Locating Value(s) in Political Ecologies of Knowledge: The East Svalbard Management Plan

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Abstract

Svalbard has become a site of prolific scientific interest and draws increasing numbers of scientists and students to its high Arctic research stations every year. They join the proliferation of tourists visiting the archipelago. Meanwhile, Norway aims for Svalbard to be one of the best managed wilderness areas in the world and works to achieve this through a series of regulations and visitor guidelines. I argue that wilderness management in Svalbard can be understood as part of a wider framework of value circulations and constructions. Through this chapter, I demonstrate that tracing value processes – concentrating on what value does, the 'work' it performs, how it is practiced and what relations are caught up in productions and circulations of value – can be an illuminating analytical tactic capable of tracing links between 'everyday' micro-value practices and wider geopolitical and international environmental concerns. Svalbard can be seen then as a place which acts as a hub in an expanding network of value through the practice of knowledge production. Svalbard as a central point where many actors meet also exerts its own force upon those producing knowledge of it and with it. I examine the case of the East Svalbard Management Plan as an example of tensions between different ways of enacting value and values. Here, knowledge about Svalbard is used to support opposing strategies of wilderness management and the way in which knowledge is enrolled in ecological management becomes a key point of tension.

Main Text

> While we stopped to survey lichens, we spotted a gosling amongst the rocks. Our excitement watching this cute, fluffy, photogenic chick turned to concern when it began to follow us. Were we disturbing nature? Were we leading it too far away from its mother? We decided to move on and 'lose' our intrepid follower. A few minutes later we saw a polar fox carrying a gosling away. We were left sobered and full of questions we could not answer. "Was it our fault?" Did our presence make a difference? "That's nature for you, harsh". "At least Mr Fox got some lunch". (Field notes, 4th July 2013)

Whilst academically, we may have resolved the problem of our place in 'natureculture' (Davis, 2007), in practice, as the above extract illustrates, tensions and questions still arise, particularly in regions that are more 'wild'. In this chapter I explore such tensions through the

example of wilderness management in Svalbard. A place where visitors are "welcome to the Arctic – as long as you leave no signs of having been here!" (Governor of Svalbard, 2010, p.8). I demonstrate that tracing value processes – concentrating on what value does, the 'work' it performs, how it is practiced and what relations are caught up in productions and circulations of value – can be an illuminating analytical tactic capable of tracing links between 'everyday' micro-value practices and wider geopolitical and international environmental concerns. I argue that wilderness management in Svalbard can be understood as part of a wider framework of value circulations and constructions. These value practices are not yet fully incorporated into protected area management plans. I take knowledge production[i] in Svalbard as one part of an ecology which also encompasses state regulations, tourists, residents and more than human natures.

Throughout the chapter I draw upon extensive interviews and ethnographic experiences from research undertaken in the summers of 2013 and 2014. I begin by introducing the guiding premises of working with value and values in this way. Svalbard is then located, geographically as a valued site of knowledge production. This is developed into an understanding of Svalbard as a place which acts as a hub in an expanding network of value through the practice of knowledge production. Svalbard as a central point where many actors meet also exerts its own force upon those producing knowledge of it and with it. Finally, I examine the case of the East Svalbard Management Plan as an example of tensions between different ways of enacting value and values. Here, knowledge about Svalbard is used to support opposing strategies of wilderness management and the way in which knowledge is enrolled in ecological management becomes a key point of tension. A split between humanist and eco-centric ideological stances is apparent. However, an expanded examination of value circulations presented here further highlights the need to take value seriously in decision making and as an analytical tool.

Locating a value approach

> Value emerges contextually and relates to the interests of those doing the valuing (Bourdieu cited by Cresswell, 2012, p. 167).

In his detailed evaluation of the concept of value within the writings of Marx's, George Henderson (2013) notes the importance of paying attention to the work that value does and how this work in turn affects value. Henderson considers value to be performative and relational; a concept that can travel beyond the realms of labour and capital relations (2004). Similarly, anthropologists David Graeber (2001) and Daniel Miller (2008) along with sociologist Beverley Skeggs (2014) are keen to focus not on what value is exactly, but what value *does*, how it is practiced and what relations are caught up in the production of value and values. My examinations of value in Svalbard have been inspired by a combination of these ideas and the beginnings of a geographical engagement with value as being contingent, thoroughly peopled, political and constructed through the values of those caught up in the processes of valuation (Lee, 2006; Cresswell, 2012; Robertson and Wainwright, 2013).

