

FRILUFTSLIV: MORE THAN A DISTANT CRY IN THE WILDERNESS

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**Ulrike Schenk & Bea Reuter
Friluftsliv - Leben draußen, Norway**

Ulrike Schenk & Bea Reuter
Hotellveien 1, Anneksbu
NO-4540 Åserål, Norway
Ph: +47-91870828

e-mail: post@friluftsliv-lebendraussen.com
www.frluftsliv-lebendraussen.com

Abstract

The financial crisis is overwhelming the postmodern society. And as the capitalistic, market-economic system can be seen as the ‘highest rule’ the first reaction to handle the crisis in politics and public discussion is to try to keep consumption flowing. This approach clings to the old, well-known system and tries to repair it, as well as possibly hoping that time will heal the wounds. Seen realistically this strategy will probably not work. When the big bubble of consumption bursts there is a need for solutions going beyond the capitalistic system and going beyond the focus on pure financial growth. A central question will be how human beings can live a good life after times of never-ending economic growth. Can the world’s problems be solved by being in nature? And is the Scandinavian cultural phenomenon ‘friluftsliv’ of any importance seen in a European or even bigger context?

Nature does not follow market-economic rules but has its own rhythm. Consequently friluftsliv has its own rhythm as well. Being in nature with people has at first no economic value. You produce nothing and the outcomes of what people will ‘learn’ outdoors can not be clearly defined. Friluftsliv does not fit in any system but can rather be seen as an alternative way of living and thinking.

Moving from Germany to Norway to live in nature and to work with friluftsliv could be seen as escapism from ‘real life’. We would rather like to call it a step into ‘real life’. Friluftsliv covers various possibilities – not only for us but also for the people we take with us into nature – by spreading the idea of *a rich life with simple means* (Næss, 1999). With the help of examples we would like to show why friluftsliv is not only a distant cry in the wilderness, but a connection to ‘real life’ – and maybe a part of a solution.

Introduction

We are two Germans who are now – after having studied in Hamburg – living in a little hut in the mountains of southern Norway, working and living with friluftsliv. Seen from the perspective of our friends and family in Germany this kind of lifestyle may look like ‘living in the wilderness’. But what makes it look so ‘wild’? We are still linked to the internet, telephone; we share a car and have electricity and warm water in our hut. Every week we receive the German newspaper DIE ZEIT.

Reading the news about the financial crisis and how the struggle for finding a solution out of it is discussed made us start thinking, both about what the main problem arising out of this crisis is, and about what we are actually doing up here in the mountains. Is it escapism out of, or rather a step into the ‘real life’? A distant cry in the wilderness or an alternative way of living, which shows possibilities for other people as well?

In the discussion around the financial crisis one way of thinking - in short - is: keep consumption flowing; protect the ‘good old German car industry’ that brought the nation glory and kept it moving fast over many years, rather than protect the ‘good old Schiesser-underwear company’, which kept people warm over centuries! (Brost & Dausend, 2009). Decisions like these cling to the old, well-known system and try to repair it as well as possible, hoping that time will heal the wounds. Seen realistically this strategy will probably not work. When people will start to freeze, they probably need ‘Schiesser-underwear’ rather than a ‘Mercedes Benz’! When the big bubble of consumption bursts, there’s a need for solutions going beyond the capitalistic system and moving beyond the focus on pure economic growth, which still seems to be the one-and-only way of thinking and the highest rule in politics and the public discussion. The real crisis is the ecological crisis, which with the economic crisis gets into the background. Both the ecological and the economic crisis are – in short - results of conspicuous consumption. The challenge is to reduce consumption without losing quality of life, so that a central question is how people can live a good life even after times of never ending financial growth. The Scandinavian cultural phenomenon of friluftsliv could be seen as an alternative way - spreading the idea of a rich life with simple means (Næss, 1999).

The green L



In May 2008 we brought  with the green L in the middle, which stands for life (in Norwegian: liv; in German: Leben) into being and we simply work with friluftsliv. Since then different people – friends, family, groups, individuals (mostly from Germany) – have come for holidays/recreation or a time of studying or practical training, spending various periods of time up here. Some came only for a few days, others for several weeks. We would like to tell five stories of our everyday life to give insight into our observations of what happens to people who get in touch with friluftsliv with us and with the silence of the Norwegian landscape.

