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Outdoor life, nature experience, and sports in Norway: tensions and dilemmas in the preservation and use of urban forest

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ABSTRACT

How should contemporary societies promote physical activity in nature and preservation of the natural environment? Outdoor life occupies a central and contested position on this question in the Nordic countries. In Norway, a 1957 Act of Parliament took a major step by guaranteeing free public access to both public and private uncultivated land. This article explores the media debate that raged in 2008–2009, when the national government proposed new legislation intended to promote outdoor life, sport, nature experience and urban forest preservation around Oslo, Norway's capital. Applying narrative and discourse methodologies, this case study reveals how the media debate evolved from an initial cacophony of voices into a schism between advocates of nature preservation and advocates of sport. The controversy explored here is increasingly relevant throughout all of Europe: how to encourage urban active living, sustainable recreation and democratic citizenship that embody distinct social practices, identities, emotional bonds and symbolic meaning.

Introduction

Throughout the Nordic countries and Europe, efforts to encourage active living and well-being through promotion of outdoor recreation, whilst sustaining the natural environment have become increasingly contentious. On 1 September 2009, an Act of Parliament took effect in greater Oslo, the region around Norway's capital, that was intended to promote public outdoor recreation and at the same time to protect its urban forests – locally known as *Marka*, from urbanization. Geographically, *Marka* consists of approximately 1700 km² of woodland. Legally, the land belongs to 19 municipalities and about 2000 private landowners. Of the 70% that is privately owned, two-thirds belongs to a single proprietor.

The legislation, known as *Markaloven* [the *Marka* law], was intended to 'encourage and accommodate outdoor life, experiences in nature [*naturopplevelse*] and sport [*idrett*], and

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to preserve the rich and varied natural landscape, including physical cultural features' (Ministry of Environment 2009a, §1). In presenting the proposed Act at a public hearing in December 2008, the Minister of Environment described it as 'a gift to Oslo's citizens', and promised that it would 'ensure that skiing, angling and camping would be an integral part of city life' in perpetuity (*Aftenposten Aften*, 9 December 2008). 'In generations to come', the Minister declared, the Act would ensure that inhabitants have 'access to invaluable experiences of nature in their neighbourhoods ... [and] provide enormous benefits to people's well-being and health, and to children's development' (*Aftenposten Aften*, 28 April 2009).

The legislation illustrates the extent to which *friluftsliv* is a core political, social and cultural value in Norway, rooted in the democratic principle of free public access to uncultivated public and private land. This access has been guaranteed for the past 60 years, under a 1957 Act of Parliament. The concept of *friluftsliv* has a prominent role in all three Scandinavian countries (Norway, Sweden and Denmark), as well as in Finland and Iceland, except for comprehensively cultivated Denmark, guarantee free public access (Emmelin et al. 2010).

In the early 1970s, the Norwegian Ministry of the Environment formally defined *friluftsliv* as 'physical activity in open spaces during leisure time to experience diverse natural environments and foster experiences of nature' (2000, 9). Elements of *friluftsliv*, in particular hiking and (sport) skiing, have enjoyed a prominent position in Norwegian national culture since the turn of the nineteenth century (Goksøyr 1994). Ever since, Norwegian discourse has consistently asserted that *friluftsliv* and sport refer to different 'worlds' (Eichberg and Loland 2010). As we shall see, this distinction, always disputed, has profound consequences to this day. Whilst the Ministry of Culture governs sport, *friluftsliv* is under the purview of the Ministry of Climate and Environment. The 'two worlds' are also organized in different associations and national federations. When the government proposed *Markaloven*, these two worlds collided. Was this legislation 'a gift to Oslo's citizens', as the Minister of Environment declared? Not all Oslo citizens agreed.

Researchers have found that the uses of urban green space for recreation and sport are influenced by widely differing social and cultural values (Brown 2014; Flemsæter, Setten, and Brown 2014; Macnaghten and Urry 1998). For example, people in western countries and of European descent tend to favour physically active forms of recreation performed in minimally managed environments such as 'first growth' urban forests that convey an image of 'authentic naturalness' (Özgüner 2011). Moreover, politicians in the Nordic countries and globally consider increased public participation in outdoor recreation cultures to be vital to meeting policy imperatives of health, well-being and environmental citizenship (Ministry of Health and Care 2015; WHO 2010). Participation is indeed increasing, but it has been accompanied by new tensions. The transformation of contemporary outdoor recreation cultures based on new technologies and activities, such as modern skiing on groomed trails, snowboarding, adventure races and trail-biking, often results in discursively contested moral values, identities and practices, as well as spatial conflicts (Brown 2014; Flemsæter, Setten, and Brown 2014). In addition, increasing urban outdoor recreation facilitation may have negative consequences, such as erosion, loss of biodiversity and fragmentation of habitats that threaten the lives of animals and plants (European Environmental Agency 2010).