Miller (2008) interrogates the link between value as a quantitative, calculative term and values as qualitative and intangible. He argues that the two are not easily separated but are intimately related on a moving scale, or bridge and "this bridge lies at the core of what could be called the everyday cosmologies by which people, and indeed companies and governments live" (Miller, 2008, p.1123). In his analysis of shareholder value and 'best value' policies in local governance Miller (ibid.) shows how calculative value dominates, yet prevents the ultimate realisation of societal benefits due to a failure to accommodate qualitative values. Drawing upon Miller's approach and the above insights, I seek to explore how value and values of knowledge production are practiced in Svalbard and what this means in terms of wilderness management. Methodologically, this has meant a focus on value from the start, with lines of investigation, questions and participant selection all geared towards exploring Svalbard through this lens.

Svalbard is an interesting case from the perspective of knowledge networks and circulation, given its specifically international environment and a recent shift towards becoming a 'centre of calculation' and knowledge creation (Jöns, 2015). Paying attention to how value flows and how values connect between different stakeholders, on different levels through both 'everyday' happenings and particular moments of decision making, offers one way to address seemingly paradoxical impasses.

Svalbard as a valued site for knowledge production

Svalbard is an archipelago within the Arctic Circle between 74 and 81 degrees north, governed by Norway under a special international treaty since 1925. Unlike many Arctic areas of human settlement, Svalbard's population is non-indigenous, cosmopolitan and transient. The majority of the 2500 residents live in the Norwegian capital of Longyearbyen, the active Russian coal mining town of Barentsburg houses four hundred workers including scientific bases.

Svalbard's physical features of relative accessibility, arctic ecology, geological and glacial formations have attracted scientific expeditions from many nations. Svalbard has a history of exploration dating back to the 16th Century. Extraction of natural resources, with the accompanying scientific, specifically geological, knowledge took precedence from 1600 to the modern coal mining of today (Avango *et al.*, 2011). Non-mining related scientific activity and tourism were marginal, but on-going until recently. Since the 1990s Norway has actively sought to support, encourage and promote Norwegian science and international collaborations in Svalbard as part of its economic diversification away from a sole reliance on coal mining and active demonstration of sovereignty in Svalbard[ii]. In 1993 the University Centre in Svalbard, UNIS, opened in Longyearbyen.

Svalbard now attracts a wide range of natural and physical scientists having developed facilities in Longyearbyen and research bases in the former mining base of Ny Alesund,

which hosts research stations for 13 nations. For climate change scientists, its geographical position gives access to Arctic conditions in the East and the effects of the Gulf Stream in the West through the West Spitsbergen Current as well as the Arctic Ocean and Greenland Sea - interesting too for marine biologists. Almost two thirds of the nearly 62,000 square kilometre land mass is glaciated, hence glaciologists have a range of glacial processes, including surging glaciers to attract them. Physicists can make use of the high latitudes and highly specified arrays to observe Auroral conditions and other upper atmospheric phenomena. Terrestrial biologists are occupied with rare and unique species such as the polar bear, Svalbard reindeer and myriad invertebrates as well as the plethora of migratory birds that arrive in the summer. Arctic technology is a growing department at UNIS as well, combining the challenging climatic and physical conditions of the arctic with access to existing and developing industrial activities.

The research and education sector in Svalbard continues to grow. UNIS reports continued growth with nearly 800 students attending and over 100 staff or adjuncts producing 153 published articles in 2017 (UNIS, 2013). The international research base in Ny Alesund also reports increased activity (Kings Bay AS, 2013). Operations out of Russian scientific bases in Barentsburg and Pyramiden are likewise rising and are seen as a key area of growth for Russian presence in Svalbard. For the purposes of this chapter, I am focussing on the main settlement and access point of Longyearbyen where UNIS, the Norwegian Polar Institute and associated research facilities are located: around one third of the scientific activity takes place in this area.

