

Tourism Management in Wilderness areas – Svalbard

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Wilderness areas are considered to represent one of the last vestiges of the past and to be untouched by the modern world. In many respects, this is no longer true: wilderness areas have been explored, and in some cases promoted as products or as sites of production and consumption. This is most clearly in evidence in connection with... the world's largest and fastest growing industry, tourism (Saarinen, 1998, p. 29).

Tourism has become one of the major industries in many parts of the world. The continuing growth of the sector calls for strong management and planning actions. It is important that vulnerable areas are regulated according to issues such as sustainable development, nature conservation as well as an emphasis on maintaining their unique image for the future.

The idea of wilderness has been around for a long time and has had an evolving history through the centuries. The attitude towards wilderness areas has changed dramatically in the last century, what was considered a fearful and dangerous place has now become one of the most desired places to visit by tourists (Nash, 1990). The history of the wilderness concept is characterized by the fact that tourism and nature conservation have been linked closely together to form one alternative policy. It would seem that a certain synergy exists between use of the natural environment for tourism and its protection, so that no significant contradiction was perceived between nature conservation and the development of tourism, at least at the initial stage, perhaps even the reverse (Saarinen, 1998).

The concept of Wilderness has its origins in the United States with the Wilderness Act of 1964. The main purpose of the act was to allocate land to wilderness so a portion of the nation's wilderness would be unspoiled for future generations. Wilderness areas are increasingly becoming more popular for tourism purposes. These areas are characterized by unspoiled nature and solitude. The wrong type of use or overuse of wilderness areas can damage

their image and thereby damage the experience that the tourists themselves. By managing and planning wilderness areas in a holistic and systematic way, one can offer different possibilities for tourists depending on the expectations they have towards the area visited.

In 1995 the Norwegian government set a goal of making Svalbard one of the best managed wilderness areas in the world. Svalbard is unique because of the special nature and wildlife that has mostly developed without visible human involvement. The area has been defined as the biggest unspoiled wilderness area in Western Europe and is home to species such as polar bears, reindeers and walruses.

In the early 1990's an increase in tourism numbers along with increased nature protection awareness made people realize that a management plan was needed for Svalbard. The main goal of the plan was to develop tourism and recreation in a sustainable way and in balance with the nature, culture and the history of the area along with holding on to the uniqueness of the area as wilderness. What characterizes the plan is a division of areas in Svalbard according to different user possibilities, the Recreational Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) and Limits of acceptable change (LAC) where used to divide the areas (Kaltenborn, 2000). These methods have been used in Iceland for the same purpose in tourism planning in wilderness areas (Anna Dóra Sæþórsdóttir, 2005).

A research was conducted in the fall of 2009 in the form of interviews with people involved with the tourism industry in Svalbard, both private operators and public agents. The purpose of the research was to get their opinions on the wilderness management of Svalbard in regards to tourism, their experience of the management plan and to learn about possible conflicts that might arise between different stakeholders. The goal of the research was to see if it is possible to learn something from the Svalbard experience and compare it to similar management plans made for tourism in wilderness areas in Iceland.

Svalbard

Svalbard is the collective name of the high arctic islands situated between 74° and 81° North, and 10° and 35° East. Its neighboring countries are Greenland to the west, Iceland and Norway to the south, Jan Mayen and Russia to the east (see figure 1).



Figure 1. Location Svalbard
(Norwegian Polar Institute, 1991)



Figure 2. Svalbard (Norwegian
Polar Institute, 1991)

The whole archipelago is 61.020 km², consisting of the main islands Spitsbergen, Nordaustlandet, Edgeøya and Barentsøya. Kvitøya, Kong Karls Land, and Hopen are situated east of the main archipelago. Bjørnøya is situated between mainland Norway and Svalbard (see figure 2).

About 60% of Svalbard's land area is glaciated, it is composed of rugged mountainous landscape, with high and steep mountains in the North and West, as well as castle-like table mountains with steep scree-covered flanks in Central parts. These mountains are often divided by wide valleys and extensive fjord systems (Hjelle, 1993).