Markaloven represented a new type of environmental law that its framers hoped would meet the needs and interests of a wide range of citizens. Together with a Swedish establishment of a national urban park (Schantz 2006), *Markaloven* represents a significant Nordic contribution to global efforts to create sustainable urban outdoor recreational opportunities. Although the law applies only to Oslo and its surrounding region, *Markaloven* has transnational relevance. The emotional public debate that the legislation generated sheds light on principles and challenges regarding multi-functional spatial usage and democracy that are influencing urban natural landscape management and recreational use in many countries (see e.g. Antrop 2004; Heintzman 2007).

In the sections that follow, we will begin with a brief account of the historical and socio-political background of *Markaloven*. We will then apply narrative and discourse methodologies to scrutinize dilemmas, tensions and transformations that ensued in 2008–2009, when the proposed legislation provoked a media storm that quickly evolved from a cacophony of individual and group-based voices into a polarized debate between supporters of nature preservation and sport (development) enthusiasts.

Theoretical perspectives and historical background

Narrative and discourse analyses

We have conceptualized the plethora of mediated voices as personal narratives, and as a storied presentation of themes and interests. Narrative refers to how individuals and groups present themselves by organizing and communicating experiences consisting of incidents and identifiable stakeholders (Svarstad 2009). Discourse analysis concentrates on the norms and power structures that underlie those expressions (Fairclough 2003). The discursive premises that influenced the narratives of the various stakeholders described here were the discourses on health, nature preservation, national identity and historical conceptions of the Marka outlined at the beginning of this article.

Bourdieu (1991) has illuminated the narrative–discourse relationship through his argument that communication in social fields seeks to construct, transform and potentially enforce distinct embodied social patterns. Invoking the term *symbolic power*, he describes how acquisition and communication of knowledge through narratives and metaphors can function as a concealed form of compulsion: People may believe and confirm distinct perceptions of reality as ‘truth’, even though neither the individuals who exercise symbolic power nor those influenced by it are necessarily aware that they are supporting specific power structures. The narrative/discourse relationship offers a fruitful approach for studying how people creatively construct narratives used in normative social discourse. Most importantly, this approach highlights exchanges of power, in which the mediated narratives of individuals or groups discursively cement preferred understandings. When stakeholders obtain discursive legitimacy, other individuals and groups are compelled to relate to the understandings these stakeholders have established. Preferably, the study of a narrative/discourse relationship includes an analysis of language and texts; it may also include bodily actions and visual elements, such as the ways in which newspapers use photographs, cover pages, fonts and depictions of bodily practices. We would argue that the narratives created during the public *Markaloven* debate not only show how actors thought about and represented their cause, they reflect the social positions and affiliations of these actors.

Friluftsliv and nature sports as discursive fields

When the *Markaloven* proposal was introduced to the public in 2007, most stakeholders, including municipalities and nature preservation and outdoor organizations, as well as the political parties in the governing majority coalition, initially supported it. *Aftenposten*, Norway's most prominent newspaper (though Oslo-based), characterized it in a lead article as a 'prudent measure' (*Aftenposten Aften*, 26 June 2007). However, over the next two years, *Aftenposten* in particular and other media sporadically became moderators of an intense and escalating public debate as the law went through three iterations: the draft presented for a public hearing, the legislative proposal and the final law (Ministry of Environment 2007, 2008, 2009a).

The level of passion and public engagement that the debate generated illustrate how *friluftsliv* can be conceptualized as a 'discursive field' and central in symbolic battles over notions of nature and cultural identity to which many relate and contribute. The dissonance of voices was embodied in four major discourses: nature preservation, nature experience, *friluftsliv* and sport (Gurholt and Broch 2011). Although *friluftsliv* occupies a central historic and cultural position in Norway, both symbolically and in practice, the virtues attributed to it range widely. Various supporters have cited moral values, ecology and environmental friendly actions, nature experience and spirituality, the good life and cultural identity (Pedersen 1999). A bit of historical background will provide a clearer sense of its significance in Norway.

In the 1880s, a wealthy merchant who was one of the founding fathers of the Norwegian Tourist Association (established in 1868), made a 'testamentary gift' to the public. In presenting the top of the Tryvann, the merchant declared the area for the 'future of outdoor life'. Since then, private and municipal entities have expanded on his 'gift' by adding a variety of amenities, including cabins, maps and marked trails for hikers and skiers. Perhaps, the most important enhancement has been the tram. The private/public initiative opened in 1898 gave Oslo's inhabitants access to Tryvann, Holmenkollen ski-jump arena, fresh air, the natural beauty of the woodlands and a view overlooking the city. In 1936, several newly established outdoor life and sport associations founded a political body – *Oslomarka friluftsråd* (later Oslo og Omland Friluftsråd, OOF), to ensure the 'permanent protection of Marka' as 'a nature park' and 'the people's healthy home' (OOF 1937, 5, 8).

Over time, Marka has been under the purview of agencies concerned with farming, logging, and the growing city's water supply. Since the 1970s, the municipality of Oslo has limited commercial development in 'its' parts of Marka, to meet the recreational needs of the growing population of the greater capital region – currently, about 1.2 million inhabitants, nearly 20% of all Norwegians. Among its other initiatives, OOF drew a 'black line' on the map – *Markagrensen* [the Marka border] – in an effort to establish a practical and mental border between the city and the forests in which privatization, urbanization and fragmentation would be prohibited and public access and recreational roaming would be promoted (OOF 1937, 10). The boundaries of the Marka were less controversial. The fierce debate arose around what would be permitted within them.

The debate is joined

Friluftsliv is considered as an egalitarian feature of Norwegian culture, promoted by a state policy of '*friluftsliv* for all' and the democratic principle of free public access to all uncultivated land (Gurholt 2016; Ministry of Climate and Environment 2016). The *friluftsliv* legislation guarantees three public rights: to roam the countryside; to camp temporarily overnight; and to forage for wild foods such as berries, mushrooms and fish, with minor restrictions. These three rights are derived from Norwegian traditions of living off the land, and from political efforts to promote a good life of health and well-being for all, to counteract negative consequences of the rapid urbanization and industrialization that began in the early twentieth century. It should be noted, that the popularity of *friluftsliv* activities and perspectives on its moral values, identities and worldviews, vary according to social class, gender, and age (Breivik 2013; Statistics Norway 2012).

The legislative process leading to *Markaloven* originated in the 2005 founding declaration of the parliamentary majority coalition, comprised of the Norwegian Labour party, the Socialist Left party and the Centre party. This declaration, named after *Soria Moria*, a mythical and faraway glittering mountain castle well-known from Norwegian fairy tales, included a commitment to legislative protection for 'the forests surrounding Oslo' (Office of the Prime Minister 2005). The intention was to safeguard the country's most visited recreational area, and to establish a template for similar projects in urban centres throughout the country.

Intriguingly, an earlier Labour-led government had presented similar legislation in the spring of 1981. A few months later, the government's own committee on communal and environmental affairs withdrew the proposal, apparently out of fear that the legislation could lead to Labour's defeat in an upcoming national election (Gangdal 2011). The principal resistance to the proposal came from the loggers' association. By 2005, the prime minister was ready to push ahead. He declared that the coalition government was 'serious' about passing a law, noting that he had the necessary majority to win parliamentary approval. When presenting the first draft at a June 2007 public hearing, he personally endorsed it, declaring that the law's principal objectives were 'to protect a rich and varied cultural landscape and pristine nature throughout *Marka* and to designate areas of special value for outdoor life, experience of nature and sport' (Ministry of Environment 2007).

In the months that followed, public debate on the law remained sporadic. The Oslo Sport Council argued that the law's 'most contentious points [...] (appear) in relation to sport' (*Aftenposten Aften*, 07 September 2007). The Conservative party Mayor of Oslo voiced support for 'saving the greenbelt of woodlands surrounding Oslo' without 'abolishing the authority of local democratic bodies' (*Aftenposten Aften*, 19 July 2007). Other Conservative party leaders expressed concern that the law would inhibit expansion of Tryvann Winter Park, Oslo's main commercial ski area. The Association for the Promotion of Skiing [*Skiforeningen*] expressed concern that a restrictive law would hinder the association's efforts to increase maintenance and development of the city's 2600 km of groomed, open-access ski trails.

When the Minister of Environment presented the legislative proposal in December 2008, he declared that the Act would 'protect *Marka* from expanding urban infrastructure', whilst 'promoting outdoor life and fostering appreciation of nature in *Marka*' (*Aftenposten Aften*, 19 December 2008). The minister also emphasized the need to foster 'activity and acceptance of diverse recreational use of *Marka*' by balancing two commitments: 'Our starting point

is that we must ensure that future generations can enjoy Marka's benefits ... we are also protecting it by encouraging people to use it'.

Although the objectives of the draft law presented at the June 2007 hearing promoted outdoor life, appreciation of nature and sport in equal measure, the Ministry of Environment's subsequent amendments, added in 2008, diminished the role of sport. When the parliamentary proposal was issued, it promised only to promote sport 'that naturally belong to Marka' (Ministry of Environment 2008). The Minister of the Environment emphasized that his ministry 'obviously [would] address details affecting local democracy' (*Aftenposten Aften*, 19 December 2008), but specified that the law would impose stricter, more comprehensive protection and management. The proposal submitted to Parliament also included a ban on construction of buildings for agricultural purposes. Although that iteration stipulated that the existing forestry management system would continue, it stipulated that unique areas such as 'old growth 'unspoiled fairy-tale' forests' would receive special protection.

