism concepts such as stakeholder involvement, partnerships, and cooperation, therefore it is relevant to explore this notion and comprehend ecotourism cooperation by analyzing different forms of social capital.

Jones (2005) explains that since social capital is embedded in participatory groups, it can facilitate the development of reasonable and sustainable solutions to local development problems because it relates to the qualities that facilitate coordination and cooperation. It is also applicable to natural resources that are managed as common properties. Through the development of appropriate norms and rules and the enhancement of trust and reciprocity, social capital can enhance the ability of a community to sustainably manage its natural resources. Jones (2005) further adds that cooperative relationships are lubricated by trust and reciprocity, which reduces the need to monitor other people's behavior. As a result of social capital, individuals can gain the confidence to invest in group activities such as ecotourism cooperatives. It is therefore believed that higher social capital leads to better environmental protection (Jones, 2005). By exploring different forms of social capital such as bonding and bridging social capital, it will enlighten how social ties within ecotourism cooperation evolve and impact stakeholders and their operations



in biosphere reserves. The features of these social ties including trust, reciprocity, and network will be analyzed empirically in this study in order to provide a deeper understanding of ecotourism cooperation and the social interaction among different stakeholders in the biosphere reserve.



4 Methodology

This methodology chapter aims to provide a description and justification for the following research steps. By including different aspects of the research process such as data collection and coding, research setting, limitations, and ethical aspects, the aim is to increase the dependability of this study. This chapter begins with clarifying social constructionism and explaining why this study is relevant to that philosophical paradigm. This will be followed by a justification of the qualitative design that has been employed. After that, an explanation will be provided of why the Blekinge Archipelago biosphere reserve and ARK56 represented an appropriate research setting. Then there will be a description of how the data was collected, and how the sampling procedure was carried out. A section describing the research process will then be highlighted, as well as the process of coding the collected data. The last section of the methodology discusses the ethical aspects that have been considered during the research development and the limitations that have emerged during the process. Hence, this chapter intends to provide a detailed description of how the research process was conducted in an effort to enhance the trustworthiness and the quality of the study.

4.1 Social Constructionism

To answer the research question, a qualitative research design has been conducted, using social constructionism as a guiding paradigm for research and knowledge production. Butowski et al. (2021) asserts that social constructionism is based on a qualitative model of science cognition known as hermeneutics which can be used to retain an advantaged position in tourism research. The social constructionism paradigm suggests that humans construct reality through their actions and that individuals cannot discover reality, since reality can only be constructed by society as a whole (Kim, 2001; Galbin, 2014). Constructionist further believes that society shapes people, and people



shape society, in a constant two-way exchange (Onuf, 2012). In both common sense and scientific thinking, the world is comprehended by using abstractions, generalizations, formalizations, and idealizations, and Flick (2020) elaborates that the realities are a social product that emerges through interactions and institutions among actors. It is through social and cultural interactions that constructivists believe knowledge is accumulated, and it is by these interactions that meaning is created as well (Kim, 2001; Flick, 2020). Constructivists view language as a means to constructing knowledge, which makes it an important factor (Onuf, 2012). In addition, Flick (2020) clarifies that as a social construct, knowledge is constructed through social interactions, and language provides structure and function to these relationships. Hence, human relations can be maintained through the use of language. According to Kim (2001), communication is based on shared interests and assumptions that form the ground for intersubjective understanding among individuals. The author further explains that communication and interaction are fundamentally impacted by language and social patterns. By using these patterns, individuals can construct social meanings through intersubjectivity, which can then be shaped and evolved through negotiation. Throughout these experiences, each individual's meaning is shaped by their community's intersubjectivity as well.

Furthermore, in organizational contexts, constructionism can have important propositions for knowledge production, as it implies that social actions can be guided by scientific knowledge based on its contextual relevance. For instance, it supports “processes of deconstruction by stimulating a reflexive stance in the production of the knowledge that allows a critique of traditional practices in the society and its cultural implications” (Galbin, 2014. p.90). Another assumption is that it encourages new ways of generating knowledge as well as presenting it by using language to capture people's imaginations, which will allow new insights and construct new realities creatively. Further, it emphasizes the connection between research and intervention, and the



importance of cooperation and participation in knowledge production (Galbin, 2014).

The social constructionism paradigm is relevant to this study since it aims to determine how stakeholders reconstruct their social relationships in ecotourism cooperation. Social constructionism is a particularly suitable philosophical paradigm to focus on the ARK56 network since it is comprised of a number of tourism operators that have various cooperative initiatives. Hence, it is possible to explore different social interactions within these cooperatives, and it is also possible to go in-depth into social relationships that emerge in the network and in the different cooperatives. This is explained by Onuf (2012), who argues that the paradigm of constructionism can be applied to all forms of social relations. As tourism operators in the network cooperate in a variety of ways it will be possible to identify diverse realities that emerge from their interactions as well. Hence, this study embodies social constructionism in the sense that it investigates tourism operators' experiences through their networks and cooperation, i.e., how they perceive their realities as social constructs. In this regard, this study is based on the premise that social capital, which is created through social interactions, plays a fundamental role in cooperation. Hence ecotourism cooperation is a social activity that generates value and allows stakeholders to establish valuable relationships.

4.2 Qualitative Design

This study applied a qualitative approach to the research design. As Creswell and Poth (2018) explains that qualitative approach is suitable for exploring issues or problems that require a deeper and more detailed understanding of a complex phenomenon. Creswell and Creswell (2018) point out what characterizes qualitative research. Among the characteristics of such research are natural setting, research as the key instrument, multiple sources of data, inductive and deductive data analysis, participants' meanings, emergent design, reflexivity, and holistic perspective. As a researcher, it is necessary to



visit participants in their natural settings, where they engage in cooperation and interact with each other. This was essential for the study since an understanding of how people interact, and exchange information within ecotourism cooperation is a central purpose of this study.

In terms of the qualitative research methodology, this study will follow a case study approach. Creswell and Poth (2018) define case study research as “a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (cases) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information... (p.96)”. As part of a case study, the investigator describes and analyzes a case or several cases in detail. Furthermore, Creswell and Poth (2018) explain several characteristics of case study research, which are applicable to this study. For instance, an important aspect of a case study is to identify the specific case such as a community, an individual, or an event, and to gather accurate information by studying current situations. So for this research, the specific case and location are Blekinge Archipelago and the tourism operators within this region, those who are members of the ARK56 network. Creswell and Poth (2018) highlight that a case can be identified based on a set of parameters. In terms of this study, the parameters are the ecotourism stakeholders and their involvement in different cooperation and networks, as well as the location that they operate in. Their perception of social relationships is also a crucial parameter due to it is linked to the concept of social capital and its attributes.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) clarify that qualitative research is also an emergent design, meaning that research questions and data collection might change during the research process. Therefore, it was important for this study to be open-minded to new information that might arise during the data collection process. As well as being reflective and holistic, qualitative research



aims to develop a broader picture of the subject, incorporating multiple factors that function together in a variety of ways (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Further, by applying a qualitative case study it is therefore possible to receive in-depth information concerning tourism cooperation and their social relationship in the ARK56 network. Through the application of case study research, the quality of social capital will be possible to identify as well as different forms of social capital. It is also necessary to conduct qualitative research to better understand how ecotourism cooperation and social capital might be impacted by the fact that the ecotourism stakeholders operate in a biosphere reserve. A qualitative design often involves several sources of data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), and in this case, interviews are the primary source of data. In particular, open-ended interviews were selected due to their ability to provide in-depth and rich information about tourism stakeholders' cooperation and social relationships. The interviews focused purposely on ecotourism stakeholders' cooperation and their social relations. Through the interviews, the aim was to learn more about the participants' perceptions of their social relationships across different cooperatives within the ARK56 network.

4.3 Research Setting

This research was conducted within the Blekinge Archipelago biosphere reserve which is located in the southeast of Sweden. In 2011, Blekinge Archipelago become designated as a biosphere reserve by UNESCO for its high and unique cultural and natural values. The reserve consists mainly of coastal zones and archipelago landscapes, and as part of the biosphere reserve, four municipalities are included, Karlskrona, Ronneby, Karlshamn, and Sölvesborg municipality (blekingearkipleag, n.d.). To enhance sustainable development and sustainable tourism in the region, Blekinge Archipelago developed a network of coastal trails throughout the biosphere reserve, called ARK56 (ark56, n.d.). The name ARK56 originates from the word archipelago,



but can also refer to the word ark, which means boat. The number 56 stands for the 56th latitude degree, at which Blekinge's outdoor trails and archipelago are located (visitblekinge, n.d. A). Through this initiative, the biosphere reserve can be explored by boat, kayak, bike, or on foot along the trails of ARK56 (ark56, n.d.). In addition to the network of coastal trails, ARK56 is also a network of over 80 tourism companies that provide outdoor and hospitality services. (visitblekinge, n.d. B). Members of the ARK56 network were initially involved in this study; however, additional stakeholders outside of this network were also contacted in order to gain their perspective on ecotourism cooperation in the biosphere reserve as well. Figure 1 below shows the whole ARK56 network. All the numbers represent the members, and who is an ecotourism operator, either provides outdoor activities or hospitality services.



