

From Coal-mining Production to the Wilderness Industry: The Ethnography of Svalbard Archipelago

Research problem

Svalbard is an archipelago situated in the Arctic Ocean, approximately midway between Northern Norway and the North Pole. The archipelago is claimed to be discovered in 1700's by Dutch explorers who were on their way to find North-East passage for a trade with Asian countries. Svalbard was since then a place of various activities as seasonal whale hunting and trapping, expeditions, and a couple of scientific researchers. However, these activities were very limited, there was no permanent settlement and in general, Svalbard was not a place of a great interest.

The situation changed early 1900's when coal mining showed as an economically viable activity on Svalbard. First permanent settlements were established and mining companies started running. Economic crisis after First World War resulted in a contraction of coal mining and so only Norwegian and Russian mines continued the production.

Until 1920 Svalbard was a "no man's land" and after several years of political negotiations in 1925 Svalbard Treaty was introduced. This treaty gave Norway the sovereignty over Svalbard, but the archipelago remained neutral and demilitarized area. Thus, all the treaty nations have a right of access to and residence in Svalbard and the activities are granted for everyone in equal terms (Sysselmannen, 2016). The role of Norway since then is to ratify and enforce the legislation that is to apply for the archipelago, including the obligation to protect Svalbard's natural environment, tourism management, search and rescue, contact with foreign settlements, etc. (ibid).

After the Second World War the archipelago became a place of interest for political reasons in a (potential) war strategies and/or as potential oil resource. However, for a long time in a 20th century the settlements on Svalbard were only places of coal mining production which was the most important activity. Settlements were run by private mining companies, with only basic infrastructure and harsh working conditions with long working hours and insufficient payment (Arlov). On top of that living conditions of miners were influenced by half year of polar night, cold winters and isolation on an island with the only connection to Europe by ships in summer.

In spite of the importance and profitability of mining, since late 1970's the focus of (economic) activity on Svalbard started to be a little bit more various. The Norwegian government started to focus on public infrastructure and local services. The population started

to grow and next to the introduction of health care and cultural activities, the airport was build and provided better connection with mainland Europe.

In 1990's first hotels were established and tourism started to become a livelihood for local people. Before that, the tourism on Svalbard was limited to few Arctic expeditions while it was mostly used as a base on the way to the North Pole. Through the last decade of 20th century tourism increased and started to gain importance as an economical activity independent of mining (ODKAZ).

While some of the mining settlements were abandoned and tourism started to grow, several scientific institutions and research stations were established. The University Centre in Svalbard (UNIS), Norwegian Polar Institute (NPI) and Svalbard Satellite Station (SSS) are probably the most important ones. With the influence of scientific research, the Svalbard Environmental Protection Act was introduced in 2002 and was followed up with establishment of three national parks and several nature reserves (DOKAZ). Until then, several fauna and flora species were protected by international laws, but the scientific research did not have such an important position on Svalbard. Currently, next to mining, the scientific research and tourism have become important supplementary industries on Svalbard.

Since last decades the coal prices dropped, the mining industry started to lose their dominant position. One of two current mining company, Store Norske Spitsbergen Kulkompani (SNSK) is scaling back its workforce (from about 400 in 2012 to about 100 today, the money in equity dropped from nearly 1,3 billion Norwegian Crowns last year, to 73 million Crowns this year (Ice People, 2016). This year the main mine (Svea Gruve) was closed and so the amount of produced coal decreased dramatically. SNSK is facing a question of how to keep their presence and influence on Svalbard. In order to do that, and to replace lost coal mining jobs, they are— among other – making use of their possessions, for example creating some tourist attractions from old decommissioned mine buildings.

The strategy to cooperate with tourist agencies and the attempt to get into tourism business is not random, for at the same time that SNSK and coal mining is decreasing, the tourist industry is growing rapidly. In fact, it seems that tourism takes over the dominant position. Some sources talk about 60 % increase of overnight tourist stays from 2009 (Ice People, 2016b; Palm, 2015). New companies providing guided tours are starting a business; the established ones are providing more trips for more visitors, buying new houses to have events in, etc. The local University Centre which was focused exclusively on sciences as biology or geology is since 2008 offering a guiding education.

The situation of the former dominant actor is raising quite strong reactions on a political level as well. It brings questions about future of life on the archipelago as well as concerns about the affection of the strength of Norway's presence on one country's important strategic assets. The legal documents that include plans and strategies to keep activity on Svalbard are being revised much earlier than planned and it seems that to secure the basis for tourism to grow and take the dominant role will most likely play a significant role in political planning.

The Arctic, in general, is considered as one of the places on Earth that are most fragile and most afflicted by contemporary environmental ills as global warming, water pollution, glaciers melting or animals under threat of climate changes. Svalbard Archipelago is – as part of the Arctic – one of those places and moreover, it is considered as last wilderness in Europe.