Svalbard has always been rich in natural resources such as coal mining. Until the First World War numerous conflicts between different coal companies arose over the right to claim new areas and mines. The need for regulations on Svalbard became obvious, which had until then been a no-mans land. After several unsuccessful attempts, this problem was solved at the international peace conference in Paris (1919-1920). The Svalbard-Treaty, stating Norwegian sovereignty over Svalbard, was signed on 9th of February 1920 (Arlov, 1996).

Although the Svalbard Treaty grants Norway "absolute and full sovereignty" it also contains important restrictions on the exercise of Norwegian sovereign rights and sets out a principle of non-discrimination towards all 44 treaty members, granting equal rights of fishing and hunting in the treaty area. The Svalbard Treaty also deals with the preservation of Svalbard's nature: "Norway shall be free to maintain, take or decree suitable measures to ensure the preservation and, if necessary, the re-constitution of

the fauna and flora of the said regions, and their territorial waters” (Ulfstein, 1995) and it is up to the Norwegian government to decide what “suitable measures” are (Ulfstein, 2001). This has undoubtedly influenced the way the Norwegian government has dealt with Svalbard as a wilderness area.

Tourism on Svalbard

Historically, tourism has played a modest role in developing livelihoods in the Norwegian High Arctic, although visitors started coming to these regions for pleasure purposes more than 100 years ago. Cruise ship traffic actually began as early as the 1870’s for the privileged few (Hall, Muller & Saarinen, 2009).

Tourism in Svalbard in its modern form was initiated by the government of Norway in 1990 and by 1995 an official goal was set to make Svalbard one of the best-managed wilderness areas in the world (Det kongelige miljø-department, 1994-1995).

Svalbard bases its local economy on coal mining, arctic research, and tourism. There was a fourfold increase in tourists from the 1970s to the 1990’s. This development was considered to pose threats to the highly vulnerable arctic–alpine environment of Svalbard. A management plan for tourism and outdoor recreation was prepared with a view to safeguard the unique environment and keeping tourism development within environmentally sustainable and commercially acceptable boundaries (Kaltertnborn, 2000).

Today Svalbard receives aprox. 36.000 locally generated visitors in addition to aprox. 30.000 passangers with oversea cruiseliners (S. T. Pedersen, The Svalbard Governors Office, personal communication, april 3rd 2009). There is a variety of recreational opportunities in the area such as sailing, snow-scooter trips, dog-sledge trips, skiing, hiking etc. There is a big variety among the tourists that visit the area, from cruise ship visitors that only spent a few hours ashore to the extreme athletes and excurionists that spend days in tents in extreme temperatures.

The Management Plan for Svalbard

With the decline of coal mining and reduced military strategic importance of Svalbard from the 1970s and on, there was a pressure of dealing with unwanted and unforeseen ecological and economic changes in the area. Most would agree that this challenge has improved the economic development, professionalised the tourism industry and provided impetus and legal backing for improved tourism management and management planning. Prior to around 1990 there was virtually no locally based tourism industry in Svalbard. In 1997 Longyearbyen, the largest community on Svalbard, received around 46.000 paid visitor days. In 2004 this number had increased to 77.926 (Hall, Muller og Saarinen, 2009).

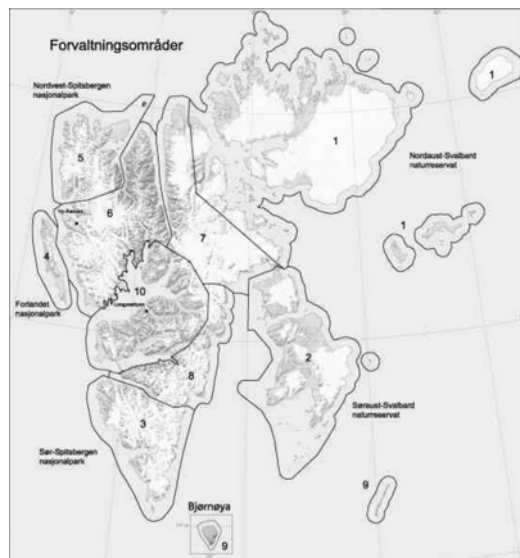


Figure 3. Management areas of Svalbard (Norwegian Polar Institute, 2006)

By the early 1990s, the rapid development of tourism and increasing concern about the vulnerability of the environment in Svalbard made it obvious that a management plan was needed. Officials in environmental management were responsible for controlling the use of the natural environment, while the tourism industry had to meet certain requirements in order to operate successfully. In addition to a good product that offered a

diversity of opportunities and a reliable market, the greatest needs from the perspective of the tourism industry were centered around a set of clear rules and regulations as well as good dialogue with managers.