Figure 1. The ARK56 Network (visitblekinge, n.d. B)

There is a wide variety of professional backgrounds among the tourism operators who participated in this study, as well as an even distribution of males and females. There are a few of them who have been in the tourism industry for a long time and possess a significant amount of experience, and there are others who have only been in the industry for a short period of time. Therefore there are demographical differences between the participants such



as age. In terms of their tourism businesses, the majority provide hospitality services such as dining and different kinds of accommodations including camping, hostels, and cottages. There are two participants that provide tourism activities and experiences such as kayaking and rib boating.

4.4 Data Collection

In order to gather relevant data that would provide answers to the research question, open-ended interviews have been selected as a method for data collection. Weller et al. (2018) explain that the purpose of open-ended interview questions is to explore a topic in detail, comprehend processes, and investigate the underlying causes of observed patterns. Thus, the interview guide included predetermined open-ended questions about cooperation and social relationships, allowing for further questions to be asked. Interviews within qualitative research are defined “as an interview, whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena” (Opdenekker, 2006, p.1). Because of this, the interviews provided valuable insight into ecotourism cooperation, and in turn, the quality of social capital, since participants could share their real-life experiences.

Moreover, the interviews were held face-to-face on Zoom, and two telephone interviews were conducted. It was possible to incorporate social cues into the interview process by conducting face-to-face interviews, which was not possible over the telephone. Opdenekker (2006) explains that in addition to verbal answers, social cues such as voice, tone, and body language can provide extra information. As long as permission was granted, the interviews were recorded, which is another advantage of interviews because accurate information can be obtained (Opdenekker, 2006). Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that qualitative interviews provide researchers with historical information and control over the questioning process, among other



advantages. The interview process began at the end of March, with the first interview being conducted on 28th March, and the remaining interviews were conducted throughout April. On 23rd April, the final two interviews were conducted. Since the interviews took place via Zoom and telephone, there is a certain limitation associated with them regarding the data collection. More comprehensive data could be gathered if the interviews were on site, and the observation could then be conducted as well to complement the information obtained through the interviews. As for the length of the interviews, they were intended to be approximately 30 minutes but ended up being longer in some cases and shorter in others. The interviews included questions regarding the tourism operators' different cooperation and network and important attributes for successful cooperation. Questions about their perceptions of social relationships and how the biosphere reserve has impacted their operation were also asked. For more detailed information about the questions, the interview guide can be found in Appendix B.

Code	Municipality	Type of tourism business	Member of ARK56	Job Title
Respondent 1	Karlshamn	Hospitality	Yes	Business owner
Respondent 2	Ronneby	Outdoor	Yes	Business owner
Respondent 3	Sölvesborg	Outdoor	Yes	Business owner
Respondent 4	Sölvesborg	Hospitality	Yes	Business owner
Respondent 5	Karlshamn	Hospitality	Yes	Employee
Respondent 6	Karlskrona	Hospitality	Yes	Business owner
Respondent 7	Karlshamn	Hospitality	No	Employee
Respondent 8	Ronneby	Hospitality	Yes	Business owner

Table 1. Codes of the Respondents (own table)



4.4.1 Sampling Method

As the aim is to obtain rich and in-depth data a snowball sampling method was conducted. Koerber and McMichael (2008) explain that such sampling techniques are a nonprobability method, and Gill (2020) asserts that snowball sampling is appropriate when current participants can recommend other relevant participants who are willing to contribute to the study. Using this kind of sampling strategy provided a practical process to reach out to relevant participants that cooperate in ARK56, it was also cost-efficient since the interviews were held through Zoom meetings and over the telephone. Due to the snowball sampling process, it was possible to obtain rich and detailed data about certain cooperatives within the ARK56 network. This was because several respondents were involved in different cooperative initiatives together.

In addition, it was appropriate to use a snowball sampling method for this research given that it allows the researcher to track networks and relationships among tourism stakeholders. It also allowed an inclusive analysis of tourism cooperation's social capital due to the fact that the respondents cooperate and belong to the ARK56 network. It was then possible to analyze their perception of social relationships and cooperation within the network. Therefore, it was necessary for the first participant to propose other tourism stakeholders to whom he or she cooperates, thereby gaining insight into their social network. Initially, the first participant was contacted by email, and after the first interview, other tourism stakeholders could be tracked down and contacted as needed. A request has also been made to tourism actors that do not cooperate to understand why they do not wish to do so. But very few responses were received. In spite of this, one participant responded to the study and was eligible to participate.

Consequently, the snowball sampling method was an appropriate approach given that the purpose of the study was to explore the cooperation between tourism stakeholders in the biosphere reserve. This sampling approach



provided an opportunity to connect with tourism stakeholders who cooperate within the research context. However, despite the low number of participants, it could still serve the purpose of the study since those in the ARK56 network are actively engaged and form a variety of cooperative relationships. Further, it is also worthwhile to acknowledge that snowball sampling is generally employed to locate or access certain populations that are difficult to find (Noy, 2007; Cohen & Arieli, 2011), which is broadly the opposite of what has been done in this study. As previously noted, a snowball sampling was suitable since it allowed access to tourism operators that cooperate, therefore it was necessary to ask respondents about their primary cooperators, in order to gain access to them. So in this context, the purpose of such a sampling procedure was to locate the cooperators of participants within ARK56. It is however noteworthy to recognize the limitations associated with snowball sampling. Cohen and Arieli (2011) argue that representativity is a main limitation and as a result, selecting bias can emerge as an additional limitation. Nevertheless, Noy (2007) stresses that snowball sampling is effective for investigating social networks, due to the fact that participants who are in possession of social capital, and who maintain both weak and strong relationships within their networks are much more likely to share and perform it with the researcher. A clear indication of this can be seen from the fact that the first participant recommended several cooperators in a positive manner.

4.5 Research Process

Because there are numerous members of ARK56 representing a wide range of tourism-related businesses, the network presents an interesting analysis considering its capacity to develop different ecotourism cooperatives. With the benefit of past experiences with Blekinge Archipelago and ARK56, it was a predetermined decision to conduct a case study of the ARK56 network. Therefore, personal contacts could be used to access the first respondent, who could then provide access to other respondents within the network. In order to



gain access to more tourism stakeholders, the first four respondents were asked to recommend others in their networks. However, as mentioned in the previous section, the data collection included open-ended interviews with tourism operators within the Blekinge Archipelago biosphere reserve and a primary focus on those within the ARK56 network. Through open-ended interviews, the respondents provided insight into their networks and perception of social relationships in different cooperation and the biosphere reserve influence on their businesses.

During the course of conducting this study, several quality criteria were assessed in order to ensure its quality. Chowdhury (2015) asserts that trustworthiness is the core of qualitative research. It is determined by four factors such as credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. As a way to ensure the credibility of this study, a qualitative research design with open-ended interviews was selected because it allows the collection of comprehensive data relevant to the research purpose. A description of social capital and ecotourism cooperation, and of past research was also conducted which contributes to the credibility of this study. Dependability refers to the consistency of the results of the study, implying that if another research repeats the exact same study, similar results may be obtained (Chowdhury, 2015). Therefore, a comprehensive description of the research process can support the claim of dependability of this study. Transferability refers to the extent to which the study's result might be applicable in different other contexts, situations, and settings. To ensure transferability, it is crucial to describe the phenomenon in detail to facilitate comparisons (Chowdhury, 2015). This was accomplished by providing a background of social capital and ecotourism cooperation within biosphere reserves in the introduction chapter. To ensure transparency with respect to the confirmability of the results, it is essential that research methods are clearly outlined, and faults are recognized (Chowdhury, 2015). Similar to the quality criterion of dependability, confirmability will be



achieved by an in-depth methodology chapter in which faults will be identified as well. By considering these four criteria, the quality of the study will increase.

4.6 Data Coding

To analyze the collected data a thematic coding has been applied to this study. Flick (2020) argues that thematic coding includes a method with the aim to find and identify recurrent patterns and themes within the data. In other words, it involves the interpretation of diverse aspects of research. Locke et al. (2022) elaborates that coding involves the process of carefully inspecting, collecting, and organizing the materials, and incorporating applicable theoretical aspects such as features and relationships into them. Since interviews have been conducted, the thematic coding assumes that the recollections of participants deserve the attention of a rigorous synthesis, analysis, and discussion (Lochmiller, 2021). To interpret the results of thematic coding, Lochmiller (2021) clarifies that there is a need for a clear and concise line of inquiry and a focus on patterns repeated within the dataset and finding similarities and differences. Furthermore, thematic coding was an appropriate coding method for the data because it allows the researcher to go in-depth into the data collection. As this is a study based on social constructionism, Kiger and Varpio (2020) asserts that thematic coding is beneficial since it can provide valuable insight by illustrating the development of certain social constructs. Additionally, different themes related to the purpose and the research question could be identified by analyzing a collection of experiences that reflect the social relationships embodied within the ARK56 network.

