AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO CONTEMPORARY RURAL IDENTITIES: THE CASE OF TOURISM FARMS IN SOUTH-EAST ESTONIA

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ABSTRACT
We focus* on how tourism farmers use the potential of their living environment, consisting of both cultural and natural elements, for designing and mediating certain affordances for activities that can be performed in their farms. From the ecological perspective this living environment, perceived through the set of everyday and tourism related activities, may become an important part of individual rural identities of the tourism farmers in Rõuge and Haanja municipalities in Võru County, south-east Estonia. We analyse different activities practised in tourism farms, related to particular environments as "taskscapes" and show how these "taskscapes" participate in the formation of contemporary rural identities as they are related to farm tourism and tourism farmers individual place identities.

KEYWORDS: farm tourism • rural life • identity • affordances • taskscape

Recent works on regional and rural identities stress that "locality", "rurality" and "identity" are all dynamic concepts, the meanings of which change in time and due to context; furthermore, these three concepts usually have multiple meanings as places may have various meanings to the different individuals and groups who identify themselves with them (Haartsen et al. 2000; Paasi 2003; Sharpley 2004). Although spatial meanings are changing and heterogeneous, places, regions and local identities still have crucial significance (Ruotsala 2008: 46). Identity is always in the process of formation, whether we consider its spatial or temporal, individual or collective dimensions; actually all

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identities have a *spatial dimension* (as human action emerges in particular places, within certain physical settings).

Tourism as a cultural practice "is mediated through, and shaped by, existing aspects of place identity. In turn, place identities may exhibit changes as a result of tourism related activities." (Kneafsey 2000: 36) The research of rural identities in particular locations and in relation to farm tourism[1] raises the question, "how identity constructions are based on specific perceived characteristics or qualities of an area?" (Haartsen et al. 2000: 145). More precisely, how place identity is defined by individuals relying on three interrelated components – (1) the physical features of a certain environment, (2) observable activities and (3) symbolic meanings of this environment (George et al. 2009: 98–99). Namely, the research question for us is how these three aspects of a certain place are perceived and conceptualised on an individual level by tourism farmers we researched in Rõuge and Haanja municipalities. The manifestations of place identity(ies) are realised in different narratives, including life histories, which in turn may draw on miscellaneous elements: ideas on "nature", "the built environment", "culture/ethnicity", "dialects", etc. (Paasi 2003: 477).[2] These narratives are closely related to the situated practices of people's everyday lives – both constitute each other mutually. Talking about place-related identities "at a specific location is the first step in creating such identities" (Huigen et al. 2000: 150). In that sense individual place identities, as we present them here, were created by tourism farmers who told us their stories: these reflections on their living environments form a significant part of our empirical data.

From an ecological perspective[3] it is important to underline that the living environment of farmers is an integrated whole consisting of both cultural and natural elements (see Gibson 1986: 128), of both physical and symbolic aspects as the basis for *identity formation*. Therefore, we argue that it is not sufficient to say that local rural identities are merely social constructs but they are likewise particular embodied perceptions *of* and *in* particular places. In sum, individual place identity refers to the perception of one's self (namely, a tourism farmer) in mutually meaningful relation to one's living environment, an environment that forms the basis for the individual's belonging as it is perceived via certain (embodied) actions, perceptual experiences and representations.[4]

In this paper we focus on how tourism farmers use the potential of their living environment to create certain possibilities for activities that can be performed on their farms. From an ecological perspective, as introduced in the first part of the article, this living environment as a set of everyday activities may become an important part of the individual rural identities of the tourism farmers we interviewed during our fieldwork in Rõuge and Haanja municipalities in Võru County, south-east Estonia, in 2008 and 2009.[5] In the second part of the study we aim to analyse different activities practised in tourism farms and how they relate to particular environments as "taskscapes" (Ingold 1993; 2000) and to discuss how these "taskscapes" participate in the formation of the contemporary rural identities that are related to farm tourism and tourism farmers' individual place identities.

Though it is not our aim to focus on how contemporary representations and interpretations of "rurality" are socially constructed and related to the meanings of landscapes in and outside the municipalities we were researching,[6] the concept of rurality as it is related to certain identities, environments and activities still needs some clarification. The concept of "the rural" or "rurality" is not easily definable in the current situation of changing lifestyles and novel activities (e.g. farm tourism) associated with rural regions – from the socio-cultural perspective one should not define rural as opposed to urban environments but rather take into account a rural-urban continuum as the political, economic and social structures of rural areas are becoming increasingly urban (Sharpley 2004: 376). Contemporary rural areas have become sites for recreational opportunities and experiences rather than mainly places for agricultural production once identifying the "countryside" (Kneafsey 2001; Sharpley 2004; Crouch 2006). Therefore, the term "rural" is acquiring new meanings for both locals (especially for those settled quite recently) and tourists. "Rural" is associated with certain lifestyle values, privacy, peace and silence (contrasted with urban noise), the beauty and purity of the natural environment (as opposed to artificial, urban environments) and with heritage (both cultural and natural) (Cloke 2006). Experiencing silence in their living environment is an experience tourism farmers regard as valuable, both for themselves and for their guests:[7]

> They come here because of the pristine nature, because of the calm and the silence. If we were to build god knows what sort of big hotels here, then people might discover that it's not a place they wanted to visit anymore. (Peeter, Sepa Farm, Rõuge)

As revealed in the interviews, silence was actually one of the most treasured values for tourism farmers, as all of them discussed it at length during the interviews. Most of them stressed the importance of keeping a balance with nature, often seeing themselves as mediators between the local environment and tourists.

The decrease in traditional agricultural activities (e.g. farming) in many rural areas in Europe, including Estonia, has lead to the development of new activities of which rural tourism[8] and recreation forms a considerable part. A characteristic example of the latter in Estonia is the development of farm tourism, which became an organised activity from the middle of the 1990s.[9] Production farms started to turn into tourism farms in Estonia as in other European countries – tourism promised alternative income for those who wanted to keep their rural homes but were not able to go on with agricultural activities (cf. Busby, Rendle 2000; Granberg 2004). Today about two-thirds of all accommodation establishments in Estonia are located in rural areas (Ardel 2004: 5).