As anticipated, Labour-governed municipalities and the regional council for outdoor life OOF supported the proposal submitted to Parliament. The regional Society for the Conservation of Nature (NOA), a member of the OOF, declared its disappointment with the proposal as written, expressing a hope that the legislation would ensure that as 'many people as possible are able to use *Marka, the way it is*' (*Aftenposten Aften*, 27 January 2009, authors' italics). Other stakeholders voiced stronger criticisms. The Conservative party and the populist Progress party reiterated their objection to the law's provisions that banned further construction of sport facilities in Marka. The largest proprietor there, who was also a resident, maintained that the law would be counterproductive, inhibiting public access. When introducing the legislation, the Minister of Environment did not discuss these objections or specific issues, such as the expansion plans for Tryvann Winter Park. Instead, he declared the submission of *Markaloven* to Parliament 'this most joyful of all days, a day like Norway's Independence Day' (*Aftenposten Aften*, 19 December 2008). 'The most essential thing', he continued, 'is the long-term perspective', meaning the law would protect Marka in perpetuity and register its permanent borders on digital maps (Ministry of Environment 2009b).

Throughout the spring of 2009, a bitter, emotional and symbolic debate raged in the media prior to the anticipated parliamentary vote. *Aftenposten's* editorial director later recalled that he was 'bombarded with letters to the editor' and 'had seldom previously experienced such a magnitude of response' (*Aftenposten*, 31 March 2009). During the month of March 2009, when the debate reached its peak, *Aftenposten* alone published 100 news and debate articles on the proposed legislation. Participants included journalists, skiers, residents in Marka, environmentalists and politicians.

Media analysis

From the time *Markaloven's* initial draft was released in June 2007 to its enactment on 1 September 2009, Norwegian newspapers printed 241 news, feature articles and letters from the readers debating its provisions. Our initial analysis identified six constituencies that clearly opposed the law: agriculture, forestry, residents of Marka, sport enthusiasts (Association for the Promotion of Skiing, Oslo Sport Council, Norwegian Snowboard Association), Tryvann Winter Park commercial interests and politicians belonging to the opposition parties – Christian Democrats, Conservatives and Populist Progress (Gurholt and Broch 2011).

Our second step of analysis concentrated on the intensive period of public debate, between January and September 2009, in which we identified 182 published articles containing the views of 259 individuals/groups. We coded these articles according to whether they expressed a negative, sceptical, positive or neutral attitude to the proposed *Markaloven*. This analysis revealed an apparently balanced representation of positive/neutral versus negative/sceptical viewpoints. Our third step was a detailed review of the journalistic positioning of the articles during an even more intense stage of debate, February–April 2009. During this period, the newspapers published 148 news and feature articles – 9 in February, 142 in March and 29 in April, most of them appearing in *Aftenposten*. Our analysis identified a striking change: Although the number of positive and negative pieces remained balanced on the opinion pages, negative/sceptical voices clearly predominated in the articles on the news pages. These articles were often longer, included more photographs and were written primarily by journalists. As such, readers may have regarded them as more informed and objective than the contributions to the debate by individuals and interest groups that appeared in columns and letters to the editor published on the opinion pages (Allern 2001). The latter were explicitly representations of subjective meanings. Further, our analysis of the use of front-page stories, editorials, headlines, fonts, pictures and emotionally laden metaphors during the spring 2009 media debate clearly showed that negative and sceptical voices were dominant. This bias was evident in the coverage by *Aftenposten*, which had praised the initial draft of the proposed law but exhibited a strong bias against the next iteration.

The methodology included thematic analysis, coding and category building (Riessman 2008). Constructions of narratives were studied as situational, symbolic and dynamic formations of meaning that draw on broadly available discourses, providing the actors with background representations to be amended for use in various situations. In interpreting the ongoing alternation between narratives, levels of discourse and contextual referencing, the researchers relied on a hermeneutic process (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). During the second and third phases of analysis, each of the newspaper articles was analysed both individually and as part of the entire public debate and law-forming process. The analysis encompassed themes, interests, positions and arguments that shaped and transformed the media debate. All of the citations in this paper come from *Aftenposten*, where coverage of the issue was most extensive and continuous throughout the period of formative power.

In the following narrative summary, we present the results of our study. They show how media presentations simplified and distorted the debate, driving the political discourse and process in a particular direction and ultimately influencing *Markaloven's* final text.

Multi-vocal emotions and provocations in the media

A condensed storyline

In the period up to New Year's 2009, newspapers published articles occasionally voiced the scepticism of various individuals and groups towards the legislative proposal. The resulting impression was of a growing but as yet unfocused public debate. This polyphonic period quickly dissipated after *Aftenposten* published a front-page letter to the editor written by 'a pensioned Olympic skier' with an accompanying photograph that showed him skiing in the Marka. In his letter, he charged that the law would turn the forests into 'a nature reserve for wolves [...] devoid of people' (*Aftenposten Aften*, 8 March 2009). Abruptly, the debate

became an ‘uproar in the media.’ The former Olympic champion’s assertion generated a wave of letters to the editor; its symbolic power dimension ultimately altered the law’s overall objectives.

