

Friluftsliv as Slow Experiences in a post-modern Experience Society

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Introduction

The fractal dancing of the flames from my fire place slows my mind into a trance. I sit alone by the fire at my favourite place, the Falcon Cliff. Behind me from an old pine a lonely male redstart desperately tries to attract any stray female with his melancholic song. I feel a strong sympathy with the longsome bird and his half hearted attempts this late in the season. From the bogs below I hear a crane pair giving their majestic greeting calls accompanied from the distant by the bubbling evening displays of black grouse. At the horizon in front of me I see the distant archipelago islands of the Baltic Sea flooded by the subarctic midnight sun and I shiver by pleasure of the intense moment. My mind expands and merges with the more-than human world around me. I merge into a natural part of the landscape and its drama.

The rubber on my right shoe is slowly gliding off the rock and my left leg is starting to tremble like a sewing machine filling up with lactic acid. Desperately my right hand is probing the cliff above me while I at any second will fall off the wall. Just when I am giving up my finger tips find a crack allowing me to hold my weight and push me up to a stable position. My adrenalin level is peaking and the dopamine/endorphin cocktail flushing my brain kicks me into a euphoric happiness. I take a quick glance at the spectacular landscape behind me, look down at my buddy who responds with a "Right On" and I continue for the next challenge.

I prepare our morning coffee having just crawled out of our tent greeted by the dazzling mountain landscape flooded in the morning sun. Getting in the mood for a great day I hear the first humming in the distance. After an annoyingly long time this disturbance has increased to an inferno when three snowmobiles nonchalantly races past very close to our tent leaving a stinking petrol trace. Behind us on the mountain slope they start to challenge the steepness of the mountain by driving up as far as their strong engines manages, making one loop after another on the untouched snow. After an intense eternity the snowmobiles give up their play and their sound fades away. We have just recovered from the stress when a new sound reaches us from the distance. While finishing our breakfast a snow caterpillar dragging a dozen snowboarders up the mountain appears from the valley. With great enthusiasm for their mountain adventure and the untouched snow the kid's races down the slopes while the snow caterpillar slowly returns back down. In the same moment the first heliskiing tour of the morning passes above us and we prepare for our departure.

My three outdoor experiences characterize different aspects what we in the Nordic countries call "*Friluftsliv*"¹. My first experience represent the original interpretation of *Friluftsliv* as a way of life in relation to nature, where the interconnectedness and immersion in the natural setting is central, a low key activity I have called "*Genuine Friluftsliv*"². It is a philosophical experience of human interconnectedness with nature with roots in the romantic "back-to-nature" movement in the 18th century. Its essence is not unique only for the Nordic countries and has been described within environmental philosophy as well as early naturalists such as Muir, Mills, Leopold and others³. Unique for the Nordic countries is that *Friluftsliv* has become a way of everyday life of most people and part of the national soul. The Norwegian explorer Nansen 1921 talked about *Friluftsliv* as a philosophy to co-operate with nature's

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powers and as an alternative for youth to avoid "tourism," the superficial acquaintance with nature⁴. Nansen believed that free nature was our true home and that *Friluftsliv* was our way back home. Also the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss described this personal interconnectedness with nature, often associated with strong emotional and spiritual experiences as essential for developing his deep ecology philosophy⁵.

New Forms of Friluftsliv

Friluftsliv has, however, through organized activities of early tourist and outdoor associations and through recent commercialisation developed from an original way of thinking to today's focus on the activities *per se* as illustrated by my two other experience, resulting in a more superficial conceptualization of *Friluftsliv* I call "*Post-modern Friluftsliv*". Today there usually has to be a reason to visit nature such as nature as a working place, exploring natural resources (fishing, hunting, picking berries etc.), collecting natural artefacts (minerals, plants, bird observations etc.) collecting places (nature tourists), learning (scientists, school excursions, etc.), aesthetic exploration (photographers, painters), searching sacral experiences (meditation, reflection, etc.), as an escape from urban life or consuming nature as an arena or playground for recreation and sport activities where nature functions as a big coulisse for competition and personal challenges. Many of these outdoor activities are today included in the general concept of *Friluftsliv*.