The transcripts were prepared after the interviews, which provided the foundation for the coding and analysis to follow. Flick (2020) claims the transcription must be based on the research question, and only include what is needed. The process of thematic coding occurred in six steps. Flick (2020) and Kiger and Varpio (2020) clarifies that these six steps include familiarizing with



the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. In the first step, the material was reviewed to gain an understanding of the data, and then color coding was applied in the second step in order to find the initial codes. In the below table are some examples of the codes that were identified and then translated into themes. This was done by identifying the characteristics of social capital within the responses that reflected trust, reciprocity, and network, and to interpret how these characteristics are applicable according to the respondents. In comparing different answers, codes such as trust, reciprocity, and perception of friendships within cooperation emerged.

Themes	Cooperation in ARK56	Social relationships
Codes	Trust	Friendships
Codes	Communication	Acceptance
Codes	Reciprocity	Openness

Table 2 Themes and codes (own table)

In order to identify statements that could be coded under various themes, it was necessary to use a systematic approach, and then all codes could be sorted into themes (Flick, 2020). So when the above codes were identified they were divided into common themes. The following three themes were identified: cooperation in the ARK56 network, the importance of cooperation in ecotourism, and social relationships within cooperation. These identified themes will be the basis for the result presentation.



4.7 Ethical Aspects

It is important to consider the ethics of those who participate in a study throughout the entire research process (Flick, 2020). In regard to the ethical aspects of social research, several ethical principles have been considered during the research process. As Flick (2020) enlightens, it is crucial to take into account ethical issues such as informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and data protection. This has been done through a prepared consent document, which was sent out to the participant who agreed to take part in this study. It included a consent form and an information letter about the study. During the interviews, the participants got acknowledged about the terms as well. The consent form can be seen in Appendix A.

Brinkman and Kvale (2015) underline several ethical issues associated with an interview inquiry. Through the interview phases including designing, interview situation, transcription, analysis, and verification, ethical aspects have been considered. In designing the interview, it was crucial to gain the respondents' informed agreement to participate. As an interviewer, it was important to be attentive and flexible regarding the topic since it might be a sensitive and personal issue. Brinkman and Kvale (2015) clarify that stress and changes in self-perception need to be considered as a consequence of the interview interaction. In the next phases of the transcription, it was vital that the transcript included the interviewee's actual statements, and that the confidentiality of the interviewee is protected (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). For the analysis, it was important as a researcher to consider the manner in which the respondents' statements were presented, and verification is the process of verifying the information and examining it critically (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). Flick (2020) emphasizes anonymity as a challenge while collecting the data, and before the interviews, the respondents were informed that they would remain anonymous. When respondents recommended other participants, they were asked if they wanted to remain anonymous or not.



The ethical implications of using the data have been considered. As Flick (2020) underlines, it is significant that the researcher does not include any personal judgments when analyzing the data. Similarly, Creswell and Creswell (2018) stress the importance of being cautious, not siding with the participants, and respecting the privacy and anonymity of participants when analyzing the results. They elaborate that for a researcher, taking a participant's point of view is relatively easy, which makes it easy to favor their perspective. Thus, they emphasize the need of remaining objective and avoiding taking sides. It is also important that the researcher include all the findings in the result, which Creswell and Creswell (2018) explains that the diversity of perspectives of participants is an important aspect of a good research study. During the process of engaging with the results and analyzing the information, all of these ethical considerations have been taken into account. The results have been processed with the precaution that the participants will remain anonymous and have also been acknowledged when analyzing and discussing the results.

4.8 Limitations

Several limitations have been acknowledged during the research process. Although the study covers tourism stakeholders that cooperate, it does not provide a comprehensive picture of the network as a whole and its social mechanisms, as it focuses primarily on one part of the network. Numerous efforts have been made to reach out to additional tourism operators, both those who are members of the ARK56 network and those who are not a member. Therefore, the low response rate was one limitation, and a possible explanation for it may be the season. In many cases, companies were preparing for the upcoming summer season or were about to open. Hence, they were too busy.

The reasons for whether certain companies choose not to cooperate may include their independence and their perception that the network is not suitable for them based on their location, for example. There were, however, attempts to locate stakeholders outside of the ARK56 network, but the results were very



limited. The purpose of contacting those outside the network was to gain their perspective on ecotourism cooperation and social relationships as well. In that case, it would be interesting to analyze the comparisons if a sufficient number of operators were represented. Hence, there was only one respondent from outside the ARK56 network who was able to participate in the study, which is an additional limitation. Thus it will be difficult to obtain a complete understanding of those stakeholders outside of the network. Moreover, as the response rate is low, it will be challenging to draw general conclusions about the ARK56 network and the social interactions among its members. However, it is likely that the analysis of the findings provided some insight into the network and the social relationships among the participants.



5 Result

In recognition of social capital's essential role in sustainable tourism development and cooperation between ecotourism stakeholders, social capital has been conceptualized as a means of conceptualizing tourism stakeholder relationships. Considering social capital as a factor influencing the development of sustainable ecotourism in biosphere reserves, it may be possible to discuss how the creation of these changes the local communities and relationships between stakeholders. Through the lens of social capital theory, the aim of this research is to examine how the quality of social relationships among ecotourism stakeholders influences local tourism cooperation within the Blekinge Archipelago Biosphere Reserve, especially members in the network of ARK56. For the purpose of answering the research question of this study, the findings of the interviews with ecotourism stakeholders who operate in the biosphere reserve will be presented in this chapter.

Based on bonding and bridging social capital three themes have emerged from the findings. The first theme identified is the importance of cooperation. As social capital contributes to successful cooperation, trust, and reciprocity were identified as important characteristics among the answers regarding cooperation's importance and benefits. The second theme is different kinds of cooperation since different types of social capital may be generated depending on the form of cooperation. As a result of social exchanges within cooperatives and in the ARK56 network, bonding and bridging social capital may be generated. Thus, the third theme identified is social relationships within cooperatives and ARK56.

Figure 2, which is shown below, indicates how the respondent relates to one another in terms of the different cooperatives. The connections are based on

the findings from the interviews, and it is worth noting that the respondents may have many more connections and cooperation. So the figure illustrates how the respondents cooperate with each other and therefore have different relationships with one another. Both kinds of arrows indicate that the respondents cooperate with one another.

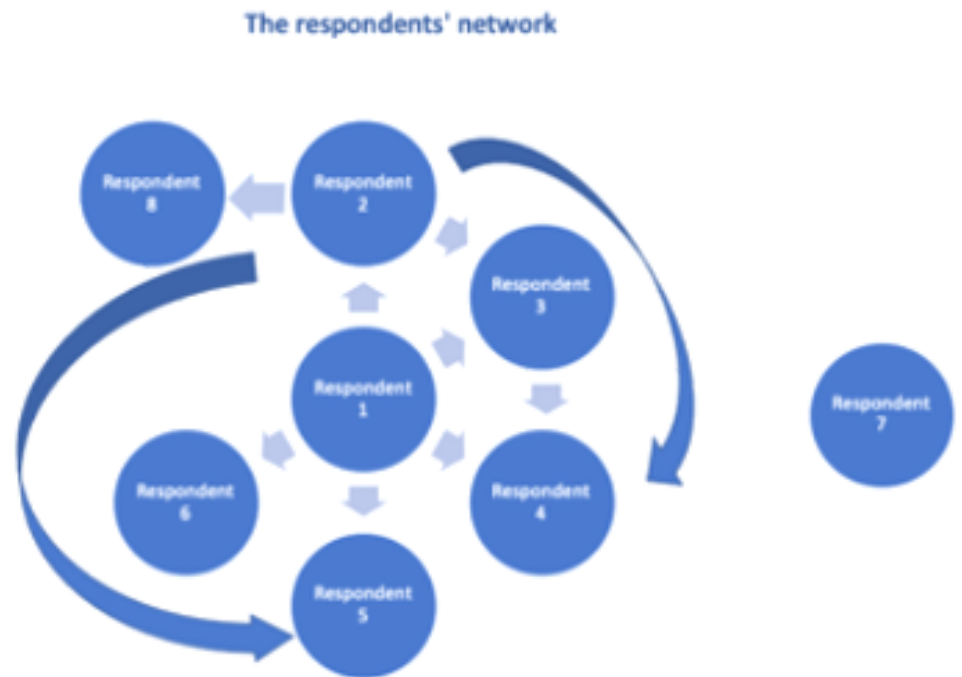


Figure 2 The respondents' network (own figure)

Worth highlighting, cooperation, as indicated by the findings, include for example the development of different types of tourism packages, or the establishment of cooperation with appropriate suppliers, or special arrangements. Given that the respondents have their businesses to attend to, it was found that most of their communications take place remotely. Cooperation could also mean support and exchange of information, for instance, those respondents with similar tourism businesses can assist and help each other concerning matters and issues that both operators are faced with. As two of the respondents run their business on an island, they are probably faced with



similar problems such as boat transportation and waste management, and can therefore exchange valuable information.

