



# TRACKING NATURE INSCRIBED

## *Nature in Rights and Bureaucratic Practice*

by Gro Birgit Ween

*Indigenous people live in places that non-indigenous people generally consider nature. As these peoples' livelihoods often are in this nature, their lives are frequently bureaucratized in ways that most of us would never encounter. This article describes my long-term effort to find ways to explore such bureaucratic processes in practice as part of my contribution to an environmental anthropology. I describe how I methodologically and theoretically explore such processes by using two examples of my writing, the articles "Blåfjella-Skjækerfjella nasjonalpark: Naturforvaltning som produksjon av natur/sted" and "Enacting Human and Non-Human Indigenous Salmon, Sami and Norwegian Natural Resource Management". The first text describes Sami reindeer herders fighting the establishment of a national park. The other concerns an attempt of the Directorate of Nature Management to reregulate sea salmon fishing. Comparing these two articles, I show the variety of bits of nature that are materialised in bureaucratic process. Agency within such bureaucratic processes is explored with references to the materialities of the coined terms, texts bits, conventions and other legal references, as well as the numbers produced in the documents. Circulated, these bits of nature certainly influence the outcome of environmental controversies – they can contribute to naturalising particular narratives or foreseen outcomes.*

**Keywords:** Bureaucratic process, documents, numbers, narratives, indigenous peoples.

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## Introduction

My anthropological work concerns indigenous people, people that live in places that non-indigenous people generally consider as nature. As these people's livelihoods are often in this nature, their lives are frequently bureaucratised in ways that most of us would never encounter.

For a long time, when anthropologists wrote about nature and bureaucratic processes, the usual strategy was to focus on laws behind natural resource management practices – the conventions and regulations, citing paragraphs of national and international laws. Alternatively, anthropologists engaged coined terms – for instance “national parks”, “biodiversity”, “alien species”, and “the common good of mankind” – in a general kind of discourse analysis. One example of such is Kalland's (Kalland and Sejersen 2005) analysis of the “super-whale”. This humorous piece elaborated on the various characteristics attributed to the whale by the different voices in the anti-whaling lobby. The analysis did not make an effort to localise these voices since the rhetorical benefit was in lumping all claims together (Kalland and Sejersen 2005). In my opinion, such efforts to deconstruct terms, concepts, and laws in environmental discourse masked rather than revealed the process and practices which the terms were part of. By reading these simple forms of discourse analysis, I learned little about how some

of those nature narratives became dominant and how exactly they came to conceal the existence of others. There was also scarce concern regarding nature, or the materialities that enter into the production of nature.

These shortcomings motivated me to open up my anthropological practice by examining how nature becomes enacted in natural resource management practice. My aim is to study legal and bureaucratic nature writings and how these texts affect the natures which indigenous peoples engaged with. Several efforts in this regard were already made in the 1990s, when anthropological writings on indigenous peoples started to look at bureaucratic practices. They were however, more concerned with the interface between local and bureaucratic knowledge and the ontological impossibility of merging the two, rather than on the analysis of the workings of bureaucratic practice in itself (Nadasdy 2003).

In this article, I describe my search for the adequate anthropological tools that help me to get theoretically and methodologically closer to the inscriptions circulated in bureaucratic documents; as well as their potential to shape, intervene, and co-produce the nature that is considered to exist “out there” – the kind of nature that indigenous peoples engage with in their subsistence practices.

## An Anthropological biography

This anthropological endeavor started when I was studying in Australia. I observed back then the gentrification of the northern towns as the tourist industry became the second successful coloniser of the Australian coastline. City Council by-laws changed vacant land within the city borders from being nature to becoming culture. In this process, the Aboriginal vagrants that inhabited this land were forced out (Ween 1997). This actually happened about the same time as Aboriginal people's rights to nature became articulated in the Australian Native Title Act (1993), and Aboriginal rights to land became an issue in the Australian courts. I was struck by how, in Darwin, newspapers and talk-back radio managed to create such a powerful image of the Aboriginal savage threatening white suburbia in the middle of an Aboriginal rights era.

As part of this Native Title regime, anthropologists largely spoke to legal institutions and the law. Anthropologists saw their position as translators between Aboriginal worldviews and legal institutions (Ween 2006). Anthropologists were empowered as expert witnesses to transform Aboriginal lives and nature practices into data that satisfied the legally determined criteria, in the hope of achieving legal recognition of Aboriginal rights to land.

A decade later, indigenous land rights cases appeared in the Norwegian High Court (Bjerkli and Thuen 1999, Bjerkli 2004, Bjerkli

and Eythorsson 2011, Ween 2006). To my surprise, while Native Title anthropologists had been made part of the academic anthropological tradition in Australia, such anthropological efforts were treated differently in Norway. Indigenous rights work was considered applied anthropology, and a completely different species, particularly from environmental anthropology's view. Even though anthropological documentation of indigenous nature practices stood at the core of such legal practices (see e.g., Peterson and Rigsby 1998, Bjerkli 2004, Scott 2005). In its efforts to engage with more powerful knowledge practices like law and the courts, applied anthropology became disqualified as normative.