The most expanding field of outdoor activities and by many included in the concept of *Friluftsliv* is the increased use of nature as a playground for motorised recreation such as snowmobiles, ski-dos, water-dos, motor boats, 4x4s, etc. Illustrative is that in the last twenty years the number of registered snowmobiles in Sweden has increased from only 20 000 to over 262 000 today, to compare with about 570 000 in Canada⁶. Traditional outdoor activities such as hiking are more and more replaced by motorized outdoor activities and nature contact has evolved from a low-tech slow interaction with nature to a high-tech based fast activity.

Friluftsliv as Slow Experiences

This change in the Scandinavian relation to outdoor life reflects the rapid change in our western society. Our human culture has evolved through several transformations from a hunting/gathering society to present post-modern society. This cultural evolution has resulted in increased complexity expressed by the many label of our contemporary society such as the information, communication, knowledge, post-modern, and experience society. Also the speed of the transformation of the society has increased and having just entered the experience society with its demands of experiences as personal staged memorable sensations we already talk about the coming "transformational society" with its demands of "make over" and personal changes of appearance and life styles⁷. This new post-modern society with its never ending search for consuming experiences and quick fixes has fundamental implications for our relations to nature and outdoor life. Today urban people spend more then 90% of their time indoors and visit nature more rarely then previous generations and mainly experiencing nature and the outdoor through media such as television.

In addition to being flooded by information speed has become the icon of our time determine our behaviours and consumption. All our technological development is oriented to increase speed and "save time" resulting in an ever increasing quickening of the pace of life. This is one reason for the increasing popularity of motorized *Friluftsliv* as people feel the need to race through nature in search for experiences. This speedy life has resulted in a longing for an alternative to this hectic life, a search for "slowness" to get a break to breath and regain energy. Besides the recent trend with yoga and other meditation techniques a new global

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counter-trend has emerged, the "**Slow Movement**" where "*slow environments*", "*slow products*", "*slow design*", "*slow food*" and "*slow cities*" designed to promoting an alternative to ever increasing faster urban conditions⁸. Urban stressed out people are searching **Slow Experiences** designed to temporary "stop the speed" of the hectic every day life. People are complimenting the urban quick-meal with a "*Slow Food*" experience where the time waiting for and consuming the food is the essential experience, searching for flow experiences where time ceased to be. Interestingly already the Greeks talked about a dual time concept, where *Kronos* – the Greek word for linear time that now rule our lives meant the chronological ticking of time that create order in chaos and facilitate our interpretation of the past and planning of the future. In contrast was *Kairos* – the Greek word for vertical time or experienced time, "the right moment" that makes time stand still, as in the optimal moments in the flow experiences⁹.

To test the concept of *Slow Experiences* within *Friluftsliv* I conducted a pilot-study (unpublished) to test if a *Slow Experience* through nature contact can affects the mood of the mind. In association to field trips 221 adults had to alone and silently sit down in the natural setting. After 10 minutes of silence in nature the groups gather and each participant was asked to write down their thoughts and feelings during the nature experience. Most (96%) expressed a positive experience of the nature encounter. The most common reflection (66%) on the experience was about their mood such as calm, relaxation, stillness, quietness, peace, harmony, recharging the batteries, etc. Almost as common were comments on new sensations, to see, hear, feel, smell the surrounding and its details. A third expressed feelings of gratitude, dauntlessness, happiness, freedom etc. This study confirms the "common sense knowledge" that nature contact is a positive experience and puts you in a relaxing positive mode, extending your senses to rediscover details in your surrounding and let your thoughts wander freely, forgetting every-day life issues and getting into a state of relaxing flow, where *Kronos*-time evaporate and *Kairos*-time gets you in a state of absorption of the presence. This can thus be called a true "*Slow Experience*" and is the essence of *Genuine Friluftsliv*.

It is interesting that only ten minutes of close encounter with nature can alter your mental rhythm and time sense. Rhythms are central to our experiences and we are daily ruled by social rhythms, working rhythms, media rhythms, indoor leisure rhythm and technological rhythms violating our internal biological rhythms, seasonal rhythms etc. This disharmony of biological and technological rhythms can result in people feel inharmonious¹. Even our thoughts have their rhythms affected by external and internal rhythms, where rhythmical movements such as walking stimulate our creative thinking. Looking at the rhythms of a fire place or the ocean with the rhythms of the waves and the rhythms of the sparkling lights of sun reflection in the water may affect us such as triggering feelings of infinity, with a rhythm with the frequency of zero. Such zero-rhythms is *Slow experiences*, and essential to *Genuine Friluftsliv* contrasting to the post-modern urban rhythms and the fast *Post-modern Friluftsliv*.

Understanding Friluftsliv as different experiences

To understand this diversification and complexity of contemporary outdoor leisure we can look at *Friluftsliv* as four experience realms of *entertainment*, *educational*, *escapist* and *esthetic* based on activity and environmental interaction¹⁰. The basic way to understand different expressions of *Friluftsliv* is your engagement in the experience. At one end we find passive participation where you do not directly influence the events in the experience, you only observer. This characterizes *Genuine Friluftsliv* as illustrated by my first example where you just by being passively in nature may experiences emotions and modes, which can interconnect you with the place, the landscape and nature. At the other end lies your active

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participation where you actively affect the events and create your own experience. This characterizes most form of *Post-modern Friluftsliv* such as illustrated in my second and third *Friluftsliv* experiences. Although *Genuine Friluftsliv* may involve outdoor activities such as canoeing, it is not the activity *per se* that is the focus and reward of the experience, but rather to be in the landscape and interact with the forces and rhythms of nature. The second dimension constituting the four experience realms is the environmental where the **absorption** of the experience is your attention to bring the experience into the mind like a sponge is absorbing water as in learning situations. On the other end of this dimension lays **immersion**, the ability to "go into" the experience such as when you powder-ski down a big mountain and get immersed in the alpine snow-landscape. Both are essential for *Genuine Friluftsliv* and immersion characterizing *Slow Experiences*.

The first realm of **entertainment** within *Friluftsliv* is illustrated by my experience of the fractal dancing flames of the fire which involves my passive absorbing of the experiences through my senses, an essential component of *Genuine Friluftsliv*. The second realm of **educational** experiences is also fundamental to *Friluftsliv*. As the alienation to nature increases in post-modern society, we need good environmental education as an aid in restoring human interconnectedness with and engagement for nature. A variety of educational programs and curriculum's have emerged to educate the post-modern human to be aware of, understand and engage in environmental issues. *Genuine Friluftsliv* has the same ultimate goal as many environmental education programs, but does not use any curriculum and is not about teaching and lecturing or being on excursions. The only educational aid is being in nature itself. *Genuine Friluftsliv* is thus not traditional outdoor education with its specific learning goals of place (natural environment), a subject (ecological processes) and a reason (resource stewardship)¹¹. It rather involves learning the ways of yourself and the place in the more-than-human world, interest in and learning the ways of every creature and phenomenon you meet on your journey through life. It links natural history and philosophy, linking the knowledge of yourself and the surroundings into the understanding of the world. Traditional environmental education and natural sciences enrich and deepen the experiences of *Friluftsliv*, such as understanding the song of the redstart but the goal is not to become an expert naturalist or a skilled adventurer. Although *Friluftsliv* is on the curriculum of educational systems in Scandinavian and elsewhere, its goal in such educational context has often become that of outdoor education with its focus on mastering different outdoor activities and rarely the deeper philosophical goals of *Genuine Friluftsliv*.