The main objective of the managing plan was to facilitate tourism and outdoor recreation within limits set by natural, cultural, and historical resources in such a way that the wilderness character of the environment would be preserved. As seen in figure 3. the plan covered the entire Svalbard archipelago and operates according to a zoning system that divides the group of islands into management areas. For each area or zone, specific goals, resource conditions, management actions, and acceptable activities are described.

The plan is a management tool for identifying the amount and type of facilities in each zone as well as access to and restrictions on use. Recreational values are integrated into land management planning through explicit management objectives related to environmental and social conditions in the different areas.

The basic planning concept is to provide a diversity of recreational opportunities, which can be described in terms of combinations of the physical, social, and managerial characteristics of the settings. These include Nature reserves which constitute a management category consisting of areas characterized by great size, difficult accessibility, and minimal human impacts. National parks where regulations are not quite as strict., the purpose is to allow opportunities for dispersed, largely nonmotorized recreation, guided commercial trips are e.g. permitted by concession and are carefully monitored by the authorities. In outdoor recreation and excursion areas regulations are more liberal, these areas are not protected and tourists need not report their travel agenda to the authorities. Independent travelers and commercial companies use these areas extensively and fairly freely (Kaltenborn, 2000).

The Svalbard Reiseliv or Svalbard Tourism office is a coordinated body that handles tourism development in Svalbard. The company is owned by the local tourism industry as well as the Norwegian government itself. Situated in the same building as Svalbard Reiseliv is Svalbard Museum, it is owned by five institutions: Store Norske, Norsk Polar Institute, The Governor of Svalbard, The University centre of Svalbard (UNIS) and Longyearbyen Localstyre. The museum was founded in 1979 but renovated in 2006. It is meant to be the main entrance for tourists coming to Svalbard, established by the Norwegian government as a kind of a teaching room

about the area, the history, wildlife and culture of Svalbard (A. L. Ekeblad, Svalbard Museum, personal communication, April 28th 2009).

Attitudes towards the management of tourism in Svalbard

A research was conducted in Longyearbyen, Svalbard in the fall of 2009 in the form of interviews with people involved with the tourism industry, both private operators and public agents. The purpose of the research was to get their opinions on the management of the wilderness area of Svalbard in regards to tourism, their experience of the management since the plan was made and learn about possible conflicts that might arise between different stakeholders.

The interviewees where: Anna Lena Ekeblad from the Svalbard museum, Frigg Jørgensen from the AECO (The Arctic Expedition and Cruise Operator), Jørn Dybdahl, owner of Svalbard Hestesenter, Martin Machiedo, a private guide, Solfrid Haakonson, the Activity Manager at Basecamp Travel A/S, Stefano Poli, owner of Poli Arctici tour operator, Stein Tore Pedersen a tourism adviser at the governors office in Svalbard, Tove Eliassen, Tourism Manager with Svalbard Reiseliv AS or Svalbard Tourism, Tryggve Sten, the General Manager of Spitzbergen Travel, the biggest tour operator on Svalbard and Björn Kaltenborn from the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research who was involved with the original management plan in the 1990's. He was interviewed via e-mail and gave his opinion on the Svalbard wilderness management.

Tourism Management issues in Svalbard

From the beginning tourism has been regulated which has resulted in a positive experience where people have had to adapt to the regulations and include them in their business from the beginning.

It started with the white paper [from the government of Norway] in 1999/1991 when they decided that tourism should become one of the three legs that the society of Longyearbyen should stand on for building up this community. They kind of said, Yes we are going to have tourism but it is going to be regulated. We started with nothing and it just went hand in hand (Tove Eliassen, Svalbard Reiseliv, personal communication, april 10th 2009).

According to Tove Eliassen the tourism industry in the area is considered economically sound and professional, with good products and with businesses cooperating with each other rather than against each other in spite of the competition. The smaller companies did feel some frustrations in regards of the cooperation, they felt that they pay a higher percentage to the cooperation compared to the bigger companies and because they are so small they have lesser saying about issues regarding their business. Because of the smallness of the industry in Svalbard they were concerned with close connections between the people involved with the management.

