“Norwayism” – a failed ideological framework for understanding Norwegian friluftsliv

© **André Horgen**

University of South-Eastern Norway

Author contact <andre.horgen@usn.no>

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This scientific essay seeks to spark debate among academics in the field of outdoor recreation, both in Norway and internationally. While many acknowledge the diversity of practices, motivations, and meanings associated with Norwegian friluftsliv (outdoor recreation), the academic discourse surrounding it remains surprisingly narrow, essentialist, and stereotypical. Dominant interpretations often portray Norwegian friluftsliv as simple and nature-friendly outdoor travel, rooted in a uniquely Norwegian spiritual and profound connection with nature. This perspective positions friluftsliv as a phenomenon that is unparalleled, culturally untranslatable, and even capable of addressing global environmental and climate crises. Such an understanding endures despite its origins in a curious blend of ecophilosophy, anti-capitalist nationalism, selective storytelling, and subjective preferences. These elements are further reinforced by a powerful rhetoric of depth, tradition, and naturalness, which demands reverence and conformity. For the academic field of outdoor recreation—particularly studies of Norwegian friluftsliv in higher education—to be taken seriously within the broader academic community, it must confront the blind spots and biases perpetuated by what I term “Norwayism” in this essay. Only by critically examining these assumptions can the field evolve and contribute meaningfully to global scholarly discourse.

Within the international field of Outdoor Education, the concept of *friluftsliv* is recognized as part of the discipline but is often regarded as untranslatable and distinct from outdoor recreation, outdoor life, and outdoor adventure/education. In the book *Norwegian Friluftsliv: A Way of Living and Learning in Nature* (Hofmann et al., 2018, 21), the authors argue that *friluftsliv* represents more than just activities like walking, climbing, or cycling in nature: "Through the word friluftsliv Norwegians want to express their relationship with nature: 'a simple way of life in the open air.'" Syvertsen & Rodriguez-Morales (2025) claims that *friluftsliv* is today promoted internationally, in the lifestyle market, as a unique and authentic tradition, as "the next big thing in outdoor adventure" (2). These notions remain influential both nationally and internationally, despite research suggesting that the activities we now associate with *friluftsliv* have not historically been tied to a specific philosophy of nature. Instead, they have often been rooted in a sports ideology, where sports and *friluftsliv* have coexisted in a fusion with fluid boundaries between sports, *friluftsliv*, and tourism. This historical context has contributed to the diverse practices, motivations, and meanings encompassed by what Norwegians today refer to as *friluftsliv* (Olstad 1987; Goksøyr 1991; 2008; Tordsson 2003; Slagstad 2008; Ulvund 2013; Schaanning 2015; Horgen 2022, 2025b).

There is substantial evidence that *friluftsliv* has long been understood in Norway in its literal sense as "life in the open air." Rather than using the term *friluftsliv*, Norwegians often refer to "going on a trip" (*tur*) or engaging in specific activities. The distinction between sports and *friluftsliv* in Norway emerged gradually over a long historical process, beginning with the so-called "sports dispute" (*idrettsstriden*) around 1920 (Olstad 1987; Ulvund 2013) and gaining prominence during the 1980s and 1990s. While *friluftsliv* was given its broad and vague public definition as early as 1972, the boundaries between sports, *friluftsliv*, and tourism remained unclear, particularly within the public sector. This process culminated in 2001, when a white paper clarified that the absence of competition was a key factor distinguishing sports from *friluftsliv* (Horgen 2017, 2022, 2025b).

A similar understanding of *friluftsliv*, as emphasized by Hofmann et al. (2018), is also referenced by Gurholt (2008), drawing on Henderson and Vikander (2007). In this interpretation, *friluftsliv* is described as "[...] a relatively value-based green life philosophy of environmentally friendly practices, in contrast to what is often seen as the more commercialized, skilled, and risk-oriented activities denoted by the notion of outdoor education

in English-speaking cultures" (Gurholt 2008, 55). This dominant, or hegemonic, understanding of *friluftsliv* is the product of several decades of what I term "Norwayism". It was primarily shaped by Nils Faarlund and the network surrounding the Norwegian Alpine Center and later reinforced by Outdoor Education academics—many of whom were based abroad.

The concept of Norwayism is a new construct, inspired by Edward Said's (2001) *Orientalism*, which highlights the use of stereotypes in the portrayal of a supposed essence of Norwegian *friluftsliv*. Unlike Orientalism, however, these stereotypes are not negative. On the contrary, they are imbued with admiration but remain equally stereotypical and essentialist in their depiction of Norwegian outdoor recreation as a homogeneous, static, and exotic phenomenon. The exoticism is conveyed through the narrative of Norwegian *friluftsliv* as something fundamentally different from other countries' outdoor recreational cultures. This perception persists despite evidence suggesting that the primary ways in which Norwegian outdoor recreation stands out, according to Gåsdal (2007), are its prevalence and frequency, which are notably higher among Norwegians compared to other nations with which meaningful comparisons can be made (Gåsdal 2007, 77). This distinction can largely be attributed to the fact that most Norwegians have convenient access to natural areas, enabling them to engage in recreational activities close to where they live.

An alternative term for Norwayism could be "Nordicism", which portrays the Nordic region as a homogeneous and exotic entity, often emphasizing stereotypes such as nature, Vikings, or other cultural symbols. The phrase "the Nordic outdoor tradition friluftsliv" has been used (Sandell & Öhman 2025, 5), but Swedish and Danish Outdoor Education academics have also contributed to reinforcing Norwayism by portraying Norwegian *friluftsliv* as something unique also within the Nordic region. For instance, as early as the book *Om å gripe fjellet – og bli grep av fjellet. En vennebog om friluftslivet og Nils Faarlund* ("About grasping the mountain – and being grasped by the mountain. A Festschcrift about *friluftsliv* and Nils Faarlund") (1986). Danish contributors Torbjørn Ydegaard, Svend Ulstrup, and Jesper Jakobsen, alongside the Swedish academic Bjørn Tordsson, helped shape the Nordic *friluftsliv* discourse, leaving a lasting imprint.

