

## Community Resourcefulness Under Pandemic Pressure: A Japanese Island's Creative Network

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### Abstract

For Japan's small island communities, already facing an existential demographic crisis due to their aging, shrinking populations, the 2020 coronavirus pandemic has proven to be a critical stress test. On islands with nascent tourism economies that have replaced declining primary and secondary industries, the situation has threatened to reverse precious economic and demographic gains that marginal communities can scarcely afford to lose. This study examines an island that had demonstrated successful small tourism micro-firm development in earlier research prior to the pandemic—success that was tied to community resourcefulness, where a localized, creative synergy of agency and capacity spurred entrepreneurial success. New field observations and interviews revealed entrepreneurs caught between competing priorities: preserving community health and preserving their own livelihoods. A sluggish response to the crisis from the local government led to unrest and tension among small-business owners, revealing divisions between stakeholder groups. However, a strong sense of community responsibility was observed among entrepreneurs, a number of whom pivoted toward creative, community-facing services, products, and initiatives—often in partnership with other community members. This study clarifies the role of community resourcefulness in transforming peripheral communities, articulating a place for resourcefulness alongside resilience in sustainability discourse.

### I Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 triggered a profound and universal shock in the Japanese tourism sector, prompting weighty questions about the sustainability and fate of what until that point had been an area of steady growth (Funk & Cooper, 2013). In small communities that had become economically reliant on tourism, the situation became especially acute. This study examines one such place, the island of Naoshima in Japan, which has become widely known as an

art tourism destination. Prior to the pandemic, we identified Naoshima as a strong case among a growing cluster of “art islands” in the region, showing that it fared much better than several of its neighbors due to the presence of community resourcefulness (Qu et al., 2020). A local entrepreneurial network had formed, which leveraged agency and capacity to effect positive change through bottom-up innovations, distinct from but symbiotic with the exogenous art-tourism development plan. This ethnographic study re-examines Naoshima in light of current events, where the pandemic shock has dramatically altered circumstances on the island. The findings further support the use of community resourcefulness as a benchmark for gauging

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sustainable tourism development in rural and peripheral settings.

After introducing resourcefulness, we situate it alongside tourism resilience. Both metrics are strongly compatible, in that they signal the innovative potential of communities to respond to change, both surviving in hardship and responding effectively to opportunity (Cheer & Lew, 2018). However, we also weigh a potential gap between resilience and resourcefulness, proposed by MacKinnon and Derickson (2012), who consider the former to be a more conservative framework that tends to favor preserving the status quo, while the latter, resourcefulness, is a progressive course favoring equity and democratic action. We evaluate the findings from Naoshima using both lenses.

In evaluating the presence and efficacy of community resourcefulness among tourism micro-firms on Naoshima during the pandemic, we also consider the role of creative networks, and whether a creative cluster had formed. Previous research has introduced the notion of “temporary and intensified (p. 997)” clusters (Maskell et al., 2006), particularly around events like trade fairs and conventions, where groups of creative actors relocate to a place for a short time, then leave. It would not be surprising to find a similar situation at work on Naoshima, which is part of a triennial art festival. However, our research reveals that a *permanent* creative network of tourism entrepreneurs had not only formed on Naoshima, but had in some ways become more strongly bonded, innovative, and locally rooted while tourism had collapsed. While the entrepreneurs faced serious challenges during the study period, including delayed support from the local government, ultimately the study rein-

forces Naoshima as a positive case illustrating the process of community resourcefulness in rural tourism environments.

## II Literature Review

### 1) Community resourcefulness and resilience

Community resourcefulness, a nexus of agency and capacity leveraged by communities to foster change (Qu et al., 2020), is particularly essential in rural entrepreneurial contexts (ibid), where resources are more commonly socio-cultural rather than financial (Akgün et al., 2011; Klien, 2020; Woods, 2011), and collective agency is essential to the prevalence and success of local entrepreneurial activity (Müller, 2016).

Resourcefulness, also referred to as bricolage, is the *process* (Baker & Nelson, 2005) of making do with what’s at hand, and has been previously studied among individual entrepreneurs in urban (e.g., Baker & Nelson, 2005) and rural (Barraket et al., 2019; Yachin & Ioannides, 2020) settings. In the resource-constrained rural, owners of tourism micro-firms have been observed employing resourcefulness to repurpose and redeploy local resources in novel ways in order to support their businesses (Yachin & Ioannides, 2020). Such activity, particularly in the shifting global resource landscape brought about by technological advancement and global mobility, can be considered a marker of resilience in tourism economies, as it signals an ability to rapidly adapt to change (Cheer & Lew, 2018).