A valued political site

> In Svalbard, scientific research must be regarded at least in part as informal diplomatic activity engaged in by Norway (which makes such research possible) and by other states (which fund researchers) (Grydehøj, 2013, p. 53)

Political analysts as well as residents and visitors interested in Svalbard politics do not regard Norway's sovereignty of Svalbard as solid, with the Svalbard Treaty limiting the extent of power Norway can have and leaving much open to interpretation (see for example Pederson, 2009; Grydehøj, 2013). Previous research has asserted that the expansion of tourism and research are a continuation of contests over sovereignty cloaked in discourses of energy security, climate change, and local economic development (Timothy, 2010; Avango *et al.*, 2011; Grydehøj, 2013).

In Norwegian policy documents relating to the Arctic, the political role of research is seemingly transparent: Norway's High North Strategy focuses on "knowledge, activity and presence" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2007, p. 6) as key words, with knowledge development and knowledge partnerships being 2 of the 5 areas that are seen as important to 'value creation' in the region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014). More specifically, research, knowledge and higher education were a key focus areas for development in Norway's

governance of Svalbard. Svalbard was, "of vital importance as a platform for Norwegian and international research… Although Svalbard must remain an attractive venue for scientists from around the world, Norway is to have a leading role and be a key player in the area of developing knowledge in and around Svalbard" (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and the Police 2010, p.11). The most recent white paper for Norwegian policy in Svalbard recognises many of its previous development objectives have been met, whilst it remains as an ongoing priority area (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2016).

Following Jöns (2015) in a brief Latourian analysis of this situation, in terms of knowledge circulation and networks, the importance of Svalbard to Norway becomes clear. Creating knowledge with/about Svalbard not only means that Norwegian scientists working there can be part of global knowledge networks and strengthen both Svalbard research centres and Norwegian mainland ones, but also that international scientists will find themselves encouraged to collaborate with Norwegian institutions through funding and logistical advantages. Therefore more and more links and stronger relations with researchers and organisations in Svalbard and Norway are developed internationally. This, as Grydehøj notes is one way international relations can play out through science, with science 'naturalising' competition, to some extent (Katz and Kirby, 1991). The importance of asserting sovereignty and the geopolitical significance of their/our activities is not lost on those within research institutions, from high level managers to students, and indeed beyond, as one member of the scientific community expressed,

> Everything we do, everything everyone does on Svalbard, including the janitors is part of a geopolitical framework. Having contact with all these nations means that every word I say has to be weighed…It influences everything that happens in Svalbard, including your work. (Interview, 27th May 2014)

Moreover, extra care appears to be taken that the practicing of scientific activity here is made visible through material inscriptions such as signage; flags and branded equipment (for example see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The University of South Bohemia's research container, complete with signage and Czech, Russian and Norwegian flags and a Swedish Polar Research Secretariat jacket in the background.

Connected to the political need for a presence and the prestige of being a leading research nation of the Arctic, is environmental protection. Under the Svalbard Treaty, Norway is able to legislate for environmental preservation. Norway has certainly taken this opportunity and has high aspirations of Svalbard being recognised as one of the best managed wilderness areas in the world and has applied for World Heritage Status. Over 65% of the landmass is part of a protected area through National Parks, Nature Reserves or Bird Reserves. Scientific knowledge has been key to establishing the significant legislation and protection areas throughout the archipelago, beginning in the 1970s and remains an important tool in their ongoing management. However, by the penultimate white paper, the environmental impacts of scientific activities were being weighed against the value of the knowledge they can produce.

> Research that is conducted ought to be of such a nature that it only or best can be conducted in Svalbard, and it must always take the vulnerability of the environment into consideration. This caution must go hand in hand with the acknowledgement that knowledge through research is necessary in order to achieve a reliable management of the natural wilderness in Svalbard. (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and the Police, 2010, p. 75)

Whereas the subsequent white paper offers more nuance, at this time environmental protection seemed the policy priority, "environmental considerations are to take precedence over other interests whenever they conflict" (ibid, p. 10).

Svalbard is clearly a highly valued site geo-politically for Norway and other nations: not only for the opportunity to increase knowledge about the arctic, but also for the political prestige or symbolic value of being an active arctic nation with high scientific and environmental standards. Behind this political and policy support, is of course a large economic framework for both the scientific activity and the governance structures of environmental protection. In both cases employment positions are considered very prestigious, have good salaries and other valuable benefits like subsidised accommodation. Academic positions are constructed to attract high calibre staff, employment at UNIS comes with a far larger research budget than colleagues on mainland Norway. Yet, the economics are not, I would argue, the driving force or at least not the most interesting aspects of this ecology.

A hub of opportunities: practice and values

The goal of Svalbard becoming an arctic hub is certainly aspired to by policy makers and some members of the Longyearbyen community. Honing in on knowledge production, it would seem this has already been achieved to some extent. The 2008-2009 Norwegian White paper stated that "Svalbard has become a meeting place for the Government's international network … Svalbard has become a land of opportunity for the development of knowledge*"* (2010, pp. 74–76). The most recent paper affirms this position. The opportunities available in Svalbard for learning, research, impact, access to field data, equipment and expertise, were widely recurring themes within the interviews and conversations I had in and around the scientific community in Longyearbyen.

> The list of politicians, business men, religious leaders and others that come here is very long. And we get to meet them and explain what we see and

> understand. So it's an opportunity to influence directly those who would listen that is not as readily available elsewhere. (Interview 27th May 2014).
>
> The only reason I keep coming back is because the geology is so good, the research environment is so good, the opportunities we get to do the work that I want to do personally is just incredible. (Interview 27th June 2014)

Svalbard, and perhaps especially Longyearbyen, is seen as a place of opportunities. A great deal is on offer to develop scientific careers, to undertake research or education in exciting and interesting fields, in a supportive, well-funded and well-equipped way with direct access to the physical phenomena, to influential people in the field, to make connections and to find others interested in your work.

Beyond the increasing circulation of value in the sense of political collaboration and funding arrangements, the *practice* of research and its growth creates more value. As networks, collaborations, equipment and experiences expand and link together, the value of doing research in Svalbard in particular spiral outwards in a growing, self-reinforcing cycle of value. Moreover, the glaciers, upper atmospheric particles and polar bears of Svalbard alike become embroiled in the outwards push for growing knowledge and the value of such knowledge through the specific skills, research methods, equipment and knowledge networks that research in Svalbard generates. As Livingstone notes, place matters in the doing of knowledge production (Livingstone, 2003).

In addition, the enthusiasm, curiosity and other emotional, affectual elements of a relationship with Svalbard as a field site should be considered. Whilst some scientists were reluctant to talk specifically about any form of place attachment or emotional relation to their research, which chimes with previous observations of scientific practices (see for example Lorimer, 2008; Whitney, 2013) equally others at very least recognised their own enthusiasm and passion for this work and the opportunities that Svalbard presents for them. Whilst the emotional and affectual experiences of scientists and students is usually written out of the formal channels of knowledge circulation and production, they are nevertheless important factors in the practice of research and thus contribute towards this growing ‘value vortex’.

> I think all the researchers have an emotional connection to their field… having the luck to see glaciers out of my window everyday…, it inspires you a lot more. ... It’s amazing we have these images every 10 or 11 days, oh this one is surging, let's go and have a look at it. It's easier to do field work to get the data. But at the same time we have this very tight connection with the landscape where we are, so I think it’s a really big deal for sure. (Interview 13th June 2014)

Like others who have observed scientists in the field (Lorimer, 2008; Whitney, 2013), within the growing cyclical relations of value in knowledge production, I noted a common ethics of

environmental responsibility, care, respect and affinity for the 'wilderness' of Svalbard. This was encouraged within the teachings and practices at UNIS. Such values would seem to be compatible with the environmental goals of the state. However, furthering knowledge and data collection was also given utmost importance amongst the scientific community. There were clear feelings from the majority of participants that carefully managed access for *all* (including local residents and tourists) should be possible and environmentally beneficial. Reasons for supporting relatively open access ranged from it being an acceptable level of regulation (and therefore keeps good will towards other regulations from the Governor); the educational and potential advocacy effects of seeing and experiencing such areas; to the point of view that access should be available equally among citizens. This issue of access is where tensions between different stakeholders surrounding the specific case of the East Svalbard Management Plan coalesced.