5.1 The Importance of Cooperation in ARK56

The majority of respondents believe that cooperation is crucial to the success of a tourism operator in Blekinge. Cooperation was also believed to be beneficial for all parties involved. For instance, as explained by Respondent 1 that increasing broader marketing opportunities are one of the benefits of cooperation, since " *the more who advertise Blekinge, it will favor everyone in the tourism industry*". So by cooperating, there will be broader marketing possibilities, and they can also promote each other through their different communication channels. Similarly, respondent 6 stated that by cooperating, it will be possible to attract more visitors and develop innovative strategies to attract new visitors. The exchange of knowledge and information that occurs during cooperation may lead to the development of innovative solutions that might increase the attractiveness of the area in which they operate. In addition, the social aspect of cooperation was also mentioned. For instance, Respondent 2 stated that it is beneficial to have a relationship with those you operate with, as it will be easier to call them when you know the person and their business. Therefore, a strong social bond with those with whom one cooperates may be considered to be an important characteristic among respondents since it facilitates communication and knowledge sharing. If there is trust, mutual reciprocity, and understanding, it will be easier to cooperate and achieve common objectives. Moreover, Respondent 5 explained that you will learn about your local environment by cooperating as well, so tourists want to stay longer in Blekinge, which will also benefit other businesses. Respondent 5 further explained that " *if you are by yourself, you will be quite vulnerable so by cooperating you attract an audience and each other*". As a result, it will be easier to create new cooperative initiatives when one participates in multiple forms of cooperation and networks.



Tourism operators that rely on cooperation claim that trust is a necessary trait for an exchange. According to Respondent 2, the quality of carefulness regarding their customers is also essential for cooperation, along with a dialog about certain things that don't work which is important as well. The Respondent 3 discussed the implications of the particular business and explained that certain adjustments are necessary to ensure that successful cooperation can be established with different actors. Additionally, the respondent clarified that *"I need trust from the actors to do what I want... and it goes both ways. A common benevolence and patience would I also say"*. Thus, this might suggest that both cooperators must understand one another in order for the cooperation to succeed and that both may benefit from the cooperation as well.

The importance of not seeing each other as competitors was mentioned by some respondents. Respondent 8 pointed out that *"you should not run competitive businesses although we are competitors. Because we do not see each other as competitors instead we are cooperators... and we try to offer other alternatives than our competitors offer"*. Similarly, Respondent 1 also stated that *"none of us see each other as competitors, instead we see each other as a complement to each other"*. Respondent 3, who is relatively new to the tourism industry, provided a similar description, that *"never met anyone who sees another actor as a competitor, but rather someone who wants to develop the area. The more people who visit Blekinge, the better it gets for everyone... there's that mentality"*. It may be considered beneficial that there is a strong sense of mutuality among the members, and that there is a willingness to cooperate. This mentality may also contribute to the establishment of a good cooperative environment, thus creating social capital as a result. With this understanding of the importance of cooperation, it could also be argued that a good balance exists between bonding and bridging social



capital. Because when collective action is most efficient both forms of social capital are present in a balanced way.

Respondent 4 brought up a good example of successful cooperation in their branch organization. Given the respondent's central role in this organization, emphasis was placed on achieving common understanding and unity with the public sector and other organizations of similar nature. The statement was as follows, " *it is important to stay united, so we don't get split in our branch organization. Because then it will be a strange message to the authorities, the state, and the media for example. One says this and one says that. Corona made it crucial to cooperate, and we had to follow the same regulations on all camping sites. We put out information to all of our members that this is how we should operate, and everyone followed that... In our branch, we were the only ones who did that...so this illustrates quite good the importance of a branch organization...and this was put on the line during corona, and it was done really well*". Respondent 4 meant with this statement that the occurrence of the corona pandemic tested their ability to come together and cooperate and that it resulted in good cooperation. It also illustrates the importance to cooperate during a crisis, and the fact that they cooperated effectively might indicate that they possessed bonding as well as bridging social capital. High levels of trust, norms, and reciprocity within the organization might have facilitated cooperation and coordination during that time. As these attributes are present in both bonding and bridging relationships they were equally represented as well considering the efficient cooperation.

It was found that the process of developing packages is very enjoyable among the respondents and that the management of ARK56 encourages its members to develop package deals that are in line with the concept of ARK56 coastal trails. There have even been instances in which some companies have developed three different packages as a result of a meeting with the



management, including different transportation options to enable travel between different locations. Respondent 2 explained that “*we have chosen to develop packages gradually, and we created the last packages after meeting with ARK56, where we were a few companies that meet, and there was a desire that we should develop a package that reflected ARK56, through the coastal trails and with different means of transportation...in the end, it resulted in three packages*”. This indicates creativity among these companies, that they feel enjoyment and inspiration to create attractive tourist experiences. In turn, a high level of social capital is present due to the creative environment that is formed by both the management of ARK56 and its members. With this in mind, the main cooperative activity within ARK56 is the creation of different forms of sustainable package deals. As the members offer different tourism services and experiences, the packages often include a form of accommodation and outdoor experiences such as kayaking, biking, or hiking, which incorporate sustainable travel throughout the biosphere reserve.

5.2 Forms of Cooperation in ARK56

In one section of the interview, the respondents explained their involvement in different tourism cooperation and networks. Given that most respondents are entrepreneurs with small tourism businesses, being part of ARK56 allows them to gain exposure to a wider network. This also allows them to establish relationships with other businesses in Blekinge. Through the ARK56 network, the respondents have been able to take part in several cooperation initiatives. For them, cooperation is crucial, and they complement each other since they offer different tourism services and experiences. For example, those with outdoor experiences cooperate with different hospitality operators in order to attract more visitors. Therefore, tourism cooperation is highly prevalent among the respondents, and many of them participate in local, regional, and national tourism networks. For instance, seven of the eight respondents are members of the ARK56 network, which are the regional network for tourism



operators in the biosphere reserve. ARK56 is also claimed to foster a high level of cooperation among its members within the biosphere reserve, which the respondent considers to be an advantage. It was also added that “*ARK56 is the link to the network, then we have created our own networks and meetings*”. Respondent 2 clarified that the biosphere reserve and Blekinge Archipelago have improved cooperation between municipalities, as well as the opportunity for tourism actors from all over the region to meet. For instance, respondent 1 has developed packages with Respondent 2 called “biosphere glamping”, which highlights the biosphere reserve.

Moreover, according to Respondent 1 who has only been working in the tourism industry for a few years, ARK56 was one of the first networks they joined because of its focus on sustainability. *Visit Blekinge*, according to Respondent 1, is an essential networking resource as well since it provides new contacts and educational opportunities. *Visit Blekinge* was also named by Respondent 7, who is not part of the ARK56 network, as their main cooperative partner, along with Karlshamn municipality. The reason they do not belong to ARK56 is that they believe they are too busy with their own operations, and there were also a variety of opinions within this company regarding whether to join. Furthermore, both Respondent 4 and 6 who owns camping sites are members of a regional network called *Camping Sydsost*, which is also affiliated with the region of Småland and Skåne. According to these tourism operators, this network provides a strong network among the camping sites in southeast Sweden, where they can assist each other with marketing and joint ventures. In this sense, their involvement in this network implies bridging social capital since they can assist one another across regional boundaries. The fact that they are faced with similar operational challenges allows them to form strong relationships as well, and in turn, foster mutuality and trust.



Respondent 5 indicated that their primary cooperation was with *STF, the Swedish Tourist Association*, which is a national association that they are part of, and they also work closely with Respondent 2. Since they have different types of tourism businesses and different offers, they develop package deals. So, from the perspective of Respondent 5, it could be claimed that they have a vertical bond with STF. Since it is a national network that is open, inclusive, and between different businesses and people, the members form weaker ties of thin trust, and in turn, generate bridging social capital among the members. In terms of their cooperation with Respondent 2, they have instead a horizontal bond since it is a closed cooperation just between the two companies. Respondent 5 indicated that they talk a great deal and not only about work issues, so it could be assumed that their cooperation generates bonding social capital, resulting in stronger ties of trust.

Additionally, Respondent 2 specified close cooperation with Respondent 8, since they are located in the same area, they have agreed on different settlements and are involved in some local associations as well. For instance, the ideal association *Järnavik Intresseförening*, which is a local association. This association consists of 14 members who live and work in the local area, in Ronneby municipality. As part of this association, there is a monthly meeting in which they discuss different issues related to the development of the area for both locals and tourists. Respondent 2 works with the rental of kayaks and is also involved in two additional local associations, *Järnaviks Skärgårdsförening*, and *Järnaviks Seglarsällskap*. As mentioned by the respondent, these associations are directly connected to their business, as they provide docks and boat berths. Respondent 2 explained that in agreement with Respondent 8, “*We have chosen to give each other’s customers 20% discounts, if we have one customer who rents a kayak and then wants to stay over at the accommodation they will receive a discount, and if they have one customer who wants to rent a kayak, they will also receive a discount*”. This



could indicate that there is mutual understanding and trust in the exchange. Because of their close cooperation and agreements, bonding social capital may be generated from their interaction, leading to a strong sense of trust and reciprocity.