Norwayism has also found significant resonance among Norwegian Outdoor Education academics, particularly those connected to *friluftsliv* as a defined field of study from the 1970s onward. This academic field has been strongly influenced by Nils Faarlund, a central figure at the Norwegian Alpine Center and the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, among other

institutions. When *friluftsliv* was introduced as an academic subject at universities, the intention was to promote an eco-philosophical approach to teaching *friluftsliv* (Leirhaug et al., 2019; Wold et al., 2025). There is considerable evidence that many academics in this field have been predisposed to accept conclusions produced by the Faarlund network, which have been further amplified by admiring outsiders. The allure of ideas surrounding an "authentic" Norwegian *friluftsliv* has likely hindered more critical and balanced analyses, such as those offered by, for example, Slagstad (2008), Goksøyr (2008), Ulvund (2013), Schaanning (2015), and others.

Illustrative here is that newer critical perspectives on Norwegian friluftsliv come from academics outside the academy of outdoor recreation. For example, in the article *Friluftsliv as practice, culture and brand* (Syvertsen & Rodriguez-Morales, 2025), it is argued that *friluftsliv*, as practiced, does not meet the established philosophical criteria, but that the same philosophical descriptions continue unabated, nationally and internationally, despite criticism that goes in the direction of nationalism and essentialism (8). They further point out that *friluftsliv* has today become part of the self-help genre, with an emphasis on "Empowerment and well-being [...] self-optimization and self-presentation" (7), and that *friluftsliv* appears highly commercial and unsustainable, despite the fact that: "The branding of outdoor recreation capitalizes on the trend towards more eco-friendly, slow, and responsible adventure" (10).

The concept of Norwayism within the international Outdoor Education field can largely be traced back to publications such as *The History and Traditions of Friluftsliv* (Wilson, 1989); *Wisdom in the Open Air: The Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology* (Reed & Rothenberg, 1992); *Friluftsliv: The Scandinavian Philosophy of Outdoor Life* (Gelter, 2000); *Friluftsliv Education: Not Just Another Pretty Face!* (Duenkel & Pratt, 2001); *Nature First: Outdoor Life the Friluftsliv Way* (Henderson & Vikander, 2007); and *The Open-Air Life: Discover the Nordic Art of Friluftsliv and Embrace Nature Every Day* (McGurk, 2022). Syvertsen & Rodriguez-Morales (2025, 9) show how this *friluftsliv* narrative has become mainstream, through a number of media articles[1], and not least through *VisitNorway* which claims that: "*Friluftsliv* is not just a thing. It's a whole philosophy. A way of life". All these works draw upon an understanding of *friluftsliv* developed by the Faarlund network around 1970. This perspective conceptualized *friluftsliv* as a form of nature-friendly travel, characterized by simple equipment, an absence of competition,

1 For example: *The Norwegian secret: How friluftsliv boosts health and happiness*; *Fjord focus: is Norway's friluftsliv the answer to surviving a second lockdown?*; *The Scandinavian way to tackle winter* (Syvertsen & Rodriguez-Morales, 2025, 9).

and a philosophical "way back to nature" (Horgen 2017, 2022, 2025b). For example, Jeremy Wilson's *The History and Traditions of Friluftsliv* (1989) was written as a thesis at the Norwegian Alpine Center, with Nils Faarlund serving as his supervisor.

Jeremy Wilson's *The history and traditions of friluftsliv*

In the introduction to Wilson's thesis, we learn that previous research on *friluftsliv* had primarily focused on its practical aspects, which he argued had detracted from deeper inquiry. Wilson's project sought to go beyond this, delving into the fundamentals and exploring *friluftsliv* as a phenomenon "inherently spiritual" (Wilson 1989, 1). Given the widespread use of the word *friluftsliv* in Norway, he was surprised by the lack of etymological and linguistic clarity surrounding the term (2). To address this, he examined several literary sources, quoting them in Norwegian, though his analyses and conclusions often took on an anecdotal character and lacked sufficient referencing.

Wilson's work is heavily influenced by the framework of Norwayism. He traced the origins of what he called "the spirit of friluftsliv" almost exclusively to the allegedly unique Norwegian interpretation of "the spirit of romanticism" (3), itself rooted in German romanticism, where "free nature" was supposedly emphasized (5, 14). In doing so, Wilson questioned British romanticism, arguing that the British did not seek spiritual inspiration from untouched nature in the same way as Germans and Norwegians allegedly did. Instead, he claimed, British visitors to Norway approached nature on the "wrong premises"—treating it as a "playground" for challenges and excitement, engaging in predatory hunting and building cabins (16, 17). This narrative reinforced a stereotypical view of Norwegian *friluftsliv* by constructing a dichotomy between Norwegian and British outdoor recreation.

In Wilson's account, the Norwegian polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen is portrayed as a quintessential child of romanticism—even though Nansen's approach could be interpreted as contributing to almost any ideological or philosophical direction (Repp 2001). Wilson claimed that in his speech *Friluftsliv* (1921), Nansen articulated "the exact nature of friluftsliv" (23) and embodied "the inherent principles of friluftsliv" (23). Wilson thus helped establish the notion of Nansen as the originator of a *friluftsliv* intended

to re-educate the urbanized population, which had lost its connection to free nature and longed for a "way home"—back to nature. Furthermore, Wilson contributed to the perception of Nansen as an enduring source of inspiration for future generations' understanding of Norwegian *friluftsliv*. However, this portrayal has been refuted by studies suggesting that Nansen's speech had little to no influence on Norwegians' perception of *friluftsliv* throughout the 20th century, until Nils Faarlund revitalized Nansen's legacy around 1970 (Horgen 2011, 2022, 2024).

In his conclusion, Wilson argued that *friluftsliv* had suffered "misappropriation" over several decades but claimed that the Norwegian Alpine Center and the FOR-UT Foundation (a research foundation established by Faarlund in 1974) were now committed to preserving the fundamental values of traditional *friluftsliv* and developing it in accordance with "its inherent, spiritual character" (26). Despite its shortcomings, Wilson's thesis was cited by Norwegian academics, including ethnologist Tove Nedrelid (1993) in her book *Ut på tur – på nordmenns vis* ("Going on a trip – the Norwegian way"). Based primarily on interviews, the book acknowledged that the term *friluftsliv* was rarely used among Norwegians but argued that "our distinctive" *friluftsliv* could still be identified, particularly in the way Norwegians sought a deeper connection with nature compared to other peoples (1993, 283). Nedrelid also claimed that *friluftsliv* was "completely untranslatable" into other languages (282), thus contributing to the reproduction of the Norwayism framework in academia, even outside the circle of scholars associated with Outdoor Education studies. This further established *friluftsliv* as a symbol of Norwegianness (Horgen 2025b). In the absence of comparative analyses within the field of Outdoor Education, this narrative left room for what Iver B. Neumann (2003) described as "navel-gazing self-glorification" in other areas of Norwegian society: "There is a tendency to treat Norway as an exception in this or that context, which is often based on the fact that the person making such claims knows much more about Norway than about other countries, rather than on any systematic comparison" (Neumann 2003, 82).

Notably, the debates sparked by Nedrelid's approach within the field of outdoor recreation have been underreported. Little attention has been given to social anthropologist Anders Johansen (1995), who challenged Nedrelid's views and argued that there was no uniquely Norwegian quality to outdoor recreation. According to Johansen, Norwegians learned the practice of hiking from the English, who had, in turn, adopted it from the French, the original inventors of the custom. Johansen noted that Nor-

wegians shared their enthusiasm for walks in forests and mountains with other groups, such as the Germans. However, Johansen did agree with Nedrelid that outdoor recreation was exceptionally widespread in Norway and that *friluftsliv* played a significant role in shaping Norwegian self-perceptions. Yet, he rejected claims that Norwegian *friluftsliv* was unique, untranslatable, or indicative of a "special kind of Norwegian human being" who, more than others, found their true self in nature (Johansen 1995, 61).

Peter Reed and David Rothenberg's *Wisdom in the Open Air*

When the authors of *Wisdom in the Open Air: The Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology*, Peter Reed and David Rothenberg (1992), arrived in Norway, they were told they were crazy to think that Norwegians cared more about nature than other people (vii)—a sentiment closely aligned with the substance of Johansen's critique of Nedrelid. However, as the title of their book suggests, they were searching for Norwegian wisdom, aiming to trace the roots of deep ecology through interviews with Norwegian deep ecologists. It was primarily through conversations with Faarlund that the two young American scholars, fresh out of college, gained insight into what they came to understand as Norwegian *friluftsliv*.

The chapter on Faarlund opens by acknowledging that some Norwegians interpret *friluftsliv* simply as "outdoor recreation," but it is Faarlund's perspective that dominates the discussion (156). In the first part of the chapter, alternate viewpoints take a back seat, with Faarlund's version presented largely without critique. It is quickly established that *friluftsliv* has its roots in Romanticism and that its tradition portrays it as a "way home"—a return to free nature (157). According to Faarlund, *friluftsliv* is not about sports, competitions, or action where nature is used as a sparring partner; it is not tourism or any kind of vacation lifestyle; it is not a commercial activity involving the consumption of equipment; it is not scientific excursions; and it is certainly not synonymous with "outdoor activities" (164).

Horgen (2017, 484) has demonstrated how Faarlund asserted the power to define *friluftsliv* and arrived at these conclusions during the period 1968–1974. By selectively drawing on anecdotal and historical statements, combined with his own views, Faarlund and his network constructed their vision of *friluftsliv*, which they claimed to be rooted in tradition (Horgen

2017, 2022, 2025b; Eikje 2024a). Eikje (2024a, 41) makes the important observation that labeling something as "traditional" lends it rhetorical power and makes it challenging to propose counter-conceptions. Several works by Eikje and Horgen, both individually and collaboratively, have shown that the connection between *friluftsliv* and environmental concerns is not particularly traditional or historical. In contrast, sports, tourism, vacation, scientific excursions, and commercial activities can arguably be seen as part of the history and tradition of *friluftsliv* (Eikje et al. 2017; Horgen 2022; Horgen 2024; Eikje 2024a; Eikje 2024B; Horgen 2025a). Furthermore, Eikje argues that Faarlund's interpretation of *friluftsliv* was radically out of sync with the views of most Norwegians and was primarily aimed at "winning friends for nature" (Eikje 2024a, 43). Nevertheless, Faarlund's understanding of *friluftsliv* has provided a framework for the subsequent political association between *friluftsliv* and environmental issues (Eikje 2024a), much in the same way as it has influenced the management of outdoor safety in Norway (Horgen 2017).

Returning to Reed and Rothenberg (1992), we see that they highlight *friluftsliv* as a uniquely Norwegian phenomenon, setting it apart from practices in both Sweden and Denmark. While it is acknowledged that Swedes and Danes also use the term *friluftsliv*, the authors claim that the Swedish interpretation differs significantly, encompassing activities like skiing on groomed slopes and tracks, walking along marked trails in cultural landscapes, and boating in crowded holiday archipelagos (163). However, in the interview section of the chapter, Faarlund is confronted with the observation that his description of *friluftsliv* diverges significantly from the broader understanding held by most Norwegians (172)—an understanding likely as inclusive as that of the Danes and Swedes. Faarlund conceded this point but offered the following explanation:

> Most Norwegians think of friluftsliv a little differently than I do because most Norwegians have been influenced by the big business of outdoor recreation; they have gotten their idea of it from mass media, sport et cetera. This concept is much more oriented toward tourism and sport; one achieves social status by using high-tech, modern equipment, and so on (172).

Building on this, Faarlund highlighted an interesting point: among those who shared his understanding of *friluftsliv* were individuals within the Ministry of the Environment. He noted that recently published white papers gave hope that his perspective was gaining traction (172). This assertion is supported by findings in the article *Friluftsliv-Discourse: A Path Towards*

Defining Friluftsliv in Norway, 1965–2000 (Horgen 2025b), which concludes that Faarlund's interpretation of *friluftsliv* gradually achieved sufficient hegemony to shape the Ministry of the Environment's understanding of outdoor recreation in Norway throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Horgen 2025b, 31). Eikje (2024a, 47) further elaborates on this in the article *Discourses on Friluftsliv and Environmental Awareness in Norway, 1960–2000*, documenting how Faarlund and others within his network actively contributed to the development of these white papers. This illustrates how the Norwayism framework was reproduced by Norwegian authorities, culminating in the 2001 white paper.

