

# Negotiating trade-offs between the environment, sustainability and mass tourism amongst guides on Svalbard

## Research Article

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### Abstract

This paper investigates how guides on Svalbard make sense of their relations to the environment whilst working with mass tourism. The Arctic is heating up more rapidly than any other part of the world, and over the last 30 years the effect of climate change has had a large impact on the environment in the Arctic. The guides as such find themselves living a paradox where their work destroys the nature that they care about and depend on. This paper analyses empirical data collected during four months of fieldwork amongst guides in Svalbard. Throughout the paper, two dimensions are explored: the guides' relation to and understanding of the environment as well as their ways of caring for it. Building on illustrations of the guides' preconceptions of the environment, it is shown how the guides in their everyday life are engaged in pro-environmental practices. These practices are embedded in the guides' reciprocal relationship with the environment, where they negotiate between different trade-offs. The guides thus find a way to navigate the complexity of caring for the environment and working in tourism through their intimate relation to the environment.

### Introduction

“The Cruise ship industry requires far greater regulation than it currently has and penalties for breaching laws should be far tougher! How often have they dumped their trash at sea before being caught?” and “Maybe just avoid Carnival cruises for your next holiday” are just two guides' reactions to an article posted on 4th June 2019 by Business Insider. The article, titled “*Carnival slapped with a \$20 million fine after it was caught dumping trash into the ocean, again*”, informed the reader about how Princess Cruises had been releasing food waste and plastic into the ocean. Moreover, they failed to accurately record waste disposals and created false training records while secretly examining ships to fix environmental-compliance issues before third-party inspections without reporting its findings to the inspectors. I was presented with the article through Facebook as it was reposted by people living in Longyearbyen, some of whom were guides working with cruise ships. Their reaction illustrates what this paper tries to capture: the paradox of living and working as a guide in Longyearbyen. These guides were themselves working in the tourism industry full time and often also for the big cruise ships. Though they publicly criticised the actions and regulations, they still choose to work for the industry. These contradictory feelings and actions are what this paper attempt to understand as it investigates how the guides make sense of their relations to the environment whilst working with mass tourism.

The paper builds on four months of anthropological fieldwork amongst guides in Longyearbyen, Svalbard. Working as a guide often includes taking tourists on hiking, boat and snow scooter trips outside of the city or guided bus tours within the city limits. The tours can be with small groups of two to eight people and with larger groups of more than 30 people. These big groups often come to Longyearbyen during the summer with the big cruise and expedition ships or by plane. Most of the tourists coming to Svalbard have never visited before and want to experience the special Arctic environment that can be found there (Enger, 2018). However, the Arctic is heating up more rapidly than any other part of the world and over the last 30 years the extent of sea ice coverage has steadily declined and temperatures and precipitation have increased (Box, 2019; IPCC, 2014). One of the most visible effects of climate change can be seen on the sea ice charts. In Svalbard, researchers have observed that the total sea ice extent diminished by approximately 11% between 1967 and 2007. In addition, the melting season generally starts earlier than it did 40 years ago (Bystrowska, 2019, p. 153). This change in sea ice is accelerating and rapidly changing the habitat configuration and dispersal patterns of ice-dependent species. Studies of polar bears in Svalbard have as such reported a loss of local genetic diversity and exchange over roughly 20 years characterised by substantial loss of sea ice coverage. The consequences of this erosion of genetic diversity will over time be a reduced fitness of individual polar bears and an elevated risk of extinction (Maduna et al., 2021, p. 6).

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**Picture 1.** Hike to Fortet close to Pyramiden. Picture by author.

The environment is a big part of the guides' lives and they experience firsthand the effects of climate change such as changes in the weather, sea ice and behaviour of animals. At the same time, the industry they are working for is critiqued as environmentally destructive because of the greenhouse gas emissions related to tourist mobility and the burden cruise ships put on the local environment (Eckhardt et al., 2013; Higham, Cohen, Cavaliere, Reis, & Finkler, 2016). Amid this, guides find themselves living a paradox where their work destroys the environment that they care about and depend on. Through their work, they confront the kinds of choices people will increasingly be faced with in the future. It is therefore interesting to understand empirically how they negotiate their relations to the environment when working in the tourism industry as this can offer us a way to understand and learn from their choices. The following paper will first include an introduction to the context of mass tourism in Longyearbyen, the analytical framework and the methods used. It then moves on to sketch out who the guides are. Building on empirical examples, it shows how the guides in their everyday life are engaged in pro-environmental practices and how these become part of their negotiation between different trade-offs. Analysing the empirical data, it draws on practice theory and engages with the concepts of reciprocity and trade-off.

### Longyearbyen and polar tourism

There is not just one thing that defines mass tourism today. Instead, it can be characterised by various things within popular and large-scale forms of tourism. Harrison and Sharpley (2017) consider nine different features of mass tourism to be critical, although not all are likely to be found in one case. Of the nine features, several apply to Longyearbyen as a destination. In this paper, I want to highlight the first two: "1. There is a regular and systematic movement, involving many industries, of large numbers of people away from their normal places of residence, primarily for holiday purposes. 2. Tourist numbers at destinations are concentrated and seasonal" (Harrison & Sharpley, 2017, p. 7). This study focuses on mass tourism, as both the informants and I would classify much of the tourism existing on Svalbard between February and September as mass tourism. While many of the guides would prefer to work with small groups on multiple daytrip tours, the reality is that a sizeable amount of the work they engage in takes

place between February and September (i.e. it is seasonal) and consists of big groups arriving by plane or ship, whom they guide for a couple of hours or a day. As this is a collection of articles focused on Svalbard, I will not delve into the geographical and historical background of the place (see Arlov, 1989; Saville, 2016; Viken, 2011). Instead, I wish to enrich the contextual background by reviewing relevant previous work on polar tourism.

