

Making a Splash: Are Water-Related Touristic Experiences Linked to Authentic Island Tourism?

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Abstract

Water is universally synonymous with islands, encompassing a defining feature of islands' very existence. For islanders, water is critical to their sense of self, place, cultural identity, social framework, and economic livelihood. In tourism marketing, water is often portrayed as a warm, inviting place for relaxation and/or leisurely pursuits, and is a common theme used to entice visitors to the island destination. The purpose of this paper is to examine the various ways in which water-related touristic experiences are linked to authenticity in island tourism, thereby providing visitors with myriad opportunities to make meaningful connections to the place. Residents of Prince Edward Island were surveyed to explore what kinds of island tourism experiences in their home province offered opportunities for visits to experience the authentic place. Findings show that water transcends specific touristic categories and is deeply embedded throughout authentic island experiences. Island respondents identified an array of water-related experiences through which visitors experience different types of authenticity, including objective, constructive, and existential authenticity.

Keywords

Authentic

Authenticity

Island Tourism

Water-Based Tourism Experiences

Warm-Water Tourism

Introduction

The quintessential 3 Ss of island tourism — sun, sand, and sea — are well established in marketing campaigns for island destinations, even if superficial, trivialized, and stereotypical (Cameron & Gatewood, 2008). The classic island trope of swaying palm trees, sunny skies, and crystal-clear warm water lapping the shores of a white sandy beach is deeply etched in the minds of travelers around the globe (Anderson-Minshall, 2023). Yet the diversity of islands is often not reflected in these images, nor is the depth of significance of these elements to the authenticity of the island place.

Islands are not a monolith but unique microcosms that reflect unique geographic realities, distinctive histories, and well-established cultures. At the same time, islands often share common elements examined through nissology: the study of islands 'on their own terms' (Baldacchino, 2006). Water is one of those common elements.

Water is universally synonymous with islands, encompassing a defining feature of their very existence. Water is understood, with respect to the study of islands, as a geological quality, as a boundary/barrier that separates islands from other islands or mainlands, something to cross to get to land (Baldacchino, 2017; Brinklow, 2023; Brinklow & Jennings, 2023). It is the bringer of weather of all shapes and sizes, whether it be precipitation in all its manifestations or wind, fog, or sun. For many, the tidal rhythms become a clock, or even a calendar, a marker of seasons. It can be a symbol for creativity or the great unknown (Brinklow, 2015), or a balm for the body and the mind from what has been dubbed the "Blue Mind" effect (Nichols, 2014) because of the negative ions created when water meets land. It brings sea-level rise and coastline erosion and is the bringer of life — and death. Water is also a connector, a mode of transportation of people and goods, and a symbol of social and psychological entanglement with the rest of the world. It is an economic driver and a source of sustenance. For islanders, water is fundamental to their sense of self, place, cultural identity, and social framework — and central to Islanders' psychological well-being (Corkum, 2023).

Arguably, the essence of island living — or 'islandness' — can be traced to the Island's sea-surrounded existence (Baldacchino, 2018; Foley et al., 2023; Hay, 2013). Freshwater — either in abundance or dearth — can also be a hallmark of an island (think Iceland or the Faroes vs. Galapagos or Malta); however, this view of water is beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses on coastal and adjacent waters (i.e., those systems that bump up against or flow into coastal waters). In tourism marketing, water is often portrayed as warm, inviting, and a place for relaxation and leisurely pursuits and is used as a critical brand identifier for many island destinations, appearing explicitly or implicitly in branding elements such as logos (Graham, 2021b; Graham & Campbell, 2021). Yet, even cold-water islands — places that can hardly entice visitors with claims of warm and inviting water — employ water-related themes in their branding (Graham, 2020).

This paper aims to examine the various ways in which water-related touristic experiences are linked to authenticity in island tourism, thereby providing visitors with myriad opportunities to make meaningful connections to the place they are visiting. Residents of Prince Edward Island, Canada — a small island province off the Atlantic Coast — were surveyed about opportunities for visitors to their Island to experience the 'authentic' place. Residents adamantly believed visitors have numerous opportunities to experience authentic PEI through the various pillars of tourism promoted by the industry. While responses covered an array of touristic experiences, water was a common element across multiple categories. This paper delves into the water-related responses across tourism categories to identify how water is linked to the authenticity of the island place.

Literature Review

"Water... has stories to tell. It tells them not in words, but in the way that it sculpts and shapes the landscape" (Boon et al., 2018, p. 59). Water is more than a natural resource; it is a defining element of island life, shaping landscapes, cultures, and identities. For many islands worldwide, salt water and fresh water have become, and arguably have always been, intertwined with the imagery of islands and the experience of islandness. Idyllic images of seas and harbors can permeate the mind, body, and soul with feelings of one's island home, fostering a sense of nostalgia and longing, particularly for island expats (Boon et al., 2018). The physical boundary that water imposes on islands creates both material and symbolic insularity and isolation, and contributes to the development and evolution of unique cultures and

close-knit communities. However, the relationship between islands and water is far from static or one-dimensional; while water may serve as a barrier in some respects, it also serves as a means of connection for islands and islanders, facilitating travel, the trade of goods, and communication across great distances and fostering "cultural hybridization" (Dawson, 2015, p. 15; Pungetti, 2013).

