



SVALBARDS  
MILJØVERN FOND

*Final research report*

## **Wilderness Perceptions and Practice in Tourism**

Project no. 18/69



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## Preface

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The project “Wilderness Perceptions and Practice in Tourism” was funded by the Svalbard Environmental Protection Fund (SMF) in spring 2018, under the reference number 18/69. This is the final report for the project.

The project complies with current regulations in the Svalbard Environmental Act and with the necessary permissions from tour operators and their employees. The research follows standard ethical principles of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms; EU legal rules for protecting privacy, personal data, and intellectual property; and the guidelines of the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD) code of ethics (<https://www.etikkom.no/>).

The research could not have been completed without the kind cooperation, trust, and support of the tour operators and their employees. A sincere thank you goes to them. Acknowledgments also go to the Svalbard Environmental Protection Fund for funding the project and to my colleague, Matouš Jelínek, for his invaluable support.

## Introduction

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Wilderness has been widely recognized as an important concept in the politics, economics, and environmental movements of the Arctic regions (Tin, Summerson and Yang 2016; Schweitzer, Povoroznyuk and Schiesser 2017; and others). On Svalbard, the concept of wilderness (among others) establishes and frames the currently developing tourism industry. It is a common part of public presentations for the official tourism board on Svalbard (Visit Svalbard) and in the marketing of many tour operators. Wilderness is also a significant motivator for tourists that come to Svalbard (Enger 2018), and an important part of the experience provided by tour operators and guides. Given the frequent use of this concept, the question of meanings and perceptions of wilderness arises: What does wilderness mean on Svalbard and for whom?

This project aims to understand different perceptions of wilderness and the practices surrounding it in the context of Svalbard tourism through ethnographic fieldwork and anthropological theories of wilderness. The concept of wilderness is crucial to Svalbard tourism, and thus, it is important to enhance knowledge about the understandings and practices which create wilderness experiences within tourism. The understanding of perceptions of wilderness is an important contribution to enhancing appropriate relations to Svalbard's environment, including both nature and culture.

Through ethnography, anthropology allows us to “view behind the façade,” i.e. to understand in which context concepts such as wilderness are formed, and which processes and practices influence this forming. An ethnographical study of wilderness perceptions and practices in Svalbard tourism presents an additional method to the quantitative research and statistical analysis. Such an approach offers different meanings and perceptions of wilderness as well as its consequences to society.

The project thus focuses on the following questions:

- How is the concept of wilderness established within the Svalbard tourism industry?
- How and by whom is Svalbard wilderness perceived and formed during guided tours?
- How are different perceptions of wilderness formed?
- What are the consequences of these perceptions?

In this report, the project methods are introduced first, followed by an analysis of wilderness in Svalbard tourism. The sociohistorical development of understanding wilderness shows the cultural specifics concerning the current understanding of wilderness as pristine land. The consequences of this perception are discussed. Separate chapters are dedicated to the tourists' and the guides' perceptions of wilderness on Svalbard, during which the analysis shows the ongoing transformation of the perception of wilderness

on Svalbard. Finally, the summary highlights specific outcomes that are potentially interesting and relevant to a management perspective.

## Methods

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The research was conducted between May 2018 and May 2019. In May and June, the research design and its methods were created, from June to October the data was collected, and from November to February the data was analyzed. The results were discussed at a conference for Svalbard tour guides and the final report was written between March and May.

The data was collected using **qualitative methods**, namely an ethnographical approach which combines participant observation as well as informal and formal interviews (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, Amit 2000). In general, this approach offers understandings of different meanings and perceptions of wilderness on Svalbard as well as its societal consequences. Moreover, an ethnographical project **allows one to understand the perceptions in detail and on site**, which is especially useful when it comes to such a fluid and fuzzy concept as wilderness. This method goes hand in hand with another utilized conceptual background based mainly on a material-semiotic understanding of realities, which is not taken for granted (cf. Haraway 2008, Ingold 2000; Kohn 2013; and others) and rather emphasizes the focus on enactment of their form that emerges from practices, relations, and encounters between humans and nature in the environment (Ingold 2000).

The participant observation included **participation in different guided tours** and focused on perceptions and practices in wilderness in detail (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, Amit 2000). By joining the trips, the researcher could observe how and when exactly the perceptions of wilderness are formed and capture the participants' spontaneous reactions and narratives *in situ*. Participating in trips also enabled an informal setting for interviews with both tourists and guides.

Cooperation with **four different tour operators** in Longyearbyen was established. The tour operators were selected in order to cover **different sizes** (from small to larger scale operators) and, most importantly, in order to cover **a variety of trips** (hiking, kayaking, boat trips, and dog mushing). Both day and multi-day trips were part of the research. Due to the shortened scooter driving season in the spring of 2018, scooter trips were not part of the project. The observations and informal interviews were transcribed into field notes after every trip.

