

Wilderness purism revisited: The value of a simplified standardised scale for monitoring purposes

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One of the most obvious elements that management authorities can influence in, for example, a national park, is the type, amount and location of physical facilities. Knowledge about preferences or tolerance for amount and type of other visitors (social conditions) is especially important these days, due to tourism development ambitions. This paper shortly reviews the development of the monitoring measure called Purism level, followed by a presentation of relevant findings from 10 Norwegian studies (during the period 1999-2009) where a simplified and standardised purism scale was used, based on attitudes towards physical facilities and social conditions.

In Norway and Scandinavia several researchers have been inspired by the work on ideal wilderness attitudes that Hendee et al (1968) and Stankey (1973) introduced: To measure the personal level of 'Wildernism' or 'Purism'. This is not because the concept is well founded theoretically (Heberlein 1973, Stankey 1973). It has also been controversial, partly because a normative elitist connotation was attached to purism as a segmentation tool in recreation and wilderness management (Stankey & Schreyer 1987). The rationale behind the concept has been quite practical and intuitive, and based on the experience that visitors, even in designated Wilderness areas, are quite different in their attitudes concerning environmental conditions, recreation experiences and wilderness management.

The early popularity of the Purism concept in Norway is due to another intuitively felt relationship: the similarity between traditional Scandinavian outdoor recreation (called 'friluftsliv') and 'puristic wilderness recreation'. The strong purist has close similarities with the skilled and lonesome hiker, fisherman or hunter, staying in a pristine environment for several days, without any need for service facilities, namely the archetype (or stereotype) of a Norwegian outdoor recreationist. And it is also easy to see the elite aspect of both 'friluftsliv' and purism, when interpreted like this.

The early attempts to measure levels of purism used many items. Hendee et al (1968) used 60 initial items in order to segregate the Purists from the Urbanists. Although being a multidimensional concept (wilderness qualities, activities, personal benefits), an aggregated numerical value (level of 'wilderness purism') for each individual was calculated. Several later studies have confirmed that the purism scale holds a combination of several (interdependent) dimensions, but that it is still meaningful to calculate total purism score (Jaakson & Shin 1993, Shafer & Hammitt 1995, Vistad 1995). In the early Norwegian studies the chosen purism items were somewhat different from one study to another. Since 1999 the scale has been shortened (8 items), simplified, standardised (6 items covering attitudes towards physical service facilities and 2 items covering social attitudes) and measured with a 7-point Likert scale (Vorkinn 2003, 2003a).

This gives us a unique possibility to study the variation between visitor segments and whole visitor populations in different settings, and also to find out whether visitor preferences in one location change over time. Figure 1 shows one way of presenting the preferences for facilities and for meeting other visitors, through the average scores from 10 different Norwegian visitor and recreational studies (e.g. Vorkinn 2003, 2003a, Vistad 2009, Vorkinn & Andersen 2010). A high score in this figure means a non- or low-purist attitude (earlier called 'urbanistic' attitude).

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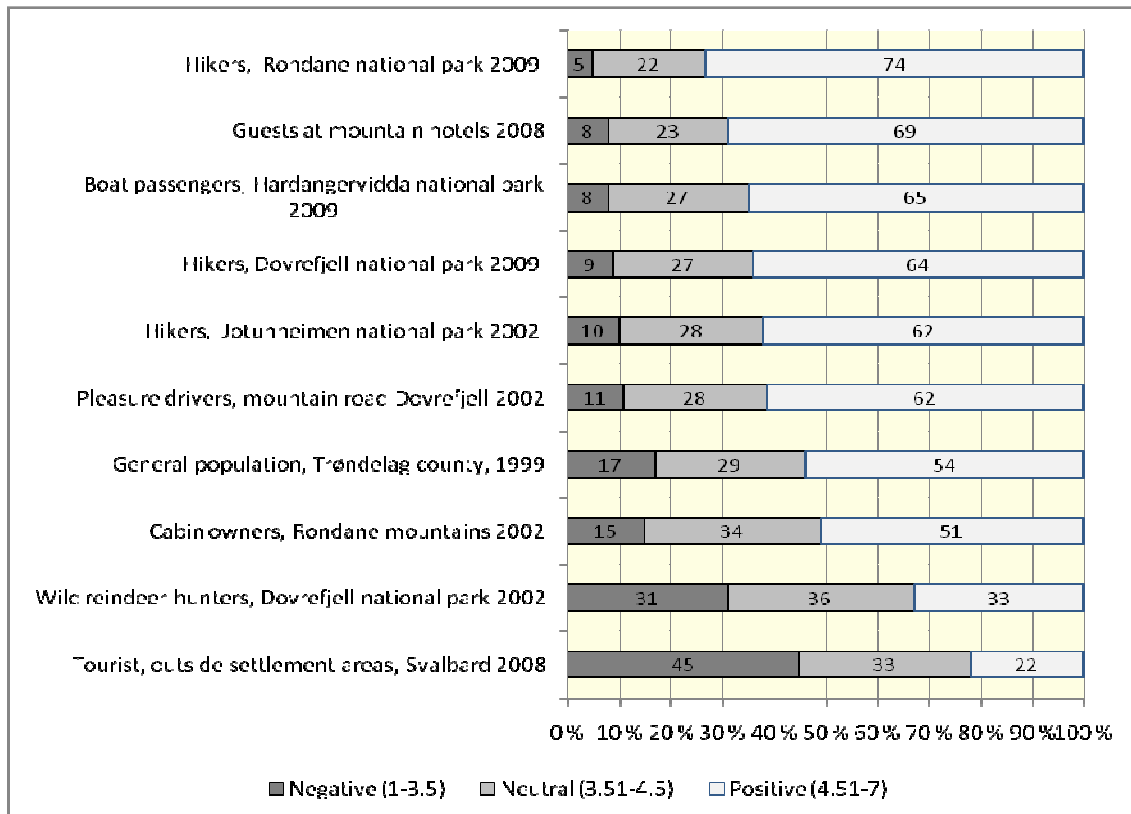


