



# Leisure traveller perceptions of iconic coastal and fjord countryside areas: Lush naturalness or remembrance of agricultural times past?



Jens Kr. Steen Jacobsen<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Hans Tømmervik<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Institute of Transport Economics, Gaustadalléen 21, NO-0349 Oslo, Norway

<sup>b</sup> University of Stavanger, NO-4036 Stavanger, Norway

<sup>c</sup> Norwegian Institute for Nature Research, Fram—High North Research Centre for Climate and the Environment, NO-9296 Tromsø, Norway

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## ABSTRACT

Several iconic coastal and fjord landscapes in Northern Norway have undergone natural spontaneous regrowth of abandoned agricultural areas and pastureland. At the same time, recent public discourse has assumed that such regrowth may taint tourists' and outdoor recreationists' perceptions of rural areas. Consequently, this *in situ* multilingual study in the archipelago of Vesterålen investigated this assumption. The results revealed that tourists' and visiting recreationists' foremost interest was in pristine rural areas that seemed devoid of human presence or activity. At the same time, roughly half of the visitors enjoyed seeing working farms. The enquiry displays preference ambivalence about the combination of "cultural" and "natural" elements of the rural landscape. The investigation also illustrates a disparity between foreign tourists' desire for lush deciduous vegetation and Norwegian visitors' fondness for a more open agricultural seaside with grassland and shrubland and just a few scattered trees, as the study area had appeared some decades earlier. Moreover, some implications of land use policy are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Several iconic rural landscapes along Northern Norway's coasts and fjords offer vital resources for livelihoods related to leisure travel (Jacobsen, 2006). However, quite a few countryside shoreline areas have changed considerably since the last decades of the twentieth century (Tømmervik et al., 2010). These changes include natural (spontaneous) forest regrowth and overgrowth in abandoned agricultural areas and pastureland (Jensen et al., 2001) and the expansion of dense spruce plantations (Bjerke et al., 2010).

In this context, tourism industry representatives, politicians, public authorities and some other public voices have expressed concern that the loss of open farmland to forest regrowth in rural districts might reduce the appeal of the country's iconic fjords and coastal areas to tourists (Arnstad, 2006; Stang, 2008). Several tourism industry spokespersons have predicted that the deciduous forest regrowth in abandoned agricultural areas and pastureland might do more than diminish leisure travellers' ability to enjoy attractive roadside vistas; these changes may also make the coun-

tryside appear less picturesque from coastal liners and other cruise ships (Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, 2004).

Similar viewpoints have also been expressed in government policy documents. According to these documents, active agriculture is beneficial to Norway's tourism and hospitality industries (Ministry of Agriculture and Food, 2011). Pastureland and grazing by livestock have been seen as important elements of Norway's visual appearance; hence its perceived value to the tourism industries and the population at large (Ministry of Agriculture and Food, 2011). Additionally, policymakers have recommended that the state should provide some disbursements to active farms for protecting the cultural landscape as a public good (Ministry of Agriculture and Food, 2011).

However, there are some differences between expert or policy-maker opinion and public wants (Herzog et al., 2000; Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989). Sang and Tveit (2013) have demonstrated differences between landscape professionals and the general public with regard to perceptions of landscape upkeep and management, both vegetation management and man-made elements in the landscape (Ode et al., 2008). Moreover, semi-qualitative research has indicated that international tourists in Northern Norway appreciated the early stages of the regrowth of agricultural land such as flowering meadows. To a lesser degree, international visitors enjoyed the shrublands and dense forests (Fyhri et al., 2009). Consequently, it is crucial to identify tourists' and visiting recreationists' subjective

\* Corresponding author at: Institute of Transport Economics, Gaustadalléen 21, NO-0349 Oslo, Norway. Fax: +47 22609200.

E-mail addresses: [jsj@toi.no](mailto:jsj@toi.no) (J.Kr. Steen Jacobsen), [hans.tommervik@nina.no](mailto:hans.tommervik@nina.no) (H. Tømmervik).

viewpoints on countryside appearance. Such insights may contribute to a knowledge-based platform for rural landscape policies that are relevant to tourism livelihoods. Since tourism and recreation also are among the many dynamic and complex sets of land uses (Williams and Shaw, 2009), this situation has called for studies of various visitor landscape preferences and assessments related to tourism and *al fresco* recreational activities (de Aranzabal et al., 2009; Sang and Tveit, 2013) preferably evaluated on site (Sevenant and Antrop, 2009).

Against the expanding body of multi-disciplinary literature on agricultural and other countryside districts as potential resources for tourism, the primary objective of this paper was to explore summer season tourists' and visiting recreationists' subjective and self-reported preferences for rural landscape aspects, based on *in situ* multilingual questionnaire survey data. The study concentrated on filling an empirical research gap in the potential ambivalences and differences between the preferences of domestic and international visitors. In addition, theoretical and policy implications were discussed, including a comparison of the results with public discourses on agricultural landscapes and rural land use policies in Norway (Fig. 1).

## 2. Literature review

Numerous rural districts in Europe have been affected by changes that might be detrimental to tourism and outdoor recreation. Countryside changes that have been negatively perceived include decreasing aesthetic quality in the eyes of leisure travellers. What has been perceived as negative rural changes include loss of variety, naturalness, vista qualities, and regional identity (Nohl, 2001). For some tourists and outdoor recreationists, the effects of regrowth and other alterations to abandoned agricultural land and pastureland may, in addition to overall rural landscape transformations, block alluring views (Jacobsen, 2011). Regrowth may also reduce physical access to areas that are perceived as attractive (Bjerke et al., 2010).

