

## 25 **MOVING ABOUT: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO LANDSCAPE RESEARCH**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

From the end of the Second World War and up to the present day, a major change in agricultural practise has taken place throughout Europe. Urbanisation as well as specialisation and mechanisation in farming have led to dramatic landscape changes in most European countries. In Norway, and especially along the west coast, one of the most significant changes has been afforestation of pasture, and natural regrowth of native woodland in previously grazed areas. This loss of pasture and open hill land is lamented in both agricultural and tourism circles, but has also led to a change in how farmers perceive and value their land. The following paper will present a qualitative method of researching unquantifiable aspects like perceptions and values.

### **BRIEF HISTORY OF AGRICULTURAL CHANGE**

A fundamental change took place in the 1950s, when chemical fertilizer was introduced to agriculture. This change affected not only farming practices, but also the agricultural landscape of Norway. In former times, farmers had to maintain a balance between the number of animals they could keep and the acres of arable land they could manage to fertilize with manure. However, when farmers could buy chemically produced fertilizer they could free themselves from animal husbandry and manure altogether if they wished. Farms could be run without animals at all, and farmers could focus their production practices to a greater extent than before. (Almås, 2002)

Norwegian farms were divided between those relying on animal husbandry and those producing grains, and agricultural policy encouraged this specialization. One of the main characteristics of Norwegian post-war agricultural policies was regional specialization, or “canalisation politics”, as it was called. Small crofts or farms along the coast and in the mountainous areas were encouraged to solely specialize in animal husbandry, and farms situated in the good agricultural soil of Eastern and Middle Norway were given subsidies to produce grains rather than milk and meat (Emmelin *et al.*, 1990). As the general agricultural competition and quality/quantity demands grew, farmers could not compete by simply letting their cattle graze in summer and feed them hay during winter. Small-scale farms holding dairy cattle had to purchase high protein fodder made with grain from East or Mid-Norway, or even fodder imported from abroad. The hill land previously grazed intensively became less important. During the

last 50 years, the utilization of non-arable grazing or hill-land in Norway has been reduced to as much as 70 %. (Almås, 2002; Skjevdaal, 1991)

### **CASE STUDY OF SMØRÅS-FJELL: CULTURAL LANDSCAPES AND RECREATION**

On the west coast of Norway, in the Bergen municipality, there is a hill that used to be grazed. It isn't big, only about 800 hectares. The hill has as much as 43% productive forest, of which 61% is Sitka spruce, 22 % Contorta Pine, 14 % Broadleaves, and 3 % juniper and brush wood. The remaining 57 % is mainly pasture, rough grazing and heather (Gundersen, 2001).

The average farm size is only 20 ha. Two generations ago there was hardly a tree - the hill was all rough grazing or pasture for sheep and dairy cattle. The hill was still in parts common, if not on the deeds than still in people's minds. Because farmers did not need as much grazing as before, due to high protein fodder, the hills' grazing became less important. In the 50s and 60s the farmers were encouraged to plant the hill with Sitka spruce or Contorta pine. Expectations of high timber prices in the future, coupled with a general rise in living standards and ideas of a life with less toil than dairy farming gave, encouraged many farmers to afforest. Those who didn't plant whole blocks would at least plant a row or two of spruce as a windbreak or shelter for their livestock. After a while, all the farmers but three gave up animal husbandry altogether and started working outside the farm. Because most farmers in the area gave up farming, the whole landscape changed. Uninvited woodland, mainly consisting of broadleaves, took over the hill.

“It's all covered in trees again. Nature has taken it back because it has been left ungrazed, untilled. To set aside. So it is growing over, being reclaimed by nature....and this development is happening all over Fana now. I grew up when farmers would win prizes for keeping their land in good condition.... It's sad. It's depressing. That's what it is. I blame the council and government. Us farmers – aren't given any respect any longer. We are treated as if we have no rights, like things you can throw away. After the war, when they [the non-farming community/the local municipality] felt hunger, well, they valued us then. But now, we're worth damned little” (Author's translation of interview with a farmer from Smørås).<sup>1</sup>

The bitterness conveyed by the farmer quoted above is general among the oldest generation of farmers or landowners in the area. Small-scale farming or even forestry is not viable any more. Timber prices are so low that no small-scale farmer in his right mind would bother to cut the few good trees he has. Meanwhile the trees have grown taller, and many good pastures have been left for the deer to graze. Most of the farmers or landowners deeply regret planting the trees in the first place, as they in retrospect

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<sup>1</sup> Transcriptions of all interviews are archived at SUM, University of Oslo.

regard it as a waste of time and money, as well as both a visible and perhaps a little painful sign of time passing and values changing.

