

Contested wilderness:

The importance of narratives in shaping responses to change in Svalbard's tourism regulations

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FACE-IT has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 869154.

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EU Polar Science Week 4 September 2024

CASE STUDY: ISFJORDEN

Main focus on Longyearbyen

Population of around 2500 people



Photo: Ragnhild F. Dale

Svalbard is rapidly undergoing multiple changes

Affects nature, communities and tourism industry



Climate change impacts ecosystems and society



Regulatory changes affect residents and tourism industry



Local sustainability transition is ongoing in Longyearbyen



Where to in future?

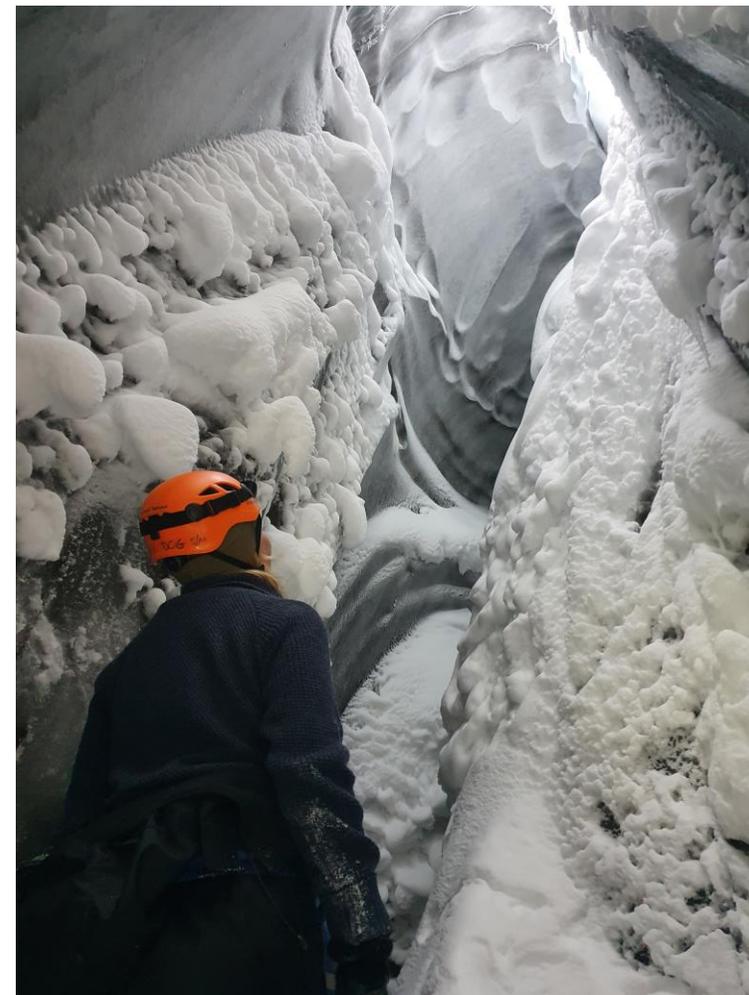


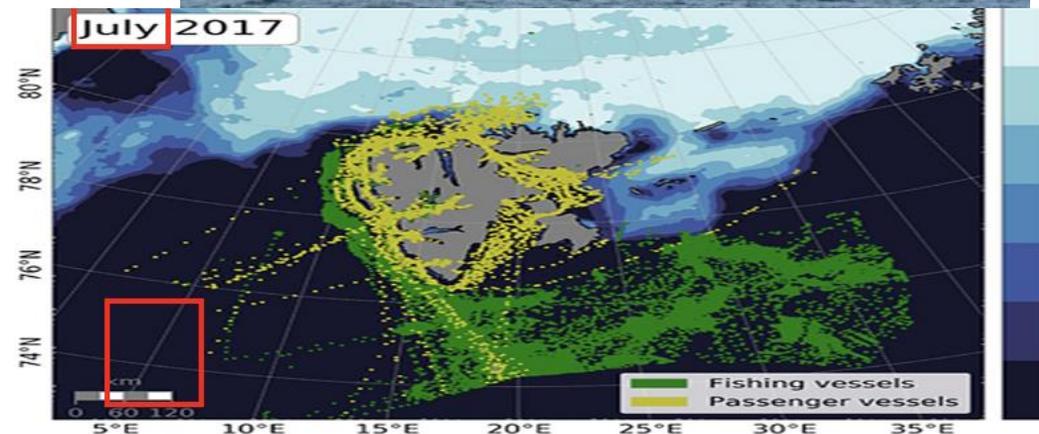
Photo: Ragnhild F. Dale

The importance of narratives in governance & adaptation

- **Narratives are “(..) the stories through which people share their experiences, make sense of their actions and perceive their place in the world”** (Paschen and Ison, 2014; Karlsson and Hovelsrud, 2022:5)
- **Narratives shape people’s way of seeing, being and acting in the world, and thereby their preferences and beliefs of how the land- and waterscapes should be governed.**
- **Narratives also *shape futures* – they are part of communities’ ideas of what is possible to imagine as a viable future, and what kinds of regulations and governance responses they see as necessary and acceptable**

Development of tourism in Svalbard

- Small number of cruise tourists in Svalbard in early 1900s
- Increased tourism from 1990s onwards – gradually becoming a major part of the economy
- Tourism activities include hiking, dog sledding, snow mobiles, longer and shorter boat trips, wildlife, cultural activities, skiing & more
- Less ice = more opportunities for boating activities
- Highest growth in smaller «expedition» cruise tourism vessels (<500 pax)
- Longyearbyen had close to 90.000 visitors on cruise ships in 2023



Tourism and 'wilderness' in Svalbard

- Tourism is part of the Norwegian government's long-term plan to secure Norwegian settlements in Svalbard (alongside research and education)
- Another key priority is the preservation of the area's unique natural wilderness:
