

Connecting nature, local cultures and tourism in subarctic landscape – a case study of local communities attached to the Varanger Peninsula National Park in Northern Norway

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Abstract

In Norway, there has traditionally been a segregative approach to nature protection, focusing on protecting nature from human activities. However, in recent years we have seen a more integrative approach, focusing on a beneficial interaction between parks and local communities. The aim of this paper is to present recent research output from the Varanger Peninsula National Park in the far north of the Norwegian mainland. The region is multicultural with Sami, Finnish and Norwegian inhabitants. The region is subject to increasing nature-based tourism, particularly related to bird watching. Through applying a 'landscape resource analysis', we have identified some preconditions for integrated sustainable development, connecting local cultures and tourism with the National Park management.¹

Key words

Subarctic landscape, local cultures, nature based tourism, landscape resource analysis

Introduction

We can trace the integrated and holistic perspectives on nature conservation and society back to the generalist tradition represented by Patrick Geddes in Scotland in the late 19th century (MACDONALD 2009). Still, in Norway there has been a strong tradition of separating nature conservation areas from rural development. Up to recent years, the policy has been to protect 'untouched' nature and to leave it 'on its own'. To some extent, this could make sense as long as the designated areas were located in remote mountain area, far from settlements and infrastructure. However, it becomes more problematic as several national parks now are established in lowlands, coastal areas and other productive and human influenced landscapes. Still, little attention has been given to processes of involvement and participation from local communities.

The integrated and dynamic approach to conservation and sustainable development gained momentum through the European Landscape Convention (COE 2000), (GAMBINO & PEANO 2015). The landscape perspective focus less on boundaries, and more on connectedness and interaction of man and nature, in local and regional contexts. The landscape approach implies also a sense of 'strong forward looking', not only concerning legal/ formal planning and management, but for innovative value creation, based on situated natural and cultural resources (HAUKELAND (ed.) 2010).

Nature based tourism in Norway has traditionally been developed by farmers and on large landowner properties (salmon rivers and terrain for game hunting etc.), which means that the experiences offered to a less degree were depending on engagement and services from local communities. When nature and landscape now increasingly has become a major asset for recreation purposes and for commercialised tourism in easier accessible areas, the question of how the encounter of visitor and resident takes place, is of importance. 'Adding value through the encounter' is an expression from a Norwegian Regional park – pointing at the motivation and personal outcome of a genuine meeting with other people – or through a nature experience, often planned and facilitated by people in the local communities. Nature-based tourism is largely a cultural product, nourished by practical skills in combination with the stories communicated locally. The sustainability of nature based-tourism in the future will therefore largely depend on the capacity of the communities connected to National Parks and other nature areas, to raise awareness of local resources.

The aim of this paper is to present and discuss some experiences from a workshop on the Varanger peninsula regarding methods to identify and activate potential resources embedded in nature, culture and the relational dimension of place. The value based, ethical dimension of integrated nature conservation, nature based tourism and local community development is essential in a sustainable perspective.

Our main research questions are; do we have methods to access and communicate the values, knowledge and skills of local communities, and how can the processes of identifying these resources contribute to community development?

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'Landscape Resource Analysis' has been developed as a general methodology for community led processes in identifying place based assets and potentials for revitalizing communities (CLEMETSEN & JOHANSEN 2015). The methodology is grounded in early models of holistic and inter-disciplinary landscape –scale planning, presented by the Scottish ecologist, regional planner and social reformer, Patrick Geddes (1854 – 1932) (RITCHIE 2015, CLEMETSEN 2016). The method was conducted in Varanger through processes combining participatory sense of place studies and landscape analyses on local and regional level. How do the inner and outer landscape correspond in a community context? In our case, we wanted to find out how people's personal values can be shared and eventually function as an interconnected basis for local communities to develop a distinct and proactive profile linked to nature based tourism products. Consistency with the National Park qualities and the sub-arctic landscape of Varanger is also an essential element of this.

The Varanger-Peninsula case area is located in the north-east part of Finnmark County in Northern Norway, with the Barents Sea as neighbor and close to Russia. There region consists of the municipalities Berlevåg, Båtsfjord, Vardø, Vadsø, Nesseby (Figure 1). The road along the Varanger fjord from Varangerbotn to Hamningberg (ca. 160 km) is a National Scenic Route. The region is multicultural with Norwegian, Saami and Finnish settlements.



Figure 1: The Varanger Peninsula National Park (Varangerhalvøya nasjonalpark)

Method

The Landscape Resource Analysis was in this case designed as a half-day workshop with 9 invited actors (tourism providers, landscape and heritage managers, farmer, reindeer herder and social entrepreneurs) from three municipalities (Nesseby, Vadsø, Vardø). A storyteller facilitated the process and to conduct the process, driven by four principal questions related to values, landscape characteristics, product development and community relevance.

Preliminary results and discussion

The workshop turned out to be very inspiring for all involved persons. The facilitator had asked the participants to bring a 'token' that could say something important about their values and relation to the area (a flat stone, a salmon fishing fly, a reindeer horn, a pair of knitted gloves, etc). The essential idea was to understand how the quality of the resources for nature based tourism were reflected in the personal values, through the stories told. This turned out to be very informative and inspiring as input to further discussions on the value added potentials in the interface between nature-based tourism, local economy and community development.

A common and distinct understanding of the landscape perspective and its multiple dimensions also appeared through the workshop; Nesseby represented the continuous Sami settlement story from prehistoric time 12000 years back, Vadsø the Finnish heritage, and Vardø the Sea and the great fishing resources.

The Varanger Peninsula National Park was not regarded as very attractive for commercial nature based tourism in itself due to the remoteness. However several of the participants experienced how visitors were seeking activities that could give them a genuine experience of the quality of the Park. In this respect, there is a great potential in storytelling, guided activities and high quality nature experiences to be developed by local entrepreneurs in and around the communities, being beneficial to both visitors and the residents.

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