

## **Essence of *Friluftsliv*: Outdoor Education in Alaska and Japan**

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### **Abstract**

This paper seeks to introduce some forms of outdoor education in Alaska and Japan, and attempts to discuss in relation to “*Friluftsliv*” philosophy with special attention to human-nature relationships and implication for sustainability. While *Friluftsliv* seems to carry universal values, its approaches and meanings are different depending on their society and cultures. Nonetheless, implications for sustainability should be taken into account across the cultures in enhancing human-nature relationships in modern context.

### **Introduction**

As we face increasing environmental and socio-economic pressures across the globe, two features have come to be recognised as of great and enduring significance; firstly the human relationship to nature and secondly the role of education in the development of ideas about sustainable living. Much of outdoor/environmental education (OE/EE) theory and practice rests on the assumption that human disconnection from nature is a fundamental problem (Abbey 1984; Orr 1994; Thomashow 1995; Lindholdt 1999; Russell 1999) , and suggests that OE/EE can contribute by restoring the connection. It is a prevailing claim among researchers that the attachment to a natural environment would lead to conservation mindset (Gray 1993; Wilson 1993).

While the link between the attachment to nature and environmental behavior is never ‘proven’, “*Friluftsliv*” concept addresses deep relationships with nature as part of philosophy which implies sustainable living. This paper first establishes some key elements of *Friluftsliv* which are described in English literature as a frame of reference, and introduces some aspects of outdoor education (OE) in Alaska and Japan, then

discuss their common values with *Friluftsliv*. The fieldwork for data gathering in Alaska was mainly conducted in 2001-03.

## 1. Norwegian *Friluftsliv* -- basic concept as a frame of reference

Having studied literature available in English concerning *Friluftsliv*, and visited the course “Conwayor (Vegleder) Training in Frilufsliv” in 2001, organised by Dr Børge Dahle at the Norwegian University of Sports and Physical Education, this article sets out core values of *Friluftsliv* as a frame of reference for further discussion. There are many forms of *Friluftsliv*, and its definitions, history, and approaches are highly contentious. However, the following points are generally agreed among those concerned with the concept while they should not be regarded as the only values of *Friluftsliv*.

*Friluftsliv* seeks a deeper relationship between people and the natural world which emphasises emotional ties, and an implication for a lifestyle which leads to sustainable living. *Friluftsliv* is also a value statement which calls for the recognition to consider the strong and harmonious connection to the natural environment as “rich” and favourable quality of life. Some of the repeated key words in literature as well as in the interviews that I conducted with students on the “Conwayor Training in Frilufsliv” course include; simple and rich, respect for nature, culture and identity.

## 2 The Alaskan case and common elements with *Friluftsliv*

Alaska is more than five times as big as Norway in size, but its population of 630,000 is about one seventh of Norway. Alaska Natives<sup>1</sup> of aboriginal ancestry in Alaska constitute 16.4% of the population, according to the 1999 US Census. Native people in Alaska consist of distinct groups on the basis of language, culture and geographic location, such as Athabaskans, Gwi’chins, and Inupiat. The camping ‘programmes’ organised for and by Alaska Natives are a fairly recent trend, though camping itself had been part of their life for many people over generations. Some of the projects are called

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<sup>1</sup> This is a widely spread term to specify people who are indigenous to Alaska, distinguishing ‘white’ Alaskans and immigrants or their descendents.

‘culture camps’ or ‘science camps’, and the organisers and providers include schools, the tribal communities, individuals, and the governmental agencies. Some of the programmes, especially those which are organised by Alaska Natives, state “connecting young people with the land” as their primary purpose. This echoes with *Friluftsliv* whose interests lie in the human relationship with nature.

An Alaskan village, called Russian Mission along the Yukon River with a population of 320, was one of the sites which organised OE for young people. The residents were predominantly Yup’ik, and they relied on subsistence foods such as fish and moose for more than 60% of their diet. Cash was an inevitable part of modern subsistence activities because of the need to purchase gas, motorboats, snow machines, rifle and ammunition. However, the opportunity of full time employment in the entire village was limited to around 44 jobs.

The Russian Mission School developed their curriculum around the year-round OE. While they had about 100 students from Kindergarten to high school, their main target was high school (17 students in 2001-02) and Junior high school (19 students). For the first five weeks of the school year in 2001, the students were out everyday, including a week long camp for Junior high school students, for fishing, moose hunting, and a canoe trip. All these activities involved lengthy procedures and knowledge such as repairing fish nets, learning how to drive a boat safely in water, the link between the river current and the movement of the net as well as fish, cleaning and preparing fish in certain ways, building a smoke house, gathering materials for smudging and smoking, and so on.

The programmes were also linked with academic skills and subjects, and the fieldwork was combined with the western scientific approach such as identification and classification of plants. Two local men who worked at the school led expeditions and activities, and community members offered support by providing logistics and volunteering their time and knowledge.

There were three issues the organisers seek to address.