**Formal interviews** with **twelve guides** and **five managers** were conducted. The participants were employees of the cooperating companies, selected according to the above described criteria and with a particular focus on their **gender**, previous **formal education**, and **length of their guiding career**. Both males and females, and formally and non-formally educated guides in the early or later stages of their careers participated in the research. Formal interviews were semi-structured and in-depth. The

researcher prepared the structure of the interviews and focused on perceptions of wilderness and the practices surrounding it. According to individual interviews, follow-up questions were asked and respondents had an opportunity to focus on what they considered important within each topic. Interviews varied from at least forty minutes to about two hours. Both the interviews and the field notes were transcribed and analyzed in the analytical software Atlas.ti.

In order to fulfill the **ethical standards** of the project, both individuals and institutions were informed about the purpose of this project, its ethical standards, and ensured anonymity. The identity of the tour operators as well as of their employees have been anonymized. All the participants signed informed consents and have been informed of their rights.

The researcher is not only an educated sociologist but also a former employee of several tour operators in Longyearbyen. The design of the project, interviews, data analysis, and interpretation followed the methodological standards of social anthropology; however, the multiple roles inhabited by the researcher certainly helped gain access to the field in terms of trust and cooperation with both companies and guides.

## Wilderness in Svalbard tourism

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The **common understanding of wilderness** is an **untamed, pure or untouched, and pristine land, which relies on the absence of men and the presence of wild animals** (Nash 1982; also Callicot and Nelson 1998, Cronon 1996, Grant 1998, and others). As many studies show, this understanding does not correspond with recent anthropological, archaeological, and natural science research indicating that **many of the places we call wilderness have long been, in one way or another, influenced by human activities** (see Gómez-Pompa and Kaus 1990). The concept of wilderness is thus formed by **political, economic, and cultural influences** which shape what we understand as wilderness and how we perceive the surrounding environment. The understanding, perception, and meaning of wilderness also changes throughout history as I will show in the following section.

Given the abovementioned influences and the sociohistorical development, wilderness is considered a cultural invention, or an idea, that is **socially constructed** (Belsky 2000; Callicott and Nelsson 1998; Cronon 1996; and others). These cultural inventions and social constructions shape and form reality in specific ways. In the construction of concepts, their description and perception, and **certain features of reality, are emphasized** while, necessarily, **other features are neglected**; and if the concept (narrative) succeeds, it can **neglect the discontinuities and contradictory experiences** that would undermine the intended meaning of the concept (in this case, wilderness). For example, if a concept of wilderness as an untamed and untouched land is constructed, pollution in the soil or the history of hunting and trapping on this land is neglected. Importantly, **our constructions then significantly form our perceptions of the environment and our actions, and vice versa**<sup>1</sup>.

The concept of wilderness is thus a **highly abstract description of a specific natural setting**. It is not "objective" in terms of being separated from humanity, culture, or history. For example, the areas in and around Larsbreen and Longyearbreenis have a number of human traces, both historical (cultural heritage, mine dump, etc.) and current (paths, scientific instruments, temporarily made bridges over rivers, etc.). These traces are more or less visible, or at least recognizable, for and by different people (see chapters 5 and 6). Most importantly, however, despite the presence of human traces, these areas can be, and are, in many occasions<sup>2</sup> still perceived as wilderness—pure and untouched land.

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<sup>1</sup>A perception includes both the (social) meaning as well as the practice of experiencing the environment. The perception is both constructed by and constructing both meanings and practices (cf. Douglas 1966, Ingold 2000).

<sup>2</sup>And as the data shows, it was perceived as such by many tourists as well as many guides at the beginning of their Svalbard residency. However, as is discussed later, for the guides, this area eventually becomes a complex environment. What is untouched wilderness for the tourists is not considered so by the guides because they see how much human traces and human work are part of the surroundings, among other reasons.

The current **tourist industry generally presents Svalbard through the common understanding of wilderness** as pristine and untouched. In Figure 1 and 2, it is possible to see examples of how the PR strategies of Visit Svalbard present Svalbard. The verbal description in Figure 1 describes Svalbard as “located on top of the world, it contains endless areas of unspoiled, raw Arctic wilderness”; as the “real Arctic”; and with the possibility of experiencing “tranquility that is virtually unrivalled anywhere else on earth” supplied with “never-ending glaciers and rich animal life” (Visit Svalbard 2019). The character of the description is highly focused on a romanticized landscape, comparable to the influential natural romantic novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (cf. Callicot. and Nelson 1998), neglecting both the human and natural history of the archipelago.

## About Svalbard

### Welcome to Svalbard, the true Arctic and home to 3,000 polar bears!

Svalbard is a Norwegian archipelago in the Arctic Ocean. Located on top of the world, it contains endless areas of unspoiled, raw Arctic wilderness. Svalbard consists of all the islands, islets and skerries between 74° and 81° north latitude and 10° and 35° east longitude. The largest island is Spitsbergen, while the highest mountain is Newtontoppen (1,713 m above sea level).

A visit to the High Arctic archipelago – roughly midway between mainland Norway and the North Pole – is full of contrasts and amazing nature-based experiences. The Arctic silence creates a unique atmosphere, and you will experience tranquility that is virtually unrivalled anywhere else on earth. Up here at 78° N, you will soon become part of the most beautiful Arctic adventure imaginable.