Reflecting on how to include the experiences of this important legal work into my environmental anthropology, I realised the need to shift focus. Such processes could not be understood with reference to people alone (neither indigenous nor bureaucrats). If I was aiming to grasp what was going on, I had to include the artifacts of bureaucracy. I would have to examine how documents could shift action and perform tasks, as well as, how these documents and texts interact in processes in dynamic and contingent ways, and often with unpredictable results (Latour 1996, Shore et al. 2011).

I discovered that these were trails that anthropologists tended to avoid since documents were generally considered boring. Since



anthropologists often worked in countries where bureaucratic documents were not generally available, those documents, laws, and regulations were considered avoidable as well. However, even in countries where management of nature depends less on laws, documents, and policy than others there is no doubt that nature management still intervenes in local practices (see e.g., Nustad 2013, Nustad and Sundnes 2013). Therefore, it is not only in countries like Norway where an anthropologist would seem

uninformed attempting to describe what happens in/with nature without relating to bureaucratic practices. As Shore et al. (2011) state, there are few people nowadays not touched in certain way by the classificatory logics and regulatory power of politics. Even if infrastructures of governance are not present in the same way as in our part of the world, people still find their lives and livelihoods subject to policies of remote governments, national and international agencies (Shore et al. 2011).

## Nature as an artefact, documents as artefacts

The way in which I understand 'nature practices' has been largely influenced from early stages by STS and material semiotic approaches. In concrete, I focus on examining how nature is enacted. These perspectives argue that there is always more than one nature. Furthermore, they also claim that nature is not out there to be studied in a unique manner, since it is not something that only lends itself to one kind of description. Therefore, we should be aware about the fact that the ways in which nature is described serve to establish one kind of nature. Description, inscription, and the act of writing themselves have agency. Written narratives can intervene in and affect other descriptions. They can be powerful and influence the materialities they intend to describe as well as people's everyday lives. Nature is produced from such an understanding; or rather, as it is produced in entanglements of places, human and non-human actors, it is co-produced (Asdal 2003, 2011). Therefore, in these practices, nature is not made by a single actor or institution, but has to become a premise for more than one to have an effect.

STS and material semiotic approaches grant agency to non-human actors like documents, legal texts, and other bureaucratic devices (see e.g., Asdal 2003, 2011). These approaches have also seeped into anthropological practices (see Riles 2001). For instance, in her study of The Fijian preparations for the UN Women's Conference in Beijing, Annelise Riles (2001) not only followed the artifacts of institutional activity, and the objects and subjects of bureaucratic practice; but also how this practice was conceived and what kind of responses it elicited (2001:xiv). In his study of how indigenous work in Chaco became global, Mario Blaser (2010) was concerned with the ways in which modern knowledge practices are performed, including how different knowledges involved in indigenous rights work engage with each other.

In this paper I return to the bits of nature that became significant to me in my previous work. In concrete, I draw on the findings from two articles I have written about the Norwegian Sami, Sami rights, and natural resource management processes. The first article examines the establishment of a national park and is entitled "Blåfjella-Skjækerfjella nasjonalpark: Naturforvaltning som produksjon av natur/sted" (Ween 2009). The second one – "Enacting Human and Non-Human Indigenous Salmon, Sami and Norwegian

Natural Resource Management" (Ween 2012) – describes the attempts to introduce new regulations for sea salmon fishing. In both cases, nature narratives were foregrounded in ways that rendered Sami practices invisible. Natural resource management processes put entities into play in such ways that they travel further and become more significant than the competing Sami processes.

Both stories involved cases of competing narratives. The first study described the establishment of Blåfjella-Skjækerfjella National Park. The narratives played out in this case were (1) the story of the urgent need to protect a bit of nature – the largest connected piece of wilderness in Southern Norway – and at the same time; and (2) the Sami rights narrative – the rights of the reindeer herders to practice their livelihood. In this case, the Sami reindeer herders lost. The second case regarded a suggestion from the Directorate of Nature Management of reregulating sea salmon fisheries. The two competing narratives in this case were (1) the story of the urgent need to protect wild Atlantic salmon; and (2) and the description of the need to protect a very vulnerable Sea Sami population that depended on salmon fishing for their livelihood. This time, the Sami narrative won.

As illustrated above by the story about Aboriginal vagrants and Native Title Rights, it is important to note what happens when two narratives compete for attention. Kristin Asdal (2003) has successfully explored the playing out of controversies in environmental politics – including the human and non-human actors involved in them. Two of the cases she studies date from 1970s, when environmental pollution first became an issue in Norway. One of the stories started with some sick cows in Årdal and ended up as a case of massive aluminum emissions. The second one describes how a planned oil-fuelled power plant went from being a naturalised part of the ongoing industrialisation to becoming a contentious environmental issue (Asdal 2003). Both cases became important issues in the establishment of the Ministry of Environment in Norway (Asdal 2011). These controversies remind us of the existence of many kinds of agency, as well as the different ways that legal texts, propositions, regulations, and policy notes have to potentially enforce great changes – yet the networks in which they are put into play are not entirely predictable (Asdal 2003, 2011, Marres 2005). It is not always apparent who succeeds in producing an



authoritative narrative. The historian William Cronon (1991) argues that the very authority with which a narrative presents its vision is achieved by obscuring large proportions of reality. Narrative foregrounds and backgrounds hide discontinuities and contradictory experiences. A powerful narrative constructs common sense,