Another important dimension of modern *Friluftsliv* is the **escapist** experiences that involve your complete immersion and active involvement in the experience, often resulting in the **flow experience**⁶. In contrary to passive entertainment experiences, in **escapist** experiences you become the actor affecting the actual performance in the experience often based on adventures and your playful and fun interaction with the environment and its elements. Staged adventure experiences where the real risk is minimized and apparent risk optimized to create a fun, active and challenging experience could be called **Adventuretainment** to distinguish them from serious and often very high risk adventurous expedition experiences. When rafting or hiking in the wilderness you become deeply immersed in the environment and through this escapism completely forget everyday life at home. The post-modern individualisation and commercialisation trends have made this adventurous escapism from modern life a very popular form of *Friluftsliv*, a new "*active post-modern Friluftsliv*". Although *Adventuretainment* is most often performed in groups it is still strongly focused on individualism through personal performance and development as in my second experience story.

An important part of *Friluftsliv* is the fourth experience realm of *esthetic* experience where you immerse yourself in an environment having little or no effect on it. Such experiences include visiting nature scenery where the main goal is not to learn as in educational realm, or to do as in escapist experience, or to sense as in the entertainment realm, but just to be there, being passively immersed in the experience. Such esthetic experiences of nature have often a touch of spiritual or existential experience with strong emotional effects and can be called *contemplation*. When esthetic nature experiences involve a restorative escapism from urban life it can be conceptualized as a *passive post-modern Friluftsliv* and become an important part of the *Slow Experiences of Genuine Friluftsliv*.

Restorative escapism into nature is not a new concept. Nansen's "way home to nature" from urban life was adapted early during the emergence of organized *Friluftsliv* and early nature tourism for the urban working class in Scandinavia and elsewhere to "strengthen the working people". New today is that this urban escapism has been individualized as a personal way to cope with post-modern speedy urban life. This quest for *Slow Experiences* to de-stress and regaining power, to "detox your mind", is an important concept of *Genuine Friluftsliv*. Nature's power as generator for "mental energy" and well-being is now empirically and theoretically well documented and constitute a solid theoretical basis for *contemplation*. Such search for *Slow Experiences* through *Genuine Friluftsliv* and *contemplation* will probably increase in the future as the urban population grows and urban speedy-life escalates.

Conclusions

I have shown that Nordic *Friluftsliv* in today's post-modern society can be conceptualised in several ways. *Genuine Friluftsliv* is the original interpretation of a way of life in relation to nature, where the interconnectedness and immersion in the natural setting is at the centre of a philosophical experience of nature. This original low key "*Genuine Friluftsliv*" has the potential to become an important *Slow Experiences* in the new contemporary global *Slow Movement*. Secondly we have a post-modern conceptualization of *Friluftsliv* where the activity is in focus. Learning and improving ones outdoor skills are in focus. High-tech equipment is an essential part of this increasing *active post-modern Friluftsliv* as well as the need for play and adventure, an experience realm I call *Adventuretainment*. Thirdly there has emerged a second post-modern conceptualization of *Friluftsliv* as an escape from urban speedy life and stress to "detox the mind" and regain power through a quest for deep and slow experiences. Nature's power as generator for mental energy and well-being is well documented and constitute the foundation for this *Contemplation*. The need for well-being through nature will increase as the urban population grows and urban *Kronos*-life gets out of hand. Through the understanding of *Genuine Friluftsliv* as different experience realms and basically being a slow experience with educational, escapist, entertainment and esthetics components, the concept of *Friluftsliv* can then become an important tool for understanding outdoor life and applied globally for management, planning and organizing leisure and tourism based on the outdoors.

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Gelter is a keen telemark skier and ski instructor in telemark and downhill skiing and has for 8 years been chairman for the outdoor association "Friluftsförbundet" in Luleå, as well as outdoor instructor and leader in mountain hiking, kayaking, MTB, climbing, etc. Gelter has participated in scientific expeditions on Greenland and along the Northern Russian Arctic coast as well as private nature tours in Northern Canada, USA, Europe, Central Russia, Australia and New Zealand and is a keen Mountaineer with climbing expeditions in the Alps, Alai and Himalayas.

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