The suburban population outside Bergen really cherishes this hill for recreational purposes. Volunteers have spent their evenings clearing paths and bridging bogs, mostly with the landowners' permission. The local forestry office has noticed the high recreational value that this hill has, whilst watching the trees mature. Norwegian law says you are not allowed to own a farm without actually running it, both its arable land and its forest, even if the farm is so small that it is impossible to maintain a living from it today. In 2000 the forestry research centre in Bergen carried out a pilot-project on behalf of the County governor, to investigate the recreational aspects of this hill. (Gundersen, 2001) What kind of hill would the strolling public want in the future? What kind of trees, what kind of paths? The questions were manifold. The farmers or landowners were not asked to participate in the study. Against this pilot study, the County governors' forestry office decided to act. They planned a forestry road that would give forestry machinery access to all the mature blocks of spruce, while at the same time dimensioning it and placing it in the terrain so that it would be suitable for recreational purposes. This way the local farmers and the municipality could share the expenses, and it could perhaps be given some financial assistance from the volunteers. So they planned the road, drew the maps, and started knocking on farmers' doors. They got absolutely nowhere.

Now this is where the story changes from being a story and goes on to become the description of a methodology of landscape research. Incidentally, I was conducting fieldwork in this area for the project "Rural Landscape Perceptions in Norway and in Scotland", and assumed that an agricultural area just outside a city would be a good point of departure. When planning this fieldwork, I was collaborating with the forestry research centre outside Bergen. On hearing about the research method, which will be described in detail later, they gave warnings of the difficulty of getting to talk to any of the farmers or landowners, as they seemingly were not very cooperative.

So I was knocking on farmers' or landowners' doors, or phoning them up, setting up interviews. Initially their response was scepticism, since most of them assumed the advances represented either the forestry office or the local government, both of whom they were reluctant to talk to. However, when the landowners or farmers were explained that this research was investigating the changes in land-use that had taken place after the wars, most of them were less reluctant to talk. During the interviews, what had actually taken place between the forestry official and the farmers also evolved. The forestry official had knocked on their doors or phoned them up, showed them the planning map and told them which parts of their land and the road would affect their forest. When they questioned the idea of a road which could not even be paid for by the timber it was built to transport, he explained that by law they should manage their forest, and letting a forest grow past maturity was not considered good management. Most of the farmers grew hostile to the law, to the forestry official, and to the whole plan of a road. Thus the

fairly good idea of a road, which could be used for both recreational purposes and timber extraction, has been left to rest for the time being.

## **ORAL HISTORY AND PHENOMENOLOGY AS A SOURCE FOR LANDSCAPE STUDIES**

According to the renowned historian Peter Burke, “historians are concerned with memory as a historical phenomenon (...) [or] the social history of remembering. Given the fact that the social memory, like the individual memory, is selective, we need to identify the principles of selection and to note how they vary from place to place or from one group to another and how they change over time. Memories are malleable, and we need to understand how they are shaped and by whom, as well as the limits to this malleability.” (Burke, 1997: 46)

Bearing this in mind, is the ethnographic method used while moving about with the informants a suitable tool to focus on questions related to land-use, and do the local rural population use the landscape as a dictionary of memories? I believe it is and that they do. Because it is through our body we understand and experience our environment and through our body we experience time and space (Merleau-Ponty, 1994: 96), an ethnographic phenomenological approach can be an appropriate methodological tool to investigate values related to landscapes, both in the past and in the present. Through movement in the landscape, certain elements are left out or ignored while others are considered important (Tilley, 1994: 27). Some places evoke memories of personal importance to us, whilst other places contain the social memory of a whole generation. Any setting can become a symbol of personal and group identity through sufficient familiarity and propinquity. “Through extensive interaction with a place, people begin to define themselves in terms of their relationships with and residence in that place, to the extent that they cannot really express who they are without inevitably taking into account the setting which surrounds them as well.” (Ryden, 1993: 76). Moreover, when people have a close physical and psychological relationship with the landscape, the landscape can act as a trigger for narration. Different places within the landscape can act as an arena for different individuals’ repertoire of stories, or in other words, as triggers for oral history (Syse, 2000: 83). The environment is so important for memory that it has been used to re-invent, or even deliberately make people forget their history. According to Levi-Strauss, Christian missionaries in Brazil were aware of the links between memories and space, and used this as a tool to convert the Indians. The Indians were moved from their villages where houses were arranged in a circle, to new villages where the houses were arranged in rows, thus wiping the slate of memory clean and preparing the Indians for the new Christian message (Levi-Strauss, 1955: 220-1).

In the case study of Smøråsfjell, sketched above, one could ask why all these farmers, with somewhat preconceived ideas about urban people, academics and planning officials, still chose to spend so much of their time, thoughts and ideas talking to a researcher. Perhaps because the interviews were conducted in the farmers own domain -

their landscape. Not their landscape drawn out on a planning map or verbalized on a questionnaire, but in the landscape itself.

The oral history of a particular landscape can be gathered by joining informants interactively within their landscape while using audio-visual equipment and techniques. By experiencing the landscape with those who have a working relationship with it one learns things about the landscape, but at the same time one learns things about the individual. It is essential to develop an understanding of the relationship between the people who work in these landscapes and the factors that have manifested physical change. Results from previous projects indicated that rural dwellers had an accurate sense of memory regarding concrete physical change in their near surroundings, because they or their families were directly affected by the change (Syse, 2000).