Tourism has generally been identified as a possible agent of economic, social and ecological change worldwide. The potential to provide economic benefits to remote communities is particularly pronounced within nature-based tourism (Balmford et al., 2015; Cheer & Lew, 2018). But it also brings many challenges, such as concerns about ecological impacts on sensitive ecosystems (Sisneros-Kidd, Monz, Hausner, Schmidt, & Clark, 2019, p. 1259). Lars-Eric Lindblad was the first to lead expedition cruises to the Antarctic and operated on the belief that "you can't protect what you don't know". This has since been taken up by the cruise industry to legitimise increasing polar tourism. Regarding this, Eijgelaar, Thaper and Peeters (2010) write that it is often claimed that travel to disappearing destinations such as Svalbard increases the environmental awareness of tourists and makes them "ambassadors" for conservation and the visited destination (Eijgelaar et al., 2010, p. 337). To do that, operators increasingly take tourists by cruise ship and aircraft to destinations such as Antarctica and other polar regions which are threatened by climate change, to see it before it disappears. But in the end, Eijgelaar et al. concluded that following this philosophy only distances tourism further from other sectors and makes the industry's emission targets harder to achieve. Furthermore, they found no evidence for the hypothesis that the trips develop greater environmental awareness, change attitudes or encourage more sustainable future travel choices (Eijgelaar et al., 2010, pp. 337, 349). Whether the trips have a positive long-lasting effect on the tourists visiting Svalbard is therefore unknown.

However, a recent study by Miller et al. (2020) has shown that a polar bear viewing experience has the potential to increase visitors' pro-environmental and ambassadorship behavioural intentions. In their study, regression analyses revealed that the total minutes educated, and the occurrence of an epiphany had a positive impact on visitors' reported pro-environmental behaviour and ambassadorship intentions (Miller et al., 2020, p. 1703). A similar study has not yet been done on Svalbard, but perhaps experiences there could also have the potential to make a difference in the pro-environmental behaviour after leaving the island (more about this in section 6.3). Svalbard has been a tourist destination since the late 19th century, but within the last 20 years alone the number of overnight stays has tripled, reflecting strong bonds between the tourism industry, research and governing institutions (Viken, 2011). Beside polar bear interest, Svalbard also attracts tourists interested in historical and cultural remains from the whaling and mining industries as well as hikers looking for solitude in the Norwegian wilderness (Aars et al., 2005; Guðmundsdóttir & Sæþórsdóttir, 2009; Hagen, Vistad, Eide, Flyen, & Fangel, 2012; Lemelin & Dyck, 2007).

Svalbard is economically reliant on the natural-resource-based tourism industry. Tourism is necessary to sustain the town, but tourists are at the same time seen as a threat to the environment if not managed (Justis- og beredskapsdepartementet, 2016, pp. 11, 14). Through management they are restricted to certain areas and can mainly take part in activities with a guide as they need a rifle to leave the settlement. However, the dependency on tourism might make Svalbard more vulnerable to boom-bust cycles and

potential alterations to community structure and cohesion as seen in other Arctic communities (Sisneros-Kidd et al., 2019, p. 1270). Furthermore, this kind of tourism tends to create service sector employment, with seasonal positions and lower levels of compensation. This means that the guides' jobs are insecure and unpredictable. Additionally, increases in tourism can result in soaring housing costs, which makes it impossible for those employed in the tourism industry to live in the community where they work (Krannich & Petrzela in Sisneros-Kidd et al., 2019, p. 1265). This is also the case on Svalbard, where guides in the last couple of years have struggled to find housing for their working period and many of the guides interviewed for this study have from time to time resorted to sleeping on friends' couches. When it comes to tourism in Longyearbyen, the topic has been explored from different perspectives of management, coping, identity, power relations and adaptation (Hovelsrud, Kaltborn, & Olsen, 2020; Olsen et al., 2020; Saville, 2019; Viken, 2011), but rarely focusing on what the guides, who work with tourism every day and meet the tourists, think or experience. This will be the aim of this paper.

### Analytical framework

Inspired by the anthropologist Berthou's (2013) in-depth empirical investigation of the logics influencing everyday pro-environmental practices, the main analytical perspective deals with the negotiation of everyday practices. Berthou argues that everyday life, as the starting point of individual pro-environmental practices, is characterised by a complexity which people have to navigate (Berthou, 2013). One of the challenges that Berthou identified in her research had to do with the continuous negotiation that the interlocutors took part in when their ideas and aspiration for a pro-environmental life did not match their wishes for their everyday life or "the good life". For Berthou's interlocutors, things like frequent long-distance flights, long warm showers or eating a lot of meat were expressions of quality of life and thus "the good life" (Berthou, 2013, p. 58). The practical consequence of the conflicting ideals is a constant navigation stemming from the discomfort of the conflict. When the interlocutors experienced a conflict between their wish for "the good life" and their principles, they sought to navigate the experienced discrepancy by trying to negotiate between the two. When negotiating, the consideration of "the good life" would often legitimise many actions normally out of line with the individual's definition of pro-environmental practice – "I would think, if I skip a glass of wine and do not smoke a cigarette today, I can take a long warm shower" (Berthou, 2013, p. 60). These same negotiations take place amongst the guides as will be shown later in this paper. When describing the guides' efforts to contribute to environmental sustainability, the term pro-environmental practices will be used to emphasise their individual involvement and includes things such as limiting energy consumption, recycling and activism related to the environment.

### Trade-offs in a reciprocal relationship

The natural environment is essential to tourism as a key attraction, but how we decide the acceptable thresholds of the trade-off is dependent upon readings of nature and the values we place on it (Holden, 2017, p. 75). To illuminate the value the guides place on nature and thus how they perceive and interact with the environment the paper draws on Latour, (1993). Additionally, it will focus on the concept of "trade-off" understood as a situation where decision making involves diminishing or losing one thing in return



**Picture 2.** Glacier front. Picture taken on a guided trip with a boat around the west coast of Svalbard. Picture by author.

for something else (Hegmon, 2017). For Berthou's interlocutors, the negotiation often manifested as concrete trade-offs. Through these trade-offs, some actions were considered legitimate both in relation to the action itself and in relation to other actions associated with, for example, sustainability or health and comfort. So, when engaged in negotiations within the category of sustainability, her interlocutors would estimate that travelling by plane was legitimate if their meat consumption or long hot showers were minimised (Berthou, 2013, p. 60). While the guides care for the environment through pro-environmental behaviour, they also need to negotiate trade-offs between the environment and the tourism industry. To develop this perspective further, this paper draws on the concept of reciprocity (Kimmerer, 2013), focusing on reciprocity not in between individuals or communities but between individuals and the environment.