Around the same time as Reed and Rothenberg's work, researchers affiliated with the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research (NINA) began offering their own perspectives on Norwegian outdoor recreation (Gåsdal 1992; Kleiven 1992; Kaltenborn & Vorkinn 1993). Gåsdal (1992) observed that *friluftsliv* was a value-laden term, sparking debates over which activities deserve to be classified under its label. According to Gåsdal, the issue lies in the prevailing opinion that activities qualifying as *friluftsliv* must be distinguished not only by external characteristics but also by certain attitudes as well as by participants' states of experience and empathy (Gåsdal 1992, 10). In short, NINA researchers found earlier definitions of *friluftsliv* to be overly normative and unsuitable for research purposes. Consequently, NINA proposed its own definition: "Friluftsliv is the leisure use of nature", or more simply, "outdoor recreation" (Kaltenborn & Vorkinn 1993, 9). This new definition discarded the spiritual, Romantic, and "free nature" connotations, as well as the uniquely Norwegian exoticism embedded in earlier interpretations. However, the influence of Norwayism was not so easily dismantled.

Norwayism is established as a framework for "the real *friluftsliv*"

From the turn of the millennium, it appears that Norwayism, as a framework for understanding "the real *friluftsliv*," had established itself on an international level. In the article *Friluftsliv Education: Not Just Another Pretty Face!* (Duenkel & Pratt, 2001), Reed and Rothenberg (1992) are cited as the primary source for understanding *friluftsliv* as a pathway to a particularly deep connection with free nature. *Friluftsliv* is presented as a distinct concept, a "peculiarly Norwegian idea" (5), and the authors note the chal-

lenge of making *friluftsliv* "mainstream" without reducing it to just another "brand" within outdoor education (11). In Gelter's (2000) article *Friluftsliv: The Scandinavian Philosophy of Outdoor Life*, the perspective is broadened to encompass Scandinavia as a whole. However, Norway is again portrayed as standing apart from Sweden and Denmark, where the term has supposedly taken on a more technical meaning as "outdoor activities", thereby losing its philosophical dimension. Gelter suggests that *friluftsliv* as understood in Norway has its roots in an old Scandinavian tradition—one that Norway has preserved while Sweden and Denmark have allegedly neglected it. This essence of *friluftsliv* aligns with the spiritual feeling of "connectedness" to the landscape and untamed nature promoted by Wilson (1989), as well as Reed and Rothenberg (1992). The original goal of *friluftsliv*, according to this perspective, was to foster closeness to nature, serving as a "way home" to nature itself. In contrast, modern, artificial concepts of *friluftsliv* as mere "activities" stand in stark opposition to this authentic *friluftsliv*, which Norway has purportedly managed to maintain (80).

Similar ideas were widely accepted by Outdoor Education scholars in Norwegian higher education programs specializing in *friluftsliv*. In Tordsson's (2003) doctoral thesis *Å svare på naturens åpne tiltale* ("Responding to Nature's Open Appeal"), he argues that while several activities can be classified as both sports and *friluftsliv*, early mountain tourism cannot simply be understood as *friluftsliv*. According to Tordsson, early tourists lacked "[...] the basic codes for experiencing, interpreting, and categorizing life in nature, which are fundamental to friluftsliv" (Tordsson 2003, 97). This essentialist view of *friluftsliv* is also reflected in Tordsson's ambition to explore "the Norwegian friluftsliv," seeking to understand its meaning and uniqueness without resorting to a postmodern, pluralistic conclusion that *friluftsliv* is merely "[...] a conglomerate of habit patterns, ways of acting, ideas, and modes of interpretation" (Tordsson 2003, 5). Interestingly, Tordsson's background includes involvement with the Swedish *friluftsliv* organization Argaladei (founded in 1966), which collaborated with the Norwegian Alpine Center and FOR-UT during the 1970s. Tordsson was encouraged to apply for a position at the *friluftsliv* program at Telemark University College (TDH) by Atle Tellnes, who had a background with the Norwegian Alpine Center and, along with Gerd von der Lippe and Faarlund, helped establish the *friluftsliv* program at TDH in Bø in 1982.

In this context, Gunnar Repp's (2001) doctoral thesis *Verdiar og ideal for dagens friluftsliv. Nansen som føredøme?* ("Values and Ideals for Today's Friluftsliv. Nansen as a Role Model?") is also highly relevant. Repp, a fac-

ulty member of the *friluftsliv* program at Volda University College of Education, admitted he had barely heard the term *friluftsliv* before becoming a student at the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences in the early 1970s, where he encountered Faarlund (Repp 2001, 15). In his academic work, Repp distinguishes between *friluftsliv* as a "formulation arena" and *friluftsliv* as a "realization arena". The "realization arena" refers to the practical, non-theoretical aspects of *friluftsliv*, which he views as constructed and socially created. However, Repp contends that this does not necessarily align with *friluftsliv* as understood in the "formulation arena," which operates on an "ideational plane". According to Repp, the formulation arena concerns "the phenomenon of friluftsliv" (17), focusing on the ideological and reflective dimensions. Despite referencing Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (2005), Repp does not fully acknowledge that *friluftsliv* in the formulation arena is socially constructed in the same way as in the realization arena. Instead, he asserts that "[...] friluftsliv is something that belongs to nature" (17). In his conclusion, Repp discusses the "very nature" of *friluftsliv* (397) and expresses concern for its future, warning that "simple friluftsliv" may be losing ground to a "new friluftsliv" or "[...] something we do not want to call friluftsliv" (404).

In contrast to Repp (2001) and Tordsson (2003), Kirsti Pedersen (1999), in her doctoral thesis *Det har bare vært naturlig. Friluftsliv, kjønn og kulturelle brytninger* ("It's Just Been Natural: Friluftsliv, Gender, and Cultural Tensions"), argued for a relational concept of *friluftsliv*. Pedersen drew on Gunnar Breivik's (1978) understanding of *friluftsliv* as presented in his article *To tradisjoner i norsk friluftsliv* ("Two Traditions in Norwegian *Friluftsliv*"). In this article, Breivik distanced himself somewhat from the Faarlund network, of which he had been a part (Breivik 1973, 1974), and proposed a more differentiated and analytical understanding of *friluftsliv*, grounded in what he called the "village tradition" and the "city tradition." Breivik and Pedersen's perspectives emphasize the diversity of motives, understandings, actions, and practices underlying what is referred to as *friluftsliv* (Breivik 1978; Pedersen 1999).

