

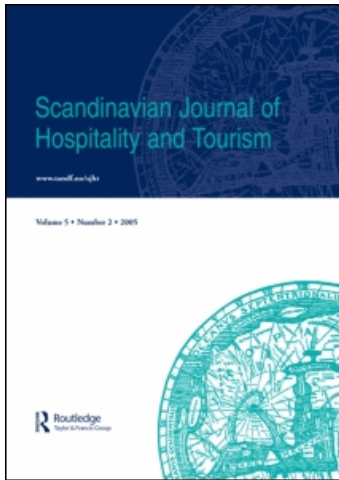
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Recreation and Rural Development in Norway: Nature Versus Culture

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ABSTRACT *This paper explores the author's observations on the barriers, risks, and, to a greater extent, opportunities associated with natural amenity-led or recreation-led rural development in Norway, which others might term rural tourism. It seeks to establish an argument for a refocusing of rural amenity-led development away from traditional "high-amenity" areas and toward previously overlooked places, thus geographically and substantively broadening the potential for this type of development in Norway. This change in orientation seeks to avoid the tourism-dependence that has emerged and is similar to older forms of natural-resource extraction dependence. Finally, the paper presents two cultural contradictions of cuisine that constitute barriers to the proposed broader geographical and cultural development of recreation and tourism in rural Norway.*

KEY WORDS: Recreation, rural development, culture, nature, Norway

Introduction

Norway is a stunningly beautiful country, a fact that is immediately obvious to even those foreign visitors whose exposure to the country is limited to travel on a single segment of the coastal ferry (Hurtigruten). It is perhaps overly endowed with the types of natural amenities, generally mountains, forests, rivers, lakes, sea coast, not to mention fjords, and other landscape features that increasingly contribute to rural growth and development in the United States (Galston & Baehler, 1995) and other industrialized, that is wealthy, countries. However, it is equally obviously a harsh, northern landscape with agriculture occupying just 3% of the land area, the majority of which is pasture and hay, leaving just over 1% in cultivation growing grains, vegetables, berries and fruit (Sogn, 2004). The idyllic countryside, that I as a 21st century American find pleasurable, was abandoned by my own 19th century grandparents and great grandparents for the potential, but for them largely never-realized, prosperity of the northern great plains of the US where they emigrated.

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In the late 1800s my grandfather was born and raised in the farming community of Skjelstadmark, a valley of small dairy farms, rolling fields and forests surrounded by low-lying forested mountains with rocky, snow-covered peaks in the background near Stjørdal and Trondheim in Nord-Trøndelag. Given the limited opportunities available to the younger sons in farm families, he and his two younger brothers emigrated sequentially to the US as young men. My grandmother was born on a farm near the village of Årdal at the end of the world's longest fjord, Sognefjord, near the city of Bergen, a region which I have yet to visit. It seems that her parents were landless farm laborers, who emigrated to the US when she was a small child.

It is my impression that Norwegians value the Sognefjord as a national treasure, with international appeal, but view Skjelstadmark and similar farming valleys as ordinary, lacking in appeal, and bereft of substantial opportunities for recreation-led rural development. However, it is the Sognefjord standard, as well as that of Lofoten and other supremely beautiful areas, under which Skjelstadmark suffers, hence my reference to Norway's overabundance of natural amenities. To me, Skjelstadmark is also a stunningly beautiful place with as yet unrealized appeal to Norwegian and International visitors. In the US Midwest, an area with topographical features similar to Skjelstadmark, if one existed, would be a major tourist destination. Admittedly, my own affinity for Skjelstadmark lacks objectivity and at least partially stems from my ancestral connections but my wife, herself a Midwesterner, on her first full day in Norway, which we spent recovering from jet lag at the farm of one of my numerous cousins in Skjelstadmark, confessed that she too had been stricken by its pastoral beauty and now understood what she views as my obsession with Norway.

In this paper, I explore my observations on the barriers, risks, and, to a greater extent, opportunities associated with natural amenity-led or recreation-led rural development in Norway, which others might term rural tourism. My thesis, which probably should remain unstated, is to establish an argument for a refocusing of rural amenity-led development toward heretofore overlooked places like Skjelstadmark, thus geographically and substantively broadening the potential for this type of development in Norway.

