



Analysis

The power of environmental indifference. A critical discourse analysis of a collaboration of tourism firms



Heidi Rapp Nilsen ^{a,*}, May-Britt Ellingsen ^b

^a Northern Research Institute, P.O. Box 746, 9487 Harstad, Norway

^b Northern Research Institute, P.O. Box 6434 Forskningsparken, 9294 Tromsø, Norway

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ABSTRACT

International attempts have not succeeded in addressing climate change, leaving an even heavier responsibility on countries, firms and people. As tourism is an expanding branch in the world economy, it is crucial to focus on how climate change issues are addressed in this industry as well. This paper analyses a group of tourism firms in Norway that join together to promote growth and profitability in winter tourism. The span in how these firms deal with environmental issues ranges from ecotourism till not addressing the subject at all. Although the majority of the firms have environmental issues on the agenda, environmental issues are not included in the cooperation. We use critical discourse theory to explore how this stance on environmental issues within a cooperation has come about, and categorize the firms into three discourses: neoclassical economics, environmental economics and ecological economics. Our data indicate that the hegemonic power of neoclassical economics hampers an environmental focus in the network. This power is exerted through the position of being environmentally indifferent. The paper adds knowledge to economic discourses on firm level.

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1. Introduction

Human-made environmental problems are escalating first and foremost through the seriousness of climate change. This article analyses how climate-related issues are dealt with among companies in the tourism sector. The tourism sector is directly responsible for 5% of the world's GDP, 6% of the total exports and the employment of one out of every 12 people in advanced and emerging economies alike (World Tourism Organisation, 2012). Tourism is one of the fastest expanding sectors in the world economy, yet it is considered at the same time among the sectors least prepared for the risks and opportunities posed by climate change (Scott, 2011). Climate change is already causing consequences for the tourism industry, although the industry's engagement in these challenges is still quite limited (Scott and Becken, 2010; Kaján and Saarinen, 2013).

The relationship between tourism and climate change has been a research topic for a long time (Kaján and Saarinen, 2013). Becken (2013) gives a thorough documentation on the growth in this research field from 1986–2012, and concludes that 'tourism and climate change' has grown into a knowledge domain in its own right: "While the focus of research is still on how climate change will impact on tourism and how destinations can adapt, considerable attention is also paid to tourism's role as a contributor to greenhouse gas emissions and how these can

be mitigated. Increasingly, researchers investigate integrative issues and policy dimensions of tourism and climate change." (Becken, 2013, pp. 60). Our paper contributes to the latter field, i.e. the integrated field of adaptation and mitigation, as well as policy dimensions.

Contributions to human-made climate change originate primarily from combustion of fossil fuels and subsequent emission of greenhouse gases (GHG), but to be able to cut substantially in emissions of GHG it is necessary to acknowledge what causes such emissions, also known as the drivers of human-made climate change (IPCC, 2014). These are linked to fundamental processes in society such as demographics, globalization, trade, market, governance, institutional and legal framework, science and technology, and cultural beliefs as consumption choices (Millenium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005, pp. vii). Many actors, also within tourism, seem to have an incomplete understanding of the drivers of growth in emissions and their complexity and dynamics (Gössling et al., 2010, pp. 126). This situation has possibly been brought about by earlier climate change research which has endeavoured to reduce this complex issue to a single variable of climatic change, maintaining that climatic change cannot be set off by a change in products from the supply side (Brouder and Lundmark, 2011). Several scholars have demonstrated the erroneousness of this assumption, and pointed out that climate change, both mitigation and adaptation, must be seen in relation to the complexity of the tourism system (Becken and Hay, 2007). To grasp this complexity, we use the broad phrases 'climate change issues' and 'environmental issues'.

As international attempts have not succeeded in the necessary radical reframing of the climate change agenda and the economic

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: heidi.nilsen@norut.no (H.R. Nilsen), may-britt.ellingsen@norut.no (M.-B. Ellingsen).

characterizations of contemporary society (Anderson and Bows, 2008), an even heavier unilateral responsibility lies on countries, firms and people to address these challenges in a proactive manner. Still, when it comes to even recognizing the existence of environmental problems, different attitudes, understandings and resulting practices coexist within the smallest groups of firms and people. A potent tool to analyse such differences is by viewing them as belonging to different discourses. More public attention directed at how different discourses reflect environmental issues can shape values and attitudes and thus contribute to a more sustainable development (Springett, 2003). Pinpointing obstacles and highlighting success criteria in specific discourses can inspire and improve future environmental performance (Rafey and Sovacool, 2011).

This paper explores climate change mitigation, adaptation and policy instruments in a cooperation of firms working together to promote growth and profitability in winter tourism in Northern Norway. The majority of the firms have climate-change related issues on the agenda. It is therefore not unreasonable to assume that this existing knowledge base was seen as an asset, and eventually adjusted to fit the goals of the cooperation. However, climate-related issues are not included in the statutes of the collaboration. We use critical discourse theory (Fairclough, 1993; Fairclough and Wodak, 2007; Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 1999; Rogers et al., 2014) to explore how this stance with regard to climate change within a cooperation of firms is formed. The research question is: What can critical discourse theory reveal in exploring this potentially productive cooperation, with regard to addressing climate change issues?