In contrast, MacKinnon and Derickson (2012) proposed resourcefulness *instead of* resilience as a desirable approach for community groups, calling out the limitations of the former in communities: “[R]esilience is inherently con-

servative insofar as it privileges the restoration of existing systemic relations rather than their transformation" (p. 263). Rather, "[T]he normative vision that underpins resourcefulness is one in which communities have the capacity to engage in genuinely deliberative democratic dialogue to develop contestable alternative agendas and work in ways that meaningfully challenge existing power relations" (p. 263). While we acknowledge that resourcefulness-as-politics differs somewhat in intent from the bricolage studies, as well as from tourism-resilience studies, we see MacKinnon and Derickson's argument mirrored in critiques of widespread development projects to "revitalize" rural locales that fail to emphasize real transformation over a return to previously functional but ultimately unsustainable or inequitable socio-economic systems (e.g., Matanle, 2017).

Resourcefulness is prevalent among social enterprises, firms bridging social and economic objectives (Barraket et al., 2019). In our previous research on social enterprises in an island art festival in Japan, we showed that community resourcefulness and sustainable rural tourism are linked (Qu et al., 2020). The presence of small-scale social enterprises in rural tourism economies has been associated with sustainability (Aquino et al., 2018); our research additionally argued that such micro-firms are evidence of communities leveraging agency and local resources to effect endogenous change. Notably, we found that island communities lacking local social enterprises were characterized by general dissatisfaction with tourism initiatives, which were perceived as being foreign elements that brought little good and clashed with local priorities (Qu et al., 2020)—as Baldacchino (2015)

wrote, "[hovering] on the limits of legitimacy" (p. 44).

Communities successfully utilizing resourcefulness typically feature not only effective local leadership (Qu et al., in press) but also active community networks (Kodithuwakku & Rosa, 2002). Even within situations of exogenous tourism development, such networks are able to activate local priorities and thereby fill the legitimacy gap between outside investment and community needs (Gaddefors et al., 2020). In such communities, tourism development is perceived much more favorably because of these links (Qu et al., 2020, in press). This framework muddles the distinction between community and business, and thus also between community and business *resilience*, which are often considered separately in tourism literature (Cheer & Lew, 2018).

## 2) Creativity in rural space

A grassroots response to tourism opportunities demands the presence of creativity and innovation in communities, but these attributes are frequently dismissed or minimized in rural contexts (Edensor & Millington, 2019; Woods, 2012). Innovations built through collaboration and partnership, and particularly those resulting in economic development and wealth creation, are commonly seen to require a city's dense social fabric. Yet creative workers, processes, and industries exist in abundance in rural regions (Bell & Jayne, 2010; Edensor & Millington, 2019; Wojan & Nichols, 2018; Woods, 2012). These workers play a central role "in helping rural communities reflect on and respond to social and economic changing, bringing people together and enabling local strengths and resources to be identified. As such, rural creativity is frequently

a facilitator of local economic regeneration rather than an objective of regeneration” (Woods, 2012, p. 12).

Clustering of creative practitioners in rural locales has been considered as an engine for economic growth and innovation outside of city centers (Collins & Power, 2019; Harvey et al., 2012). Additional research has shown how “temporary and intensified” clusters—such as at fairs, trade shows, and conferences (Maskell et al., 2006), as well as at festivals (Jonker et al., 2009; Norcliffe & Rendance, 2003)—contribute to cultural production.

Despite the growing literature describing creativity as a native rural attribute, discussions of rural innovation often focus on ideas and skills imported by urban-rural in-migrants (Bosworth & Atterton, 2012; Klien, 2016, 2019; Obikwelu et al., 2017; Zollet & Qu, 2019). But Akgün et al. (2011) claim that any influx of outsiders is unlikely to produce meaningful change without the engagement of the local population. Then again, the contribution of entrepreneurial lifestyle migrants to physical capital formation has been shown to be greater than that of locals (Akgün et al., 2011), suggesting that both newcomers and

natives bring value to rural economies.