Water's dual role as both barrier and connector is significant for understanding islands and islandness, irrespective of its touristic implications. This evolving and dynamic relationship between islands and surrounding waters mirrors broader shifts in how islands are perceived within global narratives, both by islands themselves and by non-island actors. Since the latter half of the 18th century, islands have often been viewed as metaphors for isolation in a world increasingly defined by continental perspectives, where water is seen as a challenge to overcome rather than a source of connection (Ronström, 2021). Yet, water remains a powerful symbol, shaping "our most basic categories, such as beginning and end, here and there, connection and separation" in relation to islands and their physical and metaphoric place in the world (Ronström, 2021, p. 280). The constant presence of the sea contributes to a heightened sense of place on islands, where the Island's land/sea boundary is both a physical and symbolic marker of island life.

The relationships between islands/islanders and the sea reflect a more profound tension between isolation and connectivity. This tension also manifests in touristic experiences where water often plays a central role in defining the island experience for visitors. As Dawson (2015) suggests, the sea is not just a natural boundary; it is a space for "interaction, connectivity, and networks," a vital element in the social and cultural life of island communities (p. 15). In this way, islands may be both isolated and deeply connected, using the sea as a medium to share cultural attributes and sustain island identities in the face of global influences.

Island Tourism: Island tourism holds a unique position in the global tourism sector, offering visitors an experience of remoteness, exotic landscapes, and immersion in distinctive local cultures (Graci & Maher, 2018). This allure of islands is often tied to their romanticized image as idyllic escapes, allowing tourists to detach from the routines of mainland life and enter a "bounded" environment that encapsulates a concentrated cultural and natural experience (Carvalho et al. 2024). According to Carvalho et al. (2024), islands are frequently imagined as pristine and mythic spaces, evoking the ideal of paradise, which plays a significant role in island destination marketing and shapes tourist expectations. However, while this distinct "otherness" is advantageous for attracting visitors, islands often face substantial logistical and environmental challenges, including isolation from major transportation hubs and a heightened vulnerability to environmental stressors such as extreme weather events, which must be managed carefully to maintain sustainability (Carlsen & Butler 2011; Connell, 2020).

Island tourism, distinct in its reliance on unique environmental, cultural, and social characteristics, has become an important subject of academic inquiry. Sharpley (2012) identifies "islandness" as both an allure and a challenge with respect to tourism and implores us to distinguish between island tourism and tourism on islands. The isolation and distinctiveness of islands create a romanticized "otherness," but they also lead to vulnerabilities such as dependency on tourism and susceptibility to external economic and environmental factors. The commodification of island cultures further complicates sustainable development, as local traditions are often reshaped or diluted to appeal to tourists. Recent scholarship highlights the interplay between the global and local in shaping island tourism (Reis, 2016). This work emphasizes that islands are not merely microcosms of larger systems but unique spaces where broader economic, cultural, and environmental dynamics can be examined. This perspective aligns with Baldacchino's (2006) advocacy for viewing islands as "laboratories" for understanding larger sociocultural processes.

Many islands have shifted their economic focus to tourism, which often surpasses traditional industries like fishing and agriculture in revenue generation. This shift provides essential economic support through job creation, infrastructure improvements, and local business development (Connell, 2007). However, the economic reliance on tourism exposes islands to considerable risk, as their economies become dependent on fluctuating global travel markets. For instance, sudden downturns in tourism—due to global financial crises, natural disasters, or pandemics—can destabilize these economies. Additionally, the phenomenon of “leakage” often reduces the local economic impact, as revenue generated by foreign-owned businesses does not fully circulate within the island community (Walker et al. 2021). This issue of economic sustainability and dependence has spurred interest in resilient, community-centered tourism models that distribute economic benefits more equitably among residents (McLeod et al. 2016).

The ecological sustainability of island tourism is particularly critical, especially regarding water-based tourism activities. Marine and coastal environments are central to island tourism, but they are also fragile ecosystems vulnerable to pollution, coastal erosion, and habitat loss. Activities such as snorkeling, scuba diving, and coastal boating depend on maintaining healthy marine ecosystems, which are essential for the long-term appeal of island destinations. The “Tourist Area Life Cycle” (TALC) model, which identifies stages in tourism development, can help in monitoring growth and implementing sustainable practices (Connell, 2015). TALC’s framework allows island destinations to proactively manage the environmental impacts of tourism, adjusting policies as needed to avoid over-exploitation and protect ecological resources. Sustainable practices, such as establishing marine protected areas, regulating visitor numbers, and promoting eco-friendly tourism, are vital strategies for preserving the natural assets that make island tourism unique and ensuring that this tourism remains viable in the long term (Connell, 2015).

Authenticity in Island Tourism: Authenticity is central to understanding tourism in relation to water-based touristic experiences. Objective authenticity relies on clear, established criteria to define what is real, original, or genuine in tourism contexts (Kim & Jamal, 2007). In this context, water-based experiences could be evaluated for their inherent truth or fidelity to a particular standard established by people and processes with authority to endow experiences with the moniker of ‘authentic.’ For example, an authentic island water-based experience may involve engaging directly with the Island’s natural watery environment—fishing or swimming in local waters—where the relationship between water and islandness is experienced as inherently authentic.

However, as tourism becomes increasingly commercialized and market-driven, constructive perspectives emerge as a more nuanced lens for understanding authenticity. This type of authenticity is not intrinsic in any object or experience but instead socially constructed or shaped by the narratives and expectations of different audiences (Casteran & Roederer, 2013; Chhabra, 2008). In this framework, water-based tourism activities such as cruises, scuba diving, or even beach vacations become performances that are adapted and tailored to meet tourists’ expectations of what an “authentic” island experience should be. Once viewed as a natural boundary, the sea is commodified as a product in the tourism market. Consequently, authenticity becomes fluid, shaped by local traditions and global tourism demands (Bryce, Mundy, & Alexander, 2017; Knudsen, Rickly, & Vidon, 2016).

Another layer of authenticity relevant to water-related tourism is existential authenticity, which centers on the tourist’s individual experience of self-discovery and meaning-making (Brown, 2013; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). Water can act as a vehicle or venue for personal transformation or actualization, whether through adventurous activities such as sailing or swimming, or quieter, reflective engagements like contemplating the ocean’s enormity or listening to the soothing sounds of the waves. Existential authenticity focuses less on whether an experience aligns with objective or constructed

standards of authenticity and more on the emotional and existential connections forged by the individual in pursuing or experiencing their authentic selves (Wang, 1999; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006).

Water-Related Touristic Experiences and Islandness: Water, as a practical resource and as a symbolic medium serving as both a barrier and a connector, influences the touristic appeal of islands (Craig-Smith et al., 2006). For centuries, the appeal of island destinations has been marketed through idyllic imagery of palm trees, white sandy beaches, and crystalline waters, aligning with the 3S's model of sun, sand, and sea (Cameron & Gatewood, 2008), as well as the mystique of crossing the water to get there. Yet the postmodern tourist's desire for more meaningful, active, and educational experiences has begun to shift the focus of island tourism away from these static tropes (Craig-Smith et al., 2006). Water-based activities may offer a deeper engagement with water that transcends traditional leisure models, contributing to an evolving sense of island authenticity.

Water-based activities — starting with the crossing to the island — remain central to the island tourism experience (Zhang et al., 2020). Indeed, “the crossing—a symbol of separateness *and* connectedness—is one of the defining elements of islandness” (Brinklow, 2023, p. 2). Waiting in a ferry line-up is arguably the first engagement a visitor has with the water, and the concept of islandness, experiencing with others the anticipation (or frustration, depending on how long one has to wait!) of crossing to a land mass that is separate and different from the land you start out on. Of course, it takes a conscious effort and pre-planning to get to the ferry on time, and it often adds to the journey's expense — which is another element of islandness: it often costs more to be on an island. The phenomenological experience of crossing by boat engages the visitor at the physical level — forcing one to get one's ‘sea legs’ to adjust to the boat's movement through waves — as well as at the sensory level — the sights, sounds, and smells one experiences while crossing a body of water. It “slow[s] down the crossing to human time, and allow[s]... ‘the spirit to catch up’” (Brinklow, 2023, p. 19), soon to be followed by an immersive experience in the oft-perceived slower pace of life or ‘island time’. Crossing by bridge, tunnel, or air are different experiences; the bridge and tunnel eliminate much of the preplanning and physicality of crossing by boat, while air travel takes planning (and money) but it eliminates the physical connection to the water altogether. Beyond hearing that there is a life vest under your seat should you need it, one is not reminded of the water crossing at all (Brinklow, 2023).

Whether through fishing, sailing, or simply experiencing the beauty of the sea from the beach, tourists engage with water-based experiences as both an aesthetic and functional element of island life. Water-based activities, such as swimming, boating, and snorkeling, are popular tourism activities and draw visitors who seek adventure and connection with the world beyond the shoreline (Craig-Smith et al., 2006). Freshwater tourism activities, while often overlooked in island tourism discourse in favour of saltwater experiences, can also play an essential role, supporting water-based pursuits such as kayaking and fishing, and providing crucial infrastructure for resorts and hotels that support the tourism industry (Gössling, 2006). The strain that tourism often places on freshwater supplies, particularly in small islands, raises important questions about sustainability and the long-term impact of tourism on island ecosystems (Gössling et al., 2012).

Ultimately, water in all its forms — salt, fresh, symbolic, and material — shapes the island tourism experience. The challenge remains in determining whether or how these experiences can be linked to authentic experiences of the Island and islandness. As island tourism continues to grow in response to global and local market forces, how water-based tourism intersects with authenticity in islands will continue to be central to both scholarly and practical discussions on island tourism.

Methodology

To better understand if and how water-based tourism experiences can be a vehicle or medium through which tourists can experience the authentic island place, a survey was conducted of residents of an island with a robust tourism industry. Through this survey, respondents selected three specific tourism categories and detailed ways visitors could experience the authentic place via various touristic activities related to those categories. While one of the tourism categories was explicitly water-related, responses across various categories had connections to water.