For those opposed to the legislation, the day on which *Aftenposten* published the Olympian’s comments on its front page was certainly propitious. It was a glistening winter Sunday in early March when ‘half of Oslo’ was out on cross-country ski trails. The former Olympian was shown on his skis with two other Marka residents and ‘prolific users of Marka,’ a local NGO leader and an outspoken activist who had become a prominent voice in public discussions. The former Olympic champion, also a board member of the International Ski Federation, was quoted in large print ‘demanding Marka for the people’ (*Aftenposten Aften*, 8 March 2009). Claiming to represent the ‘latest wave of Marka recreationists’ the three men argued that ‘the dispute is getting worse’ because ‘everyone’ fears that ‘the law would be so restrictive that it would hamper active use by the public’. Inside the paper, the troika was given two full pages to elaborate on their argument: The legislation must meet the needs of community members with ‘modern [sport] equipment’ who ‘go through Marka on cycles in summer and skis in winter’. Accommodating them, the troika insisted, would require professional maintenance of roads and cross-country ski trails in winter, and asphalt trails for summer skiing on wheels.

In a strident letter to the editor a couple of days earlier, the same three men had claimed that the proposed legislation would prohibit all active outdoor recreation cultures, leading to a ‘hermetic preservation process which would transform Marka into an empty museum’ (*Aftenposten*, 6 March 2009). By Sunday morning, their viewpoint had been carefully edited into front-page news, replete with powerful metaphors, photographs and symbolic agents. They warned that people who lived in Marka would lose sovereignty over their property, and local democratic processes would be suffocated in the 19 ‘Marka municipalities’. They also charged that the government were not listening to sport enthusiasts, only to nature conservationists, and that in the event that one of the cabins provided for hikers, cyclists and cross-country skiers in the heart of Marka burnt down, it could not be rebuilt. Ten days later, *Aftenposten* placed the troika in the media spotlight again. This time, they issued a broader critique:

We have been presented with an extreme and over-protective law [...] permeated by a belief that human activity in nature is a problem [...] Those who will suffer are all of the small stakeholders: sport clubs who clean up ski trails voluntarily, farmers who cultivate the soil and idealists who bring life to Marka [...]. (*Aftenposten Aften*, 8 March 2009)

Almost simultaneously, *Aftenposten* gave the Conservative party mayor of Oslo a full page, in which he argued that, ‘Marka has to be protected by the people using it, not through conservation’ and expressed doubt as to whether ‘the Minister of Environment had understood the consequences’. He asserted that ‘While all are in agreement with the [legislative] intentions, it would appear that fewer and fewer people want this new law’. The problem was that the Minister ‘had submitted a botched-up job’ (*Aftenposten*, 11 March 2009). By reiterating the troika’s charge that *Markaloven* would undermine its declared intention, he reinforced their narrative.

The mayor then went on to level his primary criticism: ‘The responsibility to protect Marka [will be ...] shifted from municipalities to the [national] Ministry. I cannot see that we have done anything in our management of Marka which would justify seizing responsibility from us’ (*Aftenposten*, 11 March 2009). The mayor also repeated a charge previously

made by several other critics: that the Ministry had only listened to the conservationist constituency. ‘*Markaloven*’, he remonstrated, affects ‘hikers, skiers, cyclists, agriculture, forestry, local inhabitants, sport organisations, municipalities’, all of whom would be ‘obliged to comply’. He concluded by urging that the proposal be sent ‘back to the Ministry with a charge to come up with a new proposal’.

As the government prepared a final version of *Markaloven*, *Aftenposten* gave prominent and repeated coverage to opposition arguments. In contrast, media coverage of the Government’s position was often personalized. For example, a few days before the final vote, the newspaper published a front-page photo of a prominent young leader of the Socialist Left party on her snowboard in Tryvann Winter Park, accompanied by her quoted assurances that ‘nobody will be expelled’ from Marka (*Aftenposten*, 17 March 2009). The proposed legislation would not prohibit construction of new ski slopes or the expansion of Tryvann. The Minister himself was given space to declare that the Act had been mischaracterized:

Cabin owners should not fear that they will need Ministry approval to build an outdoor toilet, [...] [the Olympian skier] does not need Ministry approval to overhaul [existing] ski trails [...]. It will also be possible to construct new sport facilities, or expand existing sport facilities that can be incorporated into Marka. (*Aftenposten*, 13 March 2009)

Despite these assurances and the governing coalition’s majority in Parliament, the political mobilization mounted by the proposed law’s opponents was so powerful that they were able to modify *Markaloven* significantly. When the final version was submitted for parliamentary approval, sport interests were once again accorded equal weight with the goal of promoting outdoor life and appreciation of nature. For the law’s opponents, this was a major symbolic and practical victory.

The conflict between nature preservation and sport

In the media, the debate over *Markaloven* took the form of a dramatized narrative, rich in metaphors and structured to include an introduction, followed by a succession of peak events, a turning point and a final resolution. At first sight, narratives and metaphors exemplified by the chosen terminology – including fairy tale forest, gift package, nature as a wolves’ preserve and waves of new recreationists – appear to be a series of innocent presentations of real issues. The use of these concepts was instrumental in creating an emotionally charged, meaning-laden and confusing public debate that transformed an unorganized polyphony of narratives into a conflict between a preservation discourse and a sport discourse. In the following paragraphs, we will discuss how this sharp schism was created, as well as how and why it came to overshadow and displace the draft law’s comprehensive discourse based on balancing a multiple-use approach with protection.