### Methods

Based on an interest in understanding *why people who care about the environment and the place they live, participate in an industry that pollutes and potentially threatens its existence*, the questions leading this study were centred around finding out *how the guides navigate and negotiate their relations to the environment when working in the tourism industry*. This paper is primarily based on interviews, participant observation and my own work as a cruise coordinator amongst the guides in Longyearbyen. The point of this paper is not to engage in a discussion in favour of or against the guides' work, or to find out whether the guides' job is morally good or bad. Nor is the point to judge the tourism industry. Instead, the aim is to shed light on the processes which occur when conflicting ideals meet and how we as humans deal with this.

### Access, positioning and participant observation: one of the guides

Fieldwork was conducted between May and October 2019. However, I have lived in Longyearbyen for the best part of four years both studying and guiding. During the fieldwork, I undertook a job as a cruise coordinator and the field quickly became accessible through work. The level of participation in the field was high, as I was actively participating in the industry and

interacted with the guides on a daily basis (Spradley, 1980, pp. 58–62). Active participation including informal conversations proved to be very important throughout the fieldwork, as being visible and active in the guides' field of work was vital to create trust and closer contact (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). For many informants, the summer was prime guiding season and it was difficult to find time for interviews (Kvale, 1998). Talking to guides during the workday could sometimes be sporadic as the breaks were not very long. But, on some occasions, it would lead to a longer conversation that the guide wanted to continue after work. The use of participant observation as a method was thus key to the fieldwork and an important tool to get guides interested in participating in interviews.

### Online ethnography

Due to previous experience living in Longyearbyen, I was aware that a lot of discussions about the tourism industry happen online, in particular on the local Facebook page "Ros og info – Longyearbyen". Hence, I was from the beginning of the fieldwork attentive to what discussions were going on in the public sphere. The online ethnography included finding online places of interaction and following conversations. By looking at the Facebook page and the discussions taking place, I got a fuller portrait of the social life in town and could better participate in conversation with the guides (Kozinets, 2011, pp. 1, 4). The data collected online provided a basis for conducting interviews with the guides, resulting in more informed questions as well as the opportunity to take a starting point in the discussions going on amongst the guides themselves.

### Interviews

Combining participant observation and interviews gave a better understanding of what the guides say they do and what they actually do, making it possible to see if the two things are conflicting (Eriksen, 2017, p. 48). During the fieldwork, I took part in numerous informal conversations as well as 25 interviews. All except one interview were individual and conducted in either English or Danish. In total, I interacted with 54 guides during the fieldwork. The key informants were primarily guides from Longyearbyen as well as some key figures in the tourism industry. The informants were of different ages, civil status and gender. During the interviews, an interview guide was used and it alternated between being semi-structured and unstructured allowing for the interview to follow the interlocutor's interests and views (Bernard, 2011, pp. 156–158; Spradley, 1979). The interviews were then transcribed and coded, both according to the research questions, but also allowing for new topics to emerge from the data.

### Ethical considerations

Working with and for a company there are ethical aspects which need to be taken into consideration (Jöhncke, 2009, pp. 263–268). I was aware that my associations with Hurtigruten Svalbard gave me a certain position in the field. It was therefore necessary to make sure that the study was seen as independent and not referring back to the company. Taking the position as cruise coordinator, I also knew I was going to be in a position with a lot of power attached to it, as I oversaw the guides working for me. This gave me a dual position where I constantly had to be aware of how I handled the confidentiality of the people that worked for me. Since a lot of the interaction with the guides was of an informal nature, both

through work and outside of work, they had to regularly be reminded of my role as a researcher.

I found that my earlier work in Longyearbyen was beneficial as I had already established relations with many of the guides. Because of my background, working as a guide, they trusted me immediately and were more open to help me with my fieldwork. They considered me an insider who knew about the trade and could relate to what they were talking about. About the insider/outsider experience, Spradley writes that it is a common part of participant observation to experience being an insider and outsider in the field and sometimes both simultaneously (Spradley, 1980, pp. 56–57). This was also characteristic of my fieldwork, where I felt like an insider but at the same time was aware of my observations and what was unfolding in front of me. My position influenced how I understood what I observed during the day and what was discussed in interviews. By having inside knowledge and being able to put myself in the position of the guide, I would often sympathise with the guides in the conflicts they were facing. Despite being in a management position, I could easily recognise what they were saying as feelings I once had myself or if they were different from my own, this allowed me to explore our different experiences.

### The guides

#### Different types of guides

The guides generally come from different backgrounds and have for various reasons chosen to guide on Svalbard. Some had a different career within another field before trying guiding, some are scientists and some have been guiding all their life. One big difference between the guides is whether they work full time or part time as a guide. Where many full-time guides stay on Svalbard most of the year or for a specific season, most of the part-time guides guide in their spare time and mostly in the city. These are often students from the University Center in Svalbard (UNIS).

The latter group mainly takes part in the big cruise ship days or when expedition ships are in town and they are therefore only in contact with big groups of tourists. It is furthermore not their main reason to be on Svalbard and they are therefore not as invested in the guiding trade as the full-time guides. Their relation to the environment on Svalbard comes from their experiences with UNIS and their background within natural science. All UNIS students must go through safety training when they arrive and through this they get introduced to Arctic hazards, like the polar bear, the changing environment and how to generally behave in remote Arctic regions. It differs between courses how much time the students get to spend in the field, but almost all students get to go on trips around Svalbard. At UNIS, there is also a one-year programme called "Arctic Nature Guide" (ANG) training people to become guides in the Arctic (for more on ANG see La Cour 2022, this issue).