What do you do all day?

Perhaps this is the most often asked question we are confronted with. We could tell a lot of stories, beginning with our parents and ending with people we almost do not know. The first times we were almost annoyed by the question because we interpreted it as a reproach of being lazy, and we could hardly answer. Being a bit angry made us start to think about it.

Above all it is the question people ask when they get in touch with our lifestyle in Norway – either at our place in Bortelid, or far away in other places. The easiest way to give an answer to this question is to let people join the life we live in the Norwegian mountains to make it clear by the experience itself. It is more difficult, when we have to describe our everyday life far away in other locations. We cannot say that we start work at 8 o'clock and finish at 4 p.m. because our everyday life has no uniform structure. Each day can be quite different and surprising as it follows the rhythm of nature and of ourselves. We sleep more in the winter and less in the summer. We take a ‘Sunday’ when we need such a relaxing day. And we may take another day for writing a letter with a handmade enclosure, if we feel that there is a person who should receive this letter at that moment. Our life is not strictly subdivided into work and leisure time. This kind of lifestyle may appear very unstructured to someone who follows an ‘8-4 p.m. / 5-days-a-week-life’. Of course this is hard to imagine, if you – except as a child – never experienced such a freedom in forming your day. And one may feel that there is less to hold onto without any structures, which leads to questions like: *What do you do in the mountains all day?*” or “*and what do you do in times when there is no group?* An answer to these questions is almost as elusive as friluftsliv; as being in nature itself. It is hard to put into words. You can enumerate some things like walking, skiing, philosophizing,

manually working, reading, writing, singing, artistic endeavors... Sometimes they get the point out of hearing stories or by looking at photographs. But often it needs a lot of time and patience to make the ‘friluftsliv-way-of-life’ understood, especially for people who never experienced it. As we already mentioned in the beginning, our life may look quite ‘wild’ seen from their perspective. We suppose that the question – because it appears so often – covers even more than just asking us about our life. Merely asking this question shows that people start to think about something; perhaps about what matters seriously in their own life.

It's amazing, that you don't need much to be content.

She was that kind of woman you would never think would spend a week in the Norwegian mountains. But she did! She drove up in a black Mini Cooper and with sunglasses in her blond hair. On arrival she unloaded her trolley and was surprised by seeing the way up to the hut: covered all over with deep snow. After a hard struggle she reached the hut with the skis and her baggage.

When we went on a little ski tour with the group of students and spent the night in a mountain hut without water and electricity and baked waffles on the small wood stove, she noted, more to herself than to the rest of the group: *It's amazing, that you don't need much to be content.*

We do not know what happened to her after she went back to Hamburg. Maybe she is living the same life as she did before. It is not our intention to make hermits of people but perhaps the experience of a rich life with simple means, which this woman’s comment speaks for will have consequences later on. It was an experience which obviously surprised her because it was something new she probably never encountered before. Being confronted with the difference between the simple life in the mountains and her lifestyle at home may lead to reflecting on the old patterns of thinking, leading to the question: What do I really need to live a good life?

It reminds me of my childhood.

Although the Norwegians know their traditional philosophy of friluftsliv, we experienced that they sometimes need to be reminded of it. When we opened a mountain café in a little hut without electricity and water at Easter, even the Norwegians were surprised how simple and rich life can be. They saw that you do not have to use disposable dishes just because you are high up in the mountains, making remarks such as: *Oh, so harmless to the environment!*

Being served home-made cake with fresh cream on top, sitting on a reindeer skin in the middle of nowhere appeared as something they did not expect when they followed the sign leading the way off the skitrack to the little hut. As we could hear from their reactions, it appeared as a special kind of luxury. Up there in the mountains it does not matter that you have to wait some time for waffles to be baked on the wood stove. "*It reminds me of my childhood*", was a remark we heard more than once in these days of Easter.

It reminds me of the mouse Frederick!