The locale of the study was Prince Edward Island, Canada (PEI). Located on the east coast of Canada, nestled amid the Atlantic Ocean adjacent to New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, PEI is home to 175,000 year-round residents. The main economic engines of the province include farming, fishing, and tourism. PEI is Canada's smallest province occupying 5660 km² of rolling hills and 1800 km of coastline. In 2022, 1.3 million tourists visited PEI, primarily in the summer months, with some spillover to the shoulder seasons during May, June, September, and October. These visitors generated \$455M in direct spending whilst in the province. Tourism represents 6.2% of the province's GDP and directly employs 10% of local workers (Prince Edward Island Department of Fisheries, Tourism, Sport, and Culture, n.d.). Tourism marketers have branded PEI as an idyllic getaway for beachgoers, seafood lovers, *Anne of Green Gables* fans, and golfers.

The study focused on the perspective of residents who hold a unique position in the authentication process. The survey was distributed electronically to approximately 600 residents of Prince Edward Island who volunteered to participate in tourism-related research. Over 400 of these panelists provided their responses. Specifically, respondents were asked to select three tourism categories that were heavily marketed as part of touristic visits to Prince Edward Island. These categories included beaches (273), coastal/water (92), culinary (210), cultural (80), entertainment (206), golf (69), history (158), Lucy Maud Montgomery/*Anne of Green Gables* (93), nature (184), and shopping (13). The figure in brackets indicates the number of respondents who selected each category. Respondents then described, using rich-text narratives, what would constitute authentic Prince Edward Island experiences related to that category.

Using thematic analysis, survey responses were clustered to explore their water connections, thus illuminating how water-related experiences might serve as a vehicle for authentic island tourism experiences. The thematic analysis allowed for a systematic examination of the narratives provided by respondents to the survey, ensuring that both explicit and implicit references to water were captured across various tourism categories selected by participants (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Rigers & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016; Terry et al., 2017). First, responses were organized by the tourism category through which the respondents provided their insights, which enabled a contextual understanding of how water features in different aspects of the Island's tourism offering. These clusters were then analyzed to identify common themes, patterns, and variations in depicting water as an integral part of the authentic island experience. In the final step of the analysis, the findings were interpreted through the lens of authenticity. This involved categorizing the thematic clusters into different types of authenticity as defined by the literature – objective authenticity (where the experience is linked to tangible, historical, or natural attributes of the place), constructive authenticity (where social or cultural constructs shape the experience), and existential authenticity (where the experience is personally meaningful and connects the individual to the place in a more profound way). By applying these frameworks for analysis, the study investigators explored the varied roles of water in shaping authentic tourism experiences on PEI, offering insights into both the physical and symbolic significance of water in the Island's tourism identity.

Findings

The original study invited participants to provide local insights into authentic experiences across various tourism categories. Among these ten categories, respondents covered a wide array of topics, but a common theme amid responses throughout categories was water-related experiences. Each of the tourism categories are identified below, along with the ways in which water-related experiences were represented in that category.

Two of the tourism categories included in the study were directly related to water: coastal/water-based experiences, and beaches, which garnered 92 and 273 unique responses respectively. Respondents who selected coastal/water as one of three tourism categories they wished to comment on provided an array of ways in which authentic PEI would be experienced via water. One popular refrain was that visitors should view the Island from the vantage point of the water for a different and impactful perspective on PEI's landscape/seascape. Numerous respondents cited water-based modes of transportation as a means to experience PEI but were emphatic about active transport (kayaking, canoeing, sailing) rather than mechanical modes (personal motorized watercrafts). Exceptions to this were panelists who highlighted the importance of the ferry service as quintessentially an island experience. Numerous respondents championed water-based modes of arriving to the Island — via the ferry or the Confederation Bridge. Those recommending the ferry service harkened to the long history of the ferries, the opportunity to watch the dramatic arrival at the dock, and the social opportunities to connect with others on the journey. For those mentioning the Confederation Bridge, they spoke of the engineering marvel of the 12.9km structure that spans the Northumberland Strait. In both cases, respondents shared that, via bridge or ferry, arrival to their Island was an authentic experience in-and-of itself. Fishing, particularly deep-sea and lobster fishing, was repeatedly mentioned as a fun water-based activity but also a means of connecting with locals and learning about the traditional fishing industries that were so vital to PEI's economy and communities — often naming specific fishing villages as examples where these activities could be pursued. Food was a common response, and the focal point was fresh local seafood. Respondents not only mentioned specific types of food, but also where a visitor could purchase such products (off the wharf or straight from a fisher). Clamming was cited as a great way to spend an afternoon on the shore and a delicious way to experience the ocean's bounty. And despite having its own category, beaches were mentioned here as a juxtaposition of land and sea, and a breathtaking place to spend time — alone or with family/friends. Those respondents who selected water-based tourism experiences found myriad ways in which authenticity was embedded in those activities.

