

# Irresponsible responsible tourism; observations from nature areas in Norway

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to share the trend observed around irresponsible behavior by tourists in nature areas and how this may affect future policy.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper illustrates the trend observed based on three major observations from Norway and links the observed trend to the micro-level to meso- and macro-trends.

**Findings** – As a result, it was found that due to irresponsible behavior the Norwegian *allemansratten* (Right to Roam) system is under pressure. Because of this, the freedom to enjoy the Norwegian nature risks to be limited by regulations.

**Originality/value** – The insights presented in this paper contribute to the debate on nature-based tourism, sustainable and responsible tourism and link with the debate on overtourism in the context of nature areas.

**Keywords** Tourism policy, Responsible tourism, Overtourism, Visitor management, Nature areas, Right to roam

**Paper type** Trends paper

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## Introduction

The precious nature areas and scenic landscapes such as fjords and glaciers contribute to the popularity of Norway as a holiday destination. Especially, places such as Tromsø, Trolltunga, Preikestolen, Lofoten, Geirangerfjord and Sognefjord are increasingly experiencing tourism growth. As a result, the number of visitors to Norway has been increasing rapidly over the past decade; as an example, in 2016, there was an 11 percent increase international overnight stays on the national level and in some regions this increase was even 32 percent (Visit Norway, 2017; Peeters *et al.*, 2018).

Tourists visiting Norway take advantage of the so-called *allemansratten*, or right-to-roam. Although a traditional right from ancient times, *allemansratten*, has been part of the Outdoor Recreation Act since 1957. The rules are simple: you can sleep anywhere as long as you stay at least 150m away from the nearest residency, and if you sleep more than two nights in the same place, you must ask the landowner's permission. Most important, though, is that those who practice *allemansratten* should have respect for nature, the wildlife and the locals. This allows locals and also tourists to explore and experience the nature of Norway (as shown in Plate 1).

With so many tourists visiting the Norwegian nature, this contributes to overtourism (Koens *et al.*, 2018; Cheer *et al.*, 2019). The debate on overtourism usually deals with urban contexts (UNWTO, 2018), whereas in this paper, the link is made in the context of nature areas. As a consequence of tourists visiting the nature areas in Norway due to right to roam, all the system is under pressure. This is not only limited to the Norwegian situation but is something that is increasingly observed elsewhere in the world (Peeters *et al.*, 2018). In the Norwegian case, it is not just about tourist numbers but also relates to the way tourists

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behave and act during their visit to nature. Although the so-called *Fjellvettreglene*, a way of living which encourages people to have a healthy and respectful relationship with nature is a fundamental part of Norwegian culture, this causes problems with tourists. In this paper, we share a trend that was observed around irresponsible behavior by tourists in nature areas and how this may affect future policy. These observations presented in the paper are the results of a mixture of sources, observations by the researchers themselves supported by the academic literature, reports and media sources.

### **Distorted links between tourism and nature: observations from Norway**

Tourism has various mutual relationships and interdependencies with the nature (Heslinga *et al.*, 2017; Terkenli, 2004). Tourism can be a way to help people experience and enjoy nature. For those visitors that feel connected to nature, tourism can be an opportunity for improving the understanding of natural heritage, gaining public support, and achieving the funding needed for conservation (Libosada, 2009; McCool and Spenceley, 2014). This is important as the quality of tourist experiences benefits from an attractive landscape and natural environment and a welcoming host community (Buckley, 2011). Nevertheless, it is often seen as a socio-economic activity that can provide income and jobs to the local community (Libosada, 2009), but if tourism is building on and exploiting natural resources without explicit attention to the mutual relationships with nature, tourism can have a negative impact on landscapes (Buckley, 2012; Saarinen, 2006) and on host communities (King *et al.*, 1993; McCombes *et al.*, 2015).

In this paper, we observe an emerging trend of people (and in this case tourists) losing their connection with nature. Less people see nature as something dangerous, wild and untameable, and increasingly people seem to have lost their awe and respect for nature treating it as something to be used, to cross off the bucket list and to take selfies with. This trend can be seen in the light of the debate around overtourism, which accelerates and intensifies the distorted link between tourists and nature. In our paper, this distorted link

between tourism and nature was observed in Norway. Norway is highly attractive place for tourists that seek to experience nature. Paradoxically, these same responsible tourists tend to show irresponsible behavior that contradicts with the relationship with nature that the Norwegians themselves have. In this context, and for this specific case, we highlight three observations that are illustrative for this changing relationship.

### ***Observation 1: tourist's ambitions trump their skills***

The first observation relates to the high ambitions and expectations of tourists combined with their lack of skills. Where Norwegians are true hikers, tourists often go on a hike without any proper preparation and consequently are not sufficiently outfitted with the proper hiking equipment (BBC, 2017). Because of this lack of skills, preparation and experience, many tourists get into trouble. The Red Cross has already been called out on many rescue missions (BBC, 2017). This micro-trend can be seen in the light of the meso-trend in mountaineering from personal exploring to a commercial guided-tour industry which is capitalizing on better accessibility of big mountains, affordable transportation and more advanced equipment. This boom in commercial adventure sports means "real" mountaineers are often outnumbered by tourists whose ambitions exceed their climbing skills. For designing future policy, this becomes an issue for discussion. Who can access nature? Will it remain assessable for all or will nature be restricted to those that have the proper skills?

### ***Observation 2: flirting with death***

Our second observation is the underestimation of the risks that are present when hiking in nature. For example, the risks tourists are taking to be able to make the perfect "Instagrammable" picture at Trolltunga or Preikestolen (National Geographic, 2019). Plate 2 shows a tourist staring 600 meters down the Preikestolen cliff at a safe distance, but the internet is full of photographs showing tourists in the most breathtaking positions and poses and thereby taking immense risks. Being very close to the edge of a 600-meter high cliff to strike a perfect pose is literally flirting with death leading (The Telegraph, 2015). As nature does not care about our egos, people actually got killed or injured leading (The Telegraph, 2015; BBC, 2017). This leads to a discussion for future policy to close off areas or place fences at the cliffs. The micro-trend observed here is linked to increasing individualism in our highly globalized world. Taking the actual picture, as proof of presence, seems to be more important than the actual hike to get there. This specific example does not stand on itself; this macro-trend of sharing your personal experience with your peers (at all risk) is occurring all over the world.

### ***Observation 3: littering***

A third observation is the lack of respect for the nature areas that the tourists visit (The Guardian, 2016). For example, along the hike toward the popular Trolltunga, the trail is littered with used toilet paper, leftover barbeque grills, abandoned tents, sweet wrappers and plastic bottles. Someone even wrote their name on the cliff with a marker (BBC, 2017), whereas the tourists that take this trip in nature enjoy the principle of *allemansratten* and do not fully comply with the principle when it comes to littering and show no respect for nature, the wildlife and the locals. As such, their behavior is irresponsible, the opposite of the philosophy behind the concept of *allemansratten*. The observation in Norway does not stand alone as in many nature areas these problems occur. For future policymaking, this could imply that Norwegian have to think of ways to teach and education tourists to show how to be respectful to nature according to the principles of *allemansratten*.



**Source:** Authors

## Conclusion

From this paper, it can be concluded that Norwegians are proud of their *allemansratten* which allows both local and visitor to experience and enjoy nature, but the observations above show that due to increased numbers of tourists it creates a combination of dangerous situations, negative externalities and impacts. It can be concluded that the principles of *allemansratten* are under pressure and that Norwegians maybe need to reconsider or redesign it. As an example, in Norway, there never was the need to regulate hikes, but for future plans and policies, this is now heavily debated ([Gurholt and Broch, 2019](#)).

While this paper only shows observations from the Norwegian context, this trend can also be observed elsewhere around the world. Norway is not the only country where the right to roam is in place; in Scotland, Finland, Iceland, Sweden, Austria, Switzerland and New-Zealand, to name a few, the principles of the right to roam apply. But also in other nature areas in the world, the distorted links between tourism and nature can be observed. Probably the most prominent recent example is mountain climbers waiting in line to reach the summit of Mount Everest and some unexperienced climbers got killed ([Washington Post, 2019](#)).

So what does this mean to the future of destinations where the principles of the right of roam apply? From this paper, it can be concluded that as policy and plans can change the future course of tourism, it is good to be aware of this changing relationship between tourism and nature ([Heslinga et al., 2018](#)). But most prominently, observed trend in this paper shows an increasing growth of visitors, the authors suggest that probably more or a different way of visitor management in the future and perhaps a more proactive way of management is required ([Hartman, 2018](#)).

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### Further reading

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