### III Context

Beginning in the early 1990s, the island of Naoshima in Kagawa Prefecture, Japan (see Figure 1), has undergone a profound tourism transformation. A wealthy Japanese corporate chairman and patron of the arts, Soichiro Fukutake, led a series of museum development projects in partnership with local government, bringing contemporary fine art and architecture to the forested southern section of the island, as well as in several small “art house” installations in the village of Honmura on the eastern shore (Qu et al., 2020). These developments brought a surge of tourists, particularly after the debut of the underground Chichu Art Museum in 2004, which “triggered [a] shift from niche to mass tourism” (Funck & Chang, 2018, p. 84). The Setouchi Triennale, an international art festival begun in 2010, has further increased tourism to Naoshima in triennial surges: 2010, 2013, 2016, and most recently in 2019, when Naoshima recorded more than 700,000 visitors (data provided to the authors by Naoshima Tourism Association/Naoshima Town).

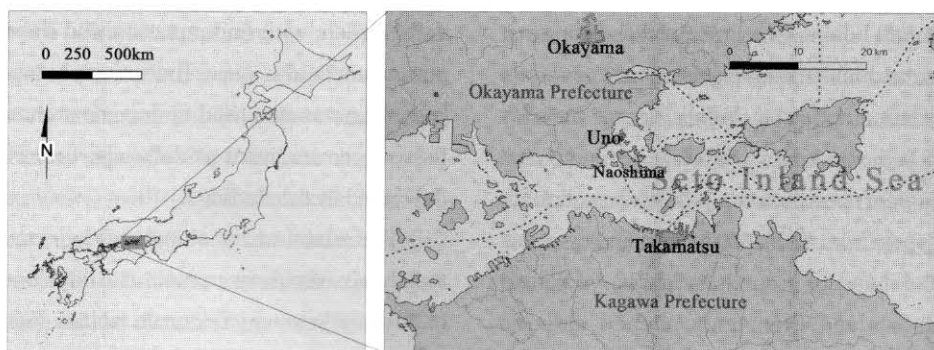


Figure 1 Location of Naoshima in Japan

Source: Illustration by Meng Qu.



Growth in tourism micro-firms has tracked this rise in tourism. New tourism businesses on Naoshima offer services such as accommodation, dining, and transportation. The number of tourism micro-firms on the island ballooned from five guesthouses and nine dining establishments in 2003 to 61 and 46, respectively, in 2016, according to data provided to the authors by the Naoshima Town Tourism Association.

In our previous fieldwork, we discovered that some mixed accommodation-dining businesses had been counted twice by the tourism association and that the real combined total, including other tourism micro-firms like bicycle rental shops, was somewhere around 70 (Qu et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the growth in local tourism businesses was undeniable, particularly on an island that had relied almost entirely on its manufacturing industry for much of the previous century. Additionally, many tourism businesses were owned or operated by urban-rural in-migrants, a group noted for their role in neoendogenous development in rural areas (Bosworth & Atterton, 2012) and part of a growing phenomenon in Japan (Klien, 2020).

While most of rural Japan is in decline, with aging, shrinking populations (Funck, 2020; Matanle et al., 2011), Naoshima is full of new and varied small businesses. Alongside a range of Japanese and international cuisine and generous transportation options including electric bicycles and two taxi companies (with one car each), the island supports uncommonly diverse accommodation types, from ¥100,000-a-night luxury suites above the museum grounds to hotels, traditional guesthouses and even tents pitched indoors. Crucially, many of the more budget-friendly accommodation options offer shared rooms and

facilities, an issue with major significance during a pandemic.

Prior to the global pandemic of 2020, the greatest challenge faced by tourism micro-firms on Naoshima was the inconsistent flow of tourists, not only during high and low seasons but also during the Triennale cycle, when surges of tourists regularly overwhelmed many business' capacity and also led to staff shortages (Qu et al., 2020). After the record-high number of tourists in 2019, 2020 offered a very different set of challenges.

#### IV Methods

Data for this paper was acquired primarily through long-term ethnography by the first author, who has been a resident of Naoshima since April 2019. Methods combined field observations with long-term interaction and unstructured or semi-structured interviews with a group of 12 Naoshima informants (see Table 1), who were interviewed repeatedly between March and November 2020. The informants included seven owners, two managers, and one employee of tourism micro-firms, as well as a mid-level administrative employee of the local museum corporation and a staff member at the town office. Interviews were conducted in both Japanese and English, with findings recorded in contemporaneous field notes. Extensive photographic recording was also used to document changes in the town environment as well as particular events described in the findings.