Beaches were among the most popular tourism categories that respondents elected to discuss in their survey responses. PEI beaches received rave reviews from all respondents. However, there was considerable debate concerning preferences for the north shore (sand dunes) versus the south shore (warm water and sandbars) and between beaches designated as National/Provincial Parks versus smaller, quieter, lesser-known beaches. Descriptions such as natural, untouched, and pristine were used repeatedly. Active pursuits, including beachcombing for shells and sea glass, swimming, walking, clamming, and kayaking, were all lauded as worthy ways of spending time. Beaches were places to enjoy alone or with family and friends, and numerous respondents celebrated finding a quiet stretch of sand that a visitor could claim as their own (even if just for the day). Various natural phenomena were identified as being particularly worthy of exploration — including the singing sands of Basin Head, Elephant Rock and Teacup Rock (both gone now due to the unrelenting nature of the north shore wind and waves), the Island's red sandstone cliffs, unique wildlife (specifically, the endangered piping plover), and stunning towering sand dunes. Also mentioned frequently were well-preserved lighthouses that dotted the coastline. Respondents espoused the benefits of never being far from a beach — just drive a few minutes and visitors will likely find one. In a prominent display of pride of place, respondents heralded

'our' beaches throughout their answers, denoting a sense of ownership. To islanders, beaches are sacred spaces owned by no one, so much so that blocking access to one creates "a kind of psychic disruption" (Corkum, 2023, n.p.).

The tourism theme related to nature is closely related to both water/coastal and beaches, and 184 respondents selected to discuss this in their survey responses. Just as with the beach-themed option, respondents to the nature theme praised PEI's beaches, both the national/provincial parks and the lesser-known beaches around the Island, and encouraged taking long beach walks to collect sea glass, enjoy the tidal sandbars, witness the dunes and red sandstone cliffs, smell the salty air, watch shore birds in the water and/or diving for fish, or catch a glimpse of a seal frolicking in the water. The North Shore was a particular focus for respondents, as were coastal drives, waterfronts (particularly those with a boardwalk), scenic seascapes, and unique wonders such as the singing sands of Basin Head. Greenwich National Park and Panmure Island were mentioned frequently as standouts among the assorted nature-based experiences. Fishing, including deep-sea fishing and clamming, were named as ways to experience nature on the water, along with swimming, kayaking, boating, and eating the bounty you catch or can buy straight from the source. Several respondents suggested that taking the ferry or crossing to the Island via the Confederation Bridge were ways to experience the Island, particularly in terms of approaching the Island.

Culinary experiences were selected by 210 respondents and many responses had strong ties to water. By far, the most common refrains focused on seafood — with lobster, mussels, and oysters as the stars of the show. Respondents emphatically noted the difference between 'eating lobster' and a 'lobster supper', the latter of which entails very specific accompaniments, protocols, and atmospheres. Various local seafood-related festivals, such as the Shellfish Festival, Summerside Lobster Carnival, and Tyne Valley Oyster Festival, were celebrated as ways to experience the venerated crustaceans from PEI. The importance, both economically and historically, of fishers, the fishing industry, and fishing communities was deeply connected to water-based culinary experiences. These connections extended to multi-generational fishing families, local churches and community halls that prepare and serve traditional lobster suppers, and local seafood shanties where visitors can purchase the catches of the day. Respondents highlighted local restaurants dotted across the province that featured seafood but also encouraged visitors to consider buying their seafood off a local wharf and cooking it themselves. Seafood, as several respondents noted, was meant to be eaten outdoors — where any mess is easily cleaned up. Overall, respondents expressed enormous pride in the quality of culinary experiences deeply rooted in water-based touristic offerings.

Two hundred and six respondents wrote about entertainment-based tourism experiences. Those with water-related connections include various seafood-related festivals around the Island, such as the Shellfish Festival, Summerside Lobster Carnival, and Tyne Valley Oyster Festival. Seafood was strongly associated with being part of many entertainment experiences, including dinner theatres or just a night out on the town. Some respondents argued that enjoying PEI's natural wonders, such as its reef system or the changing tides, was entertaining. In contrast, others suggested making your own entertainment by visiting beaches, going fishing, and pursuing other water-based activities such as sailing and kayaking.

History was also a popular tourism category selected by respondents to the survey, with 158 people providing their insights into history-related tourism experiences. Museums were heralded as being important opportunities to connect with PEI's past, including the province's rich maritime history. Respondents named the Basin Head Fisheries Museum, Green Park Shipbuilding Museum, and Cape Bear Lighthouse and Marconi Station (along with the connection to the *Titanic*) as particular examples that both preserved PEI's maritime past and educated people about that rich history. More generally, respondents mentioned visiting lighthouses dotted around the coastline to connect with a bygone era.

Others noted the historical significance of various waterfronts, traveling by ferry, experiencing fishing first-hand, and even PEI's 'rum-running' past rounded out the water-related responses to the history tourism category.

Eighty respondents elected to share their thoughts on authentic tourism experiences related to culture. Those responses that related to water-based activities included attending local festivals devoted to celebrating the bounty from the sea (the Tyne Valley Oyster Festival or Shellfish Festival, for example), visiting fisheries-related museums such as Basin Head Fisheries Museum, and learning about the Yankee Gale (a significant storm that pummeled the Island in 1851). Numerous respondents stated that anything seafood-related was closely linked to culture, including lobster suppers, buying seafood on a wharf directly from fishers themselves, digging or fishing for your supper, and community dining experiences. Finally, respondents claimed that visiting sandbars, sand dunes, and lighthouses provided glimpses into essential aspects of Island culture.