Yet, although rural tourism may take the risk of turning some areas into "rural theme parks for urban middle classes," one still must admit that many rural landscapes that otherwise would become desolate are currently preserved through tourism (Lowenthal 2007: 646). As there are many kinds of rurality, there are likewise many forms of rural tourism, and considerable differences are noticeable even when we focus solely on farm tourism. Therefore, the question of what is considered "rural" or a "rural experience" today remains, as does the question of how it differs when we talk about local inhabitants (including farmers) or urban visitors? And the question directly related to the focus

of our paper is: how does the rural environment, and the activities practised there (incl. production farms as well as tourism farms), create or recreate a contemporary image of "farm life" in relation to traditional representations of this life. Nevertheless, tradition "undergoes continual generation and regeneration within the contexts of people's practical engagement with significant components of the environment" (Ingold, Kurttila 2000: 192). The question in the case of tourism farmers is how much they are supposed to be the "guardians of tradition" (associated with the region and rural life in general) and how much they can create new rural practices because they operate within new sets of social relations (Kneafsey 2000: 47). Another issue is also related to this question. Are we talking about a commodification of the place by tourism farmers as local entrepreneurs that attempts to correspond to external needs, or are we talking about their need to sustain in the environment they are living in and their efforts to find ways to do so?

In sum, we may say that rural identities are constantly changing and often debatable due to contested understandings of rurality by the different agents involved (Haartsen et al. 2000; Holloway, Kneafsey 2004). Once associated with tradition and continuity, today rural identities seem to acquire more and more subjectively perceived characteristics. Contemporary rural identities consist of several dimensions closely tied to a specific region, and to specific living environments that are perceived via particular activities performed in these environments:

> The rural emerges as multiple, diverse, less constituted according to the ways in which its various features may be represented or experienced as social distinctions but more in terms of the ways in which individuals, through their actions, make sense of it. (Crouch 2006: 357)

Consequently, we may say that the rural environment, not just as a symbolic representation but also a physical space, forms an important part of one's identity. It becomes significant through everyday activities in one's practical interaction with the lived environment. For that reason we focus on how tourism farmers as individuals perceive their living environment to be the basis for their identity through different activities they perform in their everyday lives, as well as activities they perform for and with the tourists.

AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE TO RURAL IDENTITIES: AFFORDANCES OF RURAL ENVIRONMENTS

The concept of "affordance" has become a useful analytical tool with which to overcome approaches in several disciplines of the social sciences and humanities that tend to regard culture – nature or human – environment as dichotomies. In tourism studies the epistemology of "affordance" is closely related to the actuality of issues like materiality (of space), embodied experiences and practical actions (bodily performances, multisensory corporeal experiences), and mobility (of people in spaces) (Haldrup, Larsen 2006: 279). Affordances are "spatial potentialities, constraining and enabling range of actions", setting certain limitations to particular options for actions and producing the "everyday practical orientation" of a place (Edensor 2006b: 30).

To make more sense of the applicability of affordance in tourism studies, we would

like to give a brief background of the genealogy of the concept. "Affordance" is the term coined by an ecological psychologist James J. Gibson, who defined it as following:

> What the environment *offers* the animal, what it provides or furnishes, [...] it is something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies complementarity of the animal and the environment. [...] affordances of the environment [...] are in a sense objective, real, and physical, unlike values and meanings, which are often supposed to be subjective, phenomenal, and mental. [...] [An affordance is] equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior. It is both physical and psychical, yet neither. (Gibson 1986: 127, 129)

Hence, affordances are qualities relative to someone's perception, not just the physical properties of the environment. Affordances, according to Gibson, are perceivable possibilities for action, with certain environments and objects affording certain types of sensations, perceptions and behaviours. Nevertheless, "affordances are environmental counterparts to the organism's behavioural potentialities" (Heft 1989: 6), i.e. affordances imply mutuality of the perceiver and the environment. After Gibson the relational and situative quality of affordances is continually stressed. For example, "affordances stem from the *reciprocity* between the environment and the organism and derive [...] from how people are kinaesthetically active within their world" (Costall 1995: 475); "affordances are features meaningful for an *active perceiver*" (Heft 2001: 123); or "affordances are *relations* between particular aspects of organisms and particular aspects of situations" (Chemero 2003).

Affordances are dynamic and processual, changing in time and because of particular emerging interactions between humans, environments and objects, and thus producing various "taskscapes" (Ingold 1993; 2000) and "sensescapes" (Porteous 1990). The environment of a particular rural region may consist of affordances created by the cultural tradition (e.g. agricultural landscapes, farmsteads) but likewise affordances of the specific natural characteristics of the region (e.g. hills, forests, lakes, rivers, etc). On tourism farms and in their surrounding rural environments, varied affordances appear from activities performed there (e.g. lakes afford water for swimming, boating and fishing; hills, depending on their surface, afford walking, climbing, cycling, and skiing; forests afford hiking and picking wild mushrooms or berries; farmsteads themselves afford a manifold of activities depending on the creativity of the host and/or hostess, such as "hot tub" sauna (a barrel with its own heating system for the water), cooking lamb underground). Furthermore, what the environment once offered to its inhabitants may loose its importance as the socio-cultural situation changes. This is exactly the case in the municipalities of Rõuge and Haanja (and in Estonia in general) where we can see a lot of abandoned collective farm buildings. This illustrates the decrease in agricultural practices that has lead to maintenance of landscapes to preserve their aesthetic and heritage value (e.g. mowed land affords pleasure both for the eye and foot (walking)), practices that are not related to traditional agricultural function (forage for farm cows and horses).[10] Thereby affordances providing agricultural activities are replaced by affordances relating to tourism activities and recreation. Hence, we can likewise make a distinction between "obsolete" and "present" affordances[11] – the former are those once relevant in a rural region's agrarian past but are now abandoned due to their irrelevance (e.g. former (collective) farm fields), the latter are affordances in active use in the current situation.