Summer season leisure travel in rural areas has commonly been linked to the journey as a panorama (Schivelbusch, 1977), to glance at topographies from a distance, usually from moving ships and motor vehicles (Denstadli and Jacobsen, 2011; Jacobsen, 2001). Travel by private car is a prime form of visitor transport in rural areas and the “default” mode for leisure trips in most of Western Europe (Speakman, 2005). Thus, the visual appeal of roadsides and seashores may be crucial to tourist experiences in many areas. Moreover, it has been indicated that recreationists emphasise visual impressions of the countryside and what they perceive as scenic or charming even when they are not sightseeing (Ribe, 1994). This may be evidence of a blurry line between tourism and outdoor recreation (Wolf-Watz, 2011) with an overall orientation towards visual impressions, termed the “aestheticisation of everyday life” (Featherstone, 1991).

A national survey of people in Germany has shown that “landscape” was the most important criterion in their holiday destination choices (Lohmann and Kaim, 1999). That being said, “landscape” is an ambiguous term with a range of meanings. Hence, understanding how tourists and visiting recreationists perceive rural landscapes is challenging (see Hull et al., 2001; Meinig, 1979). Besides being a physical reality, a landscape consists of its beholders' ideas and perceptions. The significance of the perceptions of landscape in Europe has increasingly been recognised in policy and planning, partly due to the implementation of the European Landscape Convention (Sang and Tveit, 2013). For most Europeans, a landscape contains a human (or cultural) element (Council of Europe, 2000). North Americans, in contrast, tend to think of a landscape as natural scenery (Jackson, 1984). As such, they have

perceived a landscape as cultivation of “wild beauty” or “wilderness”; reflecting romantic attitudes (see Heath and Boreham, 1999). Apparently natural entities may thus be regarded as socially constructed (Wylie, 2007).

In the European context, three iconic landscape types have been identified: beautiful, picturesque, and sublime (Greer et al., 2008; Zaring, 1977). The beautiful is typically thought of as well-formed and aesthetically pleasing. Burke (1787) associated the beautiful with balance, delicacy and colour. Initially, Gilpin 1792 defined the picturesque as the kind of beauty that is agreeable in a picture. The picturesque thus exists in the perception of the viewer and has been regarded as central to contemporary tourism sightseeing (Adler, 1989), typically sequences of landscape views from vantage positions (Greer et al., 2008). The sublime is associated with an appreciation of the power and grandeur of nature and a feeling of awe and reverence (Cosgrove, 1998; Sternberg, 1997). A characteristic example is the juxtaposition of mountains and the ocean.

Schönle (2000) has assumed that the sublime has commonly been thought of as too wild, threatening, and uncontrollable, while the beautiful has traditionally been perceived as too perfect or too disconnected from nature. Many rural areas seem positioned ambivalently between the aesthetic notions of the sublime and the picturesque, as they have quite dramatic scenery in terms of mountains and shorelines at the same time as people live in or near these areas. It has been maintained that notions and pictorial representations of the sublime and the picturesque deriving from the Romantic era still influences people's landscape perceptions (Wolf-Timm, 2010; Høydaalsnes, 1999).

Contemporary rural tourism has also been linked to the idea of the pastoral (Knudsen and Greer, 2011), what has been thought of as a charmingly simple country life, implying a longing for the preindustrial era (Marx, 1964) or a specific rural context (Hunt, 1992; Knudsen and Greer, 2011), for instance as portrayed in idolised or canonised paintings (Høydaalsnes, 1999). Referring to Williams (1973), Oakes (1997) has maintained that present-day rural landscapes have been defined and idealised through an urban gaze as timeless and pastoral; an antidote to modernity. According to Oakes (1997), many nostalgic urban tourists do not search for countryside change, but instead search for stasis. Similarly, certain traditional countryside landscapes have been thought to possess a “utopian surplus”, symbolizing peace and social care; as such, it is recommended that they be protected for their recreational and historical value (Nohl, 2001). Small-scale and traditional family farms have commonly been perceived as rural idylls (Bell, 2006; Strumse, 1994, 1996), sometimes being linked to a perception of countryside landscapes as activity (Lee, 2007).

Empirical studies have pointed towards several countryside landscape features that are valued by Western tourists and by the Western public more generally. Typicality—what people perceive as characteristic—is important to tourists (Andsager and Drzewiecka, 2002; Fyhri et al., 2009). For valued settings, preference may commonly augment with increased typicality (Hägerhall, 2001).

Cognitive landscape research findings of relevance to tourism and outdoor recreation in the present context include a preference for a water view (Kent and Elliot, 1995; Nasar and Li, 2004; Zube et al., 1982). A preference for open areas with quite uniform grassiness, scattered trees and water has also been indicated (Balling and Falk, 1982; Kaplan et al., 1972) although this has only been partly supported in recent empirical research (Falk and Balling, 2010; Gao et al., 2014; Han, 2007). In terms of scenic quality, the fondness for water has been accompanied by a predilection for deciduous and mixed forests and mountains (Civco, 1979). The presence of trees is widely appreciated (Yang, 1992) and scenes with an extensive amount of foliage are preferred (Abelló and Bernáldez, 1986).

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