«Svalbard shall be one of the world's best- managed wilderness areas» - Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2016
- Regulations prioritise preserving wilderness over enabling tourism and other activities
- Precautionary principle generously applied (Hovelsrud et al. 2023; Nyseth & Viken 2016)



Photo: Ragnhild F. Dale



Photo: G.K.Hovelsrud

New regulations and legislation of environment and tourism activities could reshape Svalbard as a tourism destination

- Significant amendments to the environmental protection act and the field safety regulations proposed in 2021.
- Public hearing closed in May 2022.
- Introduces a mandatory guide certification scheme
- Reduces expedition cruise vessel size from 500 to 200 pax
- Limits disembarkment sites to 43 (from around 75 today) for tourism operators
- Prohibits crossing of a number of frozen fjords with snow mobiles
- New regulations will be implemented from 1.1.2025



Photo: Halvor Dannevig

Responses from tourism industry and locals

- Massive lobbying campaigning against the proposed changes from the expedition cruise industry and Visit Svalbard
- Total of 174 responses to the public hearings
- Majority of respondents negative to one or more of the proposed changes, but also some positive
- Local population do not want tourism to increase more than the local community can handle, but concerned about their own right to roam
- Uncertainty about long-term impacts for the tourism industry



**«Marched against stricter regulations in Longyearbyen»
Svalbardposten 16.Nov 2021**

Perceived tourism impact on environment

Tourism actors:

- Wildlife sightings an important part of tourism experience, but not the main content of a tourism product
- Land-based tourism have minimal impact on wildlife, follow guidelines

«My impression is that the wildlife in Svalbard has become extremely more rich the last 20 years.»

«Before we did not see whales in the Isfjorden, now you can't go on a boattrip without seeing one.»

Environmental authorities:

- Too much boat traffic is not compatible with preserving «wilderness», even if traffic is not harming wildlife
- «Unserious» tourism actors are taking tourists too close to wildlife



Photo: Halvor Dannevig



Photo: Grete K Hovelstrud

Perceived tourism impact on environment (cont.)