Data and Methods

This paper is primarily based on field work conducted in rural Norway, particularly Trøndelag and to a lesser extent Nord-Norge. During three visits to Norway between July 2004 and March 2006, I conducted in-depth key-informant interviews and focus groups with three types of informants: persons living in rural areas and mainly involved in agriculture or another non-tourism industry; persons living in rural areas operating recreation- and tourism-oriented businesses; and persons living in urban areas but visiting a rural area for a vacation at their family-owned cabin, at a privately-owned rental cabin, at a hiking association-owned cabin, or camping. However, my research methods were informal. For example, the focus groups that I conducted were all family gatherings that, minimally, involved coffee and dessert, which may not be that untypical of the majority of focus groups conducted in rural Norway. Given my limited abilities in the Norwegian language, participant

observation was also an important source of information for this study. I supplemented the interview, focus group, and observational data with textual analysis of tourism promotional material, principally Norwegian-language magazines and English-language websites.

Natural Resources and Natural Amenities

Historically, rural areas have been heavily dependent on extractive industries, farming, forestry, fishing, and mining, which have declined as sources of stable employment and decent earnings during the last several decades, due to changes in technology, the composition of final demand, and international competition (Galston & Baehler, 1995). Simultaneously, in industrialized countries like the United States and Europe, improvements in transportation, increasing disposable income, and expanding leisure time including prolonged retirement have contributed to increasing demand for recreational opportunities, especially in rural areas located near major metropolitan population centers. In the US the amenities valued by recreationists, vacationers, retirees, migrants, and certain businesses have become the chief source of comparative advantage for rural areas, supplanting extractable natural resources such as fertile soil and climatic conditions, mineral and petroleum deposits, and forests, as well as lower labor, land, and regulatory production costs (Galston & Baehler, 1995). Population and economic growth in rural America is increasingly associated with these location-specific amenities (Beale & Johnson, 1998; Cromartie & Wardwell, 1999; McGranahan, 1999; Rudzitis, 1999; Deller, Tsung-Hsiu, Marcouiller & English, 2001).

Demographic, social, and economic changes have engendered a broad reconsideration of the role of natural resources in many rural regions, with a de-emphasis of extractive, commodity values and instead a greater emphasis on amenity values as sources of population and economic growth. Natural amenities, as a quality-of-life factor, play a critical role in human migration and firm location (Dissart & Deller, 2000). Rural regions have sought sustainable economic development alternatives (Flora & Flora, 1988; Williams & Shaw, 1988) with amenity-led growth emerging as an important and often principal strategy (Jakus, Siegal & White, 1995). At least since the 1980s, amenity-rich rural regions have made considerable efforts to develop tourism and recreational opportunities (Kieselbach & Long, 1990; Edgell & Harbaugh, 1993; Frederick, 1993; Leatherman & Marcouiller, 1996a, 1996b, 1999; Luloff et al., 1994; Marcouiller, 1997; Wilson et al., 2001). Natural amenity-rich communities take advantage of their natural endowments as latent primary factor inputs for tourism/recreation and overall economic and community development (Marcouiller & Deller, 1996; Marcouiller, 1998). Rural space itself has been commodified (Whitson, 2001) as a viewscape (Van Auken, 2006).

Endogenous growth theory, although generally associated with human capital formation and technological innovation, has, perhaps wrongly, been applied to the case of amenity-led rural development in both Europe and the US (Bardhan, 1995; Martin & Sunley, 1998; Stough, 1998; Button, 1998). Endogenous growth theory, which refers to growth arising from within a system, argues that policy measures can have an impact on long-run growth (without necessarily having to alter the overall

savings rate) and rejects the neoclassical assumption of diminishing marginal returns to capital investments. Endogenous growth theory arose partially from the inability of neoclassical theory to explain the empirical lack of economic convergence across regions and nation-states. The lack of convergence and actual divergence of economic growth and well-being across space poses a dialectic for amenity-led rural development in Norway and other places. Ray (1999) embeds endogenous development in reflexive modernity's continuous invention and reinvention of individual identity as the continuous reinvention of space or place. Endogenous development in Ray's conceptualization of the development of place identity, creates the conditions under which amenity-led rural development in Norway and elsewhere might be desirable, the opportunities for such development, and the risks inherent in such a strategy.

Urry in his formulation of the "tourist gaze" (Urry, 1990) notes that tourism is predicated on short stays at sites outside the normal places of home and work with the intention of returning home. Overcrowding and congestion constitute the social and ecological limits of tourism (Mishan, 1969). Overcrowding of tourist destinations both degrades the experience of the tourists and residents, a social limit, but also often degrades the environment, an environmental limit, that undermines the experience of current and future tourists and residents. Therefore, tourists must constantly seek out new destinations before they are spoiled by the mass of tourists. This is particularly true of environmentally conscious tourists who may seek out less crowded, less altered destination forming the leading edge of tourist development. Concentrated tourist development, especially in cases with limited regulation, degrades or destroys the very object of the tourist gaze.

Aspenization and Oppdalization

Rural sociologists have extensively studied the challenges confronted by natural-resource dependent communities, those in which employment is concentrated in extractive industries such as farming, forestry, and fishing, but mining and petroleum extraction to an even greater extent (Gramling & Freudenburg, 1992). Rural sociologists at present are also beginning to recognize a phenomenon with similar characteristics, natural-amenity dependent communities (Hammer & Winkler, 2006). Although amenity-led development may garner significant benefits for a community (Deller et al., 2001), it can impose costs as well (Power, 1996), both social and ecological. As a local economy transitions from one of natural amenity-led endogenous growth to one of tourism dependence, the preponderance of service-sector employment can result in low-skilled, low-paying, part-time, and or seasonal employment opportunities for those in the local labor market.

Concomitantly, increased demand due to the influx of tourist, seasonal, and retirement populations with higher incomes that are not derived from or dependent upon the local labor market can lead to escalating housing prices that adversely affect local households (Hammer & Winkler, 2006). This is especially true for workers in the service sector upon which the natural amenity-led growth is dependent. In extreme cases to seek more affordable housing in outlying communities with less appeal to outsiders, thus becoming rural commuters.

Probably the most extreme case of this phenomenon is the world-famous ski resort Aspen, Colorado. In describing the negative social and economic impacts of amenity-led growth, the popular press, and increasingly academics invoke "Aspenization" (Gates & Pryor, 1993; Janofsky, 1999). To counteract these trends, the Village of Aspen has invested heavily in an affordable housing program that privileges long-term employed residents and considers households with annual incomes of up to \$250,000 eligible for assistance. Thus, only the top 1% of households nationally are excluded from the program due to excessive income.

Oppdal in Sør-Trøndelag, one of the largest alpine ski resorts in Norway, is very unlike Aspen. However, the conditions for "Aspenization" or a similar phenomenon that the Norwegian media might one day refer to as "Oppdalization", namely growth determined by a dominant industry (i.e. alpine skiing), exploiting a geographically constrained natural amenity (i.e. accessible alpine terrain) are present. By some standards may have already begun to undermine the social structure of the community. Often, those types of developments lack social and ecological sustainability. I single out Oppdal only because it is the only Norwegian ski resort of which I have direct knowledge but, as the editors of this journal suggested to me, "Trysilization" or "Hemsedalization" may be more appropriate terms. Moreover, it may not be a ski resort that epitomizes tourism dependency in Norway, as Aspen has come to in the US. However, the alternative to tourism-dependence or "Aspenization" is a broader approach to natural-amenity led rural development.

Farming, Food, and Family, not Fjords and Fjell

As would be expected, but notwithstanding my cautionary "Oppdalization" theory, mountains (fjell), fjords, and other landscape features provide the focus for rural tourism in Norway. Understandably, Norwegians want to visit the most famous and "beautiful" areas of their country and they also want international visitors to visit those same places. However, as I drove from Oppdal into the nearby mountains of Trollheimen, I did find the mountains breathtaking but what was, at least to me, even more incredible and unique were the scattered farms on the lower slopes of the mountains and in the valley below. For me, the farmsteads, with their unique and historic barns, houses, and granaries, were more astonishing than the mountains. I grew up near Montana's Glacier National Park, upon which my standards of alpine beauty were formed, but the beauty of small farms surrounded by relatively natural areas, at least on this scale, was wholly new to me.