Without a doubt one of the reasons for the tourist to come to visit Svalbard it to catch a glimpse on the wilderness. “The wilderness” is what is possible to find in almost every advertisement, tourist agencies web pages, guide book or on postcards. But what actually is “the wilderness”? It might be understood as self-explanatory: it is up in the Arctic, mostly covered by glaciers and actually there is almost the same number of polar bears as living people. However, the circumstances of ongoing changes both on a global scale as on Svalbard bring the possibility to demonstrate the transformation of understanding the wilderness in the Arctic. For most of the 20th century (understood as) the wilderness on Svalbard was mainly a place of tough working conditions, isolation, and danger. The population on the archipelago was limited and the life was formed by mining. This is now transforming into valuable and appealing attraction for tourists. The contemporary transformation is something that forms not only the understanding of wilderness but also the character of towns and life on Svalbard.

The aim of this research is thus to examine the process of transformation of Svalbard from a place that has been a center for mining to a place that is a centre of wilderness. The focus is on the process of transformation and on what is (re)formed in this process – that is, wilderness. The current situation on Svalbard offers to study the phenomenon of wilderness, its (re)construction, negotiation and/or formation in practice.

How is the wilderness socially and materially created, reformulated and/or consolidated? What is the role of politics in this process? How does this process include coal mining, one of the most environmentally damaging activity? And what can it say about the specific discourse producing knowledge about nature? The research focuses not only on everyday practice of creating wilderness but also on maintaining of this concept. It aims to grasp the principles of the self-explanatory character of wilderness on Svalbard and also focus on the moments when this self-explanatory character is weakened.

Theoretical background

Numerous publications were written in an effort to deal with the distinction between nature (wilderness) and culture, emphasizing the fuzzy borders of those two seemingly separate spheres (Conor 1995, Eder 2005, Šlesingerová 2002, Waterton, and many others). The fact that nature and culture are not two independent fields and that one forms and overlaps another is not new for social sciences. The separation of nature and culture is interpreted as a product of modernity (Latour, 1993) or else as a symbol of modernity and at the same time starting point of specific ecological discourse (Eder, 2005).

Moreover, schools emerging in last decades brought other perspectives which not only disturb the distinctive borders between nature and culture but emphasise a subjectivity and agency of non-human objects and beings (Haraway 2008, Deleuze and Guattari Gille, Latour – Callon - Law). Those perspectives further influence the sociological and anthropological studies of nature and wilderness. Animals, plants, fungi, microbes and other organisms have started to emerge alongside humans, with legibly biographical and political lives, enlivening the value of food, or engaging into international conservation agendas (Helmreich, Kirksey 2010; Paxson 2008; Lowe 2006).

Following these scholars, the thesis will be inspired by the theoretical-methodological approach of Actor-Network Theory (ANT). This approach offers a perspective on social reality as consisting of a complex range of actors, both human and non-human, that are connected in various ways and with various strength of bonds. In a constant process of negotiations, actions, conflicts, and/or alliances these actors-networks are forming social reality, knowledge, facts and/or artefacts (Latour, 1999; Latour, 1987). And as Latour points out, these processes are apparent especially in moments when the transformation is “in action” (ibid). Thus the current situation on Svalbard not only offers an opportunity to study the socio-material connection between coal, wilderness, and society in the process of transforming the understanding of Svalbard wilderness which tourists are attracted to, but also it brings the possibility to see the whole scale of actors, collectivities, controversies and interpretations that all together co-create the transformation of wilderness.

The thesis will also draw on constructivism in a way that it rejects social or biological determinism: the society forms the wilderness as well as the wilderness forms the society. Thus, the focus will be on negotiation (which usually brings conflicts and heterogeneity of interests and concerns), strategies of those who negotiate and possibly outcomes and consequences of these negotiations (see Bijker and Law 1992).

Its theoretical background is mostly constructivists with insights from sociology/anthropology of tourism (Bruner 2005, Cohen 1985), wilderness, and studies draw on ANT and/or STS. In order to contribute to the sociological understanding of socio-material construction of wilderness, the research focuses on the everyday practice of this process. In this respect it might be possible to contribute to what Eduard Kohn, in his ethnography of Ecuador's Upper Amazon called "...post human critiques of the ways in which we have treated humans as exceptional—and thus as fundamentally separate from the rest of the world—by developing a more robust analytic for understanding human relations to non-human beings." (Kohn, 2013: 7).

In an atmosphere of endless information and discussion about climate change, the consequences of human action on environments, discussions about future strategies on the political (trans/national and local) level, the outcome of this research might help to understand not only the process of socio-material construction of nature, but it can be valuable also for the understanding the (European) society, its values, and/or politics.

Research Methods and Field Site

The research will take place on Svalbard Archipelago, mainly in its biggest town: Longyearbyen. The qualitative ethnography will be the main research method including participant observation and semi-structured interviews, complemented with document analysis.

