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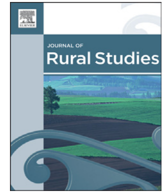

Wilderness tourism and the moralities of commitment: Hunting and angling as modes of engaging with the natures and animals of rural landscapes in Norway

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A B S T R A C T

To an increasing degree, rural landscapes are being transformed into sites for leisure. Even though tourism is welcomed as a rescue plank of agricultural communities in decline, it may at the same time also be associated with unwanted changes. In case where the natures within these landscapes are labelled as wilderness by conservationists and tourist industries alike, inhabitants of local communities may perceive that the social and cultural aspects of the landscapes they themselves strongly identify with are being disregarded. These issues are approached through explorations of how local anglers and hunters in rural communities of the south-eastern part of Norway react to new trends within angling and hunting tourism. In particular, it is looked at in terms of how meanings of wilderness emerge through anglers' and hunters' diverse modes of engaging with natures and the various landscapes. As fish and game are killed and consumed, at least some local anglers and hunters like to understand it as acts of commitment to the landscapes. While the "naturalness" of fish and game is a precarious question in a wilderness perspective, which is often associated with visiting anglers and hunters, local practices, where forest and mountains areas are experienced as extensions of the declining agricultural practices of the settlements, imply to a greater extent that the "culturalness" of animals are enacted. It has been concluded that strong voices among the local inhabitants express views which imply that non-consumptive hunters and anglers are made into symbols of a faired process in which their own landscape is being transformed into a leisurely landscape commoditized as wilderness.

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1. Introduction

A local elk hunter compared visiting elk hunters to the wolf: – *They are both killing, just for the fun of it*, he laughed. Although clearly a joking remark, it was at the same time a rhetorical one, telling something about how views upon both trophy hunters and wolfs are encompassed by moralities: Neither of these figures belong in the woods and mountains surrounding the hamlets where people live. Moreover, the comparison drew attention to widely held beliefs that hunting and angling should be motivated by the need for food, which stands in contrast to what is believed to be a modern, hedonistic morality of doing the same for fun.

The setting is some sparsely populated rural communities in a forested valley in the south-eastern part of Norway. Recently, this region has been marked by controversies over large carnivores, and strong voices have claimed that wolves in particular threaten the very viability of these communities. What is professed as the pro-wolf policy of the government, supported by research institutions and urban NGOs, is believed to fit into pre-existing patterns in which outside forces attempt to shape rural landscapes for their own purposes, consequently depriving rural communities of their identities and material livelihoods (Skogen and Krange, 2003; Blekesaune and Rønningen, 2010; Krange and Skogen, 2011). Because this is held to be a cultural landscape, it is argued that the wolf belongs to the wilderness and that the wilderness is elsewhere.

Lately, there has been an increased focus on nature-based tourism in this region, as has also been seen in many other parts of the country. New developments within angling and hunting tourism are strongly resented, as it is claimed that the visitors' increasingly non-consumptive approaches to fish and game challenge local practices and identities. It is primarily local residents who protest, but they are also supported by a good number of anglers who regularly visit the area. Globally speaking, nature-based tourism is rapidly expanding, covering a wide spectrum of

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experiences and activities (Fennell, 2012: 321–322; Newsome and Rodger, 2012: 345; Curtin, 2010). In part, this development is a response to the declining economic significance of agriculture and other resource industries, the effects of outward migration and changing public attitudes towards the environment. Although contributing to the viability of communities, nature-based tourism should also be seen as part of a process of shifting power relations (Woods, 2003; Soliva et al., 2008; Ploeg and Renting, 2000) in which rural landscapes are transformed, sometimes in dramatic ways. In many instances, these changes manifest themselves in that the landscapes to an increasing degree are defined as sites for leisure rather than for settlements and work (Phillips, 2005; Daugstad et al., 2006; Vaccaro and Beltran, 2009; Stacul, 2010; Vaccaro, 2010).

Rural communities hosting nature tourists are very often located within or at the fringe of areas labelled as wilderness (Saarinen, 2005; Sæþórsdóttir et al., 2011; Ólafsdóttir and Runnström, 2011; Wall Reinius, 2012). Recently, the tourist industry of the region has begun to use words such as *wilderness* or *wilderness experience* in advertisements and branding. Local inhabitants appear to react with ambivalence to this turn. When the spotlight is on the spectacularness and uniqueness of their own communities, as these are surrounded by deep forests and vast mountain areas, people become proud. Simultaneously, since wilderness in most cases is associated with landscapes untouched by any human presence, people who experience the nature as an integral part of both their traditions and present forms of sociality easily find the concept to be a hollow one. The *wilderness perspective* of tourism may even be perceived as a threat since it implies that some vital cultural and social aspects of the landscape are made irrelevant or denied.