One might expect that the more nuanced analyses emerging from sports and outdoor recreation research in the 1990s would contribute to a broader, more multifaceted understanding of *friluftsliv*, both in Norway and internationally (Goksøyr 1991; Gåsdal 1992; Kleiven 1992; Kaltenborn & Vorkinn 1993; Johansen 1995; Pedersen 1999). The book *Nature First: Outdoor Life the Friluftsliv Way* (Henderson & Vikander, 2007) does incorporate a range of perspectives, but as the title suggests, its central mes-

sage is that there is a specific "Friluftsliv Way" within the wider context of "Outdoor Life".

Nature First. Outdoor Life the Friluftsliv Way

Nature First (2007) is edited by Canadian Bob Henderson and Swede Nils Vikander, with the foreword written by Australian Andrew Brooks and Norwegian Børge Dahle. The foreword acknowledges that Norwegian *friluftsliv* is diverse and open to various interpretations (xii). It suggests that *friluftsliv* is Norway's "gift to the world" and argues that the term *friluftsliv* is untranslatable (ix). Norway takes centre stage in the first part of the book. Jo Ese's chapter discusses "Norwegianalized activities" (55), while Faarlund's chapter asserts that *friluftsliv* is a distinctly Norwegian tradition (56). Tordsson's chapter claims that Norway is the Nordic country where the tradition of *friluftsliv* is strongest (62). Sigmund Kvaløy-Sætreng's chapter presents *Askeladden* (the Ash Lad) as a key symbol of "Norwegianism", contrasting it with Sweden and Denmark, and describes *Askeladden* as a "Classical Figure of Norwegian Ecophilosophy" (83). Repp's chapter concludes that this generation's *friluftsliv* represents the legacy of Nansen (113). Deep ecological principles are inherently present in *friluftsliv*, which is rooted in an older Norwegian tradition known as "nature-life"— from which *friluftsliv* is said to have evolved (ix).

The concept of nature-life recurs throughout the book. For example, in Henderson's chapter, it is suggested that *friluftsliv* belongs to a Norwegian/Scandinavian tradition rooted in nature-life, which relates to eco-activism and deep ecology, embodying a life in imagined ecological balance (4-5). The term "nature-life" was likely first introduced in this context by Nansen in his speech *Friluftsliv* (1921). Later, by Jon Bojer Godal, known for his work in preserving traditional craft knowledge, in the collection of articles *Friluftsliv*, edited by Repp (1992). Nature-life is understood to represent a way of living similar to pre-industrial times—essentially, the traditional Norwegian rural lifestyle and use of nature in the countryside (Horgen, 1999). However, the term has never gained widespread academic acceptance outside the Faarlund network. The cultural historian Nina Witoszek (1998) has linked Norwegian *friluftsliv* to a persistent view of nature deeply embedded in Norwegian culture since its earliest historical records (Skår, 2010). This perspective, however, has faced criticism. Johansen (1995, 61)

challenges the notion that Norwegian culture and mentality have remained unchanged since the Middle Ages.

Vikander's chapter in *Nature First* (2007) highlights the heated debates surrounding the concept of *friluftsliv* in Norway, a contrast to the more subdued discussions in other Nordic countries. The intensity of these arguments, Vikander notes, can sometimes take on a "religious fervor" (10). However, he emphasizes the importance of supporting simple and "authentic" *friluftsliv*, making it accessible to everyone (19). In Svend Ulstrup's chapter, we gain insight into how Faarlund's vision of *friluftsliv* was introduced to Denmark by figures such as Ulstrup, who founded *Naturlivsskolen* (the Nature Life School) in 1982 to offer courses in "nature-life and friluftsliv" (118). There is considerable evidence that Ulstrup and other Danish advocates of the Faarlund network, such as Torbjørn Ydegaard, have significantly influenced modern Danish *friluftsliv* discourse. This is an example of how Norwayism has spread within the Nordic countries, a phenomenon that warrants further research, particularly in Denmark. For instance, Andkjær (2012, 13) finds that *friluftsliv* in Denmark is broadly interpreted, yet ecophilosophical perspectives remain a part of the tradition. In Sweden, Sandell and Öhman (2025) argue that Swedish and Norwegian *friluftsliv* share many similarities, but that Swedish *friluftsliv* is often perceived more broadly than its Norwegian counterpart. Although the Faarlund network's vision of *friluftsliv* was introduced to Sweden via Argaladei, the deep ecological perspectives did not gain the same traction there as in Norway or, to a lesser extent, Denmark: "Argaladei's ideology and practice are not representative of this tradition in the 1970s in Sweden and even less so of today's conception of friluftsliv" (Sandell & Öhman, 2025, 5).

In his chapter in *Nature First* (2007), Børge Dahle also reflects on the authenticity and essence of *friluftsliv*. Dahle, a student of Faarlund at the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, was introduced to the connection between *friluftsliv* and ecophilosophy during his studies. According to Dahle, the essence of *friluftsliv* lies in simple and meaningful encounters with nature, free from expensive equipment (24). He seeks to distance *friluftsliv* from international outdoor activities, which he perceives as overly commercialized and activity-driven (27). Dahle critiques the sportification and risk-taking trends in *friluftsliv*, arguing that these are problematic from an ecological perspective (31). To preserve traditional *friluftsliv*, he advocates for a dialogue about its core values (36). For Dahle, the heart of *friluftsliv* lies in the two traditions he identifies as nature-life and *friluftsliv*, which he contrasts with modern outdoor activities (30). Dahle's perspective is

echoed by Hans Gelter, who similarly argues that *friluftsliv* has a core essence. Gelter distinguishes between "Genuine friluftsliv" and "Post-modern friluftsliv," with the latter characterized as artificial outdoor activities, in contrast to the genuine lifestyle in nature that prioritizes connection and immersion in the natural world (38).