First, the opposition to the law, assisted by the media, established a clear-cut, though misleading, discursive dichotomy between ‘use of Marka is the best way to ensure protection’ and ‘pure preservation’ (through non-use). Thereafter, the expression ‘use is the best protection’ was associated with the discursive theme of ‘nature used for sport in groomed trails’ and development of sport facilities, whilst the draft law’s objectives were simplified as ‘preservation of old-growth trees’ and ‘outdoor life as traditional and simple’.

Further, the term ‘nature preservation’ was constantly invoked, but as a form of a hierarchy. Pristine nature was characterized by many supporters of the law as a more authentic and valuable inspiration for appreciation of nature. This argument was invoked by NOA

(the nature preservationist association), and dismissed by the proposed law's critics, who argued this was an illusion: People have used Marka extensively for centuries, they asserted. Therefore, enhancing and expanding its recreational training and competitive sport facilities would increase its popularity and ultimately ensure its long-term preservation from urbanization by the growing city.

Providing positive experiences of pristine nature was perceived as essential to promoting sustainable development and preserving biological diversity. These assumptions concerning complex cultural practices were subsequently interwoven into a conception of *friluftsliv* that claimed it as an integral component of environmental politics and management (Bortne, Selle, and Strømsnes 2002).

Bateson's (1972) theory of communication and concept of *schismogenesis* can shed further light on the creation of insurmountable political and mediated frontiers (Brox 2000). According to Bateson, at least two parties must always be involved. The combatants invariably seek to overcome their opposition by offering increasingly extreme and reinforcing arguments, employing methods of presentation that trigger intense feelings. Brox elucidates Bateson's relevance to environmental issues, suggesting that feelings of belonging and commitment to peers dominate the values in focus, whilst evidence gets short shrift. Brox's conception can be applied to the Marka debate remarkably well. A review of 'public and media communication about environmental issues' supports the discouraging conclusion that it is not 'so much about information or indeed about education as it is about competition between different claims-makers and between different claims or constructions of these issues' (Hansen 2010, 120). The escalating debate in the *Markaloven* controversy conforms to what Allern (2001) identifies as ordinary media tactics: To enhance news value, extreme viewpoints and interest groups are played off against each other until they are positioned as an irreconcilable conflict.

In the dispute over *Markaloven*, the media allocated considerable space to simplifications, negative stereotypes and stigmatizing of opponents and nightmare visions of worst-cases scenarios, generating a phantasmagoria of symbolic coercion and fear that eventually guided stakeholders in a particular direction. Extensive coverage of opponents of the law buttressed the authenticity of its critics. Simultaneously, the media subtly undermined support through front-page coverage given to criticisms of the draft law; slogans that challenged supportive arguments; and visual representations and bogeys that caricatured the objectives and consequences of *Markaloven*, as well as the opinions of its defenders.

The entrance of the former Olympic ski hero into the debate was decisive. With support from his allies and the media, he was able to launch an assault on the proposed Act that incorporated sport, economic interests, prosperity, progress and the desires of inhabitants of Marka. This gave the formerly disparate, unorganized critics of the Act a visual, easily recognizable image and a broad, coherent arsenal of arguments. As an Olympic ski champion, he came to the debate with an extraordinary level of legitimacy and respect. The opposition to the legislative proposal was able to use his prominence to make sport its unifying symbol, and to transform its negative position on the proposed law into a positive assertion that the opposition's approach would open Marka to substantial 'new waves of (young) casual recreationists and sporting people' who would need ever more elaborate trails.

The NOA played into their hands. Supported by the media, the NOA thrust itself into the role of standard-bearer for the campaign supporting the draft law by virtue of its enthusiastic contributions. Like the sport enthusiasts, its representatives repeatedly presented ever more

extreme worst-case scenarios. They predicted that allowing sport in Marka would be an environmental disaster, ‘hammering’ on one argument: the need to preserve ‘old growth’ areas, the so-called ‘fairy-tale forests’. Yet, even in the preliminary drafts of the Act, these areas were estimated to cover only about one per cent of Marka. By constantly linking the preservation of ‘old growth’ to the Act’s primary objectives of promoting appreciation of nature and *friluftsliv*, the NOA representatives were implicitly asserting that these forests provided a more authentic and precious experience than visitors could enjoy in what they termed ‘artificially facilitated nature’, such as groomed cross-country ski trails.

Aided by the media, opponents of the law seized on the NOA position to create an image of the Act’s supporters as old-fashioned, conservative and ‘purist’ conservationists, collectively hostile to youth, all sports and new development in general. Thus overshadowing a broad group of stakeholders favouring the Ministry’s proposal, including OOF, civic member associations, and the political and administrative committee of the Ministry of Environment. They advocated a broad, nature-friendly and multiple-use interpretation of what constitutes outdoor life.