Majestic mountains, blue sea ice, almost never-ending glaciers and a rich animal life dominate the landscape, which changes appearance during our three main seasons: from the colourful tundra of the Polar Summer, via the spectacular light show of the Northern Lights winter to the frozen fjords and endless snowy landscape of the Sunny Winter.

Figure 1.

The verbal descriptions are often complemented by videos or pictures of an endless snowy landscape where wildlife such as reindeer, polar fox, or polar bear passing by (Figure 2.), visually emphasizing the untamed character of the land.



Figure 2.

In the marketing of tour operators, although not as often as in tourist board public presentations, the names or descriptions of the tour also mention Svalbard as wilderness and unspoiled land. (Figure3.)

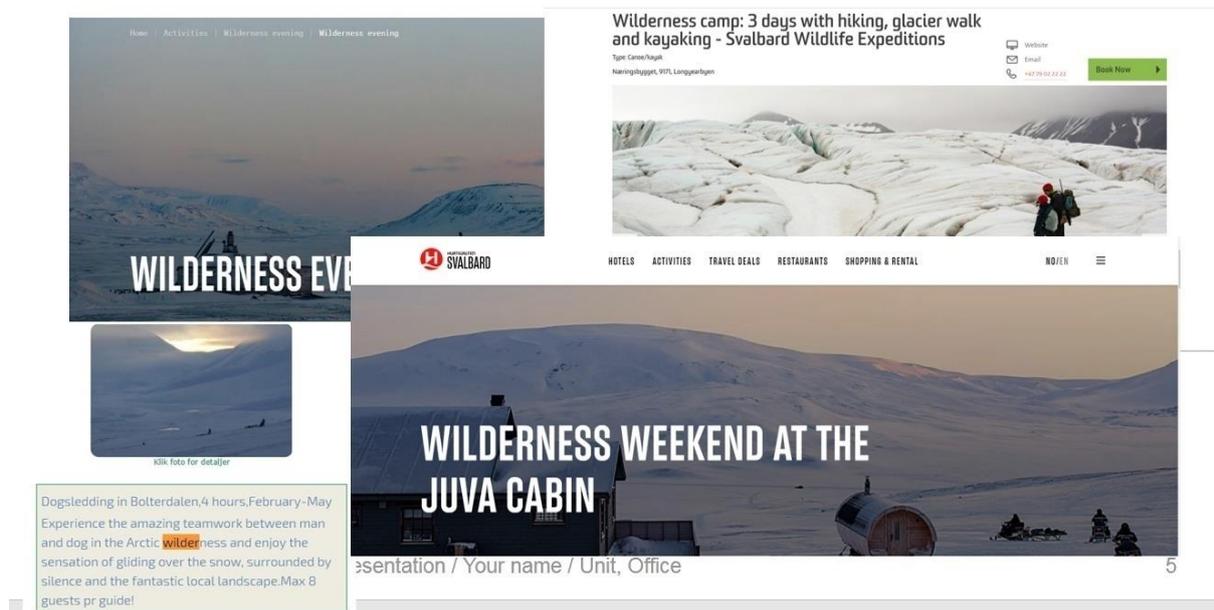


Figure 3.

Although this is not the only way Svalbard is presented, it is a rather **common reference and conscious choice of words, phrases, and images, which reproduce certain patterns of seeing and thinking about Svalbard's environment.** In these perceptions of wilderness, both **people and nature are static and homogenous, silencing the reality of complex, diverse, and dynamically changing characters and relations of and between both humans and nature.** Svalbard, a place which has been a site for human activity since 1596 (and maybe earlier), is commonly presented in terms of untamed and pristine land. The centuries of human activity on Svalbard (including whaling, hunting, trapping, and mining; the consequences of climate change during the so-called Anthropocene; the microplastics in the ocean; and the pollution in the animals, soil, and air; etc.) in the public presentation and common perception of wilderness is quite neglected or, at times, missing completely. Moreover, **to get out of civilization requires a lot of civilization**—not only the aforementioned human history and Anthropocene but also infrastructure, guides, logistics, marketing, and last but not least, global and local politics and economics.

These subtle images are important in understanding the process of construction of Svalbard as wilderness and the commodification of Svalbard's environment. The environment is constructed into a product (the wilderness) created by industry to be "real," "untamed," and filled with "unique wildlife." **This, in turn, influences what is understood as wilderness and how wilderness on Svalbard is perceived**

(see chapter four). If one is surrounded by such images, symbols, and pictures, one gets quite a clear indicator of what should be expected and valued, and what constitutes true nature and wilderness.