Figure 1: Social tolerance and preferences for physical facilitation in ten visitor or recreational studies in Norway (1999-2009) based on average scores (7-point Likert scale) in a standardized 8-item Purism attitude scale.

The most recent study presented in fig. 1 is interesting: The average national park visitor (in Rondane) is a low-purist and expresses a high general preference for physical service facilitation and a high social tolerance/preference (Vorkinn & Andersen 2010). Even guests in roadside mountain hotels are slightly more puristic than the national park visitors (Vistad 2009). This is important information for the management authorities. Another surprise for many Norwegians is that the Norwegian visitors are less puristic than visitors from any other country; and this applies to both of the most extreme findings in fig. 1: Rondane national park 2009 (see fig. 2) and Svalbard 2008. This finding does not fit with the image of the (arche-)type of the Norwegian mountain hiker presented above! These differences in preferences are a challenge for the managers, but also for the tourism actors since their ambitions are very much based on the foreign market.

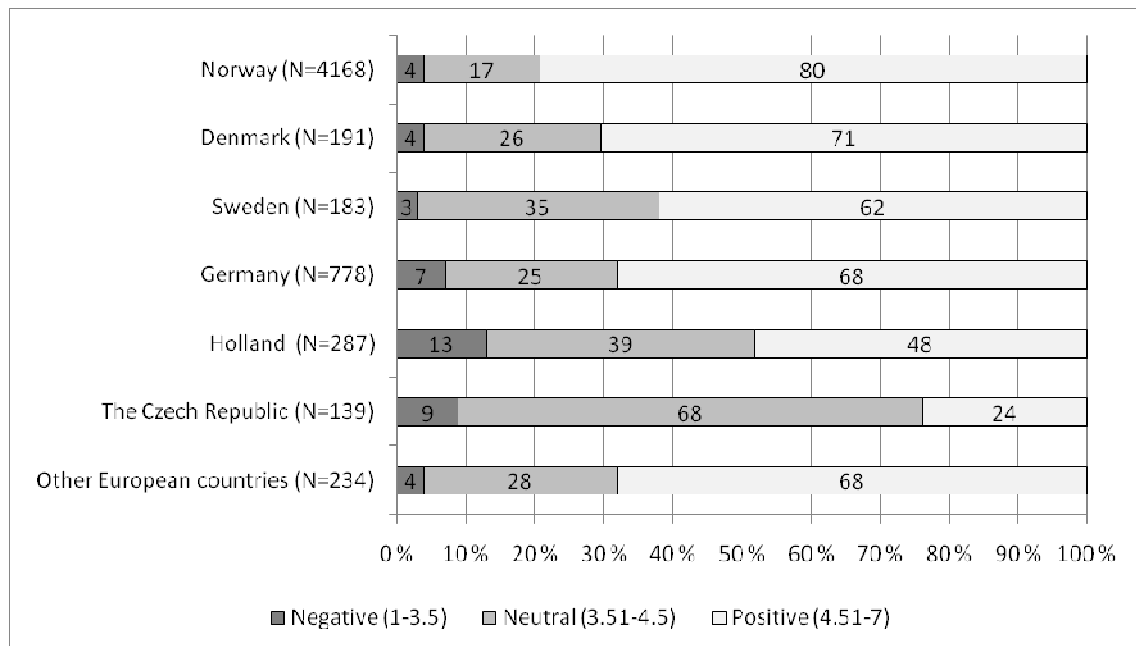


Figure 2. Differences in social tolerance and preferences for physical facilitation between visitors from different countries in Rondane national park, 2009. Average scores, 7-point Likert scale (Vorkinn & Andersen 2010)

This standardized Purism scale seems to be very relevant and useful for management purposes. It distinguishes between different areas and different visitor groups, and it also appeals to the respondents in the interview situation.

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