In their environmentally engaged activities, animals, humans included, limit the affordances by "picking up a particular kind of information, leading to the perception of a particular affordance" (Ingold 1992: 46). On the other hand, there may be "many offerings of the environment that have not been taken advantage of" (Gibson 1986: 129), meaning the potentialities of organism-environment relations that are not yet actualised/realised, and which we therefore cannot call affordances. Environments usually have more possibilities for (inter)action than are actively realised in everyday practices (considering affordances as actualisations of the potentials). These are resources of the environment that have not yet become particular affordances ("opportunities for action"), which people are "not yet aware of or acting on" (Reed 1996: 18). Harry Heft (2001: 132) proposes a distinction between the "potential functional properties of the environment considered with respect to an individual and the actualised properties of the environment, i.e. selected by that individual as an intentional agent. For a particular individual in a specific place there is a range of affordances potentially available to be engaged, these affordances exist whether or not they are presently perceived because they inhere in the structure of the environment." Similarly we may distinguish "concealed affordances"[12] specifying that they are concealed according to who views them (e.g. for a tourism farmer certain hills afford ATV rides or snowboarding, whereas for his or her neighbour these affordances may not be apparent).

In addition, other humans can likewise be a source of affordances, and "for tool-using culture as ours everything about perceiving is socially and culturally embedded"; in this sense, all human affordances have the social dimension, i.e. they can be considered "social affordances" (Good 2007: 271). The selection of possible affordances depends on the particular culture of the community one lives in, its norms and social relations (Rajala 2004: 395). Furthermore, there is no doubt that in everyday practices, affordances emerge not in chain but rather in a constant flow of activities that are co-regulated and jointly produced in social interaction (Good 2007: 277–280). From an ecological point of view we live in an environment that we share with other humans and other species; i.e. we have "socialised awareness" and "shared perception" of the environment (one individual may be aware of what the environment could offer to another individual) (Reed 1988: 122). This is particularly relevant when we talk about tourism farmers as both "affordance designers" and "affordance mediators".[13] Tourism farmers are those who both see the perceptual and interactional potentiality of the environment they have either designed themselves or mediate via their different cognitive competencies to tourists. So, they provide tourists with affordances in addition to those their guests are already able to expect and thus to detect (e.g. they keep constantly working out new activities that can be performed in farms and their surroundings). Only some of these affordances are related to agriculture, especially in the present situation. Rural tourism, in the region we researched, is a practice that is constantly developing, introducing novel affordances and refreshing the obsolete ones, which is relevant to both tourists as well as to the other community members. To sum up, certain rural environments afford certain identity formation for tourism farmers via creative use of the affordances of their living environment.

TASKSCAPES IN FARM TOURISM

Rural environments, cultural landscapes or farmsteads, are inhabited by humans who are constantly practising certain activities, "knowledgeable practices", in these environments thereby creating certain "taskscapes" (Ingold 1993: 157) that are relational and dynamic both in terms of space and time. "Just as the landscape is an array of related features so – by analogy – the taskscape is an array of related activities" (Ingold 2000: 195). Due to their relational nature, taskscapes "persist only as long as there are people continuing to practice certain activities, those practices of dwelling in the particular landscape" (Michael 2000: 111). Taskscapes are associated with the everyday activities in familiar spaces, local and domestic spaces that are rendered comfortable and homely and recreated constantly by certain "habits and habitation" (Edensor 2006b: 28), by certain "active engagement with the world" (Edensor 2002: 55, 57). The notion of taskscape is closely related to the concept of "ecological niche" (Gibson 1986) and to the recently proposed concept of "cognitive niche"[14] (Magnani, Bardone 2008) as all three can be considered *sets of affordances*; which is to say that taskscapes consist of spatially situated activities using particular sets of affordances of the environment. Inhabitants of a place have a practical orientation to its materiality – a taskscape fosters a range of affordances of an environment "delimiting some and enabling others" (Edensor 2004: 110).

In the case of farm tourism, taskscapes may emerge in both farmsteads as well as more distant surroundings, which become extended environments for the farms; taskscapes may actualise in both farmers', as well as tourists', activities. There are a number of "popular rural competencies" (Edensor 2006a: 492) tourism farmers use for their own life as well as for their business: knowledge of different characteristics and affordances of the place in which they live (both their farmstead and its surroundings), as well as certain skills they have acquired while living there. Thereby, taskscapes form a basis for their personal place identities – they are "space-making practices which embed *identity*" (Edensor 2002: 55). In the case of rural tourism we should pay attention to how tourism farmers are in a way "taskscape-experts"[15] and "taskscape-mediators" for particular places, because they are able to be aware of (or detect) a wide range of affordances for these places (especially those affordances not related to traditional agriculture) and to deliver the most suitable to tourists. However, taskscapes can likewise become environments affording multiple activities (tasks) for tourists. Tourists perform activities and are bodily involved through multisensory perception using affordances present in the environments created and mediated by tourism farmers.

Considering the theoretical framework we argue that all rural environments are complex and dynamic and consist of both natural and cultural elements as well as various sets of affordances (changing in time and according to the perceiver) that can be viewed as taskscapes. Tourism farms are not just environments for tourists' activities and experiences, they are also everyday lived environments for the tourism farmers themselves. In the following section we will look at how the taskscapes of tourism farms (and their surroundings) that farmers share with their guests become an important part of the formation of their identities.

THE EMPIRICS AND METHODOLOGY

When choosing an area for our fieldwork, the main consideration was definitely that the Võru region is one of the most popular domestic tourism and leisure destinations in Estonia, apart from the islands off the coast of western Estonia.[16] This is mostly due to the fact that the southern Estonian landscape differs from that of the rest of Estonia because of its many forests, lakes and hilly countryside. The Võru region (Võrumaa in Estonian) is also different because of its specific local ethnic identity, which has been (re)discovered both by tourists and the locals themselves in the past fifteen years or so. All researched tourism farms were situated in the municipalities of Rõuge and Haanja, which are part of the territory of the Haanja Nature Park.[17] The latter was formed to protect the landscape characteristic to this upland region, but also its lifestyle, with small villages where the houses are far apart, small fields, pastures and grasslands, as well as the specific agricultural methods used in the uplands. The municipalities of Haanja and Rõuge are among the most popular tourism destinations in the Võru region due to the rich opportunities for nature tourism, recreation and tourism farms.

The main empirical basis for our research is the data collected via semi-structured interviews, conversations and co-performed practices with the tourism farmers and other tourists, during three field trips, in 2008–2009. We visited seven tourism farms, and interviewed eight tourism farmers (two of whom were a couple; there were six men and two women in total and their ages ranged from 28 to 55) who agreed to the use of their first names in our research. Farm tourism in general is considered a small-scale enterprise in Estonia, though the farms we researched varied from very small farms (e.g. Mäe Farm can accept a maximum of eight guests) to bigger farms (e.g. Kiidi Tourism Farm can accommodate 50 people during the winter and 70 during the summer). In addition, camping is also welcomed in the farmyards at several farms as a way of enjoying the rural milieu with some additional comfort.