It is crucial to understand that these subtle images do not arise from a vacuum. On the contrary, they are part of a broader social, historical, and natural context which formed the perception of wilderness into the current common practice of seeing and understanding. In other words, for these presentations and marketing strategies to be successful, there are various natural as well as social and historical factors in play:

### **1) General sociohistorical notion of wilderness**

- The sociohistorical development changed the relationship to nature and the perception of wilderness from a worthless place to something valuable in and of itself and thus potentially profitable for the tourism industry. This perception of wilderness opened up a development of wilderness (or nature) for tourism. (For details see Box 1)

### **2) General interest in the Arctic**

- The general interest in the Arctic is an outcome of recent history. In the 1970s, the global environmental movement shifted their attention from the rainforest to the Arctic, and the Arctic became a strong symbol of wilderness and a disappearing world. In the early twenty-first century, after a political strategy of environmental movements, supported by media, the polar bear became a symbol of the Arctic and wilderness (Tyrrell and Clark 2013). This has resulted in an increased interest in politics but also economics, including tourist industries and travelers hunting for a “disappearing world” (Cronon 1996; Stonehouse, Callicot 2010).

### **3) Lack of indigenous people on Svalbard**

- One of the first arguments against wilderness in other places being called untouched, for example in North and South America, comes from indigenous people, because what we call wilderness is their home and a source of livelihood. The notion of wilderness as untouched land is strongly problematic (Grant 1998; Tyrrell and Clark 2013). However, there are no indigenous people to argue with on Svalbard, so the tourist industry can more easily focus on the “purity” of nature there.

## Sociohistorical development of wilderness perceptions

**The origin of the concept of wilderness dates back to the eighteenth century** with a reference to the Anglo-Saxon word “wildeor-ness” which translated to “a place of wild beasts” (Grant 1998; Nash 1982). At that time, mountains, waterfalls, and other natural phenomena were not perceived as attractive, extraordinary, valuable, or important in their own terms unless they were useful for utilitarian purposes of commercial or societal development (Nynäs 2015). **Fear and savage were the strongest connotations with wilderness.**

**In the nineteenth century, this perception changed.** Wilderness remained a place beyond civilization, but it **turned into something very valuable** (Cronon 1996: 71). Mountains were described as cathedrals, worshiped as places where God appears in beauty, or as gardens of Eden; waterfalls were considered spectacles and pictorial, etc. In the late eighteenth century Niagara Falls, Mongolia’s Bogod Khan Mountain, and Yellowstone were among the first to be designated as protected areas, followed by a boom of protected areas and protests against the industrialization of wilderness in the 1900s (Nash 1982).

There are several **reasons for this change**:

- 1) Nationalist movements and the creation of national identities
  - The movements to establish national parks and wilderness areas began to gain importance around the same time that questions about national boundaries and identities reached their peak (Cronon 1996). Part of the process of building nations and national identity was an admiration for one’s country, its nature, and the romanticizing of both. Nature and wilderness became essential to the question of national spirit and identity; it played an important role in creating national myths and symbols in the United States, Canada, Norway, and many other countries.
- 2) Romanticism
  - One of the most influential expressions of romanticism was the concept of the sublime, which started to dominate the verbal and visual perception of nature and allowed the terrifying aspects of nature to become a meaningful aesthetic experience (Macnaghten and Urry 1999: 114). Romanticism was an artistic, literal, and intellectual movement, and romanticized nature was then mostly a perception of people living in an urban environment, a “view of people who are far removed from the natural environment they depend on for raw resources” (Goméz-Pompa and Kaus 1992: 273). For those living in nature, it was not very romantic or sublime.
- 3) History of environmental movements
  - Due to the increasing role of environmental movements, nature in general turned from something one should control and utilize to something one should protect (Macnaghten and Urry 1999).

**Box 1.**

As much as tourism on Svalbard in general is an outcome of many various and interconnected political, national, economic, and natural forces, so too is the notion of wilderness as a pure land.

The image of wilderness as pure, untouched land is not only neglecting both social and natural scientific research findings, but it has also been criticized for **negative consequences on both the social and natural elements of the environment** (see Box 2).

As much as the concept of wilderness as untouched and pristine nature is problematic, it is an influential and specific concept which is supported by the marketing and public presentations of Svalbard. Again, this kind of perception of wilderness is what tourists are expecting when they come here. And these images project onto everything they see and experience on Svalbard—how they see and understand Svalbard’s environment including nature and towns as well as local people and life on Svalbard. This is what creates common reactions of surprise that there is a cinema in Longyearbyen, its overall “modern” infrastructure, and the scarcer presence of wildlife in the town’s surroundings. Such images are then reinforced by details such as a supermarket with a stuffed polar bear at the entrance and a sign with distances to Svalbard Airport, emphasizing the distance from civilization which was left behind once tourists have set foot on archipelago ground. Tourists come to Svalbard with specific images of what is, or should be, wilderness and how Svalbard looks and is. **While these images are very specific, they are also very unclear and obscured, and it is the discursive narratives of the local tour operators, guides, and other inhabitants as well as material signs that further shape and form these images.**

### The critique and consequences of wilderness as pristine land

The main criticism of the concept of wilderness as pristine and untouched land is towards its ahistorical and nature-culture binary:

- 1) It is ahistoric.
  - The history and presence of people who have been living or dwelling in the areas we call wilderness are neglected (Grant 1998). Instead of understanding the local populations as diverse, it leads to an image of “forest peoples” in a state of innocence and harmony with nature.
- 2) It is reproducing an ecologically harmful nature-culture binary (see e.g. Gómez-Pompa and Kaus 1992, Stoddart 2012, Tyrrell and Clark 2013 and others).
  - If we understand wilderness as untouched and pristine, i.e. separated from humans, it often leads to a protection policy without a sufficient ecological assessment, a so-called “hands off” policy (Belsky 2000: 46).