Some of the students, both regular and ANG, end up staying on Svalbard after their courses or come back when they have finished their studies. Around half of the full-time guides in this study were earlier students who had decided to stay on Svalbard working. These guides' work is versatile, as the season determines what activities they will do with the tourists. In summer when there is no snow, the activities can include hiking, kayaking, dog-sledding, ATV-driving, bus-guiding, one-day boat trips, multiday expedition ships and cruise ship days (which can include all the previously mentioned activities). In the winter season, snow scooter and ice cave trips are offered in addition to the other activities. Generally, the full-time guides work more outside of the city limits



**Picture 3.** Sign at the side of the road when leaving Longyearbyen, warning people that polar bears can be encountered all over Svalbard. Picture by author.

than the students and interact more with the tourists in nature. Their work therefore carries more responsibility as they oversee the tourists' safety. This is not to say that the student guides do not get out of town: as many of them come to Svalbard to experience the nature, they make a point of going out on trips on their own. But they do not have the same responsibility for tourist safety as the full-time guides do.

Another difference concerns the living circumstances of the guides. Where the students are ensured housing while doing courses, the full-time guides do not necessarily get housing through the companies they work for. Meanwhile, the housing situation in town is very unstable and limited. When talking to the guides, this was one of their main worries about being a guide on Svalbard, as it seemed like a constant struggle to find something permanent.

That I have named one group "full time" does not mean that the guides have full-time employment. Many work as freelancers or have seasonal contracts and can work for multiple companies at a time. This is not necessarily the guides' own choice but a consequence of an industry that can be hard to predict. Companies often will not hire full-time guides, as they do not have enough work for them all year round.

### *Who are they?*

Below, the main guides included in this paper will be described. Even though they are just some of the people interviewed and interacted with throughout the fieldwork, they come from different backgrounds and represent a variety of opinions and experiences. All informants are made anonymous throughout the paper.

Lise, a student from a Central European country, was at the time doing fieldwork in Svalbard. She comes from a natural science background and has a lot of knowledge about the effects of climate change. She has spent different periods of time in Svalbard over a span of a couple of years and keeps coming back because of the special Arctic environment. Lise goes on a lot of trips in her spare time and owns a snow scooter to get around in winter. She prides herself on caring for the environment and will often discuss the impacts that we as people have and the changes that are happening. She would work as a guide in her spare time and only guided in the city.

Mathias also comes from a Central European Country and has a natural science background. He came to Svalbard to take the ANG

course after which he stayed in Svalbard to work. He is now a full-time guide working mainly for one company and has lived in Longyearbyen for more than six years. Through his work, Mathias has discovered how distanced people have become from nature. He has chosen to stay on Svalbard because of the opportunity to show and teach people about the Arctic environment as well as the possibilities the small town has to offer in terms of starting his own pro-environmental projects. Mathias is well known in the guiding community and is very involved with the community.

Niels has a background within natural science and was in Svalbard to take courses at UNIS for his master in 2019. He comes from Western Europe but has lived in Norway where he was taking his master's degree. He spent a lot of time on his studies and mostly guided on bigger cruise and expedition days. His main reason for guiding was to earn money, as he was struggling to have enough money to stay in Svalbard. It was his first time visiting Svalbard and he spent a lot of his free time going on trips.

Erik is Scandinavian and has a background outside of the natural sciences. He works full time but for multiple companies and mostly in or close to the city. When Erik first came to Svalbard, it was only temporary, but he has now moved there more permanently and has lived in Longyearbyen for more than 3 years. Erik encourages people to go on vacation in Svalbard and sometimes works with travel companies to promote Svalbard trips. He believes that he helps by managing the tourists and in that way cares for and protects the environment.

Nina comes from Central Europe and has a background within natural science. She first came to Svalbard in 2016 with her studies and has since stayed after her studies ended, to work as a guide. She has worked as a city guide on buses as well as on expedition and one-day-trip ships. She cares a lot about the environment and part of her job while guiding is to hold lectures teaching people about the Arctic environment. She likes it when she can see that the guests understand the impact that they are having on the environment. But, at the same time, she cannot live with some of the experiences she has as a guide, when the environment is not treated right by guests or companies.

### **The guides and the environment**

Through analysis of the data from the participant observation and interviews, different themes emerged centred around the guides, the environment and how they care for it. In the following sections, these themes are represented through the subheadings.

#### *Polar bear as a commodity*

On a sunny day in July, the cruise ship *Mein Schiff* was in town. For the day, the 294-meter-long ship was tied to the harbour and at the entrance a tent was set up together with a service desk. Together with the tent, *Mein Schiff* also had a short red carpet and at the entrance to the ship, you could see a person dressed in a polar bear costume. The "polar bear" was interacting with guests, making funny gestures and taking pictures. Both guests and crew seemed to be amused by it and were willing to play along with the "polar bear". Indeed, many of the guests walking by were actively seeking out the polar bear to take a picture with it in front of the ship.

Recent research shows that to keep tourists satisfied, providers of wildlife watching tourism, instead of focusing on uncontrollable things like the polar bear, should focus on more controllable parts of the experience (Dybsand, 2020). This could be high-quality guiding, expectations management and the more guaranteed side

activities. Additionally, the providers should utilise the natural surroundings, other wildlife in the area and signs of the polar bear when encountered (Dybsand, 2020). As it became clear to me on this cruise day, many of the guides in Longyearbyen would agree to this. Outside of the cruise ship area, I was standing with a group of five full-time guides who were having a break in between tours. Looking at the person dressed in the polar bear costume with disbelief, the job and the polar bear itself became a topic of discussion. To the guides, being dressed as a polar bear was the worst possible job there could be. It almost seemed like a punishment to them, and the full-time guide Max joked about how dressing people in a polar bear costume on cruise days should be the way they punish criminals in town. Agreeing with him, the guides laughed. The discussion then turned to the use of polar bears in a commercial context. This seemed to get the full-time guide Mathias really upset and he exclaimed that it was unbelievable and stupid that they were using polar bear costumes:

*“This is just another way of commodifying the polar bear and making it a symbol of the Arctic even though Svalbard is so much more than that! This is a way of creating a demand for the guests to actually see polar bears. Stuff like this makes the polar bear an object that we can sell even though it is protected and should be left alone”.*

The other guides agreed with this and the guide Ben added:

*“There’s so much beautiful nature to see here but people become so obsessed with the polar bear that it determines whether or not they have a nice trip. We should be selling the nature and the experiences they could have with it instead”.*

Feeling supported by the other guides, Mathias continued to talk about how the companies in town should do more to promote other aspects of Svalbard and that they in general should refrain from using the polar bear as a selling point or in pictures. He explained that it makes it hard for them to create good tours for the guests, because they always have to start a tour by clarifying that they most likely will not see a polar bear. Instead, they have to work hard to get the guests excited about all the other stuff that they can see.

As the guides’ tours were starting up again and their break was over, they had to get back to work. Before leaving they looked once more at the polar bear dressed crew member and laughed. This interaction between the guides did not last more than 15 min, but it illustrates some of the conflicting ideals between the tourism industry and the environment as experienced by the guides. With its unique placement in the Arctic, Svalbard gives tourists the opportunity to experience a completely different environment than what they are used to. Here they find big open spaces of untouched nature, northern lights, snow scooters, a city of only 2400 people, and as the story above showed: polar bears. While these are all phenomena that tourists are eager to experience for the first time, it is also something that becomes part of the guides’ everyday life.

### Perceiving the environment

The environment influences how the guides will dress, prepare and act when they go out on trips. Mathias explained in an interview what the natural environment means to him:

*“It is calming in a way. The wintertime reminds me of a desert, just in white, because it is so wind shaped. It is very artsy in a way. It is like a picture you can look at and it just calms me down. It is a very soft landscape. But it can be a bit dramatic as well. . . . It has something. It’s very bare. It is not hiding anything. Especially when it comes to the rocks, so you get a lot of nice contrasts . . .”*

Mathias describes how on Svalbard there are nearly no trails, powerlines or big ski facilities (see Pictures 1, 2 and 3). Comparing this to most places in Europe, he believes that it is impossible to find that kind of untouched nature anywhere else. Correcting himself he adds that the nature on Svalbard of course is not untouched either, as people are present, but to him it does not look touched. He further explains this by comparing Svalbard to mainland Norway, where powerlines or other things go through the landscape thereby making it visible that people are present. On Svalbard you can feel completely secluded from the world and this can continue for long stretches. This is aided by the fact that when you go out on trips you can experience an extreme silence and a lack of smells from nature or cities, that you otherwise find everywhere else. This, for Mathias is difficult to experience anywhere else. He also emphasises the lack of phone connection outside of town as something good, because it makes it easier to disconnect from the world.

By many of the guides nature is, in its broadest sense, often seen as the collective phenomena of the physical world such as animals, the landscape, and other features and products of the earth. This does not include but rather is opposed to humans or human creations. Although humans are a part of nature, human activity is generally seen as separate from other natural phenomena. Latour, (1993) suggests that the rationality of some supposed “modern” subjects is derived from the historical project that strives to maintain a pure separation between natural and social phenomena (Latour, 1993, p. 99). A classification like that, he says, stems from a profoundly Eurocentric view of the world. However, as Latour and others have pointed out (Haraway, 1997; Latour, 1999; Swyngedouw, 2003), the existence of hybrid objects and processes that oppose simplistic categorisation deems this modern project of confining the world to natural and social spheres unsuccessful. Despite this, these categories of “natural” and “social” remain quite durable (Davis, 2007, p. 214) and are also identifiable in guides’ discussions about environmental preservation and resource management.

The guides simultaneously talk about nature and society as divided and about being a part of nature. They like to experience the quietness and vast human-less landscape but at the same time drive around on fuel powered snow scooters. While the guides would like the tourism providers to focus on things other than the polar bear so the tourists can manage their expectations better, they are also interested in caring for and protecting the polar bear and the environment. The guides to some degree share a notion of nature as weak and destructible which makes them want to protect the environment and manage it. Their description of nature could suggest that they have a binary view on nature and society; however, as this paper will show, their emotional connection to the environment suggests that the guides are intimately connected to it. I thus argue that they are in a reciprocal relationship where the guides are dependent on the environment but at the same time try to protect it and give back to it. Therefore, the guides do not adhere only to the binary division of nature and society, as they in their actions transgress it and interact with nature in a reciprocal way. They do so by engaging in pro-environmental practices.

### Guiding as a pro-environmental practice

While the guides work in the tourism industry and are therefore a part of the pollution, they at the same time engage in pro-environmental behaviour, which helps them care for the environment. The pro-environmental practices are visible in the ways

some of the guides hope to protect and help the environment through their work. In a group discussion regarding the impact that guides can have on the tourist, the guide Lise said:

*“I believe that we all make a huge difference and I think that people have forgotten that they have the power. If we all work together, then everything we do makes a difference. Of course, the companies are the biggest players, but the changes have to come from the root as well, not only from above. And there are these environmental things going on now, but I think we are all in this together. When I talk a lot [about climate change] or when people come to me, I’m telling them that I think that everyone of us need to change. It starts by skipping plastic bottles and it ends by maybe skipping one holiday with a flight, and then go do a nice hike on your neighbor mountain or something. Just the small actions each of us do”.*

As a trade-off for her presence on Svalbard and part in the tourism industry, Lise instead hopes to make a difference in the world through her involvement. As mentioned earlier, many of the guides would prefer to lead smaller groups over multiple days. One of the reasons for this was that they experienced that it made more of an impact as they had more time to connect with the tourists. This was exemplified by another guide, Klaus, who cancelled the trips he was supposed to do for a big cruise ship to instead go out on a small sailing boat and guide a small group of people for a week. He could not turn this opportunity down as it resonated more with his morals. However, this is not an option many guides have during the busy season, and they therefore work with what they get and like Lisa hope to make an impact in the short amount of time they have with the tourist.