Breaking down the theory into practice, the method of gathering information is as follows. Initially, one conducts a lifecourse interview with each informant. This is done to try to get to know the informants' life history as a basis for further questioning. It helps one understand utterances given spontaneously regarding other matters. Most of the recordings will contain a lifecourse interview followed by questions regarding rural affairs. The interviews are not always formal interviews with the same set of questions given to all the informants, and are in some cases more like informal conversations. Topics like farming, local government, biodiversity, and rural tourism are discussed. Governmental agencies and their policies are also discussed.

The interviews are then followed up by walking in the informants' working landscape, and recording them while walking. The audiovisual equipment needed is a voice recorder and a digital camera. The informants themselves choose where they wish to walk, and what they wish to talk about. Utterances are recorded on the spot, and with the assistance of a map or a GPS the places in the landscape where things were uttered are marked down. The source material can also contain photographs of informants in their homes, their landscapes, and things or places the informants have emphasized during the meetings. (Note the use of a voice recorder and a still camera rather than a video camera. Former experiences show that fiddling too much with hi-tech equipment makes the informants feel self-conscious and somewhat less comfortable with the situation. Also, focusing on what the informants are saying, and seeing things through one's own eyes rather than stumbling around with a video camera seem to work better.) After having walked around in the farmers working landscape, the material is transcribed and categorised by where in the landscape we are, which topics the informants choose to talk about, and the chronology in their stories, to the extent possible. The interpretation and analysis of words and actions takes place both at the researchers' desk and in the landscape. If one has further enquiries, the informants can be asked to return to the location to clarify matters. This way of entering, leaving and returning to a field-working area is a significant part of the method used for interpreting changes in land-use and values embedded in landscapes. By using oral history in this way, it can be possible to reach an understanding of several problems related to

landscape research, or, as in the case-study roughly sketched above, of how the development from an utilitarian production landscape, involving livestock and forestry, to a recreational landscape, involving walking or rambling, has changed both the landscape itself and the "man" in the landscape.

### **ETHNOLOGY IN PRACTICAL LANDSCAPE RESEARCH**

On this note, and with multidisciplinary readers in mind, it might be advisable to explain what an ethnologist or a cultural historian is. Ethnology is history from below, and history which often has its focus and starting point on the individuals, in a local setting, and with the focus on their everyday life. Moreover, understanding individual people is important. If landscape history is the story of the cultivation and development of a certain landscape, then understanding the people who have worked and shaped these landscapes must be a key to reading the landscapes themselves. Ordinary people rarely leave behind the kind of documentation on which historians rely. By recording the memories of ordinary people, groups of people who have previously been considered too unimportant to be seen as feasible subjects for historical study, or even feasible subjects to involve in local planning, are given a voice (Counce, 1994: 8).

If one takes the time to try to understand people's history, and the stories that they tell in the landscape, the results can be very rewarding. Not only as regards cultural history studies but also as a tool for local decisions makers. For instance, due to the lack of success regarding the forestry road referred to above, any comments given by farmers while walking about regarding this issue were taken heed of. In fact, the majority of them were not against the road *per se*, but they resented the way the road had been presented to them as a finished plan. They also resented the forestry's lack of local knowledge when planning the road. Bits of it were placed in areas of personal value to them, like a particularly beautiful place where they remember they used to milk the cows or which they remembered as the spot they would rest and eat their lunch when shepherding. Its beauty would strike anyone walking here, but this feature cannot be seen on a map, or even conveyed on a photo. One has to actually step out of the office and walk up the hill. Mapping land is a way of bringing the landscape into the office of planners and academics, and naturally a map big enough to take absolutely everything into account would be cumbersome and expensive to use for most purposes. Even so, stories and places like the ones described function as anchor points for local and personal history. If some of these stories and places were taken into account, and the farmers themselves had been involved in the planning process, the recreational aspects of the proposed road might have been enriched. Some of the important stories or significant places could have been explained through signs or leaflets, thereby introducing the relatively newly arrived suburbanites to the local history of the area. With regard to the Sitka spruce, all the farmers but one really wanted to get rid of them, and felt they or their fathers had been tricked into becoming mini-scale foresters. The farmer who wanted to keep his forest also wanted to harvest it and replant it, so he was

not really a problem to the forestry office in any case. In fact, some Norwegian municipalities in Hordaland are considering removing unsuccessful Sitka plantations on the local council's or the state's expense.<sup>2</sup> So perhaps the local farmers themselves ought to be asked whether they regard their particular blocks of Sitka spruce successful or not, and, if not, perhaps the forestry road might only be used to extract one rotation of commercial trees and that one ought to let the natural regeneration of birch, rowan, aspen and willows dress the old pastures. And perhaps local authorities like the one I have described will change their planning and decision making methods, because good results in local planning are easier to achieve if one plays on the same team as the people one is trying to plan for.

By walking about with people, you learn to listen to the stories embedded in the landscape. These stories can in many cases both answer unasked questions, and add to the aspects which ought to be considered; thus assisting planners and decision makers to look up from the map, and involve local values and social memory in plans related to land use.

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<sup>2</sup> According to interview of 27.11.2003 with Ole Bakkebø, director of Agriculture and Forestry, Hordaland County Governor.

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