Box 2.

## Tourist perceptions of wilderness

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The research data shows that even though the common perception of wilderness as untouched and pristine is partly present in the tourists' perception of Svalbard's environment, it is also transforming and diversifying. The most notable transformation is **from untamed and pristine land into a specific experience in nature** (a similar process has been noticed in other nature-based tourism, for example glacier skiing in the Alps. See Luger and Rest 2002). A significant number of tourists, when asked about their impressions of Svalbard, responded with reference to experiences formed in a combination of a specific activity and natural setting:

Q: "What do you think of Svalbard so far?"

R: "We love the activities here. We have been on an ATV trip, kayaking, and now this [Rigid inflatable boat trip]. And the nature is impressive—different from what we are used to."

R2: "This place makes you do things you would never do in any other place."

While the natural setting remains an important part of the experience, the focus shifts from pristine and untouched wilderness to an *activity experience* in the wilderness or simply an experience from specific nature. Based on the data, this transformation can be explained as **a consequence of three interconnected factors:**

### 1) Spreading knowledge about climate change and the Anthropocene that disturb the image of untouched nature

The number of tourists coming to Svalbard reflects the processes within climate change and knowledge about the so-called Anthropocene. While experiencing the Svalbard environment and admiring its beauties, they reflect that what they experience and see is neither untouched nor pristine. The explicit expression of these reflections came from one of the tourists:

Nothing is separated from the other. Not humans from nature, not nature from humans. I mean, we are here, and it is amazing, but...well, nothing is untouched by anything, that just doesn't exist.

**Climate change** in general **changes perceptions of the environment**, especially when it comes to nature–culture boundaries, where both become part of one environment and **nature is never separated from human actions**. This also has consequences for transforming meanings of many natural phenomena (Hulme 2010; Urry and Macnaghten 1998) and also perceptions of wilderness on Svalbard.

## 2) Practicalities

If wilderness is (a description of) a specific nature characteristic with a lack of human traces, this **specificity of nature necessarily requires a specificity of skills, equipment, and knowledge** for experiencing nature. Together with laws that require certain local wildlife knowledge on Svalbard, **tourists' dependency on tour operators and guides arise**, as they themselves lack the skills and logistic opportunities necessary for the experience. As the researcher noted after a discussion with one of the tourists about his expectations of Svalbard:

Louis said he would love to see some wildlife, except reindeers, but also just to be out in the mountains and see a glacier. Everything here is different from what he has seen before and at the same time reachable. He likes hiking, usually alone in Scotland or the Himalayas, but it is impossible here because of the polar bears, since he doesn't know anything about rifles.

Louis's expectations suggest what was discussed in the previous point, which is that he focused more on an experience in a specific environment over being in a pure and untouched land. Whether it is about experiencing wilderness or experiencing a specific environment, the desire for experience in such an environment brings a dependency on infrastructure, other people, equipment, and required skills. It might be disturbing ideals and preferences, yet it is accepted in order to meet reality. This brings us to the third factor: accepting the presence of human traces.

## 3) Accepted presence of humans and human traces (infrastructure, artifacts, tracks, etc.)

The presence of human traces on Svalbard is accepted even beyond the elementary necessities required for the possibility to be there and experience it. **Although (visible) human impacts in the landscape, such as infrastructure, are reducing the ideal wilderness experience, they are not necessarily ruining it for every visitor.** A similar finding was noticed in research on Icelandic wilderness tourism (see Sæþórsdóttir, Hall, Saarinen 2011). This can be seen, for example, in discussions with tourists about a possible Sherpa path to Plateau Mountain:

Researcher: "Would a stone-path there disturb you? Affect your experience on Svalbard?"

Tourist 1: "No, I don't think so. I mean, maybe on the contrary, it would prevent people from stepping all over the place, so maybe it would be good after all."

Tourist 2: "No. Why? There is a path there now as well, and it doesn't disturb me."

Tourist 3: "Not if it is made of stones, that's quite fitting. There are stones everywhere (laughing). And people walk up there, that's just how it is. It could be even more comfortable walking then."

As with other human traces seen or experienced on trips, most tourists are curious about their character, function, or history rather than disappointed or disturbed by their presence. However, **not all human presence and traces are accepted equally**. Acceptance is based on **aesthetics and other value-based reasoning**, as is seen in the tourists' reaction to some of the cultural heritage remains. A wooden plank remaining on the shore in Hiorthhamn, for example, was often commented on as "trash," "a mess," or simply "not nice to have around." A similar notion was also often given to wires or rusty metal objects. On the other hand, cabins, old mining buildings, and traps were considered an acceptable part of the environment. While both wires and buildings are from the legal and historical perspective the same category of cultural heritage, tourists differ between them based on aesthetics that make them meaningful and thus accepted (or not).