That the tour guide plays a crucial role in the guided experience has been argued by numerous scholars (Black & Weiler, 2005; Weiler & Ham, 2000), and tour guides are often viewed as an important part of the sustainable tourism framework (Ormsby & Mannle, 2006; Randall & Rollins, 2009). But, according to Weiler and Kim (2011), the communications and actions of tour guides must be supported by theory to fully optimise the interactions and influence the post-visit pro-environmental attitudes and behaviour (Weiler & Kim, 2011, p. 122). The barrier that they see is that “few guides have even a basic understanding of research that might facilitate their involvement in evaluating their own guiding in relation to particular groups of visitors and particular contexts” (Weiler & Kim, 2011). For the guides in Longyearbyen, I find this statement to be untrue. As described, many of the guides in Longyearbyen, both part time and full time, in some way have a background within research and in their work they draw on this background. Through their work, some guides thus believe they help conserve Svalbard’s environment, for example, by teaching people about climate change and sustainability. When asked how they practice sustainability, some of the guides would thus emphasise the small actions they took to be sustainable. The full-time guide Nina put it this way:

*“I mean I use a reusable bottle. Also, I take my own food to work. I always have it in a box, and I try to avoid using plastic as much as possible. Walking and cycling everywhere. Just like, little things like that. Reusing as much as possible, I mean I wash my plastic bags . . . It’s small things, but at least they matter to me. So yeah, that’s what I do . . . Cause, I think our carbon footprint is just huge by choosing to live up here. There are little things you can do in order not to feed into just the normal pollution”.*

As a trade-off, Nina is trying to compensate for her pollution through her actions. The small actions that the guides do to recycle or reduce pollution can be seen as a way to uphold good relations with the environment (Adams, 2017, pp. 118–120). The same can their education of the tourist, as it is spreading awareness of climate

change and is an attempt to make the tourist change their behaviour at home. While the research on the effect the experiences have on the tourist is ambiguous and it is unclear whether it does have a real effect on their behaviour, many of the guides in Longyearbyen do realise their potential to communicate and role-model sustainability in their tour content and practices. So, they continue their work and negotiation of their own behaviour based on their experience of the influence they have on the tourists.

## How do you care for the environment?

### Negotiating conflicting behaviour

In their everyday life, most of the guides I interacted with in this study were engaged in recycling and being environmentally responsible. The guide Mathias articulated this in the interview when asked how he experiences his own participation in the industry and the pollution associated with it:

*“Already living here has a big impact, coming here basically by plane. I can’t undo that. I could of course minimize it by living somewhere else but then also in that place I will leave a footprint. It might not be as big as here, but it will still be quite big. So being here, the huge profit is that I can be part of a community that is so small that I can for example have my recycling project. So, in a very small frame, I can do something that maybe helps a little bit”.*

Mathias knows that his presence on Svalbard is having a big impact, but he makes the trade-off between the impact and his chance to engage in recycling projects. Mathias is just one of the many guides I have talked to who are passionate about the environment. During a group interview with four part-time guides, I asked how they felt about the cruise industry in general and Lise replied:

*“Personally, I am very emotional when it comes to the environment. For me I think it is a bit disgusting to see it and it is also a bit weird that I am now a part of it. I have been reading a lot of articles lately, because I don’t really know what to think about it”.*

Lise’s statement points to conflicting feelings related to her own values surrounding the environment and her participation in the tourism industry. She made it clear that she is very aware of the effects of climate change on Svalbard. She also believes that she can educate tourists and make them believe in climate change. At the same time, she is disgusted by the cruise industry and feels confused when trying to justify it.

As mentioned, Berthou argues that everyday life, as the starting point of individual pro-environmental practices, is characterised by a complexity which people have to navigate. Furthermore, the practical consequence of the conflicting ideals is a constant navigation stemming from the discomfort of the conflict. What is interesting about Berthou’s study is that her interlocutors, like some of the guides in Svalbard, were engaged in discussions and reflections on how to live in a pro-environmental manner, while simultaneously carrying out practices which are contradictory to a pro-environmental lifestyle. Interestingly, in the cases of both her interlocutors and the guides, a high level of awareness does not necessarily translate into actual pro-environmental practices. When Berthou’s interlocutors thus experienced a conflict between “the good life” and their principles, they navigated the experienced discrepancy by negotiating between them (Berthou, 2013, p. 60). This negotiation is also visible amongst the guides and the different ways this was expressed will be discussed below.

### Impacting the tourist: Short-term and long-term perspectives

During the before-mentioned group interview, a discussion occurred where the two guides, Lise and Niels, disagreed about the impact they can have on the tourists they interact with. In this context, Niels said:

*"I'm gonna be honest. I did the work as a guide only for the money. It would be very hypocritical to say I'm ashamed that I work in this industry... I have met 4-5 climate sceptic assholes. That's even when I was telling them that climate change is a real thing. Maybe it's because they are rich and don't really care about that. But most of the people are generally shocked when you say to them: Oh yes you are contributing to the death of the environment that you see around. And yes, they think that the Arctic or at least Svalbard is shielded from climate change. Which is a big mistake of course. And then at the same time how, when you are guiding, can you reach these people and make them realize? Because you are just a face in the bus and as soon as it's finished, they will forget about you. But maybe you can. I don't know maybe you can try to show them..."*

He was then interrupted by Lise:

*"I don't think that's true. I think you can make a huge difference as a guide. For example, in one day you have maybe 150 people, and of the 150 people you guide through this day, if 20 of them are keeping your words in mind - and they will do it because you have a certain authority as a guide, especially if you say your background, your study. You are the one who will be the expert soon, you know. And you are the one who is at the university here, who works with the researchers here. So, you are the one who knows. Who should know. I think it can change a lot".*