The island of Naoshima was selected from among six islands in a previous study conducted in 2019 on Setouchi Triennale islands (Qu et al., 2020). Naoshima was selected for the present study due to its high number of tourism micro-

**Table 1 Respondent Profiles for 2020 Naoshima Study**

| Respondent | Age | Resident Classification             | Description                                  |
|------------|-----|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1          | 40s | Urban in-migrant ("J-turn")         | Craft shop owner                             |
| 2          | 40s | Urban in-migrant                    | Guest house owner                            |
| 3          | 40s | Urban in-migrant                    | Cafe and guest house owner                   |
| 4          | 50s | Commuter                            | Guest house manager                          |
| 5          | 30s | Urban in-migrant                    | Cafe/bar owner                               |
| 6          | 30s | Long-term local                     | Cafe/restaurant owner-manager                |
| 7          | 50s | Urban in-migrant (with family ties) | Restaurant and guest house owner             |
| 8          | 30s | Urban in-migrant                    | Restaurant manager                           |
| 9          | 50s | Long-term local                     | Bicycle shop owner                           |
| 10         | 70s | Long-term local                     | Restaurant employee                          |
| 11         | 40s | Urban in-migrant                    | Museum employee, mid-level administrative    |
| 12         | 30s | Urban in-migrant                    | Town office staff (in-migration coordinator) |

Source: 2020 interviews by A. D. McCormick.

firms compared to most of the other islands, as well as its positive results in the first study, where tourism was generally viewed favorably by respondents and where community resourcefulness was strongly evident.

Informants were drawn from the same previous study. In selecting from this pool of informants, we sought to highlight contrasts in respondent circumstances brought by the starkly different tourism environments of 2019 and 2020, as well as to continue a longitudinal analysis of Naoshima events both related and unrelated to the pandemic. Rather than profile individual informants, we combined reports from respondents with other observational data to create a narrative of the period, focusing on community responses to the pandemic's impact on tourism micro-firms. Along with participant observation and interviews, methods included collecting data from town publications and news articles or, in the case of tourism business statistics, provided to the first author directly by town officials.

Limitations included that the study focused on a single island and on a fairly small number

of respondents. Efforts were made to conduct a parallel study on a neighboring island, but the pandemic limited effective data collection and we ultimately decided to focus solely on Naoshima. The first author's unique position as a resident of Naoshima allowed for extensive observations that helped to mitigate gaps in the respondent pool. The study was also unable to draw a complete picture of the pandemic period, as it concluded well before the pandemic ended, and it is possible that later developments may contradict or complicate findings from this study. Finally, as with the earlier study, we have used a broad definition of "community" that simplifies the multitude of community sub-groups on islands; efforts were made in the findings to illustrate intra-island conflicts but, ultimately, we concede that a place-based study of community resourcefulness will not fully capture the nuanced and fluid nature of community groups and that further ethnographic research is required.

## V Findings

### 1) Official responses

For small businesses on Naoshima, the first months of 2020 were a time to prepare for a normal tourist cycle after the flood of tourists that stretched capacity to its limit in 2019. However, by March and April, with increasing travel restrictions, a nationwide state-of-emergency declaration, and the postponement of the Olympic Games, signs of a prolonged disruption to the island's tourism sector were becoming clearer. While the national government began offering zero-interest loans to struggling businesses in March, the Naoshima Town government opted for a cautious strategy in offering additional assistance to tourism micro-firms. During Golden Week, normally Japan's busiest domestic travel season, the streets of the island were deserted; that month, a petition from small business owners requesting assistance was submitted to the town mayor ("Gendai ato no seichi," 2020). In July, with the mayor still weighing options, a report on the recent quarterly town council forum circulated to all island households featured a section of critical commentary, with business owners pointing to neighboring municipalities that they felt had been more generous and more prompt in offering relief to their tourism sectors. According to one complaint:

When the mayor won't offer a concrete statement [about support for small tourism businesses], it seems like he isn't considering the issue at all. [...] I had decided to settle on Naoshima, but now [...] when people ask me about migrating to the island, I have no choice but to say, "You should not come to

Naoshima" (Naoshima Town Council, 2020, p. 11).

The drawn-out, passionate, and very public debate underscored stark rifts in the island community, with the nascent tourism sector pitted against older factions made up of the island's shrinking but still-powerful primary and secondary industries. The mayor, caught between competing interests, expressed misgivings about rolling out programs favoring one group over another: If he were to divert funds to the tourism sector, what about the fishing industry, which was also impacted by the pandemic? Many islanders were shocked that the harsh criticism of the mayor had been included in the forum report at all: as the publication was overseen by a town council member, it read as a public rebuke—by proxy—from one of the town's elected officials to another. At the end of July, the town began accepting applications for financial support from tourism micro-firms (Kobayashi, 2020).