At times, the **perception of cultural heritage changed** after a guide told a story connected to the remains, as in the case of the shore in Hiorthhamn:

Tourist: "Why don't people clean up this mess?" (The tourist asked, looking at the old saw mill and the planks, wires, wood, and metal around.)

Guide: It's actually, some of it at least, cultural heritage. A reminder of the miners who lived here and worked up in the mine you see in the mountain. You can look at it as trash, but also as a free, open museum. If you look closely, there are quite interesting things. They sawed wood here for example, and the metal is from trails they used for transportation. There was around three kilometers of rail here.

Tourist: Alright, I see! That makes sense. So what were they transporting?

(Followed by discussion about Hiorthhamn history with increased interest and questions from the tourist.)

The reasoning also changes according to **knowledge of specific remains** and perception can be formed by guides. Wires are often not accepted not only because they are considered unpleasant to look at but also because the tourists at times hear stories about animals being caught in them and, consequentially, suffering or dying. **The aesthetics are then not only a product of vision but also of knowledge and education** (cf. Bourdieu 1984), and thus, their **perception can be transformed by the guide**.

The research suggests that for tourists, a pure, pristine wilderness is reflected as something that is in practice impossible or very hard to reach, access, and experience. The focus is rather on experience in a specific environment where human traces are accepted if they are reasoned to be practically necessary,

aesthetic, or (historically) valuable. However, the focus is also on reduction and limitation of human traces based on the aforementioned reasons.

Even though the perception of wilderness is in practice transforming, and the landscape tourists see on guided trips is full of human traces (be it cultural heritage, paths, footprints, antennas, etc.), **the environment of Svalbard is still perceived by many within the common meaning of wilderness.** As mentioned before, it is a consequence of the social construction of wilderness as untouched, untamed, pristine and pure land that significantly influences the perception of Svalbard's environment. This is illustrated by the experience of one tourist, Julia, who went dogsledding on a day trip:

Julia said she and her husband had been dogsledding and it was a great experience—very wild. She said they had been dogsledding in Finland as well, but “here it is more wild.” “So how was the dogsledding in Finland?” I asked her. “It was more structured, more prepared. The tracks were pre-made and there were three snow scooters around. There were no tracks here, it was bumpy ... it felt more like in the old days. More wild, you know? It was also more silent here without the scooters.”

When Julia was dogsledding in Finland, she also thought she was in the wilderness despite being on prepared tracks surrounded by scooters; however, she then came to Svalbard and realized Svalbard is “more wild.” Her realization was based on seeing and experiencing different human traces. While in Finland prepared tracks and scooters were part of the trip, on Svalbard the tracks were prepared in a less obvious manner (they were not plowed), and there were coal mining remains, wires lying around, and in general it looked and felt messier. Even though (past and present) coal mining significantly disturbs the environment, the remains were much less disturbing to the feeling of wilderness than plowed tracks and scooters. Again, part of the construction of Svalbard as pure and untouched land is neglecting the discontinuities and experiences contradictory to this construction. And again, aesthetics come into play. Although it is a complex bodily experience which shapes the experience with the environment, it is the visual sense of space which dominates (Urry and Macnaghten 1998). In a combination of knowledge and visual impressions, **historical human traces are more fitting in a nostalgia of the past** as it is already a sedimented activity, and as such, it leads to acceptable images where tourists are treading the same paths as countless earlier generations (cf. Urry and Macnaghten 1998). On the contrary, traces referring to current human activities are more likely to disturb the natural or already sedimented (and thus also in a sense natural) setting (ibid).

This example also shows that **wilderness is not only a construct or an idea but also a perspective.** It is a perspective through which we interpret surroundings and make sense of our surroundings. Importantly, part of the surroundings are not only mountains, animals, and different natural phenomena but also human traces such as cultural heritage, buildings, infrastructure, etc. Part of the surroundings are also local people, including guides who are included in these perspectives and

interpretations. If the Svalbard environment is perceived as a “remote” and “vast empty area,” as some tourists described it, then local people can describe it the following way:

You know, as I said, it’s like Alaska, it seems to me. Very remote, very life on the edge. There are lot of things to do but I mean, I think it would be hard to live here year-round. Either you are really involved with your work as a tour activity leader, or as a kind of escape, in this vacuum in a big emptiness. You lose the stimulation you normally get in a normal urban environment.

To live on Svalbard people have to be special, as they lose “the stimulation you *normally* get in a *normal* urban environment,” while living in a “big emptiness” (emphasis mine). This commentary illustrates the perception of wilderness in opposition to normality (civilization) but also one of the critical arguments against the notion of wilderness as an untouched place, pointing out the misunderstanding of local populations which are understood as homogenous (an inhabitant of Svalbard needs to be involved in nature-based activities) instead of diverse and complex (see box 2 on p. 11). As a consequence, being a guide is **seen as romantic and sublime**. Guides are seen as tough and extreme people living on the edge, on the periphery of civilization, almost like noble savages living in harmony with nature.