The remaining themes included fewer references to water-based experiences. Fans of Lucy Maud Montgomery would be pleased that *Anne of Green Gables* was chosen as a tourism theme by 93 respondents. These responses focused on, among other things, Montgomery's eloquent description of PEI's north shore. As a tourism category, golf was selected by 69 respondents who touted the incredible seascapes and ocean vistas on various courses as a key feature of these experiences. Finally, in the category of shopping — the least selected tourism category, chosen by 13 respondents — the lonely link to water-related experiences were the several answers that suggested visitors check out Peakes Quay on the Charlottetown Waterfront as a great source of souvenirs about or made by local artisans.

Discussion

Types of Authenticity

All three types of authenticity were represented in the responses from Island residents in relation to authentic water-based touristic experiences.

Objective authenticity relies on clear standards or criteria as the basis for bestowing the label of *authentic* on an item or experience (Kim & Jamal, 2007). This model of authenticity centers on concepts of truth, realness, originality, genuineness, and integrity as determined by someone with authority to make such distinctions (Wang, 1999) and is inherent in the object itself — absolutely and regardless of circumstance (Chhabra, 2012). Residents of Prince Edward Island used their expertise, garnered via their lived experiences as Islanders, to proclaim authentic the Island's beaches, landscapes and seascapes, the bounty harvested from the Island's waters (especially lobster, mussels, and oysters), and the various water-themed museums dotted across the Island as arbiters of historical records and artifacts that are both objectively authentic themselves and tell an objectively authentic water-based Island story. These items embody objective authenticity because the 'things' are indisputably linked to and born from Prince Edward Island and its natural features — its surrounding waters — and are thus imbued with objective authenticity. According to respondents, to experience these items was to glimpse the authentic island place.

Another type of authenticity — constructive authenticity — posits that authenticity is not an absolute attribute inherent in an object but is socially constructed (and reconstructed) over time based on the needs of various audiences (Casteran & Roederer, 2013; Chhabra, 2008). Within this framework, nuanced interpretations of authenticity, such as reproductive, subjective, staged, and symbolic, emerged as relevant to the discourse (Bryce, Mundy, & Alexander, 2017; Casteran & Roederer, 2013; Knudsen, Rickly, & Vidon, 2016). This type of authenticity was abundant in the responses from the survey. Numerous respondents encouraged visitors to create their own authentic experiences by going deep sea fishing,

buying/cooking their seafood feast the way locals would, and chatting with local fishers to connect with the important fishing industries in PEI. In each of these examples, the visitors themselves are producing/reproducing the authentic experience in partnership with others via social engagement. A popular response across various tourism themes was the ubiquitous 'lobster supper', which is a highly staged culinary experience where not only is lobster the star of the show, but equally important are the location, the communal nature of the meal, the traditional (locally made) accompaniments, the adorning of the *bib*, and the sense of community, all of which require the active participation of the visitor to ensure its authenticity for the individual and the authentic experience of others. All participants — visitors and locals — co-create the authentic 'lobster supper' experience each evening during the summer months in community halls and church basements around the Island.

Subjectively constructed authentic experiences recognize that because individual participants play a role in the creation of these experiences its connection to authenticity is different for different people (Bryce, Mundy, & Alexander, 2017). For example, a significant number of respondents identified the National Parks system as an example of authentic water-related experiences because these spaces often included the provision of boardwalks, bathroom facilities, interpretive centers, surf guards, and nature-based programs. In contrast, other respondents dismissed those man-made beach additions as detracting from the beach's authentic, untouched character. Those championing the National Parks as authentic water-based experiences viewed the additional services provided by these spaces as mediums through which the authenticity was enhanced, in contrast to those who preferred 'untouched' beaches, and who viewed those additions/amenities as detracting from the place's natural authenticity. In general, respondents gave license to visitors to create and co-create authentic Island experiences for themselves, although not without caveats. Responses implored visitors to adhere to tradition, preserve fragile/vulnerable spaces, and respect those that call PEI home — otherwise, locals were happy to share their Island home with visitors.

Touristic experiences can also be a source of existential authenticity, or a means of being with and discovering/rediscovers oneself (Brown, 2013; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). Respondents identified various water-based touristic experiences where participants could find their authentic selves. Numerous responses touted the peaceful, rejuvenating, reflective, and introspective powers of a walk along an Island beach (particularly the North Shore) or finding a quiet, secluded spot in the sand for a day spent alone with one's thoughts. Existential authenticity does not only happen while alone but can also occur via interpersonal interactions whereby an individual gets to be themselves in the truest sense (Rickly-Boyd, 2012; Spracklen et al., 2013; Wallace, 2014). Water, as determined by respondents, was an optimal venue through which to experience one's authentic self and to experience well-being. The experience itself does not need to be authentic; rather, the individual participating in the experience is authentic (Lau, 2010). Respondents posited that by experiencing the otherness that the Island had to offer through water-based experiences — a different way of life and pace of life — visitors were freer to be themselves and live life more fully, which respondents deemed part of authenticity on the Island.