Package deals are common joint activities among the respondents, and together, they develop different types of tourism packages. For the respondents who offer outdoor activities, this is an important aspect. For example, Respondent 3 said that *“My type of business is dependent on cooperation...in order to attract tourists we have to cooperate”*. As the respondent offers outdoor experiences, forming strong ties with other tourism operators such as those who provide hospitality services, could be considered a crucial aspect, as it is mainly through cooperation that the respondent can provide tourism experiences to a wider range of people. Hence, close cooperation might be beneficial as mutual trust and reciprocity can emerge, which are fundamental features of successful tourism cooperation.

In addition, Respondent 2 said that they cooperate with five to six other tourism businesses within the ARK56 network, and two of these companies are also participating in this study. Their combined efforts result in the development of different types of packages that include day trips, kayaking, and biking equipment as well as overnight stays and dining. These joint activities are based on local cooperation initiatives between different tourism operators as a means of providing more attractive tourism packages. For example, Respondent 1 who has an accommodation on an island in Karlshamn municipality, explained that they are currently doing a lot of package solutions with Respondents 3 and 4. As these operators offer different services, they are able to complement each other and develop attractive packages for tourists. Based on their variety of offers, they are also able to turn to one another in case of support. There is an indication that people with similar services can



provide valuable support to one another, while those with different offers are able to gain other types of assistance and exchanges. For instance, give insights into the tourism industry since there are respondents with years of tourism industry experience as well as those who are relatively new to the field. Considering that most of them are members of ARK56, their participation in the network will facilitate the exchange of information and support.

5.3 Social Relationships within Ecotourism Cooperation

Based on responses to the question about how respondents perceived friendship within their network, it appears that most of them agreed that friendship is an important aspect of work-related relationships. This might indicate that they possess a certain level of bonding social capital. Because bonding social capital is common among friends and colleagues, it is possible to assume that cooperation among the members of the ARK56 network fosters qualities such as trust and reciprocity, and in turn, leads to efficient cooperative initiatives. By identifying these characteristics, forms of social capital may be recognized.

As most respondents believed that friendships play a crucial role in ecotourism cooperation, and for example, Respondent 7 explained that *“it is like the base, and from there, you have understanding and all of these qualities...and that is also how business is run...because you have a good flow together and you can talk about things”*. Similarly, Respondent 1 described that *“we almost become a big family, you give and help each other...it is a fantastic network that is always there when you need it”*. In addition, Respondent 8 believed that *“friendships can emerge from a working-related relationship... although you don’t form friendships with everyone, you know that it is a work-related relationship at the basis... it is always relaxed”*. Respondent 3 also explained that *“good friendships can be established as a result of you simply talking more and cooperating more”*. As these statements indicate, a strong social bond is essential when one is involved in tourism cooperation, and it might even be



the foundation of cooperative initiatives. By having a good friendship with colleagues and cooperators, communication between them might be improved, as well as the effectiveness of the cooperative efforts. Since ARK56 is a professional network, the social relationships within it might reflect the respondent's preference for a relaxed and positive work environment, regardless of the direct connection to the work environment. Consequently, bonding social capital is the form of social capital that can be recognized based on the above assertions.

Moreover, besides friendship as a fundamental characteristic of cooperation, other qualities were also emphasized by the respondents. Communication, openness, trust, and reciprocity were among the findings. Respondent 8 explained that cooperation “*requires engagement, and also trust to one another, also it requires a lot of time, you put a lot of time on creating a good relationship*”. According to Respondent 4, friendship is a matter of acceptance and reciprocity by giving the example that, “*friendship is of course very important, but you cannot be friends with everyone, but you can have the dialogue that in a meeting have separated opinions or about a specific subject, and afterward, give each other a calp on the shoulder and accept each other's opinions*”. This might be related to factors that contribute to successful cooperation such as commitment, genuine participation, reciprocity, trust, and mutuality. Accordingly, the respondents are well aware of what it takes to cooperate and establish valuable relationships, and forming long-term relationships based on the above factors can also contribute to the development of sustainable tourism.

It was also highlighted that it is not possible to be friends with everyone, as Respondent 6 stated that “*it is a common “get to know you process”, with few people you have a simple work-related relationship with, while with others you can talk about everything with*”. The social relationship in this case depends



on how people connect to one another. If they feel like they are alike as individuals, stronger social ties might emerge resulting in bonding social capital, and if they are different, weaker ties will develop, resulting in bridging social capital.



6 Discussion

A discussion of the major findings and their implications for theory and past literature will be addressed in this following chapter. Firstly, the different cooperative initiatives within ARK56 will be discussed, and then forms of social relationships that exist in the network, important attributes for successful cooperation, and then ecotourism in the biosphere reserve will be discussed. Thereafter, the implications and limitations of the findings will be reviewed, and lastly, suggestions for future research will be presented.

6.1 Cooperative Initiatives in ARK56

Based on the findings, the quality of social relationships among tourism stakeholders influences ecotourism cooperation by contributing to the foundation of successful cooperation in a biosphere reserve. It is through the establishment of social relationships within ARK56 that both friendships and working relationships are fostered, which facilitates a cooperative environment. For instance, the respondents reported that belonging to ARK56 provides them with a sense of belonging and a place where they can exchange information and resources. It was also found that many respondents considered the ARK56 network as a crucial network for their operations, as they stated that it provides a broader network and new contacts. As a result of the network, ecotourism stakeholders were able to establish several new cooperative relationships with other members of the network. The fact that the majority of the respondents is member of ARK56, may indicate the importance of being part of a larger context for ecotourism operators, which Costa and Lima (2018) explain that the sustainability of tourism depends on cooperative relationships among diverse stakeholders. As explained by Oh et al. (2004), individuals who form cooperative relationships establish a network of independent social exchanges, which results in people becoming trusted exchange partners who can provide support and resources in times of need. It could then be argued



that members of ARK56 learn to trust one another as they become part of the network and that they eventually work together beyond their immediate friendship. ARK56 can be considered to be an example of such a network that fosters relationships based on trust and provides opportunities for members to exchange resources and support one another. The network provides its members with the opportunity to form cooperative relationships with one another that reaches beyond friendship between individual members. The members value the working environment that has been established and the ability to access resources and support from Blekinge Archipelago. Therefore ARK56 is an important and valuable network for the members and their respective tourism businesses. Similarly, Bouças da Silva et al. (2023) found that a tourism network is a social system that is built on mutual benefits and trust as a core asset of social exchange. As a result of repeated positive interactions and the building of mutual gains, trust in the relationship gradually built over time, reinforced by the prospect of future business benefits or valuable business connections.

It is further significant to emphasize that with a large number of members, the ARK56 network fosters cooperation throughout the region of Blekinge. Since one respondent explained that the network has promoted cooperation among the members, which has resulted in increasing cooperative initiatives, and across the municipalities as well. This was something that Hwang and Stewart (2017) found. Individuals who are involved in tourism activities and have a positive relationship with tourism development officials will increase their cooperative efforts. Thus, tourism operators in ARK56 have increased their cooperative endeavors with other tourism stakeholders in different municipalities. There is also a common understanding among the respondent that cooperation is crucial because operators become quite vulnerable if they are by themselves. Thus, by cooperating, tourism businesses will be able to attract tourists and also facilitate the development of new partnerships. Hence,



it becomes apparent that cooperation fosters more cooperation, and creative arrangements and package deals.

Furthermore, it is widely understood that networking among tourism actors is crucial to sustainable tourism, for instance, Albrecht (2013) and Graci (2013) claim that sustainable tourism requires cooperation among diverse tourism actors. However, as there is one representative from outside the network, it could be explored why they choose not to get involved in such a network as AKR56. Their decision not to participate in the network may have been influenced by the fact that they already offer complementary services, such as accommodation and dining, and that sustainability is a central objective for their business. With this in mind, it might be interesting to consider why tourism companies join regional networks in the first place. For instance, the geographical location or the number of employees might impact their decision to join or not. For those actors located in the archipelago who tend to feel isolated from other tourism operators, it was found that they believed that ARK56 is essential for their business since the network provides a sense of belonging to a broader collective. In contrast, those outside the network are located more centrally near a city, and therefore might not feel the same need to belong to a broader collective. Notably, the number of employees is diverse among the tourism actors. Few are independent entrepreneurs, while others, like those with a camping site, have a large number of employees, particularly during the summer months. There cannot be a definitive conclusion on whether this has a particular impact on their involvement in the network, but independent actors may be more dependent on cooperative relationships, which ARK56 facilitates. As a consequence, the likelihood of them joining the tourism network is higher.

