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Second Home Tourism and Crisis Communication: Communication Preferences and Risk Awareness in Sweden

Abstract

Crisis is an inherent feature of contemporary societies; hence, risk awareness and crisis preparedness have become important in planning strategies. A crucial component that has emerged is the need for crisis communication and investigations to promote and involve communication by various local groups. One such group is second-home tourists, who are commonly well-integrated socially into local communities in the Nordic countries. However, the knowledge and inclusion of second-home tourists in planning strategies, including risk preparedness, requires improvement in local jurisdictions. Second-home communities are diverse, implying that efficient crisis communication needs to account for the place-specific characteristics of these temporary population groups. This short communication presents results from a survey on crisis-communication preferences and behaviour among second-home owners in Sweden. We explore how second-home owners communicate from their second home, to what extent they are aware of risks, and how they view the role of communication in a potential crisis.

Keywords: second homes, crisis communication, communication behaviour, risk awareness, crisis preparedness

1. Introduction and theoretical background

Crises have been recognised as an intrinsic feature of contemporary societies (Beck, 2009), and risk awareness and crisis preparedness have become important elements of planning strategies. Crisis management involves multi-stage interventions and requires managing multiple functions, such as risk awareness and mitigation, emergency response, monitoring and managing consequences, and recovery. In these efforts, communication emerges as a crucial component (Coombs, 2021). Previous research has highlighted that efficient crisis communication needs to actively involve local actors, moving from one-way, top-down information to people-centred, multidirectional dialogue (Bird & Gísladóttir, 2020). The content and delivery of communication must be based on knowledge of target groups, including understanding their vulnerabilities, capacities and communication preferences (Morrow et al., 2015). Crisis communication strategies usually target local actors, including local organisations and the permanent population (Olsson, 2014). However, less attention has been paid to groups that are more temporally present (Bird & Gísladóttir, 2020).

Earlier research at the intersection of second homes and crisis management concludes that second homes are vulnerable to various natural and man-made risks, due to several factors related mainly to their physical location in potentially risky environments (Cheong, 2018) and to temporary use patterns. The temporary presence of second-home owners poses challenges for risk monitoring and mitigation, especially when they are far away. It can also result in a lack of local knowledge, both regarding physical attributes, hazards, and how to avoid

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risks, and access to social networks and communication channels (McKenzie et al., 2007; Rey-Valette et al., 2015; Cheong, 2018; Vaiciulyte et al., 2019). Quinn et al. (2018) pointed out that sense of place provides a valuable lens to understand how risk is experienced and managed, while Adie (2020) argues that strong place attachment might affect risk response in conflicting ways – either by a stronger risk understanding and willingness to mitigate (Mugnano et al., 2019), or by downplaying risk or even opposing mitigation measures if they are expected to disturb the attractiveness of the area (Rey-Valette et al., 2015). In local jurisdictions, planners tend to have limited knowledge about when and how second homes are used (e.g., Persson, 2015; Larsson & Müller, 2019), which means that the need for risk mitigation is often underestimated in second-home areas (Rey-Valette et al., 2015). Economic factors such as financial risk and unfavourable insurance policies may also decrease crisis preparedness (Hoogendoorn & Fitchett, 2018; Hao et al., 2020).

In sum, the number of studies on second homes at the intersection of risk and crisis management is limited, and no studies to date focus explicitly on crisis communication. However, a few have included communication as a factor in crisis preparedness or management, and together they point to the necessity of dialogue between second-home owners and planners about risk awareness and mitigation (Kellens et al., 2012; Rey-Valette et al., 2019), to implement appropriate management measures and to encourage proper response behaviour (Elineau et al., 2021; Vaiciulyte et al., 2019). Second-home owners need to be aware of local risks, and local actors need to be aware of second-home owners and their sometimes-limited risk awareness. One problem raised in the crisis communication literature (e.g., Ndlela, 2019) is that operational approaches often entail top-down perspectives; crisis information rather than crisis communication, wherein the public sector takes on the role of problem solvers for a largely passive local population, a population to which second-home owners are seldom properly included.

In this short communication, we examine the communication preferences and behaviour of second-home owners, with the aim of outlining the preconditions for more inclusive communication strategies that also account for temporary populations.

2. Method

The West Coast and Stockholm archipelago of Sweden were chosen as case study locations due to the high density of second homes and the potentially risky coastal location. The web-based survey invitation was distributed via local community associations (n=83 in the West Coast area and n=121 in the Stockholm area) and shared in relevant (second-home or local community-themed) social media groups (n=8). The survey was constructed in three blocks of questions:

- General demographics and characteristics of the second home, including connectivity and available communication devices
- General communication behaviour, such as media preferences and use, communication networks, topics of interest, and trusted sources
- Risk awareness, crisis response and crisis communication

The survey yielded 108 responses (49 from the West Coast/59 from Stockholm). Even though the study areas encompass coastal, urban and rural environments, the sample reached with the survey is limited. While the gender distribution is almost equal, the average respondent was born between 1950 and 69 (67% of respondents), has at least a college/university degree (58%), and earns more than 4500 €/month (68%).