TASKSCAPES FOR IDENTITY FORMATION: TOURISM FARMS IN RÕUGE AND HAANJA

The tourism farms researched are predominantly family enterprises closely connected with the natural environment. Traditional agricultural activities are practised to a certain degree (e.g. keeping some farm animals, growing vegetables and herbs). The traditions of local culture are noticeable in the food provided (Suhka and Vaskna Farms) and the language spoken (Võru dialect, used by some tourism farmers, is significant mainly to domestic tourists); rural crafts that are performed in demonstrations (blacksmithing on Sepa Farm) and handicraft objects displayed in the farm environment both in- and outdoors (Suhka and Vaskna Farms). Tourist farms could be regarded as a specific type of place in the rural environment that gives tourism farmers opportunities to make use of their skills and competencies and provide experiences to their guests with which they (re)construct rural taskscapes. In a way, the countryside can be seen as the "refuge" of specialised skills and crafts, connoting "a nostalgia for an era of skilled work" as "rurality requires the ongoing performance of skilful action for its sustenance" (Edensor 2006a: 490). Most of the tourism farmers we visited during our fieldwork offer their

guests the opportunity to experience different kinds of crafts and skills, using their own hobbies and backgrounds to set up a space where they provide opportunities to complete different tasks. Tourism farms in Rõuge and Haanja provide a rich variety of rural leisure activities that can be practised either on the farmstead or in the vicinity (i.e. the surrounding natural environment is actively engaged in the overall experience).[18] Furthermore, various activities and attractions are made available through networking with other farmers (both those working on other tourism farms or on production farms) thus extending the taskscapes of a particular farm.

Farm tourism activity is primarily a lifestyle enterprise for the farmers we interviewed, therefore researching the taskscapes they inhabit and provide to their guests makes it possible to detect some aspects of their identities. Furthermore, in spite of the fact that the enterprises are called "tourism farms", they provide not just the experiences of farm life in a traditional sense, but also rural experiences more generally, thanks to the different taskscapes involved. Tourism farmers see their role as mediators of local culture and nature, introducing the taskscapes of their farmsteads as well as surroundings, for example, through interaction with animals or hikes in the neighbourhood. Every farm we researched offers experiences that are important to the farmer and are not offered only for the sake of providing attractions to tourists. All the interviewed tourism farmers design affordances for various tasks and experiences creating taskscapes of, for example, craftsmanship, the farmstead, the forest and the sauna, as examined in the following part of this article. (Due to the limits of the article we confined our analysis to some representative cases only.) Our selection of these particular examples was based on some of the most common, and at the same time most significant, taskscapes of farm tourism in the region. They were mainly deducted from the interviews in which farmers stressed the importance of particular environments and activities. There are, of course, several other activities provided on the tourism farms of the Võru region and some of the examples cannot be considered typical to all tourism farms. (For instance, the craftsmanship of a blacksmith can be experienced on only one of the farms we studied, although different kind of crafts are practised and displayed in some other farms; e.g. handicrafts at Vaskna Farm, breadbaking workshops at Kiidi Farm, etc.). In addition, the importance, meaning and use of some of the most common taskscapes (e.g. those related to animals, outdoor activities or sauna) vary according to the way a particular farmer interprets them.

TASKSCAPE: BLACKSMITHING AT SEPA FARM

Peeter is a working blacksmith who earns most of his income from selling his work. In 2000 he bought a farmhouse in Rõuge municipality and moved there (along with his smithy) from Võru town. He renamed the farm Sepa (Blacksmith's) Farm and started welcoming tourists to his home. Peeter told us that people had already been very interested in his work while he was living in the town, but he couldn't receive guests there because of the urban setting (his smithy was located in an industrial part of the town along with, for example, car repair garages and manufacturing buildings of different varieties, etc.). He said that it would have been "simply strange to talk about a craft that is so old" in the industrial milieu of the town.

After moving away from the town, Peeter discovered that the new home was the kind of environment that affords him a taskscape that he can use for facilitating tourism ventures:

> And when I bought this place, here was this old stable that I really liked and I thought that one day I'll rebuild it into my smithy. I don't remember when I got the idea to start with tourism, maybe a couple of weeks or months after buying the place, it was sort of spontaneous. The place itself offered the opportunity and I thought that here I have the possibility to show this work and introduce it to people.

Peeter offers his guests different options: one can just visit his smithy to observe while he and his employees are doing their everyday work, there is an opportunity to agree upon a special demonstration of the blacksmith's work (this lasts 45 to 60 minutes and generally takes place in his outdoor-smithy, if the weather conditions allow), and there is also the possibility to arrange a demonstration with an opportunity for the tourists to try their hand at forging under his guidance (approximately two hours), the souvenirs, usually nails, that the guests have crafted themselves (with the help of Peeter), can be taken home as memorabilia of the tasks performed.

The most popular event at Peeter's smithy is forging a lucky horseshoe for newlyweds, a ritualistic event Peeter has designed specifically for wedding days (it is performed in a small traditional-style outdoor smithy during the summer season):

> They are making with my help or I with their help the horseshoe for luck. [...] We are making it together, putting their names on it and the date and then I will tell them where this belief comes from, that the horseshoe brings luck, I will explain it.

Most of the preparatory work with the horseshoe is done the previous day, more or less 95 per cent of all the work that is needed since it would be too time-consuming to make the whole object from the start in front of the young couple and the wedding guests. Peeter stresses in the conversation the fact that each and every item is very personal: "All those horseshoes are personal – while I'm making them I'm thinking about the particular people they are for."

Before the wedding guests arrive in July 2009, Peeter puts on a special costume – a shirt and trousers made of linen, knee-high leather boots and blacksmith's apron made of brown leather. This is a costume that he only wears for demonstrations; even the leather apron is not needed all the time during his daily work (only when doing specific tasks). As Peeter himself has stressed many times to us, the most important part of his demonstration is storytelling. He starts with why the horseshoe has became the symbol of luck (since iron used to be considered very valuable material, finding a horseshoe for example was good fortune) and after that gives an overview of the history of the blacksmith's work, stressing that he has already been doing this work for 20 years. While he tells the stories, the iron becomes hot enough so that the newlyweds can start hammering their names on the horseshoe – this is the most important part, because the main guests at the event are directly involved in the activity. After the names are hammered into the iron, Peeter asks the other guests if anyone would help with the date (but, this time no-one volunteers). Therefore he finishes the item by himself, raises it to the air to show it to the guests and asks them to follow him from the outdoor smithy to

the main smithy where he gives it the final touch and presents the item to the couple, saying: "Don't try to change each other, try to change for each other. Should you ever experience hard times in your marriage, try to think of this day, think of this item that you made here together." It's obvious, that for him this is a highly emotional moment as well, since as he later says, every time he gives the horseshoe away, it makes him reflect on his own life and marriage as well.

Peeter's living environment, i.e. his farm, the smithy he built himself and the activities performed there, form an important part of his self-perception and thereby his identity, and also serves as a basis for his interaction with tourists. His main taskscape – the smithy as a proper environment affording the performance of blacksmith's work, and his farmstead and the surroundings that provide an appropriate rural context for it, is essential for him in order to share these affordances with his guests.

TASKSCAPE: FARM ANIMALS ON THE FARMSTEAD

The desire to experience personal interaction with animals plays an important role in (farm) tourism, whether these are traditional farm animals or recently introduced species in tourism farms. Although the primary function of the animals is no longer to afford sustenance, they are still considered quite significant and a necessary part of the farm environment by tourism farmers. The functions of the animals have transformed (for farmers as for tourists) recreational and emotional affordances, with the pleasure of watching the animals or interacting with them now being significant since the farmers tend to keep animals (some of them quite exotic) mainly as pets and for "recreational edutainment" (Hall et al. 2003: 91). Although many of the tourism farms we visited don't keep farm animals themselves, they still consider animals to be an important part of the rural taskscape and rural experience. Animals may also become part of extended taskscapes – i.e. opportunities to visit production farms or other tourism farms in the neighbourhood that keep animals, thereby facilitating networking in the community (horses, especially horse riding, seem to be one of the most popular attractions).

Some of the tourism farmers we visited used to keep cows, pigs, etc., for milk and meat, although after the agricultural situation in Estonia changed they started keeping some of these animals just as "markers" of former farm life in order to maintain for their guests the affordance to interact with and watch them:

> At first we had seven cows and pigs but then the dairy farming went down and we kept some just as a hobby. Now we have a cow, three sheep, a goat and a pig. And we also have dogs. (Luule, Mäe Farm, Rõuge)

Hall et al. (2003: 91) emphasise the importance of active participation (instead of the passive "gaze"), and of "connection, the degree to which a visitor is mentally absorbed or immersed – human interaction with animals offers an opportunity for a unique experience, and such an experience can provide the main objective of a visit or can be employed to transform positively recreational activities within a visitor attraction".

Most of the visited tourist farms can be considered versatile taskscapes for such actions, where activities like touching and feeding the animals, horse riding or sledging, but also traditional farm works that include the animals, are afforded. A small variety

of traditional farm animals are kept on Mäe Farm, while sheep take care of landscape maintenance on Kiidi Farm, horses can be met on Suhka and Eha Farms and rabbits on Vaskna farm. In addition to various activities related to horses – one of the most popular tourist attractions in the region – other activities like milking cows seem to be fairly popular and was mentioned by several tourism farmers:

> And a Swedish army major stayed here for twelve days. He milked the cow and everything. [...] We didn't offer it, he insisted on it. So when I went to the cowshed to clean it up a bit half an hour before the time we had agreed on, he was already there. He was afraid that I would milk the cow myself and wouldn't let him! (Margit, Vaskna Farm, Haanja)

Farm animals are not just a nice attraction for tourists; keeping animals on tourism farms can be considered part of the development of contemporary rural life. Aigar, one of the tourism farmers in Rõuge who is now leading the Heifer Project[19] in Võru County, considers keeping animals and affording the possibility for tourists to experience encounters with (farm) animals on tourism farms to be a crucial part of the farm tourism experience. During the last 3–4 years several animals, for example goats, sheep (the most popular), horses and cows have been taken into both tourism farms and other households in Rõuge municipality. Aigar himself has Estonian Blackhead sheep on his farm and adds that via this project local rural traditions (like keeping sheep of an Estonian breed) have become valued again. In addition he can maintain his grasslands more easily, as mowing with a harvester is complicated on the hillsides of his farm. The main principle of the Heifer Project is to give farmers animals free of charge on condition that they will give the offspring of these animals to other members of the local rural community without charge as well. Thereby not only is animal husbandry re-established as a taskscape in contemporary rural life but community ties and networking between locals are also facilitated.[20]

However, not only traditional Estonian farm animals and pets are being kept on tourism farms, since farmers are very active in modifying and recreating their farm environments. Alar, for example, has introduced some new species – reindeer and ostriches – solely for their "exotic" value, therefore creating a new taskscape providing new rural experiences that are very different from the neighbouring ones:

> At first they [the ostriches] were just a hobby. But then the people got curious and started to bother us: show them to us too, show them to us too. [...] So we started asking for a small symbolic fee for looking at them – let the ostriches earn their own living. But the reindeer are here because of a bet. I didn't want to lose a bet so I brought them from Lapland myself. The fact that I have ostriches from the south and reindeer from the north living peacefully together here. [...] It's very attractive to people. But it's not animal husbandry; I don't spend that much time doing it.

One could argue that animal husbandry forms an essential part of rural or farm identity for the tourism farmers, therefore all of them keep animals in one way or another. They keep traditional farm animals, pets, exotic animals, or extend their taskscapes into other (tourism) farms if they do not own animals themselves. An important aspect of keeping animals is also landscape maintenance. Therefore we may say that by keeping (farm) animals, tourism farmers are recreating rural taskscapes and reinforcing their rural identities.

TASKSCAPE: HIKES IN THE FOREST

Traditionally the forest was a public resource for the peasant community in Estonia, with important symbolic meanings in addition to being a practical taskscape (cf. Viires 2000: 15–17). The latter aspect is still important even today, as many tourism farmers (and other local inhabitants) get firewood from their forests, although the importance of recreational affordances of the forest has significantly increased.

