

# Nature is the Home of Culture—*Friluftsliv* is a Way Home

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**Abstract**—*Friluftsliv* is a unique Norwegian cultural heritage, which is believed to be of great importance to modern society. A brief introduction to the cultural roots of this Nature caring tradition is given. *Friluftsliv* is a legitimate child of European Romanticism—said to be a “protest movement” against the Age of Enlightenment. Artists and philosophers were the leaders of an offensive against the philosophy of the French founding father of the natural sciences, René Descartes, reducing free Nature into *res extensa* (having only measurable dimensions and no value in itself). The European middle-class profited by the revolutionary technology developed on the basis of Cartesian methods to start the Industrial Revolution. The same middle-class was charmed by paintings, poetry and music of the “protesters.” They left the crowded and polluted cities for the Alps to adore the great wonders of free Nature. Giving themselves the name tourists, they enthusiastically sought out the sublime places and admired the natives of the Alps—“the noble savages.”

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## Introduction

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In Scandinavia, at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a small bourgeoisie struggled for freedom for Norway after almost 500 years under Denmark and Sweden. The creative middle-class of the few cities in a “backward” country were keenly interested in the focus on nationality in the Romantic Movement. They saw the importance of the “noble savages” living throughout the extended “land of the midnight sun” in building a national identity. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Norway made its way to independence, having convinced continental *tourists* of a unique national culture at home in a sublime landscape. The national hero was not a general, but the curly-headed poet Henrik Wergeland (1808 to 1845)—the first hippie the world had seen. The nation builders were left with only one enigma. How could they acquire the unsurpassed status of the “noble savages” of the mountain regions during the Age of Romanticism?

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Serendipitously, they followed the lead of the continental *tourists* by becoming wanderers. In Norwegian this movement was called *friluftsliv*, Henrik Ibsen (1826 to 1906) being the first to use the word in print.

Due to a fortunate course of European history for Norway these years, a unique tradition for identification with free Nature came about. The features and values of this tradition can be established beyond doubt, thanks to the connectedness to the Norwegian national breakthrough. Thus the values orientation of *friluftsliv* is given by the paradigm of Romanticism: Free Nature, as well as humans, has intrinsic value. To bring about a change in the modern affluent societies our philosophy is to help re-establish cultures where:

*Nature is the Home of Culture.*

There are many ways to stimulate this process. Efforts are already made to enforce laws, impose taxes and negotiate international agreements. Democratic processes are practiced, using political and scientific channels. We suggest that free Nature may speak for itself:

*Friluftsliv is a Way Home.*

Since the Norwegian tradition of *friluftsliv* is about identity, expensive equipment, long approaches, arenas and indoor training are not needed. It is about touching and being touched by free Nature and thus the threshold for taking part is low. What is needed does not cost money nor has it any impact on free Nature. Leave no trace, make no noise and choose your way according to your experience!

*Silence is a way free Nature speaks by keeping quiet.*

## A Norwegian Tradition Called *Friluftsliv*

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Three Norwegian *conwayors* of *friluftsliv* (Faarlund 2005) went the long way from the high North of Europe to Alaska on the occasion of the 8<sup>th</sup> World Wilderness Congress (8WWC). Yes, we were reluctant to travel by plane—and that far—but our wish was to make Congress participants from around the world aware of the Nature caring tradition of Norwegian *friluftsliv*. Being convinced that our unique cultural heritage of free Nature (Faarlund 1993) encounter might be of great importance to any modern society, we decided to seize the opportunity given in Anchorage. Instead of more or less vain attempts to gather a group of people from around the world in Norway, the least evil as to misusing the air and the fossil fuel it appeared to us, was to make a presentation for attentive members among the WWC participants.

*Friluftsliv*? Unfortunately the Norwegian word for a nationwide beloved Nature encounter (Bollnow 1968) cannot easily be translated into a foreign language. That is of course so due to the said uniqueness. For more than 30 years we have been trying hard in dialogue with naturalists and scholars throughout the Western hemisphere without arriving at a satisfactory solution. Reed and Rothenberg (1993) writing in English about “The Norwegian Roots of deep Ecology,” decided that the word *friluftsliv* is not more strange than *ski* and other words of Norse origin. To be able to explain why “outdoor life,” “outdoor activities,” or “environmental activities” do not convey the proper meaning, we invite you to take part in a search of the cultural roots of *fri-luft-s-liv*.

By consulting a dictionary of the Norwegian language you are soon ascertained by the ending *liv*, meaning life, that we do well to follow a cultural approach. You need hardly ponder for a long time to find the fitting translation of *fri*. Norwegians write *i* for the English *ee*. Only *luft* is more of a mystery (if you are not familiar with German). The English translation is *air*. As “free-air-life” was everyday life at the stage of our cultural history when we were hunter-gatherers, we obviously must try to trace the cultural roots of *friluftsliv* in an era of “un-free” air. The times of the Industrial Revolution in Europe comes to mind—the times when cities were crowded with poor people and the air was heavily polluted—high chimneys only a protection for the west end population.

## In Search of the Cultural Roots of *Friluftsliv*

The leading philosopher of the Age of Enlightenment, René Descartes (1596 to 1650), opened up nature for an unlimited exploitation, declaring that free Nature was nothing more than *res extensa* (having measurable dimensions) and thus had no value in itself. He went on to put forward the basics of the natural sciences, which later made possible the Industrial Revolution. To make his position clear to people who were not able to follow his discussions on method, Descartes left a “short summary” in French: “L’homme est maître et possesseur de la nature” (Man is Ruler and Owner of (free) Nature).

The conditions in industrialized Europe caused by applying Descartes’ reductionism provoked a passionate “protest movement” against the ugly consequences of the Age of Enlightenment (Stoerig 1985). The protesters launched Romanticism, which is not always offered much attention today in the study of the history of ideas in countries where modernity now is the dominating paradigm. The protest movement was led by artists and philosophers, using the full palette of the arts to insist on the intrinsic value of *free* Nature—Nature in possession of the natural rhythms, that is diurnal rhythms, the rhythms of the seasons and the growth of the abundance of organisms of the biosphere.

Although the 18<sup>th</sup> century protesters were armed with nothing but manuscripts and scores, brushes and colors, violins and flutes, they successfully influenced the world view of the middle-classes, which had come to economic power following Descartes’ thinking by rules to exploit

Nature. The “west enders” thus enthusiastically left the filthy cities to adore the grandeur of the alpine landscapes. The bourgeoisie also discovered “the highlanders” (in Switzerland called “Oberlaender”), who these days were declared to be “noble savages.” They were at home in free Nature, having been brought up in places, which in the vocabulary of the new cultural leadership in Europe were categorized as sublime. The visiting city dwellers, naming themselves *tourists* (from French *tour-ist*—they were traveling around), soon discovered the mastery of the natives of the Alps in traveling in a terrain, which to “lowlanders” seemed inaccessible. The literary tributes to the montagnards were thus soon confirmed by their abilities as mountain porters and guides.

## *Friluftsliv* and the Enlightenment-Romanticism Conflict

We are not at all claiming that the inspiration behind *friluftsliv* came from Norway. What we do say is, that the economic and political situation in Europe as well as in our country, was favorable for a unique cultural development in Norway in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Even a strong driving force was at hand, which turned out to be nationalism. It cannot be denied that the idea of the nation was also part of the philosophy of the Romantic Movement. To start with, while tracking down the origins of the Norwegian *friluftsliv* tradition, this was a frightening discovery. To try to keep secret that there had been a struggle for political independence of Norway since the time of the French revolution was not in our minds. A democratic constitution, which was established in 1814 when our country went from being a province of Denmark and into a union with Sweden, is a milestone in this process. Norway was only preceded by the United States and France in this respect. The struggle to fulfill the process of establishing a free nation gained more and more momentum as the century passed (Faarlund 2007).

Gifted Norwegian artists attracted the attention of the European middle-class—first among them the painters I. C. Dahl (1788 to 1857) and Peder Balke, later on the musicians Ole Bull (1810 to 1886) and Edvard Grieg. *Tourists* from the continent and from Great Britain came to see for themselves. Soon the word went around that Norway was not only the home of wild mountains and glaciers, but also of the fantastic fjords and the exceptional midnight sun. Even as sensational was the population of “noble savages” in a vast country still lagging behind in industrial development. Less than a hundred years after the establishment of the 1814 constitution, Norway proclaimed its status as a free nation.

There had been conflicts, but there had been no military action. The national hero of the struggle was not a general, but the first hippie ever, the curly-headed poet Henrik Wergeland (1808 to 1845)—even wearing hippie spectacles. Norway had succeeded in establishing a national identity in accordance with the values of the Romantic Movement due to the magnificent free Nature, the “noble savages” and a selection of talented artists from a population of less than 3 million people.