The *friluftsliv* conveyed in *Nature First* (2007) can be described as embodying a *friluftsliv* "cult", where trips into nature are ritual acts expressing awe and gratitude for the natural world. These rituals are not only directed toward nature but are also claimed to originate from free nature. Eikje (2024a, 44) argues that when *friluftsliv* is presented as "natural", it becomes nearly indisputable and resistant to cultural change or new trends. For instance, Tordsson (2003) has shown how Faarlund's "natural" *friluftsliv*, as part of the deep ecological project, became the "proper" *friluftsliv*, evolving into a moral project with detailed guidelines. These include requirements for the use of natural materials, such as wooden skis, wool, and cotton clothing, and even specifics about lunchbox contents, like two slices of bread with brown cheese wrapped in a used oatmeal bag (Eikje 2024a, 40). However, Horgen and Eikje (2022) have demonstrated how the "natural is best" ideology could have harmful consequences, such as Faarlund's promotion of non-functioning natural "L-rods" over electronic avalanche search tools in the 1970s and 1980s.

Are we unique? – Norwayism is challenged

The chapter that stands out in *Nature First* (2007), and does not promote any form of Norwayism is Odd Gåsdal's contribution, *Norwegians and Outdoor Activities: Are We Unique?* As previously discussed, the answer to the question posed in the title is a resounding "no"—with the exception of differences in distribution and frequency (Gåsdal 2007, 77). Gåsdal identifies the strong ideological influence of the Faarlund network, including figures such as Nedrelid, as the primary explanation for the widespread perception of Norwegian outdoor recreation as uniquely distinct:

> [...] these people to varying degrees combined eco-philosophy with anti-capitalist nationalism and a belief that the ascetic Norwegian-style of friluftsliv is a particularly genuine kind of life, more true to mandkind`s psychic and biological needs than any other kind of modern life. This strange brew of thoughts seems to have had a lasting impact on Norwegian education in friluftsliv, and may thus have made its own conception of Norwegian friluft-

> sliv's particularity come true post hoc. But, of course, most people carry on their deplorably conventional and non-ascetic outdoor activities in semi-urban woodlands, or on beaten trails, prepared ski tracks, and crowded beaches, just like before (81, 82).

This "brew of thoughts" largely forms the foundation for the understanding of *friluftsliv* in parts two and three of *Nature First* (2007). While it would be too extensive to delve into all the contributions, Henderson's chapter, *An Effort to Capture an Elusive Friluftsliv*, stands out. Here, Norwegian *friluftsliv* is portrayed as a mysterious, enlightening, and extraordinary gateway to deep meaning and an "inner relationship with nature" (149). This aligns closely with the narratives Henderson has encountered in his personal interactions with figures such as Faarlund, Kvaløy-Sætreng, and Dahle. The rhetorical strategy of persistently emphasizing deep meaning and profound connections to nature—as opposed to the presumably "shallow"—fits into the same language of power that asserts something as traditional and natural. When something is framed as being simultaneously deep, traditional, and natural, it becomes almost impervious to criticism.

By consistently using the term *friluftsliv*, even in English-language writing, several publications within the international outdoor education field—following *Nature First* (2007)—have reinforced the perception of Norwegian *friluftsliv* as a unique and untranslatable concept.[2] This raises the question of how the idea of Norwegian distinctiveness in outdoor recreation has gained such international traction. As Johansen (1995, 61) has observed, there is a tendency to imagine Norwegians as a people who—more than others—have discovered a profound connection with nature through this entirely unique and supposedly untranslatable phenomenon of *friluftsliv*. This perspective overlooks the possibility that experiences of a "deep connection" with nature are culturally constructed narratives that exist across various cultural traditions, independently of one another.

What outsiders "discover" when they encounter *friluftsliv* is likely not a uniquely Norwegian phenomenon, but rather narratives that resonate with their own pre-existing receptiveness to such ideas. This receptiveness, in turn, is shaped by their own socialization. One contributor to *Nature First* (2007) who acknowledges this possibility is the American Douglas Hulmes, who writes:

2 Gurholt 2008; Gelter 2010; Andkjær 2012; Beery, 2013; Serafimova 2016; Gurholt 2014; Gurholt 2016; Eikje et.al. 2017; Hofmann et.al. 2018; Howe 2019; Gurholt & Haukeland 2019; Breivik 2020; Nerland & Aadland 2022; Wold 2023; Anderson 2024; Løvoll et.al. 2025; Sandell & Öhman 2025; Vikene et.al. 2025.

> The nuances and feelings I have experienced and described while being in Norway are not unique to friluftsliv or certainly experienced only by Norwegians. I have experienced many of these feelings long before I knew of the Norwegian expression, and I am certainly a «product» of the American culture (232).

This perspective challenges the notion of *friluftsliv* as an exclusively Norwegian phenomenon, suggesting instead that it can encompass any form of outdoor recreation. With this understanding, the foundation for Norwayism begins to erode. For many Norwegian—and later Nordic—outdoor enthusiasts, the narrative of *friluftsliv* as a uniquely Norwegian phenomenon has served as both an alluring identity and a means of gaining recognition. It has also allowed them to appear intriguing and "exotic" in international forums. This invites the question: what is it about the Faarlund construction of *friluftsliv* that makes it so compelling—not only within Norway and the Nordic countries but also on an international scale?

Norwayism—an alluring narrative

By reading Eikje's (2024a) article *Discourses on Outdoor Activities and Environmental Awareness in Norway, 1960–2000*, one likely finds the most compelling explanation for why the Faarlund construction of *friluftsliv* is so captivating—namely, the idea that *friluftsliv* is not only environmentally friendly but can also be used to "win friends for nature". In other words, it is seen as a means to foster environmental awareness and, ultimately, to save the world. Eikje (2024a) demonstrates how this idea has gained widespread traction within the field of Outdoor Education, extending its influence too organizations, ministerial levels, white papers, and even Norwegian prime ministers. Remarkably, this idea has persisted despite numerous studies documenting that *friluftsliv* does not have the desired effect on people's environmental habits—in fact, it may even have the opposite effect (49). The notion has likely become embedded as a core aspect of *friluftsliv* studies and, perhaps more importantly, as an integral part of the identity of many professors in the field.