The tourist's encounter with environment is one of the key themes in rural tourism, although the degree to which these encounters are mediated and the extent to which the tourist is involved via certain activities varies. Due to their location, tourism farms in Rõuge and Haanja municipalities use the surrounding natural environments to varying degrees in order to provide their guests with different experiences. Almost all the interviewed farmers stressed the importance of the unique beauty and versatility of the nature of the area – its hills, lakes and forests – as part of the identity of the local people, as well as major tourist attractions.[21] In terms of taskscape, lakes, hills and forests provide a lot of affordances that need not to be significantly re-designed by tourism farmers – they just had to fit the activities they offer into the existing environment, adding some social affordances for the tourists. Farmers as both taskscape experts and mediators are the ones who choose, sometimes establish, and suggest the routes for tourists to take and the sites to visit, acting as guides themselves at times or employing local people as guides for short hikes. Telling stories that introduce tourists to both the obsolete and present affordances of the environment during these hikes is an important part of the mediation practice.

In addition to enjoying nature in more passive ways, such as looking at a picturesque lake and sitting in peace, which is clearly something some tourists like to do, there are also several active forms of nature experience. Physical activities afforded by tourism farms unite the bodily senses through acts of moving in the environment (Lund 2005: 40). The heterogeneous landscape of Rõuge and Haanja stimulates manifold affordances for different physical activities, which vary seasonally (in summer hiking, walking, cycling, horse riding, boating, canoeing, swimming and fishing, etc.; in winter, in addition to hiking and walking, skiing, skating and sledging can be practised). Therefore, we can talk about the significant seasonality of possible taskscapes accessible to both hosts and guests in the Rõuge and Haanja region (cf. Palang et al. 2007).

At this point, we would like to focus on one-day hikes as a frequent example in several farms (these hikes are offered by four of the eight researched tourism farms). The hikes may last from one hour to eight hours and they are guided by a farmer, a member of his or her family or a local inhabitant. The hikes may be foot hikes or horse riding, rowing a boat, paddling a canoe, or skiing or some combination of these activities. Vello, the host at Eha Tourism Farm, for whom hiking has been a lifetime hobby, explains:

> One thing that we offer here are day-hikes. They consist of different activities, such as horseriding, walking or a canoe trip. But quite often people are rather lazy, so they're not very interested in walking, so we have to adjust these activities. We have to offer different things and be willing to change and modify them according to the wishes of the guests.

The role of the farmer as a mediator of the forest taskscape is most evident in these

guided tours, where tourists' movements are ordered and commentaries introducing certain sites and objects are provided. However, there are different ways to guide tourists in natural environments, depending on the background and the aims of the tour guide. There is something unique about a personal local guide who can introduce to the tourist signs and affordances that are not visible to the foreign eye. These hikes, as actively performed and sensed bodily experiences, have the potential to educate urban people to the value of natural environments, not only as beautiful sights but also as habitats for various species, humans included.

For instance, a hike to the primeval valley of the Piusa River was guided by the host of Suhka Farm, Väle, in July 2009.[22] He was born in the same village and therefore knows the surroundings intimately, and hikes may last from three or four hours to a whole day, depending on the guests' wishes. Our hike started at six in the evening from the farmstead and the first path went near neighbours' fields. Quite soon we entered a forest and almost immediately after that it started to rain. It was not an established hiking trail but a path that is known only to the locals and animals. Therefore we were busy bending back undergrowth branches, stepping over fallen trees and jumping across rivulets. In the high grass, our feet became wet, and we had to watch our step when we were further along because the path became muddy and slippery. Along the way, we made some short stops where Väle explained either obsolete cultural affordances from the past (the ruins of an old water-mill and a decayed small barn where local farmers used to keep their hay when they were taking it home during the winter); present taskscapes (a recent lumbering area belonging to a local farmer, special spots for picking chantarelles that are known only to the locals, the lake where he used to go fishing with his father when he was a child); or natural taskscapes around us (beaver dams and dens by the riverside). Väle was a discreet guide who gave only modest and short explanations, leaving time and space for the guests to explore the environment themselves. He chose a different way for the return trip and we got back at ten in the evening, when all of us had a chance to use the taskscape of the Suhka Farm smoke sauna in order to warm our bodies, which were soaking wet.

Rural environments are heterogeneous, involving both natural and cultural affordances, however, in the tourism farms we researched, the importance of natural affordances was stressed more by the farmers themselves, who provide or suggest to their guests various outdoor activities. The nature tourism experience is the crucial part of the overall farm tourism experience at Rõuge and Haanja, involving affordances of natural environments as tourist attractions. Thereby tourism farmers make their farmsteads extended rural taskscapes and often introduce their guests the same affordances they use in their everyday lives. Several farmers (usually the host him or herself) act as guides on short hikes provided by the farm, thereby mediating nature-tourist encounters in a personal way, bringing their guests to places they favour, to places that form a crucial part of the farmers' identities.

TASKSCAPE: TAKING A SAUNA

Taking a sauna – the practice of sweating and beating oneself with whisks (whisking) of leafy birch twigs in hot rooms that are heated by large stones on stoves that produce

steam – is an old tradition for Estonians (and for many other Finno-Ugric peoples, such as Finns, Ingrians, Votians, Livonians, Komis, Maris, Mordvins, etc.). The sauna, or *saun* as it is called in Estonian, plays a central role in the lives of individuals in Estonia. Traditionally the taskscape of the sauna was much more versatile than today. In Estonian folk tradition, saunas were believed to be sacred places inhabited by spirits; it was not just the place where people washed themselves, but where women would give birth, where illnesses were cured, where the bride was taken ritually before the wedding (see Habicht 2008); as well as being used for practical purposes such as smoking meat, drying small amounts of crops, etc. Therefore, several embodied activities are related to the sauna, making it an active and practical multisensory experience involving the whole body. As Veijola and Jokinen (1994: 140) suggest, "when one hears, sees, smells, senses and tastes, thoughts may wander around and emotions vary, but a person has become a part of the unity, becomes a *participant*".

In the tourism farms of Rõuge and Haanja, one can find a wide array of different saunas: renovated saunas that were originally built at the end of 19th century, or newer saunas built during the 20th or 21st century. Through the course of the 20th century, the sauna remained, and is today, an integral part of the Estonian lifestyle, as most summer homes had saunas: separate buildings in farmhouses and new, "Finnish-type" saunas in the summerhouse regions. The main affordances of the sauna as a taskscape – a place for sweating and washing – have remained the same, while at the same time they have been transformed into affordances related more with social and leisure activities (different informal social gatherings).