## Bits of nature

As Kristin Asdal argues, we should study both the successful and the unsuccessful bureaucratic processes. Often we learn as much (or more) from studying what went wrong as from stories of what went right (Law 2004a; Asdal 2003, 2011). In order to explore processes of competing narratives I will dwell on the bits of nature that circulate in bureaucratic nature practices. In natural resource management, knowledge of nature and hence, nature (as we see it) is produced through public documents, Norwegian Official Reports (NOU), other policy documents, international commissions, conventions, and action plans.

In networks of natural resource management actions, policy documents become central actors; they contribute to coining terms that generate new agency, in turn constituting new natures. Latour (1987) argues that, when put into motion, such terms have agency. Motion is what happens when terms are repeated, referred to, and spread in new documents and publications - often in a number of different formats, such as pictures, graphs and numbers. Through such movements terms become coined, they become entities (Ernst 1999).

In Norwegian natural resource management, terms such as "biological diversity", "local governance", and "sustainable development" are widely employed. Repeated use confirms the existence of these entities and contributes to making them increasingly real. In use, they are translated into new formats. They become numbers in reports or statistics to be reported to global institutions such as the UN. Numbers add value to these entities. The same occurs when they become part of maps or even the reason for making new maps and other kind of graphic illustrations (Latour 1987, see also Strathern 2000).

The ability of a narrative to convince depends on several factors. It is not only matter of the coined terms that are circulated, but bureaucratic documents themselves are also important. The circulation of them contributes to authorise the narrative. The more the documents, the terms they make use of, and the narratives in them are repeated and circulated; the truer they become (Latour 1987:26, Riles 2006:13). Through circulation of documents and ongoing repetitions of the known; terms, entities, and facts are established, orders are confirmed, and narratives added to (Riles 2001).

The materialities of these documents are also convincing (Riles 2006); for instance, the actual layout of the physical papers (texts

making the contingent seem determined and the artificial seem natural. It obscures the fact that actions are potentially valued in different ways (Cronon 1991). In the following, I will explore the bits of nature in bureaucratic processes that contributes to this.

from Ministries have great letter heads). There are recognisable details in the aesthetics, the structure, the paragraphs, the appearance of ministers as signatures and the use of quotes as well as the ways in which legal conventions, tables, and figures appear (Riles 2001). Significant documents, such as Norwegian Official Reports (NOU) have a distinct binding, with the Norwegian state emblem of the lion on the front. The handling in of these documents also contributes to making them accountable. Commission secretaries are photographed handing in such documents to the relevant minister. The weight of bounded documents with the logo of a Ministry on it has an effect - lined up as a series of identical looking publications on the bookshelf of a senior bureaucrat. On the inside are the logos and rules for how texts should be presented, with the particular aesthetic of Ministry standards - the fonts, the rules regarding text structure, the choice of words, the references to laws and conventions, and the use of brackets. It is interesting to explore how, in some documents, every word is negotiated, texts are circulated endlessly by correct bureaucratic procedure - from senior executive officers to their superiors, between sections and departments, within the same Ministry, or between Ministries (Neumann 2013). Moreover, how documents are heard, commented on by NGOs and other stakeholders, reawakened to compromise, or seemingly come to terms with comments and commitments.

In both these writings, I wanted to point out that bureaucratic language is a rhetorical and aesthetic practice with an elaborate formal style. One of the most significant aspects of this particular writing genre is the absence of human actors. This serves to underline that the reason for what is presented is an authority that goes beyond the individual officer who has composed particular texts (Riles 2001).

Numbers as well play a particular part, both as an aesthetic device, and as a tool for conviction. Verran (2010) describes how the use of numbers in bureaucratic nature practices has risen dramatically in the last few years. Verran is interested in numbers' capacity to carry human endeavors, attributing this to what she calls "a fantasy of an inexhaustible accumulation" (2010:177). In her opinion, numbers are convincing because they are both needy and agile. Numbers are dependent because they are not in themselves complete. In themselves, numbers have little meaning; their meaning comes from the context they are placed in and the entities they are connected with (Verran 2010). Numbers are therefore inherently unstable. In combination with other actors they may



become activated and may change meaning (Verran 2010). These characteristics are what enable numbers to create new phenomenon. By establishing relations between one and many, numbers provide authority to particular stories.

In both the cases I described, numbers created a sense of urgency; the largest connected piece of Norwegian wilderness was disappearing, along with the Atlantic salmon. Assembling wholes and parts through numbers also provides other kinds of agency (Verran 2010:1771). Annelise Riles talks about the element of competition created by the unending project of revision, demands of accountability, and reporting between projects, ministries, and states (Riles 2001:176).

In the coming discussion of my two papers about nature in bureaucratic processes, numbers serve to singularise, to hide heterogeneity, and give authority to particular narratives. However, numbers do not always succeed in becