

Visitor Monitoring in a World Heritage Area – The West Norwegian Fjordsnærøyfjorden and Geirangerfjorden.

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The two *West Norwegian Fjords, Nærøyfjorden and Geirangerfjorden*, were registered on the World Heritage List in 2005. The World Heritage Areas comprise narrow, deep and long fjords with steep sided rock walls that are considered archetypical parts of the world's fjord landscapes. Numerous waterfalls and free-flowing rivers run across forests on their way to the sea. The fjords represent unique geological values and offer an outstanding natural beauty. Nærøyfjorden and Geirangerfjorden also include small communities as well as reminisces of shut down tiny dairy farms supplementing cultural and aesthetical values to the natural fjord landscape. Moreover, the world heritage areas also include protected landscapes and natural reserves according to the Norwegian Nature Diversity Act.

The two fjords are celebrated tourism attractions with high numbers of visitors during the summer season; about 700.000 tourists per year (including cruise ship passengers) visit each of the small local communities *Flåm* and *Geiranger*. The huge visitation potentially creates high pressures on natural values, local communities and crowding problems in peak periods that may also affect the visitors' perception and valuation of the area. In general, unplanned tourism development represents a fundamental threat to the World Heritage tourism destinations throughout the world. If undertaken in a responsible way, however, tourism may be a driver for protecting the natural and cultural heritage, and a vehicle for sustainable development. To achieve this goal, adequate visitor management strategies are required (UNESCO 2012) and visitor monitoring is therefore in this context an essential knowledge base.

The paper discusses the research challenges to organise appropriate visitor monitoring in the Western Norwegian Fjord area, some characteristics of the visitors of the area and their perceptions and assessments of the quality of the World Heritage Area as a tourism destination.

Methodological issues

The survey was conducted in the two fjord areas during the summer period 2015 among 3.204 visitors (1076 in Nærøyfjorden and 1394 in Geirangerfjorden), including also 418 cruise ships passengers. Trained personnel handed out a two-page questionnaire, which the visitors filled in themselves at various sites and at different points of time in June, July and August. Random sampling problems occur in on-site surveys when the population is unknown. However, the known distribution of tourism visitation in the fjord areas made it possible to employ a stratified sampling procedure, and prevailing accommodation (i.e. hotel and camping grounds) and transport (i.e. cruise ships, ferry, and railway) statistics made this approach feasible. An additional methodical problem arises from the fact that the probability to be included in the sample varies with the tourists' length of stay: The longer a visitor is in the

area, the greater the probability is to be included in the study. Another problem is the large amount of (especially Asian) tourists in the area who are not familiar with the languages used in the questionnaires, i.e. Norwegian, English and German. In the survey, cruise passengers are underrepresented because their itinerary when on land follows a strict time schedule with several activities and excursions and makes them unavailable for the interviews.

Those who filled in the questionnaire were asked to take part in a follow-up internet survey and notify their email address. This approach resulted in altogether 647 complete responses (304 in Nærøyfjorden and 343 in Geirangerfjorden). The response rate of 36 per cent among those who in the first place expressed their willingness to take part in the follow-up internet survey was considered satisfactory. The questionnaire was forwarded to the respondents via email about two weeks after we presumed that their tour was ended. Like in the on-site survey, the form was presented in three languages (Norwegian, English and German), and with three reminders. In this lengthier internet survey, we posed detailed questions about various aspects of the visit to the two West Norwegian Fjords.

Some visitor characteristics

According to the general survey, more than 60 per cent of the visitors were aware of the fact that fjord area they visited had a UNESCO World Heritage status prior to their arrival; whereas more than 20 per cent were ignorant of this fact, (the rest received this information for the first time during their stay). Table 1 shows the influence of the World Heritage Status on the decision to visit the two fjord areas.

Table 1. Did the area's status as a World Heritage Site influence your decision to visit here? (among those who knew about the World Heritage status before visiting)

	Nærøyfjorden	Geiranger
Yes, a lot	19,5	19,1
Yes, slightly	26,1	23,3
No, not much	54,4	57,6
Sum	100,0	100,0
(N)	(640)	(924)

In spite of the fact, that only a minority of about 20 per cent ascribe the greatest significance to this recognised status, many tourists are also visiting other Norwegian World Heritage sites during their trip: For instance, about half of the visitors in Geirangerfjorden visited Nærøyfjorden as well and vice versa. A similar proportion had seen Bryggen in Bergen, and interestingly, the majority had likewise stayed in one or more national parks on the same tour. The apparent round trip travel pattern among both cruise ship, motor and bus tourists reflects the fact that a greater geographical region than the two fjord areas are the main destination. The majority of the many day visitors stay less than two hours in the world heritage area – these circumstances naturally pose challenges to the visitor management of the most visited local sites.

Some visitor perceptions and attitudes

The active geological processes of the fjord landscape represent the outstanding universal values (OUVs) of the area. The internet survey indicates that the tourist experiences of the area is firmly connected to the spatial character of the landscape with its narrow fjord surrounded by steep mountains. Waterfalls, rivers, glaciers and snow patches underpin the impression of an active natural landscape. These sense impressions seem to play a more crucial role for tourists from (distant) foreign countries compared to Norwegian visitors. In addition, the latter category demonstrates a much more critical attitude towards tourism developments of the local area such as pollution on land and sea, visual intrusion of cruise ships and commercial signposting, queues at local sites, and crowding, traffic and parking problems in Flåm and Geiranger. The tourists who have travelled long distances, and cruise tourists in particular, perceive these problems as minor or they pay far less attention to such negative impacts of the mass tourism influx.

There is an increasing number of tourists in the Norwegian Fjord Landscape, and the tourism pressure on the local area will probably continue to grow in the upcoming years. This first generation visitor survey is therefore a baseline study for prospective monitoring and visitor management planning.