At this point in the discussion, Lise had already made it clear that she believes she is making a difference with the work she is doing. And Niels is responding, saying he is not sure how much of a difference they as guides can make. Trying to negotiate this perspective with him, Lise immediately argues against it, bringing up the amount of people that they interact with in one day and the authority that they have as scientists. She is very confident that they as guides can make a difference. As it can also be seen, Niels is in the end pulling back his argument, saying that maybe they can try to show them. With this he meant show the tourist the effects of climate change. It is also visible that Niels cares about the environment as he uses phrases such as "climate sceptic assholes" and "death of the environment". He is just not sure if guiding is actually helping the environment, which is why he states that his motivation for guiding is financial. Niels is a foreign student who does not have a lot of money. Guiding is therefore a way for him to afford his stay on Svalbard, a luxury that he is willing to pay the environmental price for. The way he justifies it is through his studies:

*"Luckily I'm studying the environment and I'm dedicating my life to study a system that is most likely to disappear or shrink a lot. So, I consider that I'm kind of balancing my footprint on earth by doing that and because I hope to change people's minds to make knowledge go further. I would probably feel bad if I was a tourist or if I was working with something totally different without the environmental protection while being on Svalbard".*

Niels thus makes a trade-off in a long-term perspective, between his study that helps the environment and his participation in the tourism industry.

### Destroyer or protector?

Another guide, Erik, who works as a full-time guide negotiated it differently. During an interview, I asked him if he thinks about his own participation in the tourism industry in his everyday life. To this he answered:

*"Not in everyday life. But if the conversation gets to it, then I don't see them [the guides] as destroyers. I see them more as those who try to take control or*

*contain it. Because if it wasn't for those people [the guides] then it [Svalbard] would be destroyed. I saw a documentary about the Philippines which had been completely overrun by tourism. Garbage on the beaches, no infrastructure and so on. Like, it was really bad. And then the government and local community took care of the problems and stopped it from getting completely destroyed. So, they got it cleaned up. It's about controlling one's guests. So, I wouldn't say that they [the guides and tourist companies] destroy. I would rather say they prevent or delay it from happening".*

Hence, by being a guide Erik feels that he prevents the environment from being destroyed more than necessary. This understanding comes from a preconception of Svalbard as something sacred that needs to be protected. The trade-off he makes is based on the assumption that tourism will be present on Svalbard no matter what. Erik also explains in the interview that he tries to be sustainable or mindful about his choices of, for example cars, but at the same time he likes to travel and would not stop doing that. The idea of "the good life" outweighs the pro-environmental practices he knows he should take part in. Trying to navigate through this dilemma, Erik therefore gives his work meaning. Even though he is a part of the tourism industry, he believes that the trade-off whereby he contains the destruction the tourism industry brings is worth it.

### Moral struggles

The negotiation does not come without some moral struggles, but when talking about whether the guides feel guilty, Lise explained how it is not constructive to feel guilty:

*"I think feeling guilty is never the answer and it's not productive if you think of changing things. So, of course I feel guilty as well sometimes, but I also try to put it somewhere that I don't need to face it. Trying not to confront myself is also a strategy of course... We have to transfer this guilt to something that is constructive, like I felt really good when I collected a lot of cigarette butts. And after that I also carried a plastic bag to collect more cigarette butts when going to work".*

As the tourism industry is perceived by many of the guides as negative for the environment, Lise's participation creates conflicting feelings. But, while she describes how she tries to push the guilt aside and not confront it, she also turns it into something constructive. Thus, looking past the ambivalent feelings it is visible how she negotiates the trade-off and looks at what she and the environment can gain from her participation. This helps her focus on the things she can do to help the environment and not on the things that are in conflict with it, as this could easily stop her from doing anything at all.

However, the conflicting feelings cannot always be negotiated to go away. The guide Nina is an example of how these negotiations can also lead to changes in behaviour. As described in the beginning, she is a guide who first came to Svalbard studying at UNIS and who has since worked in the tourism industry both on expedition ships and as a bus guide. When asked what it was like to go out with expedition ships, she answered:

*"I actually found it very challenging. I mean, don't get me wrong, it was really nice to go around again and to see some places I have never been. And for that it is great. But I actually really struggled with it... On land you set up this perimeter they are supposed to walk within which people don't... I mean the tundra is so sensitive, so in certain areas you are given a route you are supposed to set up because like there's certain areas of the tundra that's more sensitive than others. But we had several times when we had been landing where when you later looked at the tundra or the moss you could see the imprint. So, you are having an impact. A very, very clear impact... so, like, in that sense I really have to say it was a bit soul destroying. Where I was just, like: I don't think I can be part of this industry..."*



When asked if she thinks she will do it again, she said:

*“No. No. I have to say I personally really morally struggled . . . There were several landings where I was so frustrated that I actually just wanted to cry. There was also one landing where they were nearly walking over a Purple Sandpiper family and the mother was like trying to take people away but then they were nearly trampling over the chicks. Because they are just not watching where they walk . . . I can't justify it [working on the ships]. Except for, like, selfish motivation to go on the boat. And I'm not a part of that”.*

Nina's description of her moral struggle points to a limit in the negotiation between pro-environmental practices and “the good life”, where the moral values outweigh the “good life”. Even though Nina likes being on the ship and it is nice to go around Svalbard and experience new places, it thus compromises her moral values too much to continue.

Looking back at the discussion the guides had about the polar bear costume, that event in addition to their pro-environmental practices further illuminates the way the guides relate to climate change and the environment. As such, their knowledge about the relationship between climate change and things like the polar bear and the environment implies that the guides have to relate to a far more abstract cycle of climate change than just sorting trash. As a part of the industry the guides can inform tourists about the current conditions of the world. They get to guard the way the environment is treated by making sure the tourists adhere to the guidelines of how to engage with the environment. The tourists can choose to take this home or forget about it as soon as they leave Svalbard. The guides, on the other hand, live close to nature and see the changes that are happening.

