

Water as a symbol of national identity in Norway

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Abstract Nature—in this case water—is examined not as a physical reality, but as a symbol of ideas, norms and values in society. Water as an element in building the nation of Norway and the Norwegian identity is used to illustrate this. A protected waterfall is, in this perspective, a cultural as much as a natural heritage. A cultural and symbolic perspective contributes to a more balanced view of nature. This view is a supplement to a technical and pragmatic view of nature.

Key words identity; nation; nature; symbol

INTRODUCTION

“Nature” is one of the most culturally loaded of concepts. It is one of the central concepts for human understanding and structuring of the surroundings (Glacken, 1967). The concept of nature is deeply embedded in our understanding of the world, so deep that we seldom reflect its central role in our thinking. With impulses from symbol theory (Elias, 1991), environmental history (Berntsen, 1994; Nash, 1982) and social sciences (Berger & Luckmann, 1987), this paper examines nature, not as a physical reality, but as a symbol of ideas, norms and values in society. “Nature” is understood and interpreted in a historical, social and cultural context. Views of nature are:

- (a) closely related to a society’s prevailing norms, values and power-relations;
- (b) paradigmatic—deeply embedded conceptions within a society;
- (c) closely related to use of nature both by individuals and collectively.

The paper deals with culturally conditioned understandings of nature, more specifically with Norwegian conceptions of “water” as a powerful symbol in the political project of building and modernizing the nation. Water and the waterfalls were, and still are, crucial symbolic elements in building the nation of Norway and upholding Norwegian identity. At the same time, water is the quintessential symbol of the modernization and industrialization of 20th-century Norway.

The paper makes conscious generalizations and short-cuts on the topic “humans–nature”. The starting-point is nature as a relative phenomenon. It emphasizes nature as mirroring human beings in the historical and socio-cultural contexts.

Nature, nation and civilization—etymological perspectives

The words nature and nation have the same etymological background—the Latin word “*natio*”—which means birth. The word “nat” relates to the innate or inherent. It refers implicitly to the origin of a nation. Both nature and nation are related not only

etymologically, but also in the sense that the political and symbolic project of building a nation makes use of particular pieces of its natural basis and uses these particular pieces to distinguish its own character.

The word nature has at least 10 different meanings (Webster's Dictionary). A glimpse at three of them will put the concept into perspective:

- (a) the natural world as it exists without human beings or civilization;
- (b) the particular combination of qualities belonging to a person, animal, thing or class by birth, origin or constitution, native or inherent character;
- (c) the laws and principles that guide the universe or an individual.

A culturally conditioned nature-concept challenges the conventional meanings, as it suggests nature to be understood as indistinguishable from the human beings' conceptualization of the so-called "outer world".

The word civilization has at least seven different meanings. It is usually thought of as "... an advanced state of human society in which a high level of cultural science and government has been reached (...) modern comforts and conveniences, as made possible by science and technology". This meaning of the word is quite outdated today. It evaluates society and culture from a typical, and restricted, European-American point of view. Today the word civilization is mostly referred to "any type of culture, society etc. of a specific place, time or group", as for example Mesopotamian or Greek civilization.

Norway—blessed with water

Norway is a young nation in many respects. The whole region was covered with ice only 10 000 years ago, and in 2005 Norway will celebrate 100 years of independence as a modern nation. Norway is also full of water—it has 240 000 lakes and ponds larger than 0.25 ha, and about 4000 rivers draining to the sea. Eighteen lakes are larger than 50 km². Some of the waterfalls are among the highest in the world. The highest waterfall has a vertical fall of 300 m, and the number of waterfalls with >10 m fall is 113. The mean annual runoff is 1140 mm. The topography is steep along the west coast, and slopes gently towards the southeast. The country is also blessed with the warm Gulf current, making living conditions quite favourable compared to other countries at similar latitudes. The water resources in Norway are almost totally under national control and governance. Only a couple of rivers in the north and east are shared with the neighbouring countries Russia, Finland and Sweden.