Given this as well as the role guides have in shaping a tourist’s perception of the Svalbard environment, it is interesting to see how the guides themselves perceive wilderness and the environment they work in.

As other research suggests, the guides are both producers and consumers of tourism images (Salazar 2010: 117). On Svalbard, imaginaries of wilderness circulate, and guides are both producers and consumers of them, so they are also part of the cultural environment producing the imaginaries of wilderness as pristine land. However, guiding not only produces the imaginaries of wilderness, **guiding also transforms the tourists’ perception**, from a place of untouched and pristine nature (which tourists come to see) to a complex and diverse environment where nature and culture are not separate. Through storytelling, showing and experiencing both the aesthetics and agency of nature, the details, the diversity, the facts about climate change, the plastics on the shore, and the cultural heritage, the tourists’ image of a pristine land is disturbed and transformed. In this context, it is interesting to look at not only the tourists’ perceptions of wilderness but also the guide’s perceptions of wilderness or the environment of Svalbard. The following section is therefore dedicated to the guides’ perceptions of wilderness.

## Guide perceptions of wilderness

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As it is with tourists, the common perception of wilderness as pristine and untouched land is for guides partly present, but as the data shows, **the wilderness perception is transforming**. For guides, the transformation is mostly a consequence of a **transition from “outsiders” to “insiders.”** This transition includes **(1) knowledge** about nature and Svalbard history and **(2) everyday routines** and familiarity with the place. For guides, the perception of Svalbard and **wilderness is partly transformed into the situation one is in**, a situation in nature where one has to rely on oneself.

When arriving on Svalbard, and shortly after arrival, most guides perceive Svalbard as untouched and pristine wilderness—quite similar to tourists. For example, when hiking to Barentsburg during Arctic Nature Guide study program or the first hike up to Nordenskiöldtoppen with a view over Isfjorden, the guides felt like they were in a wild, pristine land. After some time, this perception of wilderness was problematic. As the guides became more familiar with the place, they saw more and more marks of present or past human traces and their knowledge of Svalbard, its history, and nature increased. **What used to be considered wilderness is consequently transforming into a complex environment, a lot more diverse and heterogeneous than the common perception of wilderness.** This can be seen in the narratives of guides, such as the following one:

When I arrived here, I had no idea about Svalbard’s history. I had this idea that once you leave Longyearbyen it would be a virtual no man’s land and there wouldn’t be any cabins or anything, and it would be completely wild and untouched and so on. So yes, I was disappointed. I was disappointed that I came to places like Camp Morton and Kalypsebyen, and Texas Bar or whatever, and everywhere people have been doing something. And you see, ok, well, there aren’t any unclimbed mountains and there aren’t any white areas on the map. Like with so many things when you don’t know about them, you don’t care, but once you start to know more about things, you find them more interesting. So just by learning more about Svalbard history, I can appreciate cultural heritage more than I used to.

Many wilderness studies show that the concept is an outcome of the imaginations of “outsiders,” often ascribed to Western culture in opposition to indigenous people or urban residents in opposition to rural inhabitants (Callicot and Nelson 1998, Gómez-Pompa and Kaus 1990, Grant 1998). What is for the former untouched, pristine land, is for the latter, part of their everyday lives, a familiar place, home, and livelihood. It is far from untouched or pristine.

**The guide then goes through a transformation from outsider to insider**, including the routines of everyday life, after which many places become perceived as a complex environment rather than wilderness. The guides see various human traces, everything that is actually man-made or human-modified (be it the mine dump hill on the way to Sarkofagen or fossils in the ice cave), all the things that

an “outsider” does not have a chance to see. Last but not least is **the unromantic part of guiding and the role reality plays**: the lack of sleep during multiday trips or during high season, dealing with difficult tourists on a regular basis, and the stereotypes that guiding, as with any other job, bring after some length of time. The romantic notion of (working in) the wilderness disappears. As the data showed, for most of the guides, **the work is at least a combination of dealing with people and with nature**, and a considerable part of the perception of the profession was described quite variously as “work with people,” “physical work,” “work where I am tired at the end of the day,” “educational work,” and “mediation or facilitation of the nature experience.”

**However, it does not mean that the perception of wilderness as pristine land disappears completely. It partly remains in the guide’s perceptions of Svalbard’s environment.** As one of the guides said, they perceive Svalbard similarly to tourists:

Most people say it is so brutal and raw compared to any other places in the world. It’s a bit different, it is naked. And I think I often have the same impression... it’s the rawness and brutality of it and the difference. There are no big trees, no tall trees around here. It’s just the tundra and the mountain standing there by itself in a majestic kind of a way. I think my impression of the Svalbard landscape wilderness-wise is pretty much the same as people that enjoy it that come here.

This perception seems more common for guides who are in their first years of Svalbard residency or for guides who go further from Longyearbyen in their work. For most guides, this perception was a motivation to come to Svalbard and for many it is a motivation to stay on the archipelago.

Nevertheless, even more often, the wilderness was described as places guides travel to in their free time, such as ski trips on Svalbard pålångs or kayaking and canoeing in Canada.