Sustainable development movements from the 1990's have influenced much of what is done today regarding tourism in Svalbard. The management plan based on sustainable development has been used since with positive results according to most of the interviewees. The interviews indicated that the plan is functioning for all parties, both the tourists, the people involved with the tourism industry and for the nature conservationists. This policy of sustainability seems even to have attracted companies that are orientated on nature tourism and sustainable tourism and made them feel welcome and integrated in the natural Svalbard experience.

In general the interviewees were positive towards the regulations set by the Norwegian government regarding rules and regulations of tourism in the area. Most of them have only been involved with the tourism in Svalbard after the rules were developed and therefore don't know anything else than the codes of conduct practiced now. When asked whether the rules and regulations detract from the primitive feeling for the tourists, Anna Lena Ekeblad with Svalbard Museum responds: "I think that it is positive for the tourists to see that it's regulated, they feel exclusive to be allowed to come here".

Another example are attitudes towards the zoned areas in the management plan on one hand there are the heavily regulated areas that don't accept visitors versus the free areas where visitors are allowed to move around in without permits, the most accessible area is the so called area 10. It is situated around the main town, Longyearbyen and is viewed as a kind of playground area for tourists.

As we see it, [the regulations] are not a problem at all, if you look at the area 10 you see that it is quite a big area... there are always areas that people haven't been to... and want to see, when you are a tourist everything is new. They are always amazed. Sometimes you could wish it was a little bit easier to bring tourists out of area nr. 10, that is quite easy when you have skis or dogs but in general 99% of the tourists don't have anything outside of area 10 to do also because they stay

here for such a short time (Solfrid Haakonson with Basecamp Travel personal communication, May 8th 2009).

Nature conservation regulations in Svalbard

Tourism in Svalbard is very regulated in regards of nature conservation. The government of Norway through Nature conservation agencies such the Norwegian directorate for nature conservation (natur forvaltning) and the ministry of the environment are responsible for nature conservation in the area. Some negative issues regarding the nature conservation regulations are expressed in the interviews between the local tourism stakeholders and the government of Norway. They are expressed as “areas of different interests” where stakeholders do not agree on how things should be regulated or managed.

There is a feeling that the government sees tourism as a threat for the area and that they want to close more and more areas for tourism. This makes the local tourism agents feel quite dictated centrally and it has created some frustrations. The major causes of frustration are uncertainties about the future and the fact that different rules often apply for different groups, e.g. tourist groups versus scientific research groups. Tryggve Sten, General Manager of Spitzbergen Travel (personal communication May 4th 2009) talks about these frustrations:

You have conflicts because e.g. the Polar Institute and the scientists have their point of view here in Svalbard, they are allowed to use ATV's, helicopters, fuel depots... with no regulations at all, it is kind of unfair from our perspective, compared to the tourists that are not allowed to walk along the shoreline even...

He continues:

There are many concerns from the travel industry, not because you have regulations, but the fact that the regulations are changing all the time and the window is getting smaller and smaller but at one point we will probably feel that the window is getting too small and when that happens we would like to know why, and if there is any good reason for it. Then we can evaluate whether it is a valid reason, but we are not willing to accept that only we are supposed to crawl through this window while everyone else is allowed to go around it...

In spite of these frustrations the general opinion is that the regulations are a positive thing which keep conflict at a minimum and help the people involved with managing the area on their toes and aware of the importance of good behaviour and respect for this unique wilderness area. Solfrid Haakonson with Basecamp Travel (personal communication, May 8th 2009) expresses her opinion about the matter as follows:

...I think that the restrictions, like they are today, are quite good, I hope that we can behave in a way that they don't have to make it more strict. I think that all the people or at least most of them are quite satisfied with the rules as they are today.

Anna Lena Ekeblad at the Svalbard Museum (personal communication, April 28th 2009) emphasises the importance of the regulations as a tool to keep people having an open debate about management and environmental issues:

There are always discussions about every meter of area about what is allowed and why and what might be and I think that it is very healthy because then things are well thought through, it is being prepared well before the decisions are made, I think it's a healthy and good discussion for the private tour operators.

