

Management Plan for East Svalbard. Time for afterthought.

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As a Svalbard old-timer (51 years since first visit), and as former scientist and Director of Research at the Norwegian Polar Institute, I am a keen reader of Svalbardposten. The discussion papers on the East Svalbard Management Plans are interesting, such as Birger Amundsen's writings in defence of the local inhabitants' needs, and that which Gunnar Sand writes on behalf of UNIS. The letter from the many guides and expedition leaders in the last issue raises important questions regarding the introduction of reference areas for science (Zone A), and the writers are highly concerned at the prospect of the expansion of closed areas (Zone B).

I therefore donned my scientist-glasses to get an overview of the arguments in favour of reference areas. In one report from the Governor's working group on science and education, it says that the group is "... *not aware of any current or future negative impact on science from other local activities in the area, such as it takes place today. The fact that East Svalbard is a nature reserve in itself strongly regulates traffic in the area.*" The working group highlights Rjipfjorden as interesting and says it can be relevant to regulate the fjord against activities that might disturb the environment. It is mentioned that Nordaustlandet and Edgeøya might be important areas in studies related to climate and pollution as well as new and unknown problems. But there is not one word written which could justify setting apart half of Nordaustlandet and 2/3 of Edgeøya as reference areas. The working group, as also the group that has evaluated tourism, calls for a clear definition of the concept "reference area". This definition is still missing.

Disruption and environmental impact from tourists and other visitors are obvious motivations for introducing new traffic restrictions. Let us therefore take a look at what the Governor's working group on tourism says about this. In its report on cruise-related ship traffic in East Svalbard, it says: "*So far, no conflict area has been identified between the traffic taking place in the reserves and their purpose as reference areas for science. Scientists themselves have not identified such conflicts either. This speaks for a continuation of the management regime as it is today.*"

Further: "*Tourism such as it is carried out in the reserves leads to little risk and impacts negligible areas ... The working group finds that traffic as it is today and is expected to evolve will not lead to damage in the reserves in any foreseeable future, and hopes that the input given (here) may be taken into account as part of the fact-based management...*"

These are interesting statements, and they are confirmed in a report from the Polar Institute. After several years of camera surveillance of walrus haul-outs, the conclusion is clear: "*A quick scan of numerous cases of visits to the haul-outs indicates that we cannot find any effect of the tourist visits, at least not on the basis of the documentation we have to date.*"

The Norwegian Institute for Environmental Sciences (NINA) agrees. NINA report no. 316: "Environmental impact from traffic and tourism in the Arctic" shows that the effects of tourism have received much attention, but are "*quite negligible*" in comparison with the consequences of other activities, including research stations etc. The report concludes that: "*It seems to still be the case that the fear of negative impacts is greater than the collective knowledge about them...*" NINA refers to a UNEP study from 2007 that says that criticism of the polar tourism as an environmental offender "... *often is based more in views that in insight.*"

On this background, one can justify questioning the proposal to hugely expand traffic ban areas. A reading of the report "Evaluation of the vulnerability of 31 of the most visited sites in East Svalbard" is therefore most relevant. The group behind the report consisted of 6 members from the Governor and only one scientist (from NINA). The report contains only two literature references, but neither the working group's nor other relevant literatures' views are mentioned. The descriptions of sites in the report are not based on research and field studies, but rather on superficial visits and appear mere guesswork. If any of my students had handed in such work for evaluation, I had rejected it as failed.

The working group on tourism points out that organised tourism (i.e. expedition cruising) can contribute to increased environmental awareness. I can confirm this, as I have worked on cruise ships for some years. It has been a pleasure to share knowledge and experience with visitors who behave with care and show great respect for natural and cultural heritage. Thousands of cruise-ship visitors have over the years become good ambassadors for environmental and cultural protection in the Arctic. Even if most of the guides and expedition leaders are well qualified, there are of course - as in all sectors - a few "bad apples". Some guides drive their boats or snowmobiles recklessly, some do not respect the wildlife, and some overlook being careful around historical relics. But this can all easily be resolved through systematic and meticulous training, and by letting guide apprentices go through on-site training for a while before being authorized through an examination process. I have worked in wilderness management and nature conservation in Africa, Asia and Central America for years, placed where certification is more a rule than exception. This may be a fitting challenge for the Governor and the Directorate for Nature Management?

I have been in close contact with the administrative apparatus for more than 40 years, and have sat in countless committees and groups. I therefore now don my bureaucrat glasses when reading the minutes from meetings of the reference group for the management plan. This group has broad representation and is important in the process of creating new management regimes. But it seems that the reference group has not read and taken to heart the evaluations of the working groups – the arguments quoted above have been completely overlooked.

In direct contrast to them, the Polar Institute finds that greater areas should be closed "*... to safeguard these for current but not least future research needs*". There is no research data to back these claims. The reference group also does not seem to have cared to make the effort to acquaint itself with the relevant literature. It is purely the poor work behind the report on the evaluation of 31 sites that is used as the basis for the latest version of the management plan. That leads to new cycles of guesswork, resulting in an even poorer conclusion.

Both professional arguments and common sense dictate that there is no need for such comprehensive reference areas as suggested. And areas with traffic bans can be reduced considerably – site-specific guidelines are adequate. But with my experience of the labyrinths of bureaucracy, I fear that this process has gone so far already, so that involved directorates and other institutions will not give, because of their fear of losing prestige and losing face. I never the less appeal to them by reminding them of an important rule of the outdoors: There is no shame in turning back. One step in the right direction could be for the Governor to invite all for an open hearing in Longyearbyen, where scientists and administrators explain their views openly, and where all interested parties can contribute towards a better understanding and potential consensus.