Winter tourism has been a main theme in research on tourism and climate change. The geographic focus has traditionally been the European Alps (Falk, 2010) and North America, whereas in recent years the attention has expanded to a broader geographic diversity (Becken, 2013). The same is also true for research on Norway and Northern Norway (Aall and Høyser, 2005; Higham and Cohen, 2011; Rauken and Kelman, 2012). Several findings in these studies are relevant to our case on environmental discourses. Rauken and Kelman (2012) reveal a gap between actual impacts of weather and climate change on small and medium sized enterprises and people's perceptions of the impacts. Rauken et al. (2010) find that tourism businesses in this part of Northern Norway have a pragmatic view on weather as something that has always been dealt with and always will be. There are also physical explanations of the lack of perceptions of the impact, and thereby marginal mitigation and adaptation efforts also within tourism. The lack of reliable local scenarios for climate change implies a high uncertainty in forecasting impacts on tourism (Aall and Høyser, 2005). "The effect on winter tourism is, on the other hand, more uncertain, being dependent on snow. As one of the projected effects of climate change is higher temperatures and less snow, this might have a negative effect on winter tourism in some areas" (Aaheim et al., 2009, pp. 30). The Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme is at the forefront in documenting changes in snow cover in the Arctic region. Their data show that the region of Northern Norway is at both ends of the scale regarding changes in the number of snow cover days. From 1973–2008 there is a maximum reduction of 20 days on the one end, up to a maximum increase of 20 days on the other (AMAP, 2011, chapter 4, pp. 14). Moreover, one of the conclusions in this report is that changes in snow conditions can either dramatically improve or dramatically damage local economies, depending on local characteristics in future snow conditions¹. The

large uncertainties and the pragmatic views expressed may explain that companies in the winter tourism sector generally are not more concerned by climate change, as supported by our study.

2. Calls for Critical Approaches

With this paper we aim to contribute to the calls for more studies with a critical approach to the established neoclassical economic regime as predominant explanatory model for business behaviour. The lack of such studies in this journal was pointed out by Anderson and M'Gonigle (2012), and has been debated by central contributors to the field of ecological economics (Spash, 2013) as well as by others (Hoepner et al., 2013). More critical environmental research to bring about change is not an exclusive problem within the field of ecological economics. Calls for more critical perspectives have been voiced for instance within the field of environmental management (Welford, 1998; Åhlström et al., 2009), as well as within research on tourism and climate change (Becken, 2013).

The approach of this paper is inspired by the critical version of discourse analysis, as articulated and developed by Norman Fairclough (Fairclough and Wodak, 2007). Central to Fairclough's approach is that discourses can both reproduce and change knowledge. The term 'critical' is strongly linked to the Frankfurt School (Bottomore, 2002; Susen, 2010), and relates to the intention of revealing or exposing different power relations. What is revealed is to be used for the implementation of radical social change in favour of suppressed groups (McKenna, 2004). In this paper, we are not looking for suppressed groups or firms, but for suppressed environmental concerns (Funtowics and Ravetz, 1993, 1994).

According to Dryzek, (1997) the general meaning of discourse is "a shared way of apprehending the world". The different discourses with regard to the firms' climate change engagement are analysed in the light of neoclassical, environmental and ecological economics. In the next section we provide a short presentation of these three economic discourses; how they have developed, and how they together represent a relevant theoretical foundation for this paper. The key environmental characterizations of firms within these three discourses are reactive, receptive and constructive (Faucheux and Nicolai, 1998; Perman et al., 2003). Part of this study is a further exploration of these predefined characterizations.

2.1. The 3 Economic Discourses

In classical economics, which developed from around 1780, natural resources were a central concern and considered an absolute scarcity. In the 1870s a series of major studies began the replacement of classical economics into what is known as neoclassical economics. Absolute scarcity was replaced by relative scarcity and relative values determined by supply and demand. In neoclassical economics, environmental problems are traditionally described as external effects arising outside of the economic model. Firms engaging in the discourse of neoclassical economics have traditionally been characterized as environmentally reactive, or as having a defensive environmental strategy (Winsemius and Guntram, 1992; Sharma and Ruud, 2003; Bøgelund, 2007; Ingebrigtsen and Jakobsen, 2007). Here, nature has no value of its own and is only instrumental in achieving the highest possible level of utility. This is called 'The constant capital rule' (Ison et al., 2002, pp. 112), where a main challenge is to calculate how great the compensation in capital must be for the loss of natural goods (Asheim, 1995). From the constant capital rule it follows that a measure of total wealth over time is a capital-based indicator of sustainable development. This means that each component of wealth must be measured in commensurate units to secure aggregation, and capital is the obvious measuring rod here (Pearce and Atkinson, 1993).

The neoclassical economic discourse's view on nature and environment was not seriously challenged for over a hundred years until the

¹ "Despite the reduction in snow cover in the Arctic, the northward retreat of snow cover in mid-latitudes may provide new opportunities for snow-based tourist activities in the Arctic. However, changes in the consistency of the snowpack and the unpredictability of snow conditions could lead to negative experiences for tourists and even an increased frequency of hazards such as snow avalanches and slush torrents" (AMAP, 2011, chapter 4, pp. 3).

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