Thus, even when driving in areas that Norwegians tend not to consider to be scenic, I am constantly taking delight in the landscape and specifically the farms. These very small farms with a dozen or so milk cows or a band of sheep grazing in hillside pastures and a group of buildings some of them dating back to before the American Revolution are familiar to Americans only in folk tales. Small farms of that type in the US have succumbed to the agglomerative forces of agricultural industrialization or the subdividing forces of suburbanization. It must be acknowledged that this agricultural landscape is underwritten by Norway's petroleum revenues and would not be possible in an even quasi-market system like that of the

US where dairy herds of fewer than 20 cows have nearly disappeared. However, it must also be acknowledged that it is not a fairytale landscape but a working one in which farmers are producing commodities and facing increasing threats, especially from the global competition unleashed upon them by international trade agreements.

On a tour of innovative farms and rural businesses in Nord-Trøndelag, I, along with other delegates to the International Rural Sociology Association (IRSA) Congress, made a final stop at the farm of the former and first female president of the Norwegian Farmers' Union who gave a passionate and convincing speech concerning the looming threat to Norwegian farmers posed by trade liberalization and the decline of agricultural subsidies. Following her speech, I somewhat embarrassed both her and myself by asking her to describe the second greatest threat to Norwegian agriculture and finding that she had a very difficult time doing so and eventually returned to declining subsidies. I recount this story, not to undermine the perceived threat but to emphasize it. The consolidation of farms and the resulting net outmigration from rural Norway would debase the very landscape features that I have valued as a visitor. This process may be one of the perhaps avoidable consequences of the transition of Norwegian agriculture toward increasingly unavoidable globalized markets. However, the avoidance of landscape change of this type in an unavoidable globalization situation will require considerable political support and policy creativity. Daugstad, Rønningen and Skar (2006) have documented support for this view of agriculture as cultural heritage or landscape feature, in my terminology, among Norwegian policymakers.

Cultural Contradictions of Cuisine

Norwegian consumers seem to almost universally believe, perhaps chauvinistically but also perhaps realistically, that the food produced by Norwegian agriculture is the highest quality and safest in the World, as well as the most responsibly produced. They also appear to believe that Norway's small-scale farming ensures those qualities in the food grown in the country and thus tend to support the agricultural subsidies that make that scale of production possible in an increasingly globalized market for agricultural products. Although the farm-level production of food in Norway is not industrialized, the processing of food is, with two firms, Tine and Synnøve Finden, controlling a large portion of the cheese and fluid milk market. In the dairy cases of the supermarkets that I encountered, which was by no means a representative sample, the Norwegian-made cheese available is relatively uniform. The diversity of specialty cheeses from small and even farmstead producers typical of other European countries and now prevalent even in the US do not seem to be as evident in Norway. This may be less true in Oslo and Bergen, the country's largest urban marketplaces, although I have not seen much evidence of this in Trondheim, the third largest marketplace. Although it is undoubtedly true that artisanal cheese producers have emerged in recent years and have begun marketing diverse, award-winning products, their presence does not seem to be as prominent as similar producers have achieved in other countries. Hence, the Norwegians that I spoke to seem to concede that the country is not producing outstanding cheese, even though

they tend to believe in general that food produced in Norway is outstanding. This same attitude seems to hold true for meat and other agricultural products. However, Norwegians have assured me that the current diversity of dairy products and especially cheese is much greater now than even a decade ago. With regard to food, it seems that Norwegians maintain a commodity culture, rather than a cuisine culture.

A second level of contradiction that revolves around “Norwegian food” or “traditional Norwegian food”, may partially explain the contradiction just described. When asked, Norwegians, especially younger Norwegians, tend to denigrate “Norwegian food” and claim to not eat it often or have much knowledge of it. However, my informants did advocate the national dish (fårikål), a lamb and cabbage stew, meat patties (kjøttkaker) and a few regional dishes. As the world population that shares Norwegian ancestry, both those with Norwegian passports and the virtually equal number with US passports, have grown more affluent, it seems that they have increasingly, but perversely, used cuisine as a reminder of the real harshness and difficulty once experienced by their forebears. One traditional dish seems to be enjoying a somewhat new-found popularity among contemporary Norwegians, and according to my informants this is particularly true of the most urbane and cosmopolitan members of society.

The dish is of course *lutefisk*, gelatinous, foul-smelling, soda-preserved, reconstituted cod. As anyone from the Upper Midwest of the US and perhaps even anyone in the entire country knows, *lutefisk* is a virtual birthright of Norwegian-Americans, like myself, among whom its popularity has never waned, especially during the holiday season. Of course, Norwegian scholars have also discovered this fact and written of it (Almås, 1989). My informants have also told me that it is possible that Norwegian-Americans collective dedication to *lutefisk* is partially responsible for its rehabilitation in Norway. I was also told by several informants that at Skarven, a restaurant located on the quay in downtown Tromsø known for its *lutefisk*, patrons after enjoying their holiday meal must make their reservations for the following year prior to leaving the restaurant in order to ensure they will have a table.

Ironically, given its historical status as a food of last resort meant to stave off starvation, my family viewed *lutefisk* as prohibitively expensive, even for holiday consumption. There was no local source and it was only available through mail order and may even have been imported from Norway, or at least we thought it was. Given the abundance of lake trout near our home in North-Central Montana, my family, including my Norwegian-born grandparents and great grandparents never ate *lutefisk* at home. My family’s food tradition revolves around *lefse*, a traditional accompaniment to *lutefisk* in the Norwegian-American tradition. We ate *lefse* with fish, potatoes, and green peas, or “fish and flatbread,” at every family gathering, especially Christmas Eve. So, I only ate *lutefisk* two or three times as a child and instead developed a preference for pink-fleshed fresh fish, mainly salmon in adulthood. Ironically, in Norway salmon seems to be the only food bargain, costing about the same or even less than it does in the US and little more than potatoes needed to make the *lefse* to properly accompany it.

Lutefisk falls into a category of traditional foods from various places in the world whose acolytes invariably feel compelled to at least attempt to convince the

uninitiated that they themselves actually do enjoy eating the dish but are also willing to admit that it is an acquired taste. I have always suspected that *lutefisk* is the equivalent of the Passover meal for Norwegian Americans and increasingly for contemporary Norwegians, intended to remind us of the tribulations of the past. Although I have only eaten *rakfisk*, which I am tempted to translate as rotten fish although I understand that it only smells that way, once, I do not intend to do so again. It is also experiencing a resurgence in popularity in Norway, although seemingly not among Norwegian-Americans, perhaps due to its potential as a source of food poisoning.

I will argue that overcoming these two interrelated contradictions of cuisine, is a key, although perhaps not the key, element for harnessing amenity-led development as an endogenous growth engine for rural development in Norway. What is necessary is a fundamental transformation and reconciliation of Norwegian's attitudes toward "Norwegian food" (*norsk mat*) that will require a deconstruction of the very concept. Of course, European scholars (Ray, 1999) have recognized cultural markers, including traditional food, and the "(re)valorizing" of place with a corresponding "culture economy" approach to rural development to a much greater extent than their US counterparts. Lash and Urry developed the concept of "reflexive accumulation," permeation of economies with symbolic processes and the creation of subjective, flexible spaces (1994). In rural Europe, and to a lesser extent in the rural US, the self-promotion of regional culture or cultural regions has become a critical component in both the preservation of cultural identity and the pursuit of endogenous growth strategies. In the Norwegian context this process has mainly been described in terms of cultural values regarding food quality and safety (Nygård & Storstad, 1998). Tellstrom, Gustafsson and Mossberg (2005) have explored the extent to which some traditional foods move to the forefront in this type of revalorization, others lack viability given modern consumer tastes, while others are wholly reinvented. The latter might be termed traditional innovation or innovative traditionalism.

Leif Helmersen and Inger Marie Storli Helmersen operate Bortistu, a guest farm (*gjestegård*) in the mountainous area near Oppdal, Trollheimen. Bortistu is Inger Marie's ancestral farm, with the very old farm house and outbuildings intact, including a smokehouse (*røykhuset*). The unassuming smokehouse constitutes Bortistu's primary appeal to tourists. Leif who is not himself from Trollheimen has reinvented the area's traditional smoked leg-of-lamb (*røyket lammelår*), having experimented with many different recipes before selecting the "best" one to serve Bortistu's guest. Leif's "traditional" recipe has proven so popular that at the time of our visit, every week he was smoking 90 legs-of-lamb that he purchased from neighboring farms. Bortistu has become a popular place for wedding receptions and other large gatherings and so, neighboring farms were also accommodating spillover overnight guests, although at the time of our visit the Helmersen's were building a new guest house.