In order to provide a detailed description with emphasis on diversity, and in order to avoid selectivity in the research, my aim is to include all actors who had an irreplaceable role in the studied phenomenon (see Stake, 2005: 443). In this case, it means to include the mining company, the tourist companies, scientists, guiding education at local university centre, political institutions and last but not least the non-human actors (both animals, nature objects and material objects).

As an actor who is losing its dominant position, the mining company has various strategies how to keep their presence and influence on Svalbard. Cooperating with tourism is one of them. They are also considering cooperation with scientists, in case the coal prices will not rise again. Moreover, the mining history and the cultural heritage as mining buildings are an important part of Svalbard. As such the mining company is part of the process of transformation of wilderness on Svalbard.

The tourist companies are important actors since it is them who are offering, advertising and creating the trips to nature. At the same time, they are using the expert knowledge, scientific observation reports as protected areas, avalanche danger, thin sea ice or proper behaviour towards animals. Those are few of many factors co-creating the understanding of wilderness and influencing the way the tourists experience it. Moreover, the tourist companies have to follow rules set by a governor or a ministry and thus both the economics, expertise and the politics are present in the process of transformation and negotiation of the wilderness. **ODKAZ?**

Guiding education is an important part of the growing tourism. An integral part of the guiding education is for example storytelling about nature, trappers and/or cultural heritage. The guide is the one who pass “the story of (Svalbard) nature” to the visitors and thus co-creating the concept and form of wilderness (see Bruner 2005). The guide is for example also learned to avoid leaving traces as rubbish, footprints in swamp areas, picking flowers etc. and to ensure that the visitors are following these unwritten rules. All in all, the guiding education is structured in order to educate guides not only as pathfinders but also as mentors, teachers, entertainers and/or environmental **ambassadors (Cohen 1985, Curtin 2009, Periera 2005)**. Tourist companies, guides, and tourists themselves are part of a performance, where experiences are formed by narratives and vice versa (Bruner, 2005). “Tour guides are one of the key front-line players in the tourism industry. Through their knowledge and interpretation of a destination's attractions and culture, and their communication and service skills, they have the ability to transform the tourists' visit from a tour into an experience.” (Ap and Wong, 2000).

In order to understand the negotiation and construction of wilderness in detail and in everyday practice, I will include also a participant observation to the research methods. The participant observation will include mostly guiding but also the organization of tourist companies. I will both join guiding trips as a participant, and lead the trips as a guide myself. At this point, the research method is partly an auto-ethnography. As a guide working in few tourist companies, I am going to join and observe guide meetings and preparations for trips since those are the moments where the form and content of the organized trips are discussed. The guiding and tours provide a picture of wilderness as it is presented and provided to tourists. Observing different types of tours (from bus tours around town, short day trips on kayaks or foot, to multiday expeditions in tents) will enable to grasp the diversity of forms of wilderness as it is provided to, and co-created by, tourists.

The expert knowledge is an integral part of co-creating and transforming the understanding, knowledge and narrative about wilderness. The University Centre of Svalbard and Norwegian Polar Institute are two main scientific institutions focused on research on Svalbard. First, this knowledge forms general as well as a local understanding of wilderness. Second, as it was mentioned, this knowledge in/directly influence the character of tours provided to tourists.

The political institutions as the governor of Svalbard, Norwegian Ministry of Environmental Protection and Norwegian Ministry of Justice are those who outline the Norwegian policy goals for the archipelago, and/or maintain the law in order to manage Svalbard according to the regulations. These institutions who have a legal power for permissions, sanctions and/or regulations of activities on Svalbard. They represent the Kingdom of Norway, but they also mediate the interest of mining company, guiding companies, scientists and local people in both Russian and Norwegian towns. Apart from interviews with representatives from these institutions, the laws and regulations concerning Svalbard will be included in the research. The document analysis will further include guidelines, web pages and brochures of tourist companies, curriculums of guiding courses and also media reports (both inter/national and local press).

The analysis will be based on a careful combination of both theoretical and methodological operations during which I will focus on keeping the connection between theories and empirical data (Ragin and Becker, 1992: 221). The outcome of the qualitative ethnographic study is then a detailed description which is at the same time an explanation of the phenomenon. For this purpose, I will use the scientific software for qualitative analysis Atlas.ti. This software enables to analyze all the interviews, documents, and academic texts, to find repeating patterns and the links between them. It also enables to structure the whole analysis in a way that it neatly follows the topics and questions arising in the interviews. Interpretations growing out of such method are thus based on data sources and grounded in theories and the selectivity is minimalized.

Ethics

This research will be conducted according to the European Commission's Ethics for Researchers (European Commission, 2013). Identities of all social actors, informants and communication partners, as well as companies studied in this project, will be anonymised unless there will be explicit and informed consent of the actors involved. The participant

observation of guiding companies will be done with the permission of the companies and guides who will be informed about the research and its aims.

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