- 1) Competency in travelling, including safety

- 2) Providing food for families, living off the land, subsistence skills
- 3) Connection to the land linked to identity and welfare

Some common themes with *Friluftsliv* can be observed in terms of seeking a deeper relationship with the natural world by adopting simple and self-sufficient approaches. In addition, it is linked with culture and identity. But a fundamental difference lies in the direct purpose and the relationship with nature. Norwegian *Friluftsliv* in its modern conception is based on the idea that the time spent in nature is their leisure and recreation. Whereas enjoyment is not the direct purpose for Alaska Natives, even though it may come as a by-product.

*Friluftsliv* hopes to raise people's awareness and lead to a lifestyle which practises sustainable living. For Alaska Natives, their lives directly depend on the land, and the relationship is perceived as mutual give-and-take. Traditionally people believe the animals eternally come back to them to be hunted as long as the hunters treat the animals in a right manner. To be in proper relationships with nature directly relates with sustainability.

Sometimes the rift is apparent between local residents and governmental resource management officials or scientists, but the connection with the environment as a whole leads to the sustainability issue, and residents in Alaska are aware that it is critical to them. However, due to their cultural stance and the necessity of physical survival, the relationship may be expressed in a different way compared to *Friluftsliv* practitioners in Norway. Therefore, it may not then be looked on in the same way as the western people might talk about 'walking lightly on earth.'

The introduction of schooling in Alaska, based on a western model of boarding schools, has been argued to have deprived indigenous peoples of their cultures, and is regarded as part of the main reasons of the current social problems and loss of identity among young Alaska Natives. Having been aware of the school's historical disruptive effect, the Russian Mission School Principal Mike Hull considered that it is school's responsibility to bring back what should not have been taken away.

Some of the core values that the OE in Russian Mission carries with certainly echo with those of *Friluftsliv*. However, the rationale and the social/cultural context in which it is located are very different to each other.

### 3 The Introduction of Japanese OE

The term ‘outdoor education’ in Japan has been introduced as a translation of English phrase, and American OE was brought in as an authentic form. Mainstream OE and EE in Japan have been closely linked to US models up to now.

The traditional Japanese views regard human beings inseparable from nature. Shintoism, part of the Japanese belief system, suggests many *Kami* or deities have taken natural forms such as mountains and water. Nature is something to be held in awe, something to live in harmony with and become one with (HAGINO, Mochizuki et al. 1987). There is a word called “*FUDO*”, which is essential to understand the Japanese view of human relationship with nature. *Fudo* consists of two Japanese characters; one means ‘wind’ and another means ‘the land.’ The meaning of the whole word encompasses the natural environmental condition of a given land, and the historical and cultural accumulation of human experiences of that particular place. Watsuji, the Japanese renowned philosopher, wrote that we understand ourselves through *Fudo*, which means a deep and intentional relationship of the person with the environment (Watsuji 1961).

Japanese seem to have practiced a form of *Friluftsliv* traditionally, but it was not intentional nor with conscious environmental awareness, even though these often involved highly sophisticated rituals and enjoyment. For example, it has been a tradition for people to enjoy themselves underneath of cherry blossoms in spring, singing, dancing, and drinking, sometimes with artistic and intellectual activities. People used to go climbing and long distance walking for practising faith, and they took part in cultural activities by the sea and in mountains together with their families.

But these features are not considered a part of OE. People have not often linked the imported word ‘OE’ with their daily life, and they think of it as something instructed by someone else. While Japanese traditional worldviews and beliefs implied sustainable

living or living within the earth's capacity, it has never been materialised in that manner as economic development has been a national priority. As a result of the intensive development after the WWII and consequent societal change, now 90% of the Japanese population live in cities, and do not have opportunities to enhance their traditional relationships with the natural world.

Though historically OE did not have a high profile, the central governmental involvement in the past 10 years has greatly raised its social status. The Council for Outdoor and Nature Experiences was set up in 2000 by non-governmental organisations with a governmental support to train and license individuals at five levels to become instructors/coordinators for activities in the natural surroundings. The objective is for leaders to provide enjoyable and meaningful experiences of nature and the sensory aspects are strongly stressed. Their website include some catchy phrases such as 'let's go to nature, let's go back to yourself.' Though they look obscure, they may make sense according to the Japanese *Fudo* concept as people are to find themselves through a deep relationship with the environment. Nature experiences are also widely regarded as a vehicle for raising environmental awareness because the depth of these experiences is assumed to lead them to consider taking care of the environment in its broadest sense.

OE in Japan in a broader sense generally seems to address the relationship with nature, and implications for sustainable living. But it is still at the superficial level. What is needed for leaders in OE in Japan is to try to understand the tradition which Japanese society still carries, and develop their own philosophy and approaches which are appropriate in each locality, including a rationale of purpose and approach of OE. This may be a way for Japanese *Friluftsliv* to meet the needs of its own society.

## Conclusion

In an attempt to tweeze out some elements of *Friluftsliv* which have universal values, the paper identify 'seeking deep relationships with nature through a simple encounter and interaction with natural environment', 'respect for nature' and 'culture and identity' as common in both Alaskan case and Japanese traditional forms of relationships with nature. While their approach and meanings may be different depending on social and

cultural context, the Friluftsliv philosophy contains important implications for sustainable living, and it is this particular value that other cultures need to be more conscious in enhancing human-nature relationships in modern context.

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