## What About the Norwegian *Friluftsliv* Tradition?!

One question, however, is still open. What has the history of the national breakthrough to do with the Norwegian *friluftsliv* tradition? It is offering a unique opportunity to determine the features of the tradition, which is not at hand in other European countries. The clue is the small but creative Norwegian middle-class, assisted by the before mentioned painters, composers, poets and writers. This well educated and well-traveled group was aware of and worked hard to establish the status value of the Northern “noble savages” abroad. Unfortunately, they did not themselves belong to this admired group of people. Proving that they were conversant with the rich Norwegian treasure of fairy tales in the spirit of the Ash-lad (Kvaloy Setreng 2005), in English better known as the talent of serendipity, they set off for the mountains. In company with the “natives” they familiarized themselves with the mountain landscape and soon “qualified” as “noble savages.” Although the first organization to support these visits referred to the continental category *tourist* (“Den norske Turistforening,” established 1868), *friluftsliv* was the word most frequently used. The later world-famous playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828 to 1906) was the first to put it in print in his poem “Paa Viderne” 1861 (Wilson 1988)—a word that is still so powerful that in a poll from the year 1993, altogether 87 percent of the population declared their participation (Vaagboe 1993).

This report from tracing the roots of the Norwegian *friluftsliv* tradition has been condensed to a few pages for the Proceedings of the 8<sup>th</sup> WWC. But our research work to establish the qualities of the tradition went on for some 20 years (Faarlund 1986). We have put so much effort into this project to avoid misuse of a precious word in contemporary Norwegian by commercial interests (Jensen 2000). The struggle for influence in clubs, schools and Universities has been going on throughout Norway for more than 30 years. The marketing and media efforts are increasing in volume and in hard-hitting approaches. Thus it is important to establish what our unique tradition is about (OBS, OBS!):

- *Friluftsliv* is a legitimate child of the Romantic movement of Europe.
- The values orientation of *friluftsliv* is given by the paradigm of Romanticism: Free Nature, as well as humans, has intrinsic value.
- *Friluftsliv* is an encounter with free Nature (in the sense of Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, German: “Begegnung”)—not to be mixed up with the use of free Nature as an arena for competitive sports or the commercialized, contemporary “risk taking” activities.
- *Friluftsliv* was in the beginning a project of the middle-class, which since the 1920s was not only accepted by the working-class, but enthusiastically embraced (in contrast to the development on the continent).
- Whereas in the continental *tourist* tradition the mountains were the preferred landscape, Norwegian *friluftsliv* is at home where free Nature is found.

## But Is not Tradition Obsolete Today?!

By studying the development of cultures, using different perspectives (anthropology, philosophy, economy, etc.) we have been able to make out the characteristics of the Norwegian *friluftsliv* tradition. But for which use—in modernity around the world today tradition is obsolete (!). Of course we are aware of this point of view. Albert Einstein (see Paulus 2005)—the brilliant master of the most advanced natural science, physics—reminds us that our ability to discover is limited by the theories we adhere to. The Descartes-based worldview of modernity has led to the belief that in the future anything goes—a belief that, by the way, is not in keeping with the principles of the natural sciences. Two hundred years after the first protest movement against the *maître-et-possesseur*-thinking started, it is obvious that a change is urgently needed. By practicing the Cartesian methods, cities of affluent countries are now less affected by pollution compared to two centuries ago. The price paid however is that the burden on once free Nature is transported worldwide and has grown by factors of thousands and millions.

As free Nature never becomes obsolete our philosophy is to help bring about a change in the affluent societies to re-establish cultures where:

*Nature is the Home of Culture.*

There are many ways to stimulate this process. Efforts are already made to enforce laws, impose taxes and negotiate international agreements. Democratic processes are practiced, using political and scientific channels. For many years efforts are made in developed countries to change industrialized agriculture into Nature-friendly working methods. Small-scale, self-subsistence farming, fishing and hunting in accord with the natural rhythms, in Norway named “Nature-life,” is an alternative way to bring about a change of lifestyle. We want to remind you that:

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As the Norwegian tradition of *friluftsliv* is about identity, expensive equipment, long approaches, arenas and indoor training are not needed. It is about touching and being touched by free Nature and thus the threshold for taking part is low. What is needed does not cost money nor has it any impact on free Nature. Leave no trace, make no noise and choose your way according to your experience! And remember—*friluftsliv* also has a value in itself! Depending on the landscape or seascape in your neighborhood you may choose to be a wanderer, maybe a mountaineer (in the alpine tradition, Faarlund 1975) or take to the paddle or the oars. Your way of travelling, however, is not the most important. Every other Norwegian (Vaagboe 1993) still values “the mystique of free Nature” and nine out of 10 enjoy the silence:

*Silence is a way free Nature speaks by keeping quiet.*

**Farewell!**

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