The sauna culture has changed in time but the fact that there are no tourism farms without saunas suggests the continuing importance of the sauna in Estonians rural life and as part of the taskscapes of tourism farmers. As contrasted with those of the natural affordances of the forest that the tourism farmer can make use of, the sauna is an environment that is totally designed by farmers themselves and the sets of affordances of saunas depend on the creativity of the farmer. The tourism farmers use their imagination to create different kinds of saunas and offer varied sauna experiences for their guests using different, and creative, strategies.

Peeter, for example, has rebuilt an old granary into a smoke sauna and set it in his yard next to a big wooden "hot tub" (a barrel with its own heating system for the water) and a traditional Estonian swing. He has transformed the taskscape of an old granary into a new one, with affordances useful for himself as well as his guests (he heats the sauna for his family every Friday and for his guests when they have booked it; the pond next to the sauna is crucial for Peeter as it affords a method of cooling down when taking a sauna). In the wintertime a "hot tub" sauna affords, for example, an experience of bathing in hot water while being outdoors in cold weather. On Vaskna Farm, in addition to the regular sauna, Ahti and Margit have a small barrel-shaped sauna right next to the lake, which they regard as "more thrilling" because it does not have electricity or any washing facilities and the guests can run straight into the lake from the sauna. This latter sauna with its simple affordances can be related to the more archaic and nostalgic sauna experience. Väle and Merike own an old smoke sauna next to a pond, built at the beginning of the 20th century, which is not merely a washing facility, as visiting this taskscape affords the guest various physical and mental experiences. The sauna is located a short walk from the house and if the guests have not visited the sauna before

they are taken there by Väle, who explains the details on the way and while in the sauna. Aigar built his sauna himself some years ago and most important for him is to introduce the wide array of activities that can be practised in a sauna (whisks made of different trees; herbal extracts that can be added to the sauna water; various massages). He tries to introduce traditional Estonian sauna culture in this taskscape and also creates new traditions of his own. Quite often, Aigar takes a sauna together with his guests, especially when explaining sauna traditions and customs to guests who are not familiar with them. He introduces different activities that can be performed there and gives advice on how to behave and what exactly to do in the sauna:

> So we have massages with honey, scrubbings with salt and whatnot and I've promoted not washing yourself with shampoo or shower gel – let your skin have the opportunity to breathe.

Alar has built an "Indian sauna", which for him means heating up stones and placing a tent above them (he has creatively adapted the authentic Indian sauna according to his ideas). His completely novel sauna taskscape is very popular among his visitors:

> But when the customers come and try it, they definitely come back for more. Whoever tries it, will immediately start to like it. Generally of course people don't want to go to a sauna where there's a floor made of a groundsheet and hay, they think it's no good. [...] But you have to bring people to that kind of stadium then he will agree to try. When I have two saunas heated up together, then they use the regular one just for washing afterwards.

This sauna taskscape is a deliberately designed to be exotic and different from the traditional or familiar rural sauna taskscapes on other tourism farms.

The sauna is an experience that unites bodily and mental experiences. Taking a sauna is also an important activity for tourism farmers themselves having more than just a practical meaning. By designing and mediating sauna taskscapes they share some aspects of their everyday identity with tourists. The environment that surrounds the sauna building becomes an extension of the taskscape affording additional outdoor activities (swimming in a lake or in a pond, running into the snow, sitting on a terrace while cooling down). In sum we may say that while creating sauna taskscapes tourism farmers realise their personal creativity related to their living environment and thereby their identity.

CONCLUSION

Rural environments are complex and dynamic consisting of both natural and cultural elements and various sets of affordances that can be viewed as taskscapes. Our research demonstrated that tourism farmers of Rõuge and Haanja use the potential of their living environment for offering different activities that can be practised in their farms and in the surroundings. In the first part of our paper we proposed an ecological perspective that considers the living environment of tourism farms perceived through a set of affordances and activities that form certain taskscapes. These activities, as part of taskscapes, may become a significant component of individual rural identities.

We suggested that tourism farmers as individuals perceive their living environment as one of the important aspects of their identity which in turn serves as a basis for their interaction with tourists. The tourism farmers of the researched regions creatively use the perceptual and interactional potentiality of an environment they have either designed themselves, or mediate via their different cognitive competencies to the tourists. Thereby, tourism farmers can provide novel affordances to their guests in addition to those affordances their guests are already able to expect and thus detect immediately. Relying on the studied examples we argued that tourism farmers from Rõuge and Haanja constantly work out new activities that can be performed in farms and their surroundings, thus extending their taskscapes to other farms and to other areas when possible and necessary.

This study showed that tourism farms are not just environments designed for tourists' activities and experiences; they are also everyday *lived* environments for the tourism farmers themselves. Farm tourism activity is primarily a lifestyle enterprise for the farmers we interviewed, thereby it was possible to detect some aspects of their identities by researching the taskscapes they inhabit and provide to their guests. Every farm we visited offers experiences that are important to the farmer and his or her family. We found that tourism farmers clearly see their role as mediators of local culture and nature introducing the taskscapes of their farmsteads as well as surroundings through interaction with animals and activities such as hikes.

The second part of the article was focused on the analysis of particular taskscapes in tourism farms as they are related to current individual rural identities. The living environment of a blacksmith in Rõuge, including a smithy as his main taskscape and the craft-related activities performed there, form an important part of his self-perception and thereby his identity, and serves as a basis for his interaction with tourists. We discovered that animal husbandry seems to form an essential part of rural identity for tourism farmers as all of them keep animals in one way or another (some exotic animals in addition to traditional farm animals and pets). Furthermore, animal-related taskscapes may be extended involving other (tourism) farms if a particular farm does not have animals of its own. Keeping (farm) animals in tourism farms seems to recreate rural taskscapes and reinforce the rural identities of tourism farmers. The fact that the nature tourism experience is a crucial part of the overall farm tourism experience at Rõuge and Haanja was also shown. Manifold affordances of natural environments were involved as tourist attractions. The importance of natural affordances was stressed by the farmers themselves, who provide, or suggest to their guests, various outdoor activities. Several farmers (usually the host in person) act as guides on short hikes provided by the farm, thereby mediating nature-tourist encounters in a personal way, bringing their guests to places they favour, places that form a crucial part of their own identities. The last example – the sauna – turned out to be a heterogeneous taskscape as there are multiple different saunas available for guests in the tourism farms researched (in addition to smoke sauna as a speciality of the region). In the cases examined the environment that surrounds the sauna building becomes an important extension of the cultural taskscape, affording additional outdoor activities. Taking a sauna is also an important activity for the tourism farmers themselves who, using their personal creativity, design and mediate sauna taskscapes in various ways to the tourists.