I take this to indicate a more wide-ranging climate awareness and that an ecological cosmology (cf. Handelman, 2008, p. 181,188; Jakobsen, 2011, p. 33) within the guide community exists. This ecological cosmology includes the guides' pro-environmental practices and shows that their perception of the relation between humans and the environment is based on reciprocity (Kimmerer, 2013; Pálsson, 1996, p. 72). The environment has agency of its own and influences the guides, while the guides simultaneously impact the environment through their actions. This they are very aware of, as seen in their pro-environmental practices and their considerations regarding the environment. What becomes clear is how difficult it is to act morally in relation to the environment and how it is impossible for the guides to avoid harming the environment one way or another through their actions. Through their reciprocal relationship, however, they get to negotiate the trade-offs they make with the environment, and thus how they live with both caring for it and being a part of the tourism industry at the same time.

### *Taking from and giving to the environment*

To further understand the meaning and scale of the negotiation that the guides engage in and how they are trying to uphold a good relation to the environment through tourism, it is relevant to look closer at the concept of reciprocity. While the concept originally refers to the non-market exchange of goods or labour, the indigenous author Kimmerer (2013) discusses reciprocity between people and their environments. She writes that “one of our responsibilities as human is to find ways to enter into reciprocity with the more-than-human world. We can do it through gratitude, through ceremony, through land stewardship, science, art, and in everyday acts of practical reverence” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 190). She sees reciprocity as a matter of keeping the gift in motion. This is

done through self-perpetuating cycles of receiving and giving (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 165).

The guides are the givers of the gift when they engage in pro-environmental practices or when they educate tourists about climate change. Their actions can be perceived as a gift to the environment, as it is something they do for the environment. What they get back in return is a longer lasting environment. The exchange between the environment and the guides is not necessarily equal, as they decide how much they take from and give to the environment. There will be no other consequences of their decision besides their own personal moral struggles, as we saw with Nina regarding the expedition ships. But, at the same time, the exchange between the guides and the environment is personal and can be delayed. As with Niels, who believes that by studying the environment he will in the future make up for the pollution that he is a part of now.

Kimmerer writes that “*ecological restoration can be viewed as an act of reciprocity in which humans exercise their caregiving responsibility for the ecosystems that sustain them*” (Kimmerer 2013, 336). I believe the same can be said about the guides' pro-environmental practices. When the guides give to the environment through pro-environmental acts, the present itself symbolises caring. It shows that the individual guides care for the environment and that they are engaged with and feel a need to help it. Sustainability, according to Anna Tsing (2017), has two sides to it: the caring and the destroying (Tsing, 2017, p. 51). Where, on one hand, Tsing writes that “sustainability is the dream of passing a liveable earth to future generations, human and nonhuman” (Tsing, 2017, p. 51), the term is according to her simultaneously used as a cover up for destructive practices. In Svalbard, both sides are visible through the paradox it is to live there. As shown in this paper, multiple guides feel like the pro-environmental practices they carry out in everyday life are the least they can do, as they are already polluting by being on Svalbard. They thus feel obligated to give back what they are taking from the environment by polluting. They are bound in a covenant of reciprocity to sustain those who sustain them (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 382) and they enter into intimate, personal relationships with nature through reciprocity.

Some reciprocal relationships can be unlimited in the number of people involved. Therefore, exchange can happen asymmetrically where goods or services pass through different people (Nowak & Sigmund, 2005, pp. 1292–1296). As shown, Lise argues that she has an impact on the people that she guides. She hopes that they take what they have learned home and change their behaviour because of it. In this way, they will end up giving back to the environment because of Lise. To Lise this makes her work meaningful and helps her pay back the environment. By focusing on the whole person, the way they act and how their actions take place within a context, we understand that it is through tourism that Lise has found a way to fulfil her obligation to the environment.

### **Conclusion**

The Rubin's Vase is a famous picture made up of two figures, a vase and two faces. Depending on what figure you focus on, the other one will become a part of the background. It thus describes how two ambiguous perceptual experiences can exist together by changing between the two alternative explanations. When looking at the picture of the cruise ship (Picture 4) the same can be experienced as we either look at the cruise ship or the landscape in the background. Hence, the picture illustrates the way the tourism



**Picture 4.** Cruise ship docked at Longyearbyen Harbor. Behind the mountain Hiorthfjellet can be seen. Picture by author.

industry and the environment on Svalbard are two ambiguous figures difficult to reconcile. For the guides in Longyearbyen, the trade-off between the two is more visible and physical than for others. They see the changes that are happening and are often reminded about the impact they themselves have on the environment. While people around the world know that there are environmental problems, many do not experience them the same way as the guides do. For the tourist, it might therefore be easier to dismiss the impact that cruise ships have, without giving something back to the environment. However, as we start to see the effects of climate change, we will all have to make choices about our (un)sustainable practices.

This paper has shown how the guides try to navigate between their love and care for the environment and their work as guides on Svalbard. Through studies like this one it is possible to gain a better understanding of how people cope when living with conflicting ideals regarding the environment. The guides' relations to the environment are characterised by complexity and the choices they make have consequences which they negotiate through pro-environmental practices. By identifying the ways that trade-offs are justified, this paper has illustrated how the guides in their everyday life are engaged in these pro-environmental practices and how this becomes a part of their negotiation. The trade-offs thus make some actions, like working in the tourism industry, legitimate. By looking at the pro-environmental practices and the guides' perceptions of the environment, it furthermore becomes clear that some guides are in a reciprocal relationship with the environment. Through this relationship, the trade-offs become a way for them to navigate conflicting feelings in a short-term and long-term perspective. Many of the guides in Longyearbyen realise their potential to practice conservation from below by communicating and role-modelling sustainability in their tour content and practices. They see themselves as part of the environment and, instead of ignoring their participation in the tourism industry, they turn it into something constructive and try to pay back the environment through their engagement. As such they find a way to navigate the complexity of both caring for the environment and being a part of the tourism industry through their intimate relation to the environment and thus confront the kinds of choices and decisions we will all be

faced with. In the future, this can be applied when looking into how people make sense of transitioning to sustainable practices.

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