This disarray affected initiatives beyond government relief. One program, conceived by a business owner and taken over by the town office, involved setting up a crowdfunding campaign to appeal to fans of the island to send support to struggling micro-firms. Originally proposed in March, the project was marred by bureaucratic infighting, conflicting priorities, and uncertainty. It finally launched in September after dozens of meetings and hundreds of hours of work by town staff, only to draw modest contributions and ultimately fail to meet its fundraising goal.

### 2) Grassroots responses

In contrast to the slow action at the official

level, rapid grassroots responses flourished. Many restaurants and cafes quickly began offering take-out *bento* lunches, with changing ingredients and low prices proving popular with locals. For one month, the museum restaurant even offered delivered meals, something extraordinary for a town of 3,000 residents with no meal-delivery services in normal times.

Businesses owned by long-term residents were more inclined to ride out the disaster, closing entirely and postponing planned peak-season hiring while leveraging savings from previous years. One ramen restaurant frequented by locals posted a sign in the doorway announcing it was closed to tourists, its elderly, long-term-local proprietors viewing fellow islanders as less risky clientele than outsiders during a pandemic. The sign remained posted throughout the year.

More recent in-migrants were either less able or less willing to suspend their operations or restrict their clientele, and instead innovated. A café-and-guesthouse owner reduced his regular business hours to focus on a new project: converting an old single-family house into shared housing for new in-migrants, who continued to move to the island during the pandemic. The owner offered one of the rooms as office space to a local freelancer, further diversifying revenue while meeting community needs.

The pandemic unevenly affected accommodation businesses on Naoshima, with those able to provide private rooms much better equipped to deal with physical distancing requirements than those which featured shared rooms or shared toilets and baths. Inevitably, this favored the expensive museum hotel and the small number of other facilities offering single rooms on the island over traditional guesthouses and inns.

However, here again, the smaller actors adapted. One guesthouse manager quickly converted his shared rooms into single-occupant rooms, with each assigned its own private bath. This reduced capacity considerably but allowed business to continue. Offering discounts on weekdays served both to drive more business and spread reservations throughout the week. The guesthouse manager, a commuter, also collaborated with another local business owner, an in-migrant, to create a pop-up food stall in the guesthouse's vacant take-out café space; the manager had a high-traffic location with no one to staff it, while the vendor had a product to sell that they couldn't produce in their own small shop. Such instances of collaborative, creative experimentation quickly multiplied in the pandemic environment.

In another instance, a café began offering special menus created by a non-Japanese resident featuring cuisine from her hometown abroad. While tourist-facing cafes with few return customers rarely saw any benefit in updating menus, the pivot to local customers created an incentive for novelty. Another café also hosted a pop-up craft market that offered local residents an opportunity to sell handmade and secondhand goods, while also creating a reasonably safe outdoor attraction for tourists to enjoy.

Many entrepreneurial innovations and adaptations were the result of in-migrant actors collaborating, but long-term locals participated as well. One organization, a group of long-term islanders and in-migrants who met regularly to plan and carry out community-improvement projects, repurposed the organization's available funds to issue vouchers for local small businesses, which members could use or distribute as they wished.



The project was conceived in order to encourage fellow islanders to invest in local businesses. Participating businesses included a craft shop, cafes, restaurants, and guesthouses. While the initiative was limited to the funds the all-volunteer group had on hand, it inspired goodwill among participants and modeled a rapid reallocation of resources toward the struggling small-business community at a time when such programs were not immediately forthcoming from the local government.

Ultimately, the troubled crowdfunding campaign offered a silver lining, as it led to additional collaborations among team members. Notably, two micro-firm owners began developing a tourist information mobile phone app for the island in preparation for the eventual return of visitors, recruiting other islanders to add bilingual functionality and other features. Though the project was still under development during the study period, it was another example of the creative networks that had blossomed on the island and that continued to innovate and adapt during the pandemic.