As the majority of respondents have acknowledged the importance of networking and cooperating with one another, it has resulted in different kinds



of cooperation. They also acknowledged that it is beneficial for them as tourism operators to create a win-win situation for one another. A cooperative norm can be argued to have emerged within ARK56 given the importance of cooperation among the members. In accordance, Costa and Lima (2018) emphasized that the creation of a win-win situation is vital for successful ecotourism cooperation and that everyone can benefit from the cooperation. Similarly, Wagner and Fernandez-Gimenez (2009) found that the most successful cooperation involves individuals who have never worked together before, since they argue that these people possess significant social capital as a result of a high level of trust, reciprocity, norms, and quality of connections in their networks. This, however, was not the explanation provided by the respondents. The importance of a good working relationship was claimed to be the foundation of cooperation among the respondents. It was generally agreed that a working relationship can result in friendship. As one respondent explained, if you are friends with your colleagues and cooperative partners, other beneficial qualities can emerge from the relationship such as open communication, understanding, and trust and support for each other. This might be explained by Saz-Gil et al. (2021) who elaborates that it is common for cooperative members to form friendships. Thus, there is a greater tendency for members to rely on relational contracts rather than formal regulations, which means that sanction is less likely to be imposed. As such, the establishment of trust becomes an essential factor among the members.

6.2 Bonding and Bridging Social Capital in ARK56

ARK56 is known to foster cooperation among its members and because they have over 80 members, there are various cooperative efforts. Based on the results, it appears that respondents have different levels of engagement within their networks and perceptions regarding the nature of social relationships. As a regional network, it is beneficial for the members to be part of, as it provides a larger network of contacts and more cooperation opportunities. Since each



respondent has their unique tourism offer, cooperating and developing package deals is a valuable resource. However, it was found that the network is solely used for work purposes according to one actor, and work and personal activities are kept separate. It is therefore clear that while some respondents experience strong social relationships with others in the network, other respondents may experience weaker social relationships but stronger professional relationships. It can therefore be discussed that both bonding and bridging social capital may be present in the ARK56 network. Bonding social capital can be generated through cooperative initiatives and close working relationships. While bridging social capital might emerge between those operators who are located in different municipalities and have a more inclusive and open relationship and cooperative.

One respondent stressed that not everyone is actively engaged in the network and that it is mostly the same actors who meet regularly in the network. Consequently, those who regularly meet can build strong social ties, thus increasing their bridging social capital. On the other hand, those who do not regularly participate in network events will likely form weaker ties of social capital. Nevertheless, Mascardo et al. (2017) consider tourism as a tool for bridging social capital, since it allows local groups to connect with other groups outside their own group. Tourism can also generate bonding social capital, for instance, in the way communities develop public spaces for social interaction among residents. As explained by Wegner et al. (2010), social capital is considered a key component of sustainable tourism, and building social capital through cooperation is an integral part of promoting sustainable tourism (Hall, 1999; Karnel, 2005; Graci, 2013). In this case, both forms of social capital are necessary for ARK56, as the bonding social capital within the network contributes to commitment among members, while the bridging social capital contributes to the ability to act and form cooperative relationships.



Another clear indication of bonding capital within the ARK56 network was that the members within ARK56 is like a family where they give and help each other, and the network is viewed as a valuable resource since it provides support whenever you need it. In accordance with Putnam (1993), friends and colleagues have strong internal relationships, and therefore generate bonding social capital, and Claridge (2018) adds that friendships is the most common type of bonding social capital. Among those members who are located in the same area have the potential to be linked by bonding social capital as well. If they are involved in ARK56 and other common local initiatives, it can be assumed that these actors have a closer relationship that facilitates joint projects. This could be supported by the study of Hwang and Stewart (2017), who found that if residents are involved in tourism associations it can encourage other residents to participate as well. Hence, social capital will be enhanced between tourism operators and the residents within the association and in turn contribute to the collective performance towards sustainable development. This can also be said about the respondent who is not a member of ARK56. Instead, they have a closer relationship with the regional tourism association and the municipality, as well as the local community. In this regard, they form social capital through these connections, and by joining different events arranged by the municipality, they foster social capital and create stronger bonds with the local community. Additionally, it is possible that this is the reason they are not part of ARK56, since they may already have such strong ties within the company. This is aligned with Agnitsch et al. (2006) notion of embeddedness, which is a form of bonding social capital and occurs among members of closely associated groups.

Moreover, a further indicator of bridging social capital is the fact that ARK56 members cooperate across municipal boundaries and assist each other with different tourism and operational concerns. This is in line with the findings of Jakobsen and Lorenzen's (2015) research. They argued that the bridging social



capital was stronger among actors who had long geographical distances between them. This can be further supported by Tichá and Farsari's (2020) study, which found that destination with strong bridging social capital is more willing and interested in tourism development. Hence, it could be argued that the ARK56 network is a beneficial platform for bridging social capital to be generated at a regional level. In addition, Saz-Gil et al. (2021) describe that cooperatives must maintain enduring and long-term relationships with other cooperatives in order to build bridging social capital.

It was also found that some respondents support one another and exchange information without establishing distinct cooperation, while others cooperate and work together on several ecotourism initiatives. This is similar to what Soulard et al. (2018) found, who argue that tourism stakeholders from a variety of industries, such as hospitality and outdoor tourism, have an increased potential for generating bridging social capital when they cooperate. This could explain the social relationship within ARK56, as the majority of cooperation within ARK56 involved tourism companies that offer complementary services, so they developed a variety of activity and accommodation packages. ARK56 could therefore be characterized by bridging social capital. This might also be explained by Jakobsen and Lorentzen (2015), who found that tourism stakeholders who have similar businesses, and are involved in networks such as branch organizations or associations, are able to form bridging social capital due to their geographical distance. While tourism businesses located in the same area, are more likely to form bonding social capital, for instance within their local associations and cooperatives. However, this local social relationship can also indicate a level of bridging social capital, as their cooperation allows them to share common goals and ideas, which Murzyn and Dzialek (2013) and Claridge (2018) explains generate bridging social capital. In addition, Jones (2005) elaborates that ecotourism operators who cooperate share the belief that they can achieve



more together than they can individually, therefore they become capable to accomplish compatible and shared objectives. Similarly, Rodriguez-Giron and Vanneste (2019) concluded that social capital serves as a means to mobilize other resources towards common goals either positively or negatively. They also found that tourism operators recognize the importance of developing cooperative initiatives and making resources available through networks, trust, and collective action to accomplish their development goals rather than acting independently. This is consistent with the findings, given that ecotourism operators recognize the importance of cooperating with one another and establishing valuable working relationships. To ensure the success of tourism, they further believe that cooperation is essential.

There is a common debate in tourism studies regarding which form of social capital is most beneficial and necessary. According to Claridge (2018), bridging social capital is perceived as a more valuable form of social capital than bonding since bonding social capital is associated with more negative outcomes such as exclusion. In this particular case, however, one can claim that neither type of social connection is a negative form of social capital since it might depend on which operational level of the cooperation or network. Accordingly, it may be argued that bonding and bridging social capital are equally important and must be balanced to yield maximum benefit and to ensure positive outcomes, which are supported by Claridge (2018). As an ecotourism operator, it might be essential to possess bonding social capital in cases of local cooperation, and on a regional level, or even on a national, bridging might be more beneficial. In a community where the tourism actors operate, it is favorable to have bonding social ties with residents and other actors, because ecotourism aims to make as little negative impact on the socio-cultural and natural environment as possible. Therefore it is beneficial to have good relationships with residents and other businesses when engaging in ecotourism cooperatives.



6.3 Attributes of Effective Cooperation

In terms of the attributes of social capital, trust, and reciprocity were found to be essential for successful cooperation, which is similar to what both Bouças da Silva et al. (2023) and Pesämmaa and Hair Jr (2008) found in their studies. When forming good cooperative relationships based on trust and mutual understanding with other tourism operators, commitment and investment were also considered important factors, and the respondents also believed that friendships could emerge from a working relationship. This also indicates that strong social relationships such as bonding social capital can emerge within the network. McGehee et al. (2010) emphasize that social capital can create constraints for small tourism companies and point out the risk of strong bonding social capital. In cooperatives where there is a strong sense of bonding social capital, members might lack creativity as they may be too exclusive and self-orientated, and Soulard et al. (2018) found that in networks where members are too closely bound internally, excessive bonding capital could lead to an insular situation. However, in this case, a significant advantage of being a member of ARK56 is that it facilitates the development of social relationships among the respondents. Therefore it is reasonable to state that despite the social bonds that are formed within this network, tourism operators are not constrained by them. Rather, they are inspired by them, which increases their creativity to form new cooperative initiatives with a focus on the biosphere reserve and sustainability. This may be supported by Saz-Gil et al. (2021), who found that cooperatives based on trust and social norms encourage members to develop new social networks, thereby facilitating the establishment of new enterprises as well. It is also evident from the fact that ARK56 is a popular network among tourism companies, as it gains more members annually. Considering that Sölvesborg has recently become a part of the biosphere reserve, additional members may join ARK56 that are located within the municipality.