Together these conditions make Norway a country of abundant water. The volumes are relatively well distributed all over the country. Droughts are a rarity. Not only the amount, but also distribution, natural storage and high heads provide excellent conditions for using water in different production processes, hydropower in particular.

From the Middle Ages until 1900 it was common that small groups of farmers collaborated in the building of small water wheels for producing flour. This meant that the farmers were locally self-contained for the energy required to produce food. It was not necessary to establish central governance for one or two main rivers—as known in other parts of the world, e.g. the Nile in Egypt. This paved the way for what can be called the "democratic" character of water in Norway (Tvedt, 1997). Even before

AD 1350 rivers were used for floating timber. During the period AD 1500–1900, timber was the most important export from Norway. From early AD 1900 the hydro-electric power industry became the most important factor in the modernization of Norway.

Norwegian nature—water as a romantic topos in the representation of Norway

Norway will celebrate 100 years as an independent nation in 2005. In 1905, as Norway broke the union with Sweden, Norwegian artists had for decades contributed to national romanticism with works in which water is a crucial ingredient. A Norwegian national romantic painting is almost unthinkable without water as an element, preferably flowing or cascading and always in abundance. In this manner painters contributed in the shaping of images of the nation's nature, its essential character and thus to the political project of building the nation.

A waterfall, intact, pure and forever falling from the mountains, is in this perspective a cultural as much as a natural heritage. Conservationists at that time argued for the cultural as well as the scientific importance of taking care of nature. This reflects that the intention at that time was to create and uphold clearly distinguishable images of people in a specific territory.

Early tourism in Norway (1800s) was based on the fascination for the wild nature of the country. Norwegian waterfalls were presented as attractions for tourists as early as the 1800s. Arranging salmon fishing for foreign lords from polluted central Europe was also common. Grand tourist hotels were built to host foreigners that came to admire the fjords, mountains, glaciers and cascading waterfalls. Even today the waters in Norway are heavily represented in promoting the country as an attractive destination.

Hiking tours in the woods or mountains, as opposed to urban walks, are clearly the distinguished way of using leisure time for Norwegians, and is the preferred activity. This also means that Norwegians themselves are easy to mobilize when it comes to taking care of nature generally. It affects their daily lives.

A nation's park—shaping a character

Building and upholding the nation is a symbolic and political project. Various elements, both natural and cultural, are used to strengthen particular characteristics of the people and a region. In Norway, as in other nations, particular “parts” of nature have been specially taken care of through nature conservation. Any self respecting nation has protected and conserved parts of “its own” nature, as well as culture. Establishing a national park can be interpreted as a nation's maintenance of an image emphasizing “pure nature”, as it was thought to appear before civilization and the subsequent exploitation of it.

The concept of the earliest national parks is based on an idea of a national heritage, and on the wish to document the nation's natural history. The movement started in the USA in the early 1800s. The arguments for preserving specific areas were heavily associated with shaping the character of America in relation to the rest of the world:

“...what a beautiful and thrilling specimen for America to preserve and hold up to the view of her refined citizens and the world, in future ages! A nation’s park, containing man and beast, in all its wild(ness) and freshness of their nature’s beauty (...) the government would protect them in a magnificent park.” articulated by the American painter and preservationist G. Catlin in the 1830s, cited in Nash, 1982, p.101.

The earliest national parks and the preservation of elements in nature represent strong symbols of a nation’s understanding of self. They symbolize the nation’s “own” character and authenticity. Arguments, such as the need for scientific reference areas and the maintenance of biological diversity, have been used since the 1970s. These arguments are probably the most accepted ones today.