Many see the tourists themselves as important actor in the nature conservation process. "The tourist is a wonderful ambassador,... I think that opening Svalbard and showing people Svalbard's uniqueness for themselves is the best way to make sure that it is taken care of in the future" (Tove Eliassen with the Svalbard Reiseliv, personal communication, April 10th 2009).

The wilderness experience in Svalbard

It is obvious from the interviews that the people involved with tourism in Svalbard are aware of the importance of nature and wilderness. According to Tove Eliassen, with the Svalbard Reiseliv (personal communication, April 10th 2009) the unconditional raw nature and the wilderness are the essential part of the touristic product in Svalbard and it is essential to maintain it. It is what makes the area special for the visitor and the reason visitors choose to go there. She feels that one of the main attractions of the area is the way man becomes small in the nature.

Becoming this small for many of our visitors happens at the airport, for some they have to go 50 km out of town, for others they have to sleep in a tent for a

week but what they have in common and is the central part is that somehow you become so amazed... like ah, nature is so big and I have the opportunity to experience it.

The fact that Svalbard is a very vast wilderness area is an important aspect of the tourist experience.

We have a big area, if you go to the national parks in Norway, they are big as well but you can never go so far in one direction without hitting a road... it doesn't matter how long you walk here, you will never hit a road (Solfrid Haakonson, Basecamp Travel, personal communication, May 8th 2009).

It is quite apparent that the tour operators are happy with the way things are and want to keep Svalbard as a wilderness area even though it might make their job as a tourism provider more difficult. When asked whether it is difficult to move around with tourists without any roads and whether better infrastructure is needed in the area the general opinion was:

No, no, no we don't want any roads! In some way it would be good to have a road but in another it would take away the excitement and the spirit of Svalbard. I think today where you can go everywhere by road it is good to have some places where you can't, and also to keep the places away from getting to populated. To keep things the way they are is quite good (Solfrid Haakonson, Basecamp Travel, May 8th 2009).

The wildlife obviously plays a huge role in the attraction of Svalbard. For many the polar bear is the main reason for coming to Svalbard. For many the wilderness is a source of self-realisation and to be able to deal with the harsh environment is a big part of the Svalbard experience.

Conclusion

It is obvious that a lot can be learned from the Svalbard wilderness management experience. What is special about the tourism management in Svalbard is that the industry is relatively small and therefore quite manageable, there are few local companies on the market, they are all situated in Longyearbyen, a town with only about 2.000 inhabitants and the modern tourism industry is very young.

Another factor is a historical absence of a local population. There is only a community made of people that have lived in Svalbard for a limited time

with no indigenous people. Most of the people interviewed had a long experience of conducting tourism in Svalbard and had experienced the situation since the making of the management plan in 1995, no one interviewed had any experience of tourism before 1995.

The most important lesson to be learned is the respect, the government of Norway and the whole tourism industry in the area, show to the unique nature and wilderness in Svalbard. In spite of frustrations, there seems to be an acceptance of the regulations set by the government which make the people involved with tourism more focused on the importance unspoiled nature plays in their tourism product.

The fact that the modern tourism industry is relatively young and heavily regulated from the beginning gives the idea that the management of the area has been dealt with in a holistic and professional manner. The regulations seem to have a very positive effect on the tourists visiting the area, they appreciate the area more because they know it is cared for and respected by the local industry and the government and it makes them feel very exclusive because they are allowed to experience it.

The attitudes towards the zoned areas in the management plan are in general positive. The interviewees agree that for the tourist that is coming to Svalbard for the first or second time there is plenty of beautiful and interesting things to see in the zones that are allowed for everyone. The area 10 is big and has much to offer for tourists interested in the arctic scenery and landscape while the more restricted areas are very difficult to reach, in the winter time anyway because motorized traffic is forbidden. This I believe is very positive for the extreme traveler that wants to feel exclusive and totally immersed in nature.

The question is how this experience can be used in the Icelandic tourism management arena. Is it possible or even desirable to make such a big and holistic management plan here where wilderness areas would be viewed and assessed with tourism in mind or is it too complicated because of the many different issues Iceland is facing at the moment. What emphasis do we as a nation want to put on our unique wilderness areas for the future and are we aware of the importance areas such as these are in the ever evolving and developing world of today?

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