

Visitor Management in the West Norwegian Fjords – Bridging the Gaps between Disciplines, Sectors and Administrative Levels

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Case description and research purpose

Carrying Capacity in World Heritage Areas

The West Norwegian Fjord landscape was entered on the UNESCO List in 2005. Steep valleys and mountainsides with 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. There are still old farms and dairy farms, many of them now forsaken, but they introduce a cultural dimension to the landscape, which adds to and heightens the value of the area.

The small communities of Flåm and Geiranger have 300 residents and receive 700,000 visitors each year (including cruise ship passengers). Limits of sustainability for nature, the local communities and tourism is a big debate. Each year, the media describe protests against mass tourism, pollution and noise. The Heritage council is working to establish more sustainable practices. (Lykkja and Knagenhjelm, 2014)

UNESCO (2012) considers tourism to be the greatest threat to the World Heritage Sites, while the industry also provides economic opportunities in and adjacent to the sites. UNESCO demands Visitor Management Strategies and regular reports proving the sites are being well maintained. Suitable methods for describing landscape, “sense of place” and “outstanding beauty” have been developed in Norway (Direktoratet for naturforvaltning and Riksantikvaren, 2010). Methods for monitoring and reporting have been developed internationally, but require adjustment to conditions in Norway (Day 2013, Gundersen et al 2011). Our project builds on these methods for the first-generation Visitor Management Plan.

A more informed understanding is needed

A preliminary study revealed a need to develop a method for sustainable and user focused visitor management with a high degree of user participation, suitable for both small and high volume destinations. The Council for the WHS West Norwegian Fjords is the project owner, while management is under the Nærøyfjord world heritage park. Active partners are the municipalities, the travel industry, and local associations. (Lykkja and Knagenhjelm, 2014).

The goal is to find a balance between preservation of important sites and giving visitors a rewarding experience, while at the same time supporting economic development. Achieving this goal will make it easier for the custodians to report to UNESCO, and to maintain the site in a sustainable manner. Research to be carried out includes customer analysis, the customer journey, local value creation and usage stress limits. We collaborate with other research projects conducted in the region.

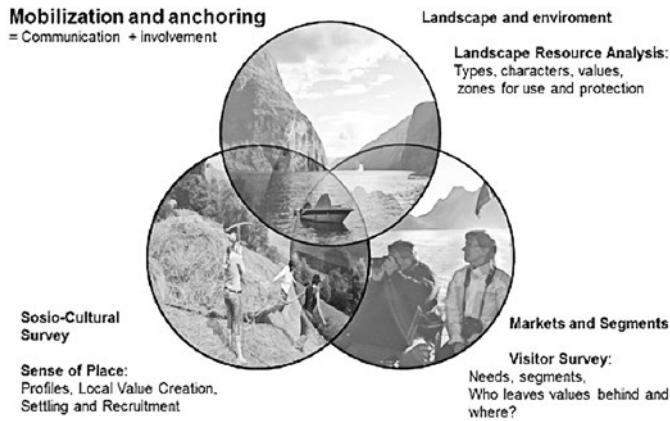


Figure 1. *Practical methods for Sustainable Visitor management*

Through the method, the municipalities will be able to assume a leading role as developers of the destinations for tourism, while guiding a sustainable transformation of the local community. The end product will be a template for visitor management in the West Norwegian Fjords, to be included in plans for protected areas, municipalities, and businesses.

Methodological issues

Management of uncultivated lands in Norway is fragmented. Most of the world heritage area is in landscape being regulated by the Norwegian Nature Diversity Act. Areas of habitation and the points of entry to the heritage sites are regulated through the Planning and Building Act. Visitor Management will therefore need to accord with both municipal plans and the action plans for the protected areas, as well as laws regulating harbors and maritime affairs.

Landscape Resource Analysis and User Participation

Both fjord areas are creating knowledge dissemination plans and collaborating with local resources and businesses. The focus is on a decentralized dissemination where knowledgeable local resource persons can help achieve the potential in unique visitor strategies. Together with all involved parties, we are performing landscape related resource analyses, as well as charting local knowledge. The Method is operationalizing the European Landscape Conventions (ELC) into local and regional planning by including public participation in landscape issues.

Researchers from the Norwegian University of Life Sciences and the Institute for Transport Economics have analyzed current plans and strategies for the areas, and interviewed representatives of municipalities, heritage sites, conservation areas, local communities, and the environmental office of the county administration. They have also met with politicians from the municipality and county level, destination companies, port administrators, the Directorate for Nature Management and the Maritime Directorate (Haukeland et al, 2015). Creating a broad consensus for the need of a Visitor Management Plan is key.

Visitor Surveys and Local Value Creation

Visitor management must include conveying values of importance to the heritage site, disseminating stories about attractions, and providing access to experiences that help visitors explore and learn. There are protests against the volume of cruise tourism and emerging conflicts related to kayaking. The Heritage Council want to ascertain the scope of the problems and stress factors among residents, related to type of tourism.

Workshops and dialog conferences

We are connecting actors by improving the transmission of knowledge and the degree of user participation. This helps connect researchers, administrators, the local communities and the travel industry. We are inviting different administrative and political levels to gather around the table, in order to increase efficiency of interaction (as listed above). Most of these also participate in the meetings of the World Heritage Council for the West Norwegian Fjords.

Preliminary findings

The project is using interviews, public assemblies, regional park meetings, dialog conferences, student theses, expert seminars, and collaborations with other research projects, seeking to involve as many actors as possible. Findings from visitor studies are now being charted against landscape resource analyses, and will be the subject of new gatherings and workshops in 2016 and 2017.

Securing buy-in at all levels is an important part of the process. This approach is, according to Innovation Norway (Official Agency for Innovation, Tourism and Trade) the most holistic planning project they have come across so far. The project has incorporated an R&D strategy for the heritage site. The two fjord regions are complementary and provide an excellent basis for exchanging experiences and communicating research across disciplines, sectors, levels of administration, regions, and even national boundaries.



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