Both Eikje (2024a, 44, 2024b) and, notably, Anker (2011) highlight that Faarlund's version of *friluftsliv* has never been particularly environmentally friendly. They point to references such as the expeditionary journeys of historical Norwegian heroes, as well as the deep ecologists' own expeditions to the Himalayas and the Atlas Mountains. Many of Faarlund's claims

about *friluftsliv* have, therefore, been refuted. However, this does not mean that none of Faarlund's ideas about *friluftsliv* hold true. The form of *friluftsliv* he advocates is, of course, valid, but it is merely one of many interpretations. The key point is that the history of *friluftsliv* is complex and dynamic, with its meanings and assumptions continually evolving. For instance, *friluftsliv* has historically been tied to various popular justifications and opinions. One example is the minimal attention given to the connections between *friluftsliv*, defence concerns, and emergency preparedness. This is despite significant evidence suggesting that militarism has run as a consistent thread through the history of *friluftsliv*—from wars and national crises to the Norwegian Alpine Center's annual courses for cadets of the Military Academy since the 1960s (Horgen, work in progress), and even *Norsk Friluftsliv*'s (The umbrella organization, "Norwegian outdoor recreation") recent proposal on *friluftsliv* and national emergency preparedness in 2025 (Lier, 2025).

We recently gained further insight into the diversity and contradictions within Norwegian outdoor recreation through Australian social geographer Sarah Anderson's Ph.D. thesis, *Making 'Good Citizens' in the Norwegian Outdoors? Friluftsliv as a Citizen-Making Project in Refugee Integration Initiatives* (Anderson, 2024). Her interview study with refugees and other immigrants, in contexts where *friluftsliv* is used as an inclusion strategy, reveals the difficulties immigrants face in understanding certain aspects of Norwegian outdoor culture. For example, why is it that in Norwegian culture, one should be able to walk fast but preferably rather like to walk slowly. This contradiction illustrates how multiple, and sometimes conflicting, moral understandings—or traditions of appropriate and inappropriate behaviours in nature—coexist within Norwegian outdoor recreation.

The observation that *friluftsliv* does not have the intended effect on people's environmental habits, often referred to as the *friluftsliv* paradox, is not new. Hille, Aall, and Klepp (2007) were among the first to demonstrate this, and their findings have since been supported by several studies (Eikje 2025, 39). Despite this, many *friluftsliv* academics still express hope, in research published within the last five years, that *friluftsliv* can contribute to environmental awareness "if done in the right way". For example, Breivik (2020) concludes that: "Naessian friluftsliv (after Arne Næss) has the potential to inspire all of us" (14). Høyem (2020), from the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, found no direct link between *friluftsliv* and environmentally friendly behaviour among her informants but still suggests that "[...] the practice of outdoor life provides an opportunity to build a

conscious relationship with nature, though it requires reflection on the topic" (7). Similarly, Nerland and Aadland (2022) express cautious optimism, though they acknowledge they cannot be certain of any connection (132). Lund (2022) outright states that the evidence for such a connection is unconvincing (23). In his study, he finds that *friluftsliv* students in Sogndal unfortunately exhibit an anthropocentric relationship with nature—a perspective he believes must be abandoned (33). Despite his own findings, Lund comes close to making a "profession of faith":

> I believe, as is argued in environmental and ecological philosophy, that the personal experience of nature is vital in this shift towards a responsible and accountable relationship with nature. *Friluftsliv* and outdoor education have the potential to facilitate such a change [...] Educators should hold themselves and their students accountable and take responsibility in their relationships with nature (33, 34).

Lund concludes with a call for *friluftsliv* professors to clarify their personal and institutional relationships with nature and how these relationships manifest in their pedagogical practices (34).

Similarly, Løvoll et al. (2025) acknowledge that neither exposure to nature nor an affection for it necessarily leads to behavioural change (56). However, they place their hopes in a "self-transcending" approach to *friluftsliv*. In their theoretical study of three emotional approaches to *friluftsliv*—the "hedonic" (focused on pleasure and well-being, or the "pleasure-consuming hamster wheel"), the "eudaimonic" (focused on realizing one's potential in nature as a "playground"), and the "self-transcending"—they argue that the latter holds the most promise. A self-transcending approach involves going beyond oneself and one's ego to experience a deeper connection with something greater—namely, nature. They argue this approach must be introduced early, from primary school through to higher education, as it "[...] carries a stronger potential to revitalize the Scandinavian roots of friluftsliv as a contribution to sustainable lifestyles" (67).

As a concrete and revitalizing pedagogical method, Løvoll (2020) previously introduced the Faarlund term, *vegledning* ("guidance"), described as a pedagogical *friluftsliv* tradition and unique experiential framework. Its goal is to inspire a "[...] nature-friendly value orientation" (189). This is achieved through trips of sufficient duration into "free nature," conducted in small groups, utilizing methods like "experiential learning", *ferdråd* (another Faarlund term, for —"consultation circles"), nature poetry, and philosophical conversations. These experiences are designed to foster

"deep cognition" that promotes nature and environmental ethics (192). Wold (2023) builds on Løvoll's perspectives, arguing that such practices, shaped through the institutionalization of *friluftsliv* in higher education, could lead to "[...] a joyful change and sustainable interaction with nature" (107). I interpret Wold (2023) as follows: as long as the deep ecological *Ferden* (Faarlund's term for "Journey") serves as the framework for the encounter with "free nature", and as long as this encounter is "deep enough", lasts sufficiently long, and is accompanied by proper reflection, then the holistic philosophy and methodology of the journey can "[...] be connected to a broader vision of joyful transformation and a sustainable relationship with nature" (107).

Looking at Sweden, Sandell and Öhman (2012) open a discussion on the causality between people's nature experiences, their attitudes, and their willingness to change. Beery (2013) claims to show a link between participation in *friluftsliv* and "environmental connectedness" (EC) but does not address whether EC leads to behavioural change. Later, in an essay on Argaladei, Sandell and Öhman (2025) conclude "[...] we believe there is every reason, both theoretical and empirical, to have strong faith in the educational potential of nature encounters" (4). It is noteworthy that Sandell was a member of Argaladei's board in the 1970s (8), and their essay promotes Argaladei as a source of inspiration for "[...] nature-related environmental pedagogy" aimed at fostering sustainable lifestyles (2). This reveals a shared mindset in Norway and Sweden: after over 40 years of attempting to use *friluftsliv* as "a way home" to sustainable living, with limited success, the solution is not to abandon the effort but rather to try harder—this time adhering more faithfully to the vision of the movement's founders, Næss and Faarlund.