Practices of value and values: The East Svalbard Management Plan

> I think that it's much better to do volunteer guidelines, teach people about it so that they can experience it. You protect what you know, and you protect what you can see. You protect what you love. (Interview 21st May 2014)

The East Svalbard Management Plan came into force in Spring 2014. Though there are no new reserves or parks created as part of the process, the plan tightened restrictions to the access of East Svalbard, making two zones 'scientific reference areas'. Other changes were the summer closing of the bird reserve areas to the west of Lågøya and at Tusenøyane, meaning that due to sea ice, and restrictions on helicopter usage it is highly unlikely access will be possible.

Somewhat ironically, the scientific reference area means that access will be very limited, even for science activities, the idea being to create an area as unaffected by humans as possible. According to the management plan, climate research and other environmental research that requires access to large, and essentially undisturbed, areas *may* receive permits for activities. Ongoing monitoring can continue, with the best available environmentally sound technology, but is expected to require less travel and presence in the nature reserves, and less direct handling of animals. New surveys that require permits will be kept to a minimum. Surveys that will create basic knowledge about prioritised or Red-listed habitats and species, or natural qualities mentioned in the purpose of protection, will be granted permission (Governor of Svalbard, 2012, p. 34).

The new management plan was already taking an effect, with permits being harder to obtain and meet conditions for, as one researcher describes:

> We've been absolutely slammed recently, by Sysselmannen [the Governor's office] … they are really trying to limit the areas in which people work. We're very lucky because as geologists we have to go where the rocks are. But I think it's unfair to limit the research in other kind of areas because there's a lot to see over there [East Svalbard]. (Interview 27th June 2014)

The management plan was devised through a consultation exercise, lasting over 8 years with several different working groups including stakeholders from research, education, and tourism sectors. The starting document from the environment department sought to close off many more areas, but through this consultation process, the stakeholder groups reduced the areas affected by the plan. However, a number of informants observing or participating, felt that the evidence, advice and experience fed into the consultation were not taken on board. They noted that the drawn out nature of the process itself put stakeholder groups at a disadvantage, given the substantial amount of un-waged time involved. The outcome was still not especially popular and is considered to reflect the values of the Governor's Office and staff and the Norwegian Environment Ministry, often described as 'symbolic politics' in action.

> There has been a case built for protection for this and that, and there was no evidence. All the evidence was flawed, or out-dated, or simply not there, or made on presumption …. I must say, I find it hard to take these people seriously now, because they wilfully ignore evidence, which is my profession is a cardinal sin. (Interview 3rd June 2014)

> They close one area which is actually quite big which they call a bird reserve: A Thousand Islands [Tusenøyane], yet there's no birds there… you've put lots of lines on the map you made lots of legal texts and operation manuals that no one can understand, but you protect nothing of the environment. (Interview 14th May 2014)

Moreover the physical environment and non-human species in this area present a challenge and tension to this approach whether from not being there, like the birds, or offering unique features, ecologies and conditions that would otherwise be of great interest to tourists and scientists.

Environmental protection has been given the top priority in these eastern zones of Svalbard, despite the predicted increased scientific observations in East Svalbard which the Svalbard White paper included (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and the Police 2010, p.77). My interpretation is that this is not so much about *what* is valued, all are in agreement that Svalbard's natural wilderness is highly valuable, but *how* it is valued and what such a valuation does. The same area can have multiple meanings and very different kinds of value associated with it, as Endres (2012) puts it, value can be polysemous. In this case, the polysemous nature of value is related to definitions and ideas of wilderness and human relations within and as part of that wilderness.