As a result, in the space of a few weeks, the media distilled the debate over Marka and its symbolic connotations into a discursive conflict between contemporary facilitated use by *all people* or ‘traditional use’ by *the few*. Ultimately, the opposition’s argument that the law would prevent many young people from visiting Marka became so persuasive that it nearly sank *Markaloven* entirely.

Moral values, outdoor identities and social relations

In presenting *Markaloven* as ‘a gift’ to the people of Oslo, the Minister of Environment invoked a metaphor laden with meaning. His phrasing equated the proposed law with celebratory and joyful expressions connoting community and solidarity among citizens. It presented *Markaloven* as a political act carrying special symbolic implications; a unifying and common moral good, with equal potential benefit for all.

Normally, laws, statutory regulations or political decisions are not characterized as gifts. Mauss ([1924] 2002) argues in *The Gift*, his classic anthropological study, that gifts are instruments that mutually confirm personal relationships among family and friends. Ideally, they constitute exchange relations that emotionally and morally forge donor–recipient relationships. Recipients are expected to receive them in gratitude and with respect, or at least to affirm their significance through token gestures or reciprocal gifts.

In characterizing *Markaloven* as a collective gift and common good for all citizens, it is certainly possible the Minister was basing this characterization on discursive but widely shared hegemonic ideas about ‘egalitarian’ Norwegian culture. From this perspective, every citizen should have been happy and grateful, because the Act would serve the community and promote a healthy lifestyle for all. Clearly, the Minister underestimated the resistance to his perspective, though not everyone was surprised. The Act was inherently political, one of a plethora of measures the Labour-led coalition had proposed to reduce social inequalities; efforts that had frequently inspired conservative opposition. As such, even in its diluted form, *Markaloven* constituted a powerful symbolic political action, bringing to completion an enduring social democratic effort to transform Marka into a ‘nature park for the public’ (Slagstad 2008, 233). Erik Sture Larre (1914–2014), head of OOF from 1946 to 1987 and a leading post-war advocate for protecting the Marka, concisely summarized

this culmination to a nearly 100-year-long dispute: ‘with the establishment of *Markaloven*, the Marka was *handed over* [from private ownership] to public [management]’. This echoed the conclusion of the Minister of Environment that passage of the Act was ‘long overdue’ and ‘a milestone’ in the political history of outdoor life (*Aftenposten Aften*, 28 April 2009).

In periods when conflicting interests and social inequalities assume importance in the political arena, those who feel threatened bond through narrative fellowship (Gullestad 2001, 17). During the dispute over *Markaloven*, this was evident among interest groups such as proprietors, municipalities and the Association for the Promotion of Skiing (which administered hiking and skiing facilities), who feared the Act would deprive them of rights and privileges they had enjoyed for more than a century.

According to Bourdieu (1991), the more egalitarian a society is, the more concerned its citizens become with delineating social differences and borders. Characterizing the draft law as a gift represented an assertion that all of the people of Oslo enjoyed a status equal to that of Marka’s traditional user groups – the landowners and members of the Ski Association, as well as citizens using Marka in self-reliant ways – thus wiping out long-standing, powerful social distinctions. For the privileged user groups, this levelling of the ‘social hierarchy of Marka’ (Slagstad 2008, 212) could have been perceived (and presumably was) as a form of devaluation; a loss of influence, identity and importance. The privileged groups’ repeated emphasis on difference and distance during their campaign against *Markaloven* can be viewed as an effort to preserve perceived social boundaries; a defence of their privileged social position and significance.

‘An art of balancing’: discourse and its practical and democratic implications

Throughout this paper, we have attempted to show how the near-consensus on the value of protecting the forest surrounding Oslo from urbanization through legislation fragmented into two competing and highly symbolic discourses during the public debate: sport-development versus ‘simple ways of *friluftsliv*’. A media-fostered climate of schizmogogenesis narrowed the discursive options for understanding, acting and managing the urban woodlands down to a simple, reductive choice: exploit the forest or preserve the forest. The opposing camps further reduced this to a battle between deforestation with groomed/asphalted ski trails owned by competitive sport and recreational enthusiasts on the one hand versus hermetic, preserved fairy tale forests ‘roamed by wolves’, on the other.

Once these reductive images solidified, advocacy for more nuanced narratives based on a comprehensive approach – what the parliamentary majority called ‘sustainable multiple usage’ of the forest as a coherently and regionally managed entity (Committee on Energy and Environment 2009, 5) – was rarely in evidence on newspaper front pages and in their headlines. For example, arguments for allowing facilitated trails or ski slope development in some of the forest fringes and limiting development in other areas virtually disappeared from the media, even though ‘[a] substantial proportion of the sport activities in Marka can be considered outdoor living’ (*Aftenposten Aften*, 28 April 2009). As a result, the assumptions underlying the final draft version of *Markaloven* (Committee on Energy and Environment 2009) favoured by the ruling majority coalition and supported by OOF (Bugge and Reusch 2010) were obscured. What the Minister of Environment later characterized as ‘an art of balancing’ (*Aftenposten Aften*, 20 May 2010) disappeared in a media blizzard devoted to stances – preservation of the forest versus sports – presented as irreconcilable worldviews.