The actual establishment of national parks came relatively late in Norway. The first national park was the mountain range Rondane and was set up in 1962. In Norway the national parks (20 today) are first and foremost mountain areas. But the ideas of and suggestions for establishing parks and monuments were on the agenda before 1900. The need for preserving actual nature was argued for, as the painters’ and writers’ descriptions of nature were viewed as far from sufficient. With reference to national parks in America Professor Yngvar Nielsen—head of the Norwegian Tourist Association—suggested in a speech in 1904:

“Should there not be reason to think of something similar here. To “reserve” a piece of Norway. To let it keep its original nature for coming generations. There are several areas that could be suited for such use. We have the Jotunheimen. It gives itself naturally to the thought that it should be as it is, like a home for true nature, a picture of Norway, as it is today (...) What wouldn’t such a natural reserve offer allurements for coming generations!” speech printed in Aanesen (1904, pp. 209–210) (translated by author).

To protect the “pure and untouched nature” was viewed as important for the people and its cultural development—at that time often in terms of “civilized citizens”. Hence its importance was not only for nature itself and scientific interest. Taking care of nature was meant to have a therapeutic function for the people, often as an answer to the dark sides of urbanization. It was also argued that the Nordic countries’ nature and national parks would be a counterweight to southern and central Europe’s zoos and gardens in the crowded cities—often characterized as “animal prisons”. As the Nordic countries are sparsely populated and far from crowded—it was not too problematic to propose the protection of nature. This early form of nature protection was culturally justified. The spokesmen were from academia—geographers, zoologists, botanists, etc. They had scientific motives, but above all it was a favourable time to propose protection with national romantic overtones current in the young nation Norway. It was important to create and uphold an image of Norway on the same level as the nations it preferred to compare itself with.

Protection of water as an important natural feature in Norway

Protection of so-called natural monuments (“monument” is here illustrating that nature protection was of cultural importance) came quite early in Norway. The waterfall Vettisfossen (275 m vertical fall) was given this status, and protected in 1924. The fact

that a waterfall as such was, and is attached great importance, is not incidental. The waterfall is supposed to symbolize the nation's particular nature. It is also the waterfall that has contributed strongly to the development of the modern nation Norway. It is in fact the symbol of identity (the past) and progress (the future) in Norway. The entire project of modernization of society in Norway is based on the use of the energy of falling water to produce hydroelectric power.

The development of hydropower put considerable pressure on the watercourses in Norway. Around 1960 the debate started on exempting rivers from development. The Norwegian environmental movement is strongly based in the struggle for protecting waterfalls and rivers against hydropower production.

It is also remarkable that the bird fossekallen (in Latin *Cinclus cinclus*) was elected by the people as the national bird in Norway in the 1960s. It is a tiny bird living near water, and off insects, particularly in rapids. Here a water-dependent little animal gets national status—a struggle with the natural forces in rivers! These days even a Norwegian “national waterfall” is the topic of a popular vote. This illustrates the importance and status of water in Norwegian minds.

Water as the key factor in modernizing Norway

Norway is known as the land of water and has been for a long time. The topography is in many places very suitable for using the waterfalls for hydroelectric purposes. The development of hydropower started in 1880s and expanded rapidly after the Second World War. After the war Norway embarked on a modernizing programme. The waterfalls were called “the white coal” as opposed to black and polluting coal in central Europe. The modernization of households and industry led to an increasing demand for electricity—in Norway hydropower development. Today 99% of all electricity produced has its source in hydropower. Norway is the sixth largest hydropower producer in the world and the second largest in Europe.

One illustrative example of the relationship between traditional and modern times in Norway was painted and literally pointed out by Theodor Kittelsen in 1908 (Christensen, 2002). Kittelsen was fascinated by the advances of modern times and received an order for paintings of Rjukanfossen—a waterfall at that time under hydropower development. The man who commissioned the paintings was Sam Eyde—a big hydropower-entrepreneur at that time. The Kittelsens paintings give many a view on the traditionalists struggling against modern times and foreign capital vs the entrepreneurs and the belief in industrialization as based on the waterfall. The paintings illustrate the traditional Norway “losing its virginity” and the strong progressive Norway “blessed with hydropower-possibilities”. This can also be seen as an illustration of the relations between art and capital. Artists were not only traditionalists, but also acted in favour of modernity.