## VI Discussion

While our earlier island study revealed the potential for the social enterprise structure to bridge tourism-revenue generation and serving local needs, the present study suggested that more ad hoc and spontaneous collaborations between creative entrepreneurs become the primary source of innovation and adaptation during times of crisis. The study affirmed previous findings that in-migrants are often drivers of entrepreneurial innovation (Bosworth & Atterton, 2012; Klien, 2016, 2019; Obikwelu et al., 2017; Zollet & Qu, 2019), while long-

term local business owners are generally more conservative. However, this was not the rule, and collaborations between long-term locals and in-migrants did prove fruitful, such as in the voucher system developed by the community organization.

The island's bureaucratic governmental systems ultimately proved the most cumbersome and least able to adapt swiftly to the situation. The reasons for this were myriad but centered on competing power dynamics that delayed key decisions. However, these very issues were symptomatic of the diversity of interests and industries on Naoshima; had the island been a tourism-industry monoculture, the adverse effects of the pandemic might have been far more profound. Instead, tourism businesses were able to pivot to local customers employed in other industries to at least partly offset losses. That they were able to rapidly do so, and that the greater community was responsive, indicates a high level of community resourcefulness on Naoshima.

Naoshima's decades of corporate arts and art-tourism investment and the advent of the Setouchi Triennale have brought an explosion of small businesses run by creative in-migrants seeking new lives for themselves and their families away from the cities. Our previous research among Setouchi Triennale islands suggested that the festival drew creative-professional and artist in-migrants who formed new art-related businesses and even businesses that functioned as socially engaged art (Qu et al., 2020), but some long-term locals were present in this activity as well, leveraging long-standing social resources and freely copying from one another to serve the new tourist market. This confirmed that

the social embeddedness of local actors is an essential component of meaningful change (Akgün et al., 2011; Gaddefors et al., 2020). But strikingly, the present study illustrated that this creative activity was sufficiently distinct from the museum-based tourism industry that the former not only survived but in some ways flourished in the absence of the latter.

This is in part an affirmation of the innate creativity found in rural locales (Bell & Jayne, 2010; Edensor & Millington, 2019; Wojan & Nichols, 2018; Woods, 2012). Additionally, based on the number of skilled in-migrants living on Naoshima, it is strongly suggestive of the formation of a creative cluster on the island (Collins & Power, 2019; Harvey et al., 2012) and that this extends beyond the “temporary and intensified” clustering observed at events like festivals (Jonker et al., 2009; Maskell et al., 2005; Norcliffe & Rendance, 2003), further evidence that local creative entrepreneurial activity is not solely dependent on seasonal or triennial tourism patterns.

While the government’s initial hesitation in offering financial relief for tourism micro-firms during the pandemic suggested that the nascent tourism industry had to vie with other interests on the island in times of crisis, the fact that the government did eventually roll out support programs for small businesses using emergency funds indicated that the sector had become a critical element of the town’s socio-economic ecosystem. The Naoshima government, which had expended considerable resources in attracting new in-migrants to stave off population decline, now depended on this new group.

Our study clarifies this dependence: the innovations and collaborations of entrepreneurial

in-migrants and allied long-term locals, synergizing the island’s community needs with the island’s capacity, contribute significantly to local sustainability. Insofar as resilience/revitalization remains an objective, the situation on Naoshima presents a positive case, with the nascent tourism industry responding to the crisis with innovation (Cheer & Lew, 2018). However, reflecting on MacKinnon and Derickson’s (2012) call for a “politics of resourcefulness,” our study further points to the emergence of a bottom-up “contestable alternative agenda,” formed jointly and democratically between resident groups, that articulates a more sustainable and likely more equitable pathway forward, rather than a return to past systems.

## VII Conclusion

Rural places experiencing major art tourism development have the potential to build native creative capacity that links to local agency. Especially in times of difficulty, this reservoir of creativity can foster innovative and adaptive responses that help local businesses while also filling social needs in the community. This study, while limited in several ways, nonetheless offers a compelling case for community resourcefulness in the sustainable tourism literature, distinct from but also largely harmonious with resilience frameworks. Though resilience and resourcefulness may diverge as political agendas, they both agree on a core principle: that nimble, adaptive communities are able to weather hardships, bending without breaking, and emerging intact when the crisis abates.

At the conclusion of this study, the pandemic was far from over. Further research is needed both during and at several stages after the pan-

demic tourism shock to assess its true effects on communities, and the long-term benefit of community resourcefulness for communities that have it, and the toll for those that don't. This study focused on the creative attributes of an entrepreneurial network built within an art tourism environment, but ultimately did not positively link the qualities of art tourism environments with community resourcefulness; more research on community resourcefulness is needed in other tourism environments to test its role in localized innovation.

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