«I was afraid of all the changes we are seeing. It can't continue like this, with 90 ships in this area each summer»

«There is no wilderness anymore in Svalbard, not in the true sense of the word. I have been at countless trips and expeditions around Svalbard, alone and with others, and I have never been left alone. I have been on kayaking trips, perhaps a 100 kilometers away from Longyearbyen, and then suddenly there is a cruise ship there with 5000 passengers, that are about to disembark to the campsite we are using.»



Photo: Halvor Dannevig



Photo: Grete K Hovelstrud

Conflicting narratives of Svalbard's future

Narrative 1 – Svalbard as one of the world's best managed wilderness areas

- Maintaining a virtually untouched environment is a key priority
- Current levels of tourism are not compatible with maintaining untouched wilderness.
- As knowledge about impacts is lacking, the precautionary principle must be applied.
- **Wilderness** understood as untouched nature with no sign of human activities.



Narrative 2 Svalbard as a sustainable wilderness tourism destination

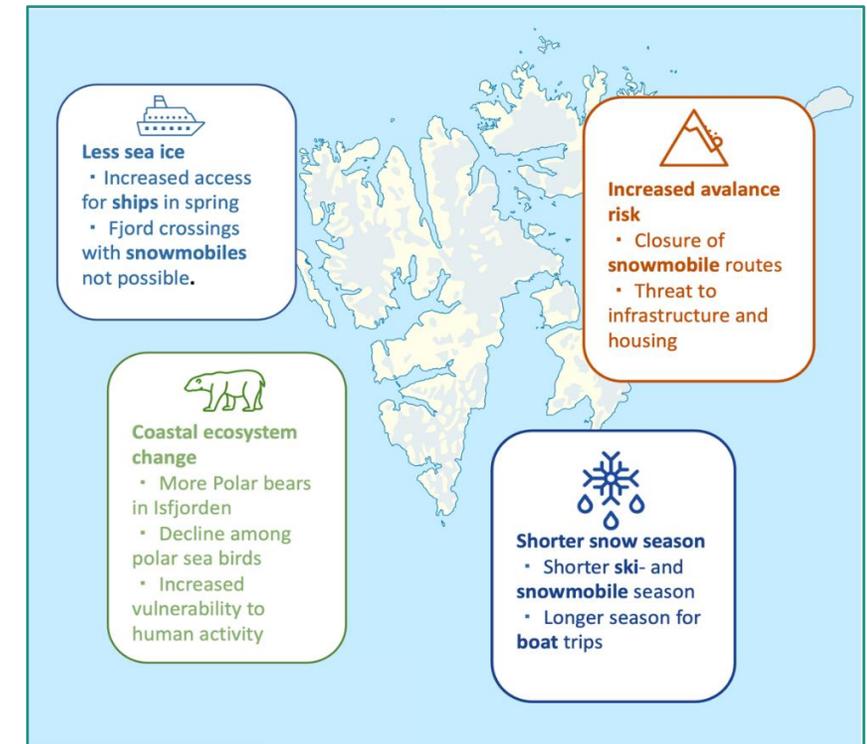
- Svalbard as a unique place where tourism should be a cornerstone industry.
- Responsible tourism activities do not harm the environment.
- Polar bears and walrus do not care about human activities.
- **Wilderness** is the key attraction, together with polar bears.

Narrative 3 Svalbard for the locals

- Locals have democratic rights and access to wilderness and welfare.
- Tourism brings benefits but there should be regulations to keep numbers at a sustainable level
- Welcome restrictions on maritime tourism.
- **Wilderness** means not encountering tourists in nature.

Implications for adaptive co-management solutions

- Diverse narratives shows value contestation and **differ in perceptions of**;
 - what Svalbard's 'wilderness' *is* and what measures are necessary to protect it
 - how strict regulations on tourism numbers, restriction of access to particular areas and minimum distance to wildlife should be.
 - role of adaptive co-management in governance of the environment and the tourism sector
- Tourism & environmental management in Svalbard should incorporate local participation... .. and value diversity.
- Use of precautionary principle to be decided in collaboration with stakeholders.



QUESTIONS?

THANKS FOR LISTENING



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Photo: Ragnhild F. Dale

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