Internationally, Vikene et al. (2025) reference two meta-analyses asserting a connection between time spent in nature and climate-positive behaviour (14). However, Whitburn et al.'s (2019) meta-analysis is based solely on self-reported data, which the authors themselves acknowledge weakens validity (191). Similarly, Mackay and Schmitt (2019) note self-reporting tends to measure intention rather than actual behaviour, with participants often exaggerating their "pro-environmental behaviour" (PEB). The study by Mackay and Schmitt (2019, 1) suggests that "[...] nature connection is a promising avenue for promoting PEB". Part of the study identifies a correlation, albeit with relatively weak significance, between "nature connection" and "observed behavioural measures". However, as

is well-known, correlation does not imply causation—a point the authors themselves acknowledge.

In this context, Mackay and Schmitt (2019) also reference experimental studies included in their meta-analysis, the results of which support the conclusion that "[...] identification with nature has a causal effect on PEB" (7). Nevertheless, the discussion highlights several limitations, including "publication bias" and variations in the success of experimental manipulations aimed at fostering nature attachment. Notably, all but one of the studies involved the researchers' own students and featured interventions or manipulations lasting less than an hour (8). These studies do not provide insights into whether the connection to nature arises from seeing nature as pleasant or frightening, fragile or resilient (8). Furthermore, they cannot rule out that nature attachment indirectly influences behaviour through secondary factors, such as empathy, moral responsibility, or identification with environmental activist groups (8). Mackay and Schmitt (2019) also fail to address whether the studies control for other variables, such as socioeconomic status, leaving open the possibility of multiple contributing factors. Causes often become entangled when investigating the likelihood of one variable affecting another. Identifying the specific effect of a single cause requires accounting for other causal factors—a highly demanding process, particularly in the type of research referenced by the two meta-analyses.

The resilient Norwayism

It is hard to ignore the fact that outdoor recreation, unless conducted with simple equipment in the local environment, often involves significant consumption of gear, travel, and cabin stays—driven by a romanticized pursuit of experiences. I would argue that the reason many engaged in outdoor recreation continue to associate *friluftsliv* with environmentally friendly behaviour lies in the enduring influence of Norwayism. As demonstrated earlier, Norwayism remains deeply ingrained in *friluftsliv* education at Norwegian universities. Contradictions to this narrative seem to be dismissed effortlessly, "like water off a duck's back". References such as Reed and Rothenberg (1993) are frequently cited in internationally published articles and prominently featured on syllabus lists. Furthermore, *friluftsliv* studies are attracting a growing number of international students, many of whom travel across the globe to Norway to experience and learn about

"free-loofts-leev"—a term they have likely encountered at their home institutions. Norwegian *friluftsliv* has evolved into a recognizable brand that now sustains *friluftsliv* studies at university campuses across Norway.

As a professor in *friluftsliv* studies at the University of Southeast Norway, I have observed that some students arrive with the belief that, because they identify as "outdoor people" and hold the "right attitudes", they are inherently environmentally friendly. Even the most ideologically driven students often overlook the fact that their pursuit of nature experiences frequently results in a significant carbon footprint. I consider this to be one of the greatest dilemmas in our field: on the one hand, we actively promote "environmentally friendly *friluftsliv*", while on the other, we equip students with the knowledge and skills to venture into more remote and challenging landscapes, broaden their horizons, and seek out new and exciting adventures—both domestically and abroad.

In a recently published study on how Norwegian and international students in *friluftsliv* programs in Sogndal perceive *friluftsliv*, it was found that Norwegian students tend to have a relatively broad understanding of the term, while international students, in particular, embrace "[...] a more philosophical and traditional friluftsliv, rooted in the eco-philosophical movement" (Vikene et al. 2025, 14). However, both groups share a common understanding that *friluftsliv* is more about connecting with nature than engaging in activities for their own sake. They also agree that some activities are "more" *friluftsliv* than others (10). Furthermore, both Norwegian and international students reject the notion that sport, which "[...] uses nature for the sake of big experiences, defeats the purpose of friluftsliv, as it represents a selfish and anthropocentric way of engaging with nature that disregards the otherness of place" (15).

I would like to highlight three interesting observations here. First, the students replicate a *friluftsliv* narrative shaped by Faarlund, which, as discussed earlier, is a product of eco-philosophy, anti-capitalist nationalism, selective storytelling, and personal preferences. Second, the researchers behind the study suggest that the students reflect what the researchers themselves perceive as "[...] the historical and philosophical ideas of friluftsliv, where the goal is to experience the silence, grandeur, and beauty of nature" (10). Third, the article's introduction includes approximately 20 references to Reed and Rothenberg (1992), Gelter (2000), and various *Nature First* (2007) articles, supplemented by more recent references such as Howe (2019) and Wold (2023)—both of which can be situated within the framework of Norwayism. For instance, Howe (2019) frequently cites

Nature First (2007) and refers to "traditional or genuine friluftsliv" (12). Similarly, Wold (2023) centers their work around the idea of "Ferd Toward a Joyful Change," emphasizing "deep encounters in free nature" (12).

This raises the question: where do students acquire their knowledge? Most likely, from the same researchers who, wearing their professor hats, have conveyed the "[...] historical and philosophical ideas of friluftsliv". The authors of the article even acknowledge that international students may have been influenced by the teaching they received (Vikene et al. 2025, 14). It is likely that both Norwegian and international students have been shaped by these teachings, but Norwegian students are probably more grounded in reality, given their firsthand experience with Norwegian outdoor recreation practices outside the *friluftsliv* academy.

In conclusion, I believe that everyone working within the field of *friluftsliv* studies must take the challenge of proximity to their own research area more seriously. This challenge is not unique to *friluftsliv*—it affects all kinds of hyphenated studies, including sports studies, cultural studies, and outdoor education. The enthusiasm we bring to teaching can sometimes conflict with the objectivity required in research. We must be cautious not to allow our field to become one of fixed beliefs that we are unwilling to question or have challenged by others. A field that disregards its critics risks becoming an echo chamber. Enthusiasm for our research area, while valuable, can lead to unintended biases, such as finding what we expect to find or confirming pre-existing assumptions—a phenomenon sometimes referred to as "enthusiasm research" (Stavrum 2013). It is all too easy to express personal opinions in front of students, revealing where our true passions lie, even when we strive to remain neutral. History has shown that our field has often been guided by intuitive ideas about the essence of *friluftsliv* and the transformative potential of encounters with nature. It is time for us to critically examine these intuitions and engage with them more thoughtfully.

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