Hydropower and water protection today

Today 341 rivers are permanently protected from hydropower development. Four of the 12 highest waterfalls are protected. Of the hydropower potential (total 188 TWh),

some 118 TWh is developed. About 20% of the potential is permanently protected. The hydropower developers are today meeting a political climate of “enough is enough”, and only minor developments and rehabilitation of existing power-stations is licensed. The consideration of protection interests is an essential part of a normal licensing procedure.

Since the amounts of water are huge in Norway, it has not been necessary to develop alternative sources of energy on a large scale. Nonetheless, growing demands on energy still apply pressure to further developments in this field. Norwegian waters have given Norway a high-tech status and a modern standard of living worth envying, but they also have—in their amounts and dominance as energy source—blocked alternative thinking in the energy field.

The fact that about a fifth of the Norwegian hydropower potential is still protected may be seen as a relative great success for nature conservation, taking into account the considerable pressure for hydropower development. The strong national status water is given, and the Norwegian way of feeling and using nature on a daily basis has indeed contributed to this situation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Interpreting water and the waterfall in the context of national identity, shows that ideas, norms and values are not static, but actively shaped in, and by society. They are altered over time along with other developments in society, such as technological and scientific developments. The point is also to contribute to a more balanced view of nature. This view is a supplement to the more usual technical and pragmatic view of nature.

The cultural and symbolic perspective opens for reflection on and questioning of the meanings and values we attach to intact nature/nature today. The preservation of nature can be said to contribute to a view of nature as something “out there”, at a distance from daily practice. To approach the theme “nature” will require the consideration of the active shaping of particular natures in and by society.

The following reflections may serve as conclusion:

- (a) The time of building the nation is over—the focus has shifted to either local or global/international levels. Water is running, and has always been running, without man-made boundaries. For water management it is crucial to extend the view to the river basin as such. This requires extended cooperation on all levels.
- (b) The arguments for protecting nature (here especially water) should not underestimate the crucial meaning it has for the general well-being of humans in any society. The existence of so-called untouched nature facilitates actual experience and use of this nature, and this must be seen as a necessary condition for developing an attitude of taking care of nature, both individually and collectively.
- (c) Protecting nature in parks and reserves is set out in governmental laws and plans. Nature protected in this way is often to be experienced in built-up-centres—is this “wrapping of nature” appropriate? Yes, but it has limitations. A protectionist attitude starts with an individual’s development from child to adult. Learning how nature acts and reacts, how it forms our living conditions and how society has

formed the nature historically is fundamental. Learning about nature is today dominated by a technical and natural-scientific approach. These approaches should be complemented by cultural, historical and ethical perspectives.

- (d) Development of civilization is connected to advances in sciences. An appropriate question is whether scientific and technical advances in our modern society also contribute to alienating people from having immediate contact with, and understanding of, this society's relationship to nature.
- (e) Social and cultural scientists have for too long neglected the fundamental questions on nature as shaped in the mind of people and as constructed by social practices. In the Nordic countries cultural geographers have made interesting contributions in this respect (Olwig, 1987; Lehtinen, 1991; Mels, 2002).
- (f) Challenges for social and cultural scientist include:
- nature viewed separately from (as existing independently of) human beings makes no sense—our conceptualization of it is *qua* conceptualization relating to social structures (language being one of them);
 - to analyse fundamentally the social construction of nature (Vogel, 1996);
 - local natures—local realities and everyday spheres of living should be made primary issues in welfare definitions (Lehtinen, 1991, p.149);
 - are social and cultural scientists better off with the term environment than nature? Environment would include nature, people and mental, social and political structures. This means rejecting dualism, the natural world and the social world as not distinguishable, “because the *Umwelt*, the surrounding world of “nature”, is itself in various senses the product of social practices” (Vogel, 1996, p.7).

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