When answering questions about crisis response and communication, respondents were asked to either draw on their own experience of a crisis or on a given scenario. The scenario described a significant storm and flooding event that caused property and infrastructure damage and posed a potential hazard to individuals in vulnerable locations. Ninety-seven (90%) individuals responded to the scenario.

3. Results

3.1. Setting, equipment and communication preferences

About half of the respondents described the area where their second home is located as ‘countryside’, with some variation across study areas. In the Stockholm archipelago, the countryside category dominated (57%) while the ‘urban fringe’ made up 28% of respondents. On the West Coast, most respondents described the location as ‘small town/village’ (57%) and 39% as ‘countryside’. The majority (75%) of second homes are in areas where most other properties are second homes, and 92% of respondents have a neighbouring property within 200 meters of their own. Connectivity is generally strong, with mobile data (3-5G) being the most common choice (87%), followed by ADSL/fibre (58%). Preferred devices for information are mobile phones, tablets/laptop computers, and television; ideal communication channels are online news, TV, and email, followed by radio and personal communication. Non-digital information, such as print media, letters and billboards, is less preferred. When seeking information about the local area, common topics of interest were news and weather forecasts, local social issues, risk information, neighbourhood watch and local development issues.

Even though second homes are generally located in relatively dense areas, the respondents reported moderate levels of communication with others while in their second homes. The largest group to whom communication was directed was family and friends, and, to a lesser extent, other second-home owners in the area. Permanent residents in the area and local associations drew less interest as communication partners.

3.2. Risk awareness and mitigation, and crisis communication

The respondents were moderately worried about different types of risk (Table 1), with storm damage the most significant concern. The respondents were also only moderately interested in actively seeking information about risks in the area. This goes together with the notion that the public sector is the responsible agent for risk mitigation measures, with the highest expectations placed on local governments. The respondents acknowledge their responsibility to mitigate risk, and 47% have already taken measures to reduce risk.

Table 1
Awareness of different risks

	1- No experienced risk 7 - Highly experienced risk
Water related	2,2
Storm damage	4,3
Snow/frost damage	3,3
Crime and vandalism	3,3
Infrastructural/technical	3,9
Accessibility in an emergency	3,7

Note. Results shown mean based on 7-point Likert scale.

In the face of a crisis, the respondents, on average, expressed moderate knowledge about how they should act; however, they were more confident in knowing where to find adequate information. Most respondents stated that they would prefer to seek information from public-sector actors, especially the local government and the Swedish Contingency Agency. Almost as important is the news media and personal communication with neighbours. Although recent research has acknowledged that social media is an important channel for crisis communication, the participants in this study preferred not to use it. The respondents stated that the most helpful information in a crisis would contain instructions for emergency response, how to protect oneself and near ones, and how to understand the situation and its consequences (Table 2).

Table 2
Preferred risk information

	1 - Not at all useful 7 - Very useful
How to protect my property	5,1
How to protect myself or near ones	5,6
Understanding the situation/ consequences	5,6
Organisation of crisis management	5,4
Proper response action	5,7
How to sign up as volunteer	5,0
How to find emergency support	5,8
How to apply for economic support	4,7

Note. Results shown mean based on 7-point Likert scale.

When asked about how trustworthy they deem different sources to be, a similar pattern emerges. The highest trust is placed in the public sector, and levels of trust increase both at the local level and in crisis security situations. The highest trust is placed in the Swedish Contingency Agency. When it comes to news media and personal communication with neighbours, trust is moderate and decreases somewhat in crises. Minimal trust is placed in information found on social media; however, this increases slightly for crisis information. In general, the respondents do not find crisis information difficult to find or understand. Reasons given as free text responses for low accessibility or understanding are related to a feeling that the message is targeted to somebody else or not relevant, or that they find the message to be “ambiguous and tardy” or “politicised”.

4. Conclusions and future research

Second-home owners are a heterogeneous group, and it is necessary to consider the spatial and social context of second-home communities to understand their communication needs and preferences regarding risk and crisis (Back & Marjavaara, 2017). Despite heightened public discourse about risks in contemporary societies, the participants in this case study exhibited a relatively modest level of risk perception regarding their second homes. This does not necessarily mean that they have a low-risk awareness. The study shows that they are well-equipped to receive crucial information when needed. While the second home sometimes represents a “back-to-basics”, disconnected zone, the participants in this study are indeed connected to digital information daily while at their second home. They are also in proximity to neighbours and the community at large, enabling conversations that may be relevant to potential threats. However, for this group, the preference seems to be for the role of “passive receivers” of information, rather than “active communicators”. At the same time, they can receive information when needed, but they show less interest in actively participating in a proactive dialogue on risk awareness and mitigation.

While this case study is of limited scope, we call for further research to scrutinise communication infrastructures and networks, and to examine second-home owners’ roles in risk and crisis communication across different spatial contexts. Are, for example, rural second homes more disconnected in terms of information infrastructures? What options are available to monitor and mitigate risks in remote second homes when the owners are not present? Do the owners’ sociocultural characteristics matter for their communication behaviour? Are their emotional and social relations to the place important for their risk awareness and communication behaviour? How can a more proactive, multi-actor and multi-directional dialogue on risk and mitigation be encouraged?

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