One afternoon, a tour bus arrived and a large group of Norwegian seniors emerged. From how far they had traveled, I am uncertain but I am certain that their primary objective was a midday lunch of the smoked leg-of-lamb, boiled potatoes, steamed vegetables, and flat bread. Admittedly, this repast may have been followed

by a tour of the farm or a stroll in the surrounding mountains but the meal drew them to the place. Bortistu's activities are creating the types of spillover effects for the surrounding area hypothesized by the advocates of endogenous growth theory. Ideally, the new, larger guest house will further develop the business, thus enhancing the virtuous cycle, rather than consolidating, concentrating, and constraining the benefits of the activities.

The International Rural Sociological Association bus tour, mentioned earlier, traveled the "Golden Detour" (Den Gyldne Omvei), a collection of seemingly "ordinary" Norwegian farms, rural communities, and villages that had collectively developed a network of places of interest to tourists. One of these farms raised Norwegian red deer, which did not seem quite so ordinary, but tasted delicious. It is unfortunate that this is viewed as a "detour" (omvei) rather than as the main route (hovedrute) but that may change. The farmers of the Golden Detour did not possess the same natural amenity advantage that Bortistu, located in the mountains of Trollheimen, enjoys but collectively pursued a similar endogenous growth strategy based on their area's natural-amenity and cultural-amenity endowments. Similarly, Skjelstadmark claim to be home to the oldest continuously operating stone mill in Norway and the farmers there, I believe operating as the Hegra Historical Society, are collectively planning to develop it as a "tourist attraction" that serves sandwiches and pastries produced with the flour ground at the mill. These types of seemingly small and inconsequential efforts have the potential to build strong networks in rural Norway that both precipitate and deconcentrate recreation-led development, while avoiding the corrosive effects of natural-amenity dependence.

Conclusions

After spending three cold, wet, windy July days camping at Femunden with my wife and our two small children, I joked to several Norwegians that perhaps the best way for foreigners to experience Norwegian nature was through the window of the coastal ferry (Hurtigruten) and to my surprise they all agreed. However, after traveling by Hurtigruten from Trondheim to Tromsø, and having slept during the passage through the most breathtaking passage, Trollfjorden, illuminated by the midnight sun, a consequence of traveling with two small children, I disagree. Although it may be a good way, arguably even the best way, to view certain limited localities comprising "Norwegian nature," it is a very unsatisfying way to "experience" Norwegian nature and by extension to experience the country and the culture itself. The Hurtigruten provides only the most fleeting, superficial survey of its intended subject, yet it seems that to both Norwegians and foreign visitors it is still considered to be the ultimate Norwegian experience.

In this paper, I have largely ignored the barriers to a reconsideration of natural amenities and recreation development in rural Norway. However, as I noted in the introduction, just as the stunning beauty of Norway is immediately obvious to even those foreign tourists whose exposure to Norway is limited to travel on a single, short segment of the coastal ferry, Norway is a stunningly expensive country in which to travel. Information also does not seem readily available to potential English-speaking visitors to rural Norway and finally, Norwegian weather, as

mentioned, can serve as a formidable barrier. I have placed greater emphasis on the risks involved, and formulate the concept of “Oppdalization” in which natural-amenity led rural development focuses on a limited number of locales that are viewed as outstanding. This could result in an emergent type of natural resource dependency in these areas with a concomitant degradation of the natural and social environment that is being sought by visitors. My argument has been that the way to avoid this risk is to broaden the focus of rural development beyond these “extraordinary” places to the rural places and spaces that Norwegians view as very ordinary, the working countryside with its multifunctional symbiosis of small farms, forests, and villages. A key to this revalorization of the Norwegian countryside as a locale for recreation and tourism development would be a revalorization of the culture and especially the cuisine that have sustained that countryside for centuries.

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