

(Changing) Human-Environment Relations in Longyearbyen, Svalbard

RESEARCH TOPIC:

The maintenance of a Norwegian family society on the arctic archipelago of Svalbard is a main aim of Norway's arctic strategy. This non-indigenous community, Longyearbyen, is in the process of economic restructuring from coal mining to a post-industrial economy based on tourism, research and education, with a corresponding growth in the service sector. The population in town is increasingly international (35% non-Norwegians) and transient (more than 20% yearly turnover). At the same time, climate change impacts the town and requires adaptation.

This project examines human-environment relations in Longyearbyen and the impacts of climate change in the context of economic restructuring. The focus is on the natural and the built environment, and the subject is approached through different but interrelated thematic foci.



Coal mining determined the location of Longyearbyen, which makes it exposed to a variety of natural hazards, intensified by climate change.



Recreational nature use is an important part of life on Svalbard, and mostly facilitated by motorized transport. Increasing environmental regulations conflict with the locals' wish to be able to move across the island.

PLACE ATTACHMENT AND TURNOVER:

Why is the turnover so high in Longyearbyen and how does it impact the society? What are the reasons for moving to, staying in, and leaving Longyearbyen? How do people attach to place in the context of extreme turnover?

CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS, ADAPTATIONS, PERCEPTIONS:

How is the community impacted by, responding to, and perceiving environmental change, in particular permafrost thaw? How do environmental changes impact urban development, and to what extent is urban planning a tool for adaptation?

OUTDOOR LIFE (FRILUFTSLIV):

How do locals use and perceive nature through recreational outdoor activities? To what extent are they part of Svalbard life and contribute to place attachment and well-being?

URBAN DEVELOPMENT:

How did Longyearbyen develop and what are important issues in urban planning today? How do people use and perceive the town?



Inspecting the foundational structures of a dwelling. Unstable ground due to permafrost thaw constitutes a challenge for urban development in Longyearbyen.

OBJECTIVES

The research aims to contribute to a better understanding of:

- the relationship between place attachment and transience
- the social impacts of population turnover
- the combined impacts of climate change and economic restructuring
- the role of urban planning for climate change adaptation
- the role of recreational nature use for life and well-being in a non-indigenous, arctic setting

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The project builds on one year of ethnographic fieldwork in Longyearbyen. The main data sources are around 80 qualitative interviews, participant observation and a quantitative survey. The concerns and knowledge needs of the community have informed some of the research questions.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

- Human-environment relations on Svalbard are strongly impacted by Norway's Svalbard policies, which shape urban development and regulate access to housing and use of nature
- Economic restructuring leads to increased population turnover
- Whereas lifestyle choices have replaced work as the main motivation for moving to Svalbard for Norwegians, work continues to be the main pull-factor for most non-Norwegians
- Climate change, economic restructuring and Norwegian Svalbard policies converge to make housing the main limiting factor for settling in Longyearbyen
- Climate change is impacting the built environment in town, but has only limited influence on economic activities, social life and culture. Adaptation in the domains of housing and infrastructure is considered a top priority
- The perceptions of climate change differ according to factors such as political orientation and time spent on Svalbard. Many express the dilemma that living on Svalbard cannot be environmentally sustainable
- Use of nature and mobility by the means of motorized transport is an important factor for well-being and place attachment

INFO

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Alexandra Meyer is an active member of the Svalbard Social Science Initiative (SSSI).

She is involved in a collaborative project between the architecture bureau in Longyearbyen (LPO) and the SSSI on how people use and perceive the town.

The research on nature use is a collaboration with anthropologist Tomas Salem (UiB), funded by the Svalbard Environmental Protection Fund.

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