In the case of *Markaloven*, the comprehensive discourse did not focus exclusively on the woodlands themselves; rather, its primary concern was the increasing urban population's need for high-quality outdoor recreation. *Markaloven* was introduced to preserve Marka's rich and varied natural and cultural landscapes, including traces of its cultural heritage – of farming, sport and outdoor life alike. Furthermore, it was designed to accommodate sustainable forestry and farming. The prime concern was serving people's needs and interests, as encapsulated in the slogan 'use of Marka is the best form of protection' (Committee on Energy and Environment 2009, 5). This *Markaloven* case study thus illustrates legislative, symbolic and practical complexities involved in negotiating the multi-functional usage of active outdoor living and protection of an urban landscape.

As the study shows, the cultures involved were politically conceptualized as outdoor living, aesthetic experience of nature and sports that 'naturally belong to Marka'. Despite this apparent precision, both the preliminary legislative proposals and the final law actually left the definitions of the law's three key concepts open to negotiation and modification (Bugge and Reusch 2010). All three represent dynamic cultural values, and are subject to diverse contextual and blurred interpretations. This is consistent with international social research conceptualizing outdoor living and sport as sociocultural phenomena that lend themselves to differing understandings, negotiation and change. In Norway, outdoor living has a particular significance, broadly connoting explorations of nature 'on nature's own terms', whilst the term sport connotes organized and competitive activities in constructed and nature-transformative facilities.

The media debate analysed here explicates the distinction between outdoor life 'on nature's own terms' and outdoor recreation-cultures 'on the terms of modern sports'. This schism highlights the debate's distinctive Norwegian dimension. Urban outdoor recreation research in other countries has revealed similar discourses involving environmental moral values, identities and spatial disputes (Antrop 2004; Macnaghten and Urry 1998; Schantz 2006). One conflict shared cross-culturally comprises challenges to the so-called 'traditional' outdoor recreational activities of hiking and mountaineering that emphasize tranquillity and nearness to nature in the form of activities based on recent innovations such as mountain bikes, snowboards or kites. 'Traditionalists' regard these 'new' activities involving speed, noise and bright colours as 'urban artefacts' and sources of 'environmental damage' that are 'disrespectful of nature' (Brown 2014, 22), and a challenge to the ethos of *friluftsliv* as a 'simple way of living'. The Norwegian and Nordic democratic principles of the right to roam freely, to temporarily stay overnight and to forage for food is commonly understood to depend on trust and mutual respect between landowners and visitors, as well as an ethos of being considerate. Thus, each individual is expected to commit oneself to act with care and not endanger the life of any species, whilst always capable of caring for oneself.

The final Marka legislation represented something of a compromise. It allows 'sports which naturally belong to Marka' – a category which may include activities such as orienteering, cross-country skiing, ski-touring on groomed trails, as well as training for diverse sport competitions, including bicycling on paths – but bans development of facilities for sports such as football, golf, shooting and racing motorized vehicles. Competitive sports such as skiing on groomed trails, cycling on paths and adventure races are permitted upon agreement by the private and/or municipal owner of the land used. In the initial implementation phase of the law, Tryvann Winter Park was allowed to build new slopes for snowboarding, in conformity with the Act's provisions permitting the construction of new

facilities in designated locations on the fringes of the Marka provided they encourage public engagement in outdoor activities. To meet the interests of the increasing numbers of trail-cyclists, the Municipality of Oslo has allowed construction of a 'handcrafted' cycling trail using 'place-based' materials.

'Fairy-tale forests' are also kept 'as they are'. *Markaloven* provides for preserving specified 'quality areas' for *friluftsliv*. During its first five years, 13 'landscape reserves' were demarcated under either *Markaloven* or the Biodiversity Act. A group that calls itself Friends of the East Parts of Marka has proposed transforming 'their' region into Norway's first urban national park.

Concluding remarks

Urbanization has played a major role in modern history and the alteration of the Nordic landscape. With the proportion of Norwegians living in urban areas approaching the same 80% level as elsewhere in Europe, the use and conceptualization of urban natural landscapes has become highly dynamic, multifunctional, symbolic and complex (Antrop 2004). The contested 'nature' of urban forest management shows how democratic processes for active living and environmental citizenship embody distinct social practices, identities, emotional bonds and symbolic meaning. Thus, the dispute over *Markaloven* may serve as a cautionary example of how multiple outdoor recreational interests and multi-layered meanings make it difficult to establish a broadly accepted balance between preservation and utilization. In particular, as this study shows, the media can play a powerful role in producing a simplified and polarized worldview. Once proponents of personally acquired sport identities have been pitted against advocates of outdoor living coupled with aesthetic appreciation of local natural environments, the dispute may escalate into an unresolvable conflict involving moral values, identities and land usage.

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