Notions of wilderness are included in several studies in which Norwegian or Nordic conditions are made relevant. Focussing on the willingness to pay and the management of the preferences of tourists (Fredman and Emmelin, 2001), attitudes and preferences based on cognitive perceptions (Kaltenborn and Bjerke, 2002) or wilderness as social constructs (Saarinen, 2005; Sæþórsdóttir et al., 2011; Ólafsdóttir and Runnström, 2011; Vistad and Vorkin, 2011; Kaltenborn and Williams, 2002), these studies are for the most part preoccupied with discursive representations of nature. In what ways meanings of wilderness emerge through people's diverse modes of engaging with natures and landscapes have not been looked much into.

The meaning of wilderness tends to depend on the absence of human interference (Whatmore and Thorne, 1998) and a distinction between the human on the one hand, and nature as a non-human realm on the other (Lien and Law, 2011: 9). The extent to which areas or landscapes are labelled wilderness is hence largely an arbitrary matter. In many instances, the meaningfulness or plausibility of using the term is enhanced by the occurrences of charismatic animals, such as wolves or other large carnivores, as these are made into icons of wilderness (Knight, 2003; Lien and Law, 2011). In the present case, large carnivores such as wolves and bear, and even elks and attractive fish species such as brown trout, appear to serve this function.

Purchasing the very experience of spotting a wolf, catching a trout or shooting an elk like commodities, wilderness tourists engage with nature environments and its animals in a provisional fashion (see Franklin, 2008). These practices may form a contrast as to how local inhabitants engage with the same landscapes in more committed ways. Local hunters and anglers perform, experience and idealize their surroundings within a complex field of relations, such as when hunting is defined as stewardship of the landscapes or is seen as the prime mode of upholding local traditions. For centuries, the landscapes of forests and mountains have represented integral parts of the subsistence economies. Until the present it has been experienced like an extension of the agricultural landscapes of the hamlets. Although harvesting fish and game has lost most of the economic significance it used to have just a few decades ago, the symbolic and social significance has been retained. In light of these kinds of contrasts, dissimilarities between local and visiting anglers' and hunters' engagements with animals and natures, as well as the way in which these differences engender conflicting perspectives upon the notion of wilderness, will be explored in the following.

2. Wilderness, natures, landscapes, animals

The notion of wilderness has ancient Christian roots, and is used in European mythologies to signify the darkness on the other side of the wall of the Garden of Eden (Nash, 1974; Stankey, 1989). Today, one could say that wilderness has been transformed into the very garden itself. It is no longer seen as encompassing human civilization, and as such is something to conquer. Rather purist definitions make wilderness into enclaves encompassed by modern human civilizations (Cronon, 1996; Manning, 1989; Fletcher, 2009). Whereas environmentalist movements are among the prime proponents of the view of wilderness as valuable and vulnerable reserves, it has also been adopted by a wide range of actors, such as e.g. the tourist industry (Reis, 2009). Several problematic aspects follow from a purist understanding for wilderness: 1) Wilderness definitions are often contextualized by particular political concerns and cultural imaginations (Head and Muir, 2004: 506), 2) Even in instances in which nature areas have been historically untouched by humans, notions of wilderness can be challenged by the current effects of globalized pollution and climatic changes (Burkhardt et al., 2012), and 3) Nature areas labelled as wilderness are often in reality the outcome of long-term human interventions (see e.g. Fairhead and Leach, 1997). In other words, landscapes – whether they are considered wilderness or not – are constituted by social and historical relations (Stacul, 2005: 830), and should subsequently also be seen as the result of cultural modes of appropriating environments (Hirsch, 1995).

Tim Ingold's advance of this non-dualistic conceptualization of landscapes is represented in the notion of *dwelling perspective*: In contrast to the *building perspective*, "… whose point of departure is that of a mind detached from the world", the dwelling perspective views humans as "… immersed from the start, like other creatures, in an active, practical and perceptual engagement with constituents of the dwelt-in world" (Ingold, 2005: 42). Taking up a view in the world, rather than of the world, is accordingly the basis of our engagement with the world. From this, it follows that dualisms between nature and culture/society are rejected as analytical distinctions. As it is used here, the term *landscape* does not accordingly simply denote a topographic configuration sustaining a particular combination of ecosystems, but brings attention to the *topological* combination of biophysical reality and the human uses, reconstructions, representations, agencies and experiences (Nadaï and van der Horst, 2010: 147; Vaccaro and Norman, 2008: 361). Different aesthetics and temporalities may be attributed to the same landscape depending on different experiences and the agencies of different social actors pursuing their different interests (Vergunst et al., 2012).

As will be highlighted below, natures can emerge as meaningful in the experiences and conceptions of different landscapes, partly as a result of peoples' dissimilar engagements with and experiences of animals. While social constructivist approaches see natures as discursive representations (see e.g. Macnaghten and Urry, 1998; Beck, 1992), multiplicities and diversities of natures in alternative perspectives are explored as evolving in specific processes of socio-material practices, and hence as something enacted or performed

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