According to Mascardo et al. (2017), trust is established within ecotourism cooperation through positive interactions, regular and required meetings, mutual interdependence, reciprocity, and respect. The fact that one respondent explained that ARK56 arranges meetings where tourism actors can meet and create new relations might indicate that trust is generated from these meetings. Another indicator of mutual interdependence and reciprocity within the network is that several of the respondents explained the importance of not running competitive businesses. As asserted by Zee and Vanneste (2015), a network that can create a balance between competition and cooperation, can maximize their performance, which in turn is beneficial for both individual actors and for the destination. However, it was clarified that no one in ARK56 perceives another as a competitor, instead there is a mentality that they complement each other. Therefore, it is possible to claim that based on this mindset, there is a sense of mutuality and reciprocity within the network, which will then generate stronger social capital that facilitates cooperation. Karnel (2005) and Graci (2013) elaborate that as long as tourism operators maintain mutual trust and reciprocity, their cooperative efforts will contribute to the development of social capital, which enables sustainable tourism. The fact that there is a mentality among members of the ARK56 network, that they complement each other rather than compete may indicate a strong sense of reciprocity. The development of ecotourism can then be built upon this foundation and facilitate cooperation as well. In this regard, the network of ARK56 has a central role towards its members to promote and encourage cooperation as well as long-term partnerships, which is also important to foster sustainable tourism.

6.4 Ecotourism in the Biosphere Reserve

Because ecotourism stakeholders are located in a biosphere reserve, it is important to consider the effects that the designation of this biosphere reserve may have on their cooperation. Many respondents agreed that the biosphere



reserve has a positive impact on their operations, as sustainability is a crucial part of their businesses. For instance, among those respondents who operate in Sölvesborg municipality, one believed that since the municipality recently joined the Blekinge Archipelago biosphere reserve, it will certainly increase sustainability awareness among authorities and other stakeholders. On the other hand, the other respondent explained due to their past focus on sustainability it was not a significant change. However, the importance of not overexploiting the environment was also highlighted, which reflected the increased awareness of sustainability (Ishwaran & Persic, 2008). This can be explained by the fact that those operators who have been involved in the tourism industry for many years have been incorporating sustainability into their business before Blekinge Archipelago was designated.

The Blekinge Archipelago biosphere reserve has provided many positive outcomes for the ecotourism actors, such as the ARK56 network and educational opportunities regarding sustainable tourism development. It was found that the majority of the respondents have incorporated the biosphere reserve into their businesses in the way they promote it on their websites as well as developing new package agreements with a focus on the biosphere reserve. In this regard, one can argue that the biosphere reserve has inspired ecotourism operators to cooperate more sustainably and develop their businesses in accordance with its objectives. As Bouamrane et al. (2016) emphasized, the occurrence of sustainable development goals and increased focus on social sustainability such as education and community engagement has resulted in improved cooperation and effective communication among actors within and beyond national borders. Hence, in broader terms, assumably the biosphere reserves around the world foster bridging social capital since there are dialogues and exchanges across nations. From more of a local perspective, the biosphere reserve has influenced the respondent's ecotourism



cooperation in the way it encourages cooperation as well as provides educational opportunities.

According to Hoppstadius (2019), ecotourism is becoming increasingly important in enhancing sustainability in biosphere reserves, requiring cooperation among tourism stakeholders, and thus the social relationship between them becomes crucial. Overall, ARK56 creates a conducive environment for members to engage with one another and form valuable relationships while focusing on ecotourism and sustainability. According to the research, ecotourism operators know the importance of cooperation as it provides a variety of benefits. Additionally, several authors have argued that cooperation enhances a destination's competitive position, such as Czernek (2012), and Jones (2005) maintains that cooperation is one of the key aspects within a network. Within ARK56, there is a mutual understanding of the complementary effects that ultimately lead to cooperation between the members, as well as encouragement from the management of ARK56. Given that they operate within a biosphere reserve, sustainability becomes a critical consideration for all stakeholders involved with ecotourism. Thus, the social relationships among the members, which are based on mutual reciprocity and trust, facilitate sustainable cooperative efforts within the biosphere reserve.

Poder (2011) refers to horizontal ties, which are generated through participation in local associations. A few of the respondents explained that they are involved in different local associations, where they can discuss different development matters in monthly meetings. It may be argued that, by participating in such associations, horizontal ties are established, and features such as reciprocity norms are formed, which facilitate trust, exchanges, and cooperative efforts. So, participating in activities with local residents facilitates the development of ecotourism, which Wildan et al. (2016) consider a key aspect of ecotourism. This could be aligned with Hoppstadius and



Sandel's (2018) study, which found that a network of ecotourism operators in a biosphere reserve was able to increase sustainable development by focusing on local living conditions among small tourism businesses. This could be further explained by Lyon et al. (2017), who argue that there is an emotional connection between tourism operators and the natural environment and the local community. Ecotourism operators can therefore create positive changes in their communities due to their close relationship with the local community and their environmental commitment. Ultimately, ARK56 and the biosphere reserve positively impact and influence tourism stakeholders and their businesses, as well as the social relationships among its members. By providing opportunities for education on sustainable development and sustainable packaging, ecotourism operators can develop sustainable businesses and cooperative relationships, which contributes to the development of ecotourism and sustainable cooperation within the biosphere reserve.

In summary, Blekinge Archipelago, which oversees ARK56, encourages its members to cooperate in developing packages that reflect its concept. Assuring that it is feasible to travel from one location to another by different means of transportation, such as bicycle, kayak, or by foot along the coastal trails. Based on the findings, members of ARK56 have for instance developed three sustainable activity packages including a four-day package, following a meeting with the network, during which they were encouraged to cooperate. The efficiency of these cooperatives' emergence might be explained by Jones (2005), who argues that throughout social cooperative relationships, social capital is produced, which contributes to individual confidence in the decision to invest in ecotourism cooperatives. A higher level of social capital is therefore believed to be associated with better protection of the environment. The attributes of trust and reciprocity are vital to cooperative relationships since they reduce the need for monitoring (Jones, 2005). In the context of the



biosphere reserve, this would then mean that cooperation among the tourism stakeholders in ARK56 might possess a high level of social capital since they can develop different forms of cooperative initiatives. Through these initiatives, they are then able to build stronger working relationships which may lead to additional initiatives in ecotourism. It is also possible to argue that there exists a high level of trust between Blekinge Archipelago and ARK56 members, since the operators design packages based on the concept of ARK56 coastal trails, and the operators are also inspired to develop additional packages on their initiatives.

Agreed to Saz-Gil et al. (2021), who argue that the relationship between social capital and cooperation is a two-way relationship, meaning that to foster social capital cooperation is essential, and for successful cooperation, levels of social capital are needed. In terms of the ARK56 network, the members can create valuable working relationships through meetings with the network, thus building social capital which results in different cooperation efforts. By doing so, social capital will be enhanced within the cooperatives. It could therefore be argued that first bridging social capital is formed, and then bonding social capital can be established, which strengthens the social relationship. So the more network members cooperate, the stronger their social connections will be. Consequently, these findings of the research will contribute to the understanding of the importance of acquiring both bonding and bridging social capital, as both contribute to effective cooperation. Based on the findings of this study, the social capital theory is supported by the fact that social exchanges among tourism operators facilitate trust, reciprocity, and networks that enable cooperation and coordination and that various types of social relationships can be beneficial when promoting cooperative activities in a biosphere reserve.



6.5 Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

The findings of this study revealed that there are different types of social relationships within ecotourism cooperation and important attributes associated with successful cooperation. It could be argued that the findings provide new evidence that supports the existing theory regarding social capital and its attributes. As different forms of social relationships such as bonding and bridging social capital could be identified, the findings support Putnam's (1993) theory of social capital. The attributes of social capital could be recognized as well which supports the theory, as it was found that these attributes facilitate cooperation and coordination among the respondents. The findings of this study have also been consistent with the cooperation theory regarding the importance of cooperation in tourism since the findings indicate for instance, that open communication and trust play a fundamental role in effective cooperation.

As mentioned throughout the paper and what the results indicated, cooperation among tourism operators is essential to achieve sustainable tourism development. Therefore, in practice, it is essential to understand each other to form a cooperative and maintain a reciprocal and trusting relationship. To establish a successful cooperative relationship, these attributes and qualities need to be considered regardless form of social relationship. The associated risk of bonding social capital needs to be understood. When a cooperative has more bonding than bridging, there is a risk of becoming too inward-looking and exclusive. There are, however, no distinctive effects of bridging, so establishing a balanced between these two forms of social capital is essential for efficient cooperation among ecotourism stakeholders.

It may be worth addressing the cooperative norm that is found to be established among the members in ARK56. According to Bouças da Silva et al. (2023), there is a certain risk of establishing too many business ties within a network.



The risk is that there is a tendency to undermine trust if there are too many business ties among ecotourism operators. Thus, the question can be addressed of how many cooperation initiatives should be made before a negative effect is observed. In this case, members of ARK56 establish different kinds of working relationships, and most cooperative initiative occurs among the same members. Because their relationship is based on bonding social capital, the trust may instead increase between them. The other type of social relations within the network is based on bridging social capital as the members of the network help each other and exchange information and resources with one another. In this regard, it is worth considering the significance of trust within a tourism network. The question arises if trust can be viewed as a risk or if it can be regarded as a core element of the success of a cooperative. As both forms of social capital play an important role within AKR56, it can be argued that a balance between different forms of social relationships is crucial to the maintenance of a sufficient level of trust.