In conclusion we suggest that the analysis of these taskscapes – a blacksmith's farm,

(farm) animals, the forest in the vicinity, the sauna in the farmstead – demonstrated that the creative and extended use of different types of affordances of their living environment plays an important role in the formation of the rural identities of tourism farmers. Furthermore, extended rural taskscapes seem to emerge from the ways tourism farmers design and mediate their living environment by creating new rural practices. This in turn may influence the perception of contemporary rural identities and rurality in general, not just for tourists but also for other community members in the region. Further comparative research might explore how taskscapes of other inhabitants of the region and rural identities related with these might be connected to the current rural identities associated with farm tourism activities.

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NOTES

1 Though, one must admit that the meaning of the concept "farm tourism" varies over time due to the development of the farm tourism practice itself, as well as the differences between countries; in addition, farm tourism practice is comprised of a vast range of activities that have no common denominator (Busby, Rendle 2000: 635). We use the concepts of "tourism farmer" and "tourism farms" to emphasise that the farms we researched produce no agricultural goods, but specialise in tourism activities solely. "Tourism farm" is also the term used by the NGO Estonian Rural Tourism.

2 In the cases of Rõuge, Haanja and the Võru region in general, we must add that there is also a recognisable ethnic/cultural dimension to regional identity that is mainly realised in (a) regional dialect/s that form an important everyday basis for the local identity of the tourism farmers as well as other inhabitants.

3 The term "ecological" in the present paper does not refer to ecological tourism in terms of sustainability but rather from an epistemological perspective originating from the works on ecological psychology (originating from the works of James J. Gibson) related to environmental perception and cognition. This approach sees the individual as "the situated perceiver" emphasising the "mutuality of the perceiving organism and environment, the reciprocity of perception and action, and a form of direct perception in which suitably equipped perceivers pick up information specific to its source" (Good 2007: 268–269).

4 There is no doubt that local identity as a collective construct is always contested as it is both ecological and a social process involving several dimensions (not just the environmental), different participating agents (local inhabitants, policymakers, etc.) and practices (economic, political, etc.) (Paasi 2003: 477).

5 We collected our data during three field trips to Rõuge and Haanja municipalities, situated in Võru County, in south-east Estonia (in July and September 2008, and July 2009). All interviews with tourism farmers were conducted and recorded by us; transcripts are in our possession.

6 On this topic, see Jääts 2008.

7 The notion "guest" is used synonymously with the notion "tourist" following the tradition from the literature on tourism anthropology.

8 "Rural tourism" is another problematic concept as it is often defined as tourism that takes place in the countryside, whereas rural areas or countryside are themselves difficult to define and the criteria used by different nations vary considerably (Roberts, Hall 2001; Sharpley 2004; Lane 2009).

9 Considering different practices in different countries the distinction can be made between (1) farm-based tourism, holiday farms or agritourism (which includes farm holidays on a working farm where tourism is a supplemental activity) and (2) farm tourism or tourism farms specialising solely in tourism (these farms provide accommodation, catering and usually some other services related to recreation and/or experience tourism in rural areas) (see Busby, Rendle 2000; Roberts, Hall 2001; Hall et al. 2008: 117–121). Farm tourism in Estonia is predominantly of the second type, in the sense that a few or almost no working farm elements are involved in the enterprises (yet, pluriactivity is common, as in other countries, because farm tourism is usually a small scale enterprise and highly seasonal). In 2002, only 13.3 per cent of rural tourism accommodation also offered farm work participation (see Rural Tourism International). The reason for this might be that many Estonians, as domestic tourists, still have a certain connection with farm work (i.e. from their childhood or from visiting parents or grandparents who live in the countryside) and therefore do not consider it to be an attraction. The Tourism Law of Estonia (2005) permits the use of the word *turismitalu* (tourism farm) in designating a "bed and breakfast" type of enterprise (a guesthouse, hostel, holiday village, etc.) located in a rural area. Hence, the law does not prescribe that an enterprise called a tourism farm should have any connection to a farm household at all. Therefore, it largely depends on the particular tourism entrepreneur's concept of what is farm-like.

10 All tourism farms researched are situated in the territory of the Haanja Nature Park and maintenance of some of the lands that belong to the tourism farmers is supported by agricultural funds of the European Union (e.g. the PHARE programme).

11 We owe this distinction to Emanuele Bardone.

12 The distinction between "concealed" and "visible" affordances was made by Rajala (2004: 394–395).

13 We are grateful to Emanuele Bardone for helping to work out this specification.

14 Lorenzo Magnani and Emanuele Bardone (2008) argue that "a *cognitive niche* emerges from a network of continuous interplays between individuals and the environment, in which people alter and modify the environment by mimetically externalizing fleeting thoughts, private ideas, etc., into external supports".

15 We thank Emanuele Bardone for proposing this term.

16 The research conducted for the Estonian Rural Tourism Development Plan (for 2004–2007) demonstrated that 86 per cent of the visitors to rural enterprises (including tourism farms) are domestic tourists. Foreign tourists mainly come from Latvia, Finland, Sweden and Germany, and only a few from other countries.

17 The Haanja Nature Park (with an area of 16,903 hectares) is a member of the European Natura 2000 network. See also Haanja County Compass.

18 The most up-to-date information about activities available can be found in the *Estonian Travel Guide: Holiday in the Countryside* (2009), published by the NGO Estonian Rural Tourism.

19 See Heifer International.

20 The community based in Võru County, who share animals taken via the Heifer Project, has a weblog for the purposes of sharing information (see Võromaa Heifer).

21 Yet, they admit that what is considered beautiful by the tourist was once a challenge for local farmers, who had to cultivate and harvest these hilled landscapes – the production was unprofitable due to the high costs of fuel (tractors consumed extra fuel when driving uphill). That is one of the main reasons why farmers who are now involved in tourism have quit agricultural activities.

22 This summer one of us attended a short hike with him as a guide, as a part of a small group of guests.

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