What I draw as a line when I came up here was maybe to walk up Plateaufjellet and I felt like I was in the wilderness. But I think you push the line the more trips you do. ... Still, it feels like Svalbard is definitely wilderness, I’d say. There are a lot of places where you have to rely on yourself when you are on a trip. I guess that is also what is so appealing about the island. The wilderness is fairly close.

Not only do places perceived as wilderness move a bit further geographically and ideally, **wilderness is also perceived as an untouched place, and most importantly, it is a situation one is in when being out in nature.** Many guides described the wilderness as *a situation where one has to rely on oneself*.

Q: What do you think wilderness is?

G1: “If you feel it is not easy to get help—I cannot just communicate with my mobile phone, I cannot just get food if I need it from a supermarket—and you don’t see people and you don’t see tracks of people and you are a good distance away, then I think you can start talking about wilderness.”

G2: "For me it means a situation where you need to plan activities and rely on yourself. Not planned trips, relying on a situation where you can go back to town in one hour and, I don't know, go to a café and warm up or jump in a shower. You plan a trip without taking this into consideration. So that's wilderness for me."

The absence of human traces is not only important for a visual or sensory impression of the landscape but also for very practical reasons such as hard-to-obtain food resources, medical help, etc., where the basics become essential. Even though the Svalbard environment does not necessarily remain untouched and a pristine wilderness, it still is special, exotic, beautiful, and enjoyable in many of the intersections of human and natural history and presence it offers. And this applies to both the guides and the tourists.

## Summary

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The common imaginary of wilderness as unspoiled, pristine, untouched, and untamed land plays an important role in Svalbard tourism—in both public presentations of Svalbard as well as in tour marketing. While such images are a social **construct**, as such, it is a significant factor in **influencing the perception of the environment**, and it is also a **subject of negotiation and potential change**. As the experience of both tourists and guides suggest, the process of transforming wilderness perception, and thus the change in perception of Svalbard’s environment, is ongoing.

For tourists, **the perception of wilderness is partly transformed from untamed and pristine land into a nature-specific experience due to:**

- 1) spreading knowledge about climate change and the Anthropocene that disturbs the image of untouched nature;
- 2) practicalities that do (not) allow one to experience the “real” (i.e. truly untouched and pristine) wilderness; and
- 3) accepted presence of humans and human traces (infrastructure, artifacts, tracks, etc.) that show the history and presence of human activities on Svalbard.

The last point is, however, problematic, as not all humans and human traces are accepted equally. The acceptance of those is, again, based on aesthetics and other value-based reasoning. The reasoning also changes according to knowledge about specific remains, perceptions which can be formed by guides.

Due to the socially and historically embedded perception of wilderness as untamed and pristine land, a perception which is further reinforced through PR strategies and marketing, **wilderness becomes a perspective through which the environment of Svalbard is understood** and through which tourists make sense of it. Consequently, **the Svalbard environment is still partially perceived by many tourists (and some guides) as pure and untouched, regardless of human traces and presence.**

The transformation in the perception of wilderness is ongoing not only for tourists but also for guides. For guides, the perception of Svalbard and **wilderness is partly transformed into a situation in nature** where one has to rely on oneself. As the data shows, wilderness perception is changing mostly due to a transition from “outsiders” to “insiders,” which includes:

- 1) knowledge about the nature and history of Svalbard, and
- 2) everyday routines and familiarity with the place.

This change in perception has **consequences for the change of perception of guides’ work and working environment**, where the notion of wilderness is disappearing and the focus shifts from sublime landscapes to work with people and nature and to a facilitation of the nature experience.

Given that the guides' perception of wilderness is somewhat similar and different from the tourists' perception through being a guide, the common perception of wilderness is reproduced and also transformed. **Through guiding and experience in Svalbard's environment itself, the perception of wilderness is transformed for tourists** from a place of untouched and pristine nature (which tourists came to see) to a **complex and diverse environment** where nature and culture are not separate from each other.

The guides possess and pass on a more open and complex understanding of the Svalbard environment to tourists which contributes to a deeper knowledge of the environment in its diverse forms, including natural phenomena, culture, history, and relationships between diverse phenomena in the environment. Recent scientific findings suggest that the environment is an outcome of both human and natural influences which both form each other. As such, the concept of wilderness as untouched and pristine land is a rather simplistic perception. While the transformation of such perceptions is ongoing, the multiple character of wilderness perceptions can be an opening for opportunities in tour production and tourism management in general. From this point of view, it might be of importance to assess:

- 1) enhancing more open and complex understanding of the Svalbard environment in PR strategies, marketing, and general representations of Svalbard;**
- 2) enhancing diversity of awareness towards the complexity of the environment of Svalbard, both cultural and natural, in the past, present, and future;**
- 3) enhancing environmental education in tourism (including education of management, guides, and tourists)**

This would also possibly lead to more realistic expectations of tourists and thus build a base for creating appropriate, holistic, and complex relationships with Svalbard's environment, reflecting its natural and cultural phenomena.

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