Furthermore, this study exhibited similarities with previous literature on successful ecotourism cooperation in biosphere reserves that could be attributed to their transferability. Given the unique nature of ARK56, which was developed based on the biosphere reserve guidelines concerning sustainable tourism and aims to bring together tourism operators to cooperate and develop sustainable tourism, the findings of this research confirm Hoppstadius and Sandell's (2018) study. As they find that ecotourism operators could increase their sustainable development by focusing on local living conditions among small tourism businesses. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that ARK56, in combination with the biosphere reserve, is a network that focuses on local tourism businesses and facilitates ecotourism development aligned with the biosphere reserve's objectives. Given the similarity between the previous study and this study, the results may apply to other biosphere reserves. Assumably, as this study has indicated on social



relationships among ecotourism stakeholders in a biosphere reserve, the result can be considered to be limited to such a research setting. However, ARK56 provides a good example of how cooperative relationships can be developed between tourism stakeholders at the local, and regional levels. As such, the way they form working relationships and develop cooperative initiatives could therefore be transferred to other settings where tourism stakeholders cooperate locally and regionally for the purpose of achieving sustainability.

Considering that the study represents a small number of ARK56 network members, the findings provided insights into the social relationships within the group. It may, however, be argued that it is not sufficiently supported and might be considered a limitation of the study, since it may not be representative enough. A similar limitation includes the fact that the findings did not provide any conclusive information about the tourism operators outside the ARK56 network. As a representative of those who are not part of the network, one respondent provided some valuable insights, although additional research is necessary to gain a broader understanding.

As the results of the study did not offer any understanding regarding which particular action contributes to the realization of certain attributes and cooperative behavior. Hence, additional questions could be asked to understand these mechanisms, and it would require another research approach. For instance, future research might investigate how trust is established among tourism operators or how norms are formed in specific cooperation initiatives. Since trust is a fundamental condition for cooperation and an indicator of social capital, it could be investigated further to understand how this quality is established within a specific cooperative. Since this study did not include how the attribute of social capital arises within ecotourism cooperation, further research could include another research approach that can provide a more comprehensive data collection. To reach a large network of tourism



stakeholders, such as ARK56, a qualitative and quantitative approach may be employed in a future study to ensure adequate representation. A separate study should also include those operators outside a network such as ARK56 and investigate those factors or reasons why tourism companies do not cooperate with other tourism companies.



7 Conclusion

Based on the analysis of social relationships within ecotourism cooperation, it was found that good working relationships based on trust and reciprocity, facilitate efficient cooperation within the ARK56 network. Ecotourism operators place a high value on cooperating and networking and recognizing the importance of such initiatives among tourism stakeholders. Considering that they offer a variety of tourism services and experiences, they know that it is beneficial to work together as it facilitates the development of tourism products that will attract visitors. As social capital has been applied as a theoretical lens for conceptualizing social relationships within different cooperation within the ARK56 network, various types of social relationships and attributes contributing to their success have been identified. Firstly, as ARK56 offers its members a regional network that allows them to participate in a larger context and form work-related relationships, it contributes to bonding and bridging social capital. It has been established that members who are actively involved can form stronger bonds with each other and can create mutual trust and reciprocity, which facilitates cooperation and coordination among them. In this sense, bonding social capital is generated and they can also develop different cooperative initiatives together. Such relationships benefit ecotourism cooperation in the biosphere reserve. For instance, in one cooperative, they promote the biosphere reserve through tourism packages, such as biosphere glamping. As this illustrates an example of bonding social capital, it also poses the question of what specific actions within cooperation that creates trust or a sense of reciprocity within such cooperation.

Secondly, bridging social might be generated among those members who are actively involved in ARK56 but do not develop a specific cooperative initiative. They form bridging social capital in the way they share knowledge and information and support each other. Through ARK56, the members have



adopted a complementary mentality rather than a competitive approach. This could explain the fact that there has been increased cooperation among the members, both within municipalities and between municipalities. The quality of social relationships among tourism stakeholders plays a significant role in determining the success of ecotourism cooperation. The positive attitude among tourism operators towards cooperation, along with the social relationships formed as a result of ARK56, suggest there is a good balanced between bonding and bridging given the efficiency of their cooperation. Tourism operators value good working relationships, and some of them have developed close friendships as well, which implies the presence of bonding social capital. This is also evident from the fact that the ARK56 network inspires and encourages cooperation among its members. This, in turn, has resulted in positive cooperative initiatives throughout the network.

Social relationships of bonding social capital facilitate social support in cooperative groups where people possess similar characteristics. It was found that ARK56 is an important factor in terms of the social aspect of cooperation. Thus, these types of relationships facilitate social exchanges, norms, and trust among members of ARK56, which facilitates the implementation of cooperative initiatives. Social relationships based on bridging social capital, on the other hand, may facilitate the increased capability to gather information and identify new opportunities. Given the members' diverse experiences in the tourism industry and the fact that they provide a wide range of tourism services and experiences, they can assist one another with their specific expertise in tourism. Besides ARK56, several tourism operators are involved in other networks through which information can be exchanged and shared. Consequently, social relationships based on bridging social capital facilitate ARK56 members with access to a variety of information sources.



As a result of this research, an understanding of social relationships within ecotourism cooperatives has been developed, as well as the importance of maintaining a good relationship with cooperative partners, as this is the key to ensuring success in ecotourism cooperation in a biosphere reserve. The results also provided insights into the benefits of belonging to a regional network such as ARK56, as it offers a greater network of contacts and a feeling of belonging to a broader context. Since they operate within a biosphere reserve that encourages cooperation among tourism stakeholders to promote sustainable tourism development, it has resulted in a variety of cooperative initiatives by tourism operators. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that ARK56 fosters trust, norms, and reciprocal relationships among its members, which in turn, facilitate cooperation in the biosphere reserve.



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9 Appendix

9.1 Appendix A: Informed Consent

Title: The influence of local social capital on stakeholders' cooperation within UNESCO biosphere reserve

Interviewer: Caroline Hammerfeldt, ch223dm@student.lnu.se

Supervisor: Marianna Strzelecka, marianna.strzelecka@lnu.se

I am a graduate student in Tourism and Sustainability at Linnæus University in Kalmar, and I currently working on my master thesis. My research project explores social relationships within the framework of ecotourism cooperation in the Blekinge Archipelago Biosphere Reserve. I will therefore conduct a case study of ecotourism operators and local participation in ecotourism activities in Karlshamn municipality. All participants work or live within Karlshamn municipality and have a connection to ecotourism activities in the biosphere reserve. There are one or a few collaborations among the participants, either local or regional cooperation. Through these collaborations, I will explore social capital and the various forms of social relationships within a group and across collaborations, e.g., internal relationships within a group and external relationships between collaborations. Considering the biosphere reserve context, I am also interested in examining how the designation impacts the quality of social capital in tourism cooperation. So, the study is expected to include approximately 10-15 respondents who will participate in in-depth interviews.

When you consent to participate in the study, I will ask open-ended questions concerning your cooperation and network involvement. In the end, I will ask if you have any other contacts in your network who might be interested in



participating in this study. Your decision to participate in this study is entirely voluntary, and if you choose to enroll, you can withdraw at any time. The interview will take approximately 30 minutes.

You will remain anonymous throughout the entire process. All the data collected during the interview will be transcribed and stored and will be removed after the analysis has been completed. Once the interview is recorded, you can request to exclude or erase some parts. The data collected will only be used for the purpose of this master thesis, nothing else.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this research project:

Yes

No

I understand that I will be given a copy of this signed Consent Form

Name of Interviewer (Print): Caroline Hammerfeldt	
Signature:	Date:
Name of Participant (Print):	
Signature:	Date:



9.2 Appendix 2: Interview Guide

- Will you tell me a little bit about your company and your work environment?
What do you do?
- What kind of tourism related cooperation are you involved in?
 - Can you tell me more about that. How long have you been doing this?
How did it start and how is it going now?
 - Do you need to adapt your company in order to be a part of the partnership?
- How would you describe your cooperation in tourism in the area?
 - What made you decide to join these collaborations?
 - 4.2 What challenges have you experienced in regard to tourism cooperation in the area?
 - How do the different networks you are part of connect?
 - 4.4 How are these networks managed? Do they have a structure of management?
- In your opinion, what makes cooperation work?
- How do you relate to others in your professional network in terms of friendship?
- What kind of benefits do you get from cooperating with others?
- How has biosphere reserve changed the ways you work with your business?
Can you give an example?
- How has the biosphere reserve affected local cooperation between different stakeholders?
- How are people and other companies in your community involved in cooperation?
- Before we end, do you have anything to add concerning what we just talked about?
- Can you recommend other participants for this study? Someone in your collaboration or network that are willing to be part of this study.
- Thank you for participating. Can I contact you again if I have any further questions or need further clarification?