When we were giving a presentation of friluftsliv at a German physiotherapy congress we tried to make clear what friluftsliv is about and why it is valuable for physiotherapy. It was the last presentation on this day. By showing pictures provided with a musical background the atmosphere became mysterious. It was so quiet. They were carried away by the pictures and the music. After that we went to the congress dinner. And suddenly the whole table we were sitting at was talking about friluftsliv, Norway, and living in the mountains. Some of them could not imagine living a life like this; others remarked that most people would not set aside enough time for the sensual things in life. So the discussion started. In the late evening after everyone had had some glasses of wine, and friluftsliv was still the theme, a lady remarked that our lifestyle reminded her of the story of the mouse Frederick. This children's book by Leo Lionni is about the field mouse Frederick, who does not gather food for the winter like the other mice, but sunbeams, colours and words. Frederick seems to daydream all the time. When winter comes you see the value of his daydreaming and the importance of poetry and the arts. It is an enchanting parable of the triumph of the arts over the superficial life.

You know that you have something very special here!?

There was a group of 50 young students from south-western Germany, who came for friluftsliv. They were studying in a very structured bachelor-system, tightly bound to the national school-system. They came with Dr. Achim – the students' teacher. He and his wife already arrived one week before the students and had the chance to experience friluftsliv with us and a little group of 6 people. The first evening they arrived, we sat down to plan the week with the students. Dr. Achim had prepared a colourful schedule with many activity-modules. Coming from the university structure he had organized the days into learning-units. Arriving in Norway and talking with us about the programme for the students, one problem appeared:

Nature probably wouldn't follow this schedule because it has its own rhythm! That was a typical situation, where an ideal plan meets reality. For us, it was surprising to see how 'low' a level we had to start from with the 50 students, even though they were sportstudents. We divided them into two groups and had three days of friluftsliv for each group. Most of them had never been on skis before. We planned a two-day ski tour, 20 km a day, with one day of prior practice of ski technique. Pure madness! In the end we did not even manage a 10 km tour because a storm was coming . We ended up building igloos just some kilometres away from where they stayed – after having struggled with wind and skis on the first day everybody was satisfied with digging in the snow and enjoying the sunshine all day long the next day. This illustrates, on the one hand, that 'friluftsliv in practise and theory' is not done in three days between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. because it has to follow the rhythm of nature. And on the other hand it shows that you have to bear in mind where people are at the moment. You have to take it seriously if some of them are afraid of walking in the dark in nature, even if the hut is just 500 metres away. You need to find a way to neither overtax them, nor adapt to their point of view completely. The first will lead them into frustration; the second will prevent them from being touched by nature at all.

Back to Achim, the teacher:

He saw how we worked and he saw how we lived in the little hut in Bortelid. How we wash the dishes, how we grind our coffee beans with the old hand grinder... He experienced a rich life with simple means. He saw the complexity within its simplicity and finally remarked: *You know, that you have something very special here!*? He saw the potential that lies in the peculiarity. To reach people like Dr. Achim is one way out of friluftsliv being just a distant cry in the wilderness. He will be in touch with many young students, colleagues, friends, and his family where the idea of a rich life with simple means can be spread. In the first call after he was back home, he said: "*You got an Achim out of me, who hasn't been present for a long period of time.*" It seems like Achim knew this way of life before, so it was not new. But what perhaps was new was that two women seriously live such a life in the mountains. And that they additionally want to mediate at least a glimmer of it to others to make them start thinking about their own art of life!

...And friluftsliv for our thoughts

What these five stories have in common is that people start to think about Life. And that these thoughts of life came to them all of a sudden while they did friluftsliv themselves, or when they heard stories about it, or saw nature images to music. Humans are apparently deeply touched by friluftsliv, still 150 years after Ibsen's poetry. It seems like nature is never out of fashion and that friluftsliv offers great potential for finding solutions to challenges in life. And consequently it may help to show alternative ways out of the economic and ecologic crisis. It begins by facilitating seeing values again which are suppressed under the capitalistic system, because they have no price, and consequently have no economic value. Economists and politicians are just staring at the gross domestic product (GDP), which contains all the goods and services produced in a country – as long as they have a price. Things which have no price became valueless. *Making breakfast for strangers in a café in the morning is a job, which is paid and contributes to the GDP. Making breakfast for your own children hasn't this label.* (Gilbert, 2009, p. 27) Thomas Fischermann's description of this fallacy sounds similar:

Upbringing and nursing at home? It doesn't increase the GDP in the least. Ecological damage nobody can repair? It doesn't reduce the GDP. More leisure time and self-realization for everyone? In case of doubt pretty bad for the GDP. Increasing social tensions and crime? No effects. Stop! If a hooligan breaks a window the glazier has to come. The GDP increases. The politic complies with this nonsense. (Fischermann, 2009, p.1)

There is a need for alternative valuations for the economy; values, which highlight the ecology and the social and individual human happiness; values which have no price and, moreover, may be priceless! Friluftsliv contains these values. Nature does not follow market economic rules but has its own rhythm. Consequently friluftsliv has its own rhythm. Being in nature has at first no economic value. You produce nothing and the outcomes are not clear. Friluftsliv does not fit in any system but can rather be seen as an alternative way of living and thinking, because it has no preconceived solutions.

It appears from our examples that people know the deeper values, because they are touched by them. The biggest opportunity for friluftsliv is that it shows that a rich life is possible with simple means (Næss, 1999). But the question is: Am I allowed to live with these values in this society? Such a life could be seen as a distant cry in the Norwegian wilderness: There are people who are spending time in nature, and who have the time to philosophize about nature.

Living and working with friluftsliv as Germans in Norway could be seen as escapism from ‘real life’.

Once again, back to our discussion with the physiotherapists. This discussion was so central, because being touched made them think about these deeper values and the significance one attaches to them in life. The question that follows is: What happens if one seriously dares to put these values into the centre of life? What made them start to think was, apparently, that the life we showed them through our presentation appeared at first glance quite ‘wild’, because it entered the stage with another rhythm than the rhythm and rules they were used to. Giving a living example of exactly such a lifestyle proves that it does not have to be utopian, but can become the authentically lived life! Some of them recognised that it isn’t as ‘wild’ as it seemed in the beginning, but that there must be an everyday life for us as well. They saw that we are not talking about a dream or a holiday, but that it – at least for us – is ‘real life’. Later in the evening the conversation drifted from our life to their own and their students’ life. This led to more general questions such as: *How does a good life look like?*, and further on to more practical questions such as:

What of this friluftsliv-lifestyle can be transferred to Germany? Does it include possibilities for us and in our work with the students, or does it remain just a dream or a holiday?

We think that the answers to these questions is something humans must find themselves, step by step. But what we can do is making them start to think about it, and shedding doubt on the generally accepted systems can be seen as the first step to change.

Often we cannot ‘conway’ the people for a long period in their lives, but perhaps just for one day, or maybe just one evening, like the presentation at the physiotherapy congress. Nevertheless, we try to form even this single day or evening in an authentic manner which shows a glimmer of the idea of complexity within simplicity, depicting possibilities to develop individual arts of life. And at the same time we are catching a glimpse of their art of life as well. Paolo Coelho described the interaction of teaching and learning like this:

A student should never copy the steps of his master, because everyone has a different way to meet the challenges of life. To teach means: to show, that it is possible. To learn means: to make it possible for yourself. (Coelho, 1999, p. 172)

We cannot say anything about what happened to the physiotherapists after that evening; if their memories of it just disappeared or if they had any consequences. Finally, we want to tell a story about one of their students: First he came here to Norway with his class. By being inspired he came back more than once for friluftsliv. He told us that he is himself when he is in the Norwegian nature, like Goethe's Faust recognized on a walk: *Here I'm human, here I'm allowed to be!* (Goethe, 1986, p. 28) And this seems to influence this student's way of life, not only when he is here but also back home in Germany. In the end he met Achim up here and was offered to support Achim in teaching friluftsliv at the university in Germany. As the start of a network that crosses the border of Scandinavian friluftsliv and becomes international, this does not end up as a distant cry in the wilderness. Friluftsliv has been an alternative way of life from its beginning until now. And today it retains its great potential to inspire people to change the patterns of their way of thinking and Living.

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