Visitor — Local Dynamics as Key to Authenticity

Responses to the survey highlighting the importance of interactions between locals and visitors emerged as a defining feature of authentic water-based tourism experiences. While the activity itself, whether deep-sea fishing, kayaking, or buying seafood directly from a fisher on a local wharf, played a role in the authenticity of the experience, survey respondents consistently emphasized that the inter-human connections were paramount in the authenticity of that experience. For instance, going deep-sea fishing with a local fisher was more than just a fun excursion—it provided a window into the fisher's life that was central to the authenticity of that experience. Visitors were able to encounter the

economic and cultural significance of fishing and the fishing industry to local communities, and they not only observed but also participated in the lived reality of islanders. This fostered a deeper understanding of the challenges and rewards of making a living on the water (Ronström, 2021). Similarly, purchasing fresh seafood directly off the wharf after a fisher's day out on the water allowed for an authentic exchange — visitors were not merely buying a product but engaging with the traditions and livelihoods that sustain the local economy and local families.

The dynamics of human interactions, grounded in the exchange of knowledge and experience, align with *constructivist authenticity* (Casteran & Roederer, 2013; Chhabra, 2008). Both the visitor and the resident co-create the touristic experience, interpreting it through their unique perspectives and developing a shared and individual meaning from that interaction. Here, authenticity is not a static or inherent quality but dynamically constructed (or co-constructed) through social interaction and engagement. The interplay of local knowledge and visitor curiosity forms the foundation for these authentic experiences, highlighting how water-based tourism on Prince Edward Island serves as a vehicle for meaningful connections between people. Building on this, *interhuman dynamics* can be seen as the bedrock of authenticity in water-based tourism (Gössling, 2006). While the physical environment — the sea, the boats, the seafood — anchors these experiences, ultimately, the relationships and exchanges between people render the experiences authentically transformative and impactful (Amaro et al., 2023). These interpersonal connections offer visitors a glimpse of the Island's culture and a role in its ongoing narrative, contributing to a shared understanding of the place. Visitors can become part of the story.

These relational experiences allow visitors to partake in PEI's ongoing cultural and social narrative. Engaging with the local fishing industry or participating in water-based traditions such as purchasing seafood directly from the wharf connects visitors to the Island's economy and way-of-life and allows them to become temporary participants in the Island's social fabric. The act of buying seafood is not simply transactional — it is an invitation to engage with local knowledge, stories, and customs. The fisher, who may share personal anecdotes about their life at sea or the ecological shifts they've observed over the years, transforms the interaction into a rich, layered experience where the visitor gains insight into the economic and cultural significance of the industry. These exchanges highlight how islanders serve as gatekeepers of authenticity, guiding visitors through experiences rooted in the Island's past and present (Pungetti, 2012). The relationships between locals and visitors becomes a dynamic process of meaning-making, where both parties contribute to shaping/creating the authenticity of the experience (Sheldon, 2020).

Visitors, through their curiosity and willingness to learn, help sustain and celebrate the Island's heritage. In contrast, locals, through their storytelling and cultural knowledge, offer an authentic portrayal of life on PEI that visitors could only experience with the engagement of locals themselves. This mutual exchange creates a sense of belonging for visitors, who are given the opportunity to connect with the Island's cultural and economic realities, making their water-based experience not just an observation of local life but establishing a personal connection to it (Wang, 1999; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006).

The shared understanding and meaning of experiences between visitors and locals reflect the heart of what it means to experience authentic tourism on PEI. These interhuman dynamics highlight the transformative power of personal interactions within the tourism framework (Pung et al., 2020). The sea, boats, and seafood provide the physical stage, but the relationships formed between people (regardless of duration) elevate the experience to one of genuine authenticity. Through these dynamic exchanges, water-based tourism experiences on PEI offer a unique window into the heart of island life, inviting visitors to move beyond passive observation to active participation in the Island's story and to experience islandness.

Cultural & Historical Significance of Water

Water is deeply embedded in the cultural and historical fabric of Prince Edward Island (PEI), serving as both a life source and a symbol of the Island's identity. Historically, water has been pivotal in shaping PEI's economy, from fishing to transportation to trade. Residents' responses reflected an understanding of this enduring legacy, and they frequently highlighted how visitors could connect with the Island's rich maritime history through various water-based experiences. Lighthouses, fishing villages, and coastal museums, such as the Basin Head Fisheries Museum, offer visitors more than scenic views; they provide tangible links to PEI's past, where the ocean has long been a source of sustenance and cultural connection. These historic landmarks are seen not merely as tourist attractions but as vessels of objective authenticity, offering visitors access to the Island's storied relationship with the sea (Boon et al., 2018; Conkling, 2007; Dawson, 2015; Pungetti, 2012). The Confederation Bridge and Wood Islands ferries were more than modes of accessing the Island: they were significant tangible and symbolic reminders of PEI's island identity, rich heritage, and instrumental to the Island's cultural distinctiveness and personality.

Beyond water's historical functionality, water has also been instrumental in shaping the Island's cultural practices, particularly concerning food and sustenance. The prominence of seafood in PEI's culinary culture — especially lobster, mussels, and oysters — underscores the Island's reliance on its surrounding waters for nourishment and identity. Residents emphasized how traditional lobster suppers, clamming, and the ritual of buying seafood directly from the wharf are culinary experiences and cultural rites that link participants to the Island's heritage. These activities, where visitors engage directly with local people and practices, blur the line between participant and observer, allowing them to participate in cultural traditions central to island life (Conkling, 2007; Jackson, 1995). The water, in this sense, becomes not just a physical element but a cultural touchstone, integral to PEI's historical and contemporary identity.

Water's cultural and historical significance on PEI also intersects with themes of community and resilience. The shared experiences of living by and working on the sea have fostered a strong sense of community among Islanders, reflected in cultural festivals like the Tyne Valley Oyster Festival and the Summerside Lobster Carnival. These events celebrate not just the bounty of the ocean but the collective spirit of the Island's fishing communities, whose livelihoods and lifestyles have been tied to the water for generations. For visitors, participating in these cultural moments offers a deeper connection to the Island's identity, illustrating how water continues to serve as both a literal and symbolic feature that defines and unites PEI's cultural and historical narrative (Dawson, 2015; Pungetti, 2012; Randall, 2020). By engaging with these water-based traditions, visitors become part of the ongoing story of PEI, where the ocean remains a powerful force shaping the Island's past, present, and future.

Moving Forward

This study examined the perspectives of locals (islanders) concerning the connections between authentic island experiences and water. It would be fascinating to see if this same study that looked at islanders' views of the role of water related to the authentic tourism experience could be done with visitors. In this type of study, tourism researchers on Prince Edward Island reflect what is at the heart of nissology: studying islands on their own terms. Islanders would be hard-pressed to find something more distinctive than the effects of water — that which defines islands and islandness — on tourism experiences. In addition, this case study's results reinforce the framework of islandness: discussions of authenticity in the water-based experiences data reflect that which is found in the literature, making for a compelling case.

Conclusions

Water is not just a geographical feature of islands but an essential component of island identity, particularly on Prince Edward Island. This study has illustrated how water-based experiences serve as a means for tourists to engage with the authentic island place, making meaningful connections to both the island's physical landscape and cultural fabric. The findings reveal that water-based touristic experiences are deeply embedded in the lived experiences of both residents and visitors. Through activities such as deep-sea fishing, kayaking, beachcombing, and partaking in a traditional lobster supper, visitors can experience the Island's authentic essence in various ways. These activities are not merely recreational; they represent an actual exchange between the visitor and the place, a way of engaging with the Island's history, culture, and community on a deeper level.

Water-based experiences on PEI also align with the three types of authenticity explored in this study: objective, constructive, and existential. Objective authenticity is evident in the Island's natural landscapes, seascapes, and the bounty of seafood that is inextricably linked to the Island's identity. Constructive authenticity is reflected in the socially composed experiences visitors co-create with locals, such as the iconic lobster suppers and interactions with the fishers in local fishing communities. These experiences are steeped in tradition, making them authentic not because of their inherent qualities but because of their social and cultural meanings. In contrast, existential authenticity is found in the personal and reflective experiences that water facilitates, whether through solitary walks on the beach or the quiet contemplation of the Island's serene coastal environment. The interplay between these forms of authenticity suggests that water is far more than a backdrop for tourism in PEI; it is a dynamic and multifaceted element that shapes the Island's touristic identity. Water-based experiences offer a lens through which visitors can see the Island not just as a destination but as a living, breathing entity with its unique rhythms and stories. These experiences allow visitors to step into the world of the islanders, if only briefly, and to see the world from their perspective — in other words, to experience islandness.

The authentic island experience on PEI is deeply rooted in its water-based activities. These experiences are accessible to visitors to the Island, offering a range of opportunities to engage with the authentic place. Whether through the lens of objective, constructive, or existential authenticity, water provides a medium through which the Island's identity is preserved and shared. For non-islanders, engaging with these water-based experiences is a way to connect with the Island on a profound level, making their visit not just a trip but a journey into the heart of PEI's authentic self. The study underscores the importance of preserving and promoting these water-related experiences as vital to maintaining the Island's unique character and appeal in an increasingly homogenized world of global tourism.

Water serves as a means for visitors to experience the authentic island place. More than a benign geological feature, water plays a complex and varied role in the authenticity of the island place. Islanders depend on the water for their well-being and survival. These authentic water-based experiences, as decreed by locals, are also accessible to non-islanders looking to engage with the authentic Island. Visitors may be lured to the Island's shores, but it only takes a short time before they appreciate the water at a profoundly deep level, similar to the locals. These experiences can be transformative, leading many tourists to decide to return to the island year after year or permanently. It is uncanny how many islanders (like this co-author) say they've come for a week and yet find themselves still here 41 years later. It's the perfect — yet much understudied — immigration strategy. In an increasingly globalized world, where creeping sameness infringes on people's ability to be their authentic selves and thus their sense of well-being, it is refreshing to know that

because of the water surrounding them, islands can renew and rejuvenate. It is a lofty goal to say that Prince Edward Island can be an antidote to what ails us, but as a tourism strategy from 2017 stated: *Come find your Island*.

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