> We must have the guts to say no for a lot of activities. Everybody wants to go into the wilderness and they want to go to places which nobody else has been before and we must say no. We don't want people to go in there because of the possibility to destroy the wilderness and the untouched

> landscape. When you come back in 50 years, it still has to be looking like there hasn't been any people there. (Interview 19th June 2014)

We can treat these mountains and glaciers as pristine and an opportunity to show the world high level environmental protection in action, a time-capsuled gift to future generations. The now-familiar critique of the very idea of pristine nature (Cronon, 1995) is however recognised by those against the government's approach. Svalbard's non-settled areas constructed as pristine wilderness, erase not only the history of natural resource exploitation on and around the archipelago (Avango, Hacquebord and Wråkberg, 2014), but also obscure the present activities. Tourism, fishing, resource exploration, scientific work, environmental protection and geopolitical narratives continue to shape and affect these areas. Those against such an approach might argue that we would never witness the harshness or vulnerabilities of 'nature' of our gosling being carried off by the fox if access was not permitted. Such a fox-goose encounter might as well not happen as we were not there to learn from it.

> It looks like in their mindset they [the Governor's Office] are against humans. Humans disturb nature. And nature should be left alone and not disturbed, not visited, and not used by humans. On a philosophical level I disagree…. humans are a part of nature, not a separate entity. To uphold this separation is meaningless and indeed harmful (Interview 3rd June 2014 and email 11th September 2014).

On the other hand, valuing Svalbard's wilderness as a site for learning about arctic environments and inspiring wider environmental awareness, points to a more open policy of access. Yet this more humanistic approach increases the potential for direct environmental impact and lacks the political impact of declaring an area 'fully protected' or closed. Antagonists could suggest we would never know how the fox-gosling encounter would play out without human presence, if that presence is always a possibility.

At the Environment department at the Governor's office, I heard very similar views to those complaining about the restrictions: a will to let people experience 'the nature' and therefore inspire protection, *but* that this should only occur in the Western Spitsbergen area, where human settlements and activities have historically been concentrated. It seems that East Svalbard is another matter and is valued in a very different way, with Western Spitsbergen acting as a form of sacrifice zone for tourism, leisure, resource extraction and scientific activities. Taking this view, it matters far less that we potentially disturbed the gosling in Western Spitsbergen than if we had been elsewhere in Svalbard. Put this way, complex consultation processes, where there are multiple meanings of value at work, can sometimes lead to confusing results:

> I would say the east Svalbard protection plan probably does damage to the environment. What did you stop there? You stopped 173 environmental protectionists…who are some of the richest people in the world, or a film maker or a scientist who wants to do good (Interview 14th May 2014).

Conclusion

Svalbard, as the land of opportunity for scientists, creates economic, social, cultural, environmental and symbolic value in a growing cyclic manner. Scientific engagement with Svalbard also creates values which are not necessarily in tune with the values that lie behind the government's approach to environmental regulation. This discord brings the processes of knowledge production into question. Both 'camps' make overt use of quantitative evidence to argue their case, and accuse the other of being driven by feelings, or unscientific practice. However, as Latour (2004) argues, facts and values are not so easily separated. Put another way, Miller (2008) posits that there is a wide spectrum of ways that we value from quantifiable value (monetary worth, or data sets for example) to personal values (such as care for the Svalbard Reindeer or the right to roam freely). Public policies and decision making process will achieve better outcomes, Miller demonstrates, if the breadth of different meanings and types of value can be held together and discussed. Indeed, Endres (2012) points to a growing movement within participatory decision making scholarship that seeks to find a place at the table for polysemous values to be taken into account.

If the values and politics accompanying the scientific evidence drawn upon could also be included, perhaps consultation exercises on environmental management in Svalbard could become more satisfactory for all parties. Tracing the value and values associated with knowledge production and its practice in Svalbard has proven to be an example of an illuminating angle for investigation and analysis. I believe such an approach can open up discussions and make more transparent the processes of evaluation and decision making at work in contested areas.

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[i] I focus largely on research and education activities here, however, tourism shares many characteristics with such activities, including knowledge production (see Saville, 2019).

[ii] This diversification was also a move to transition Longyearbyen from a mining company town to a more 'normal', Norwegian family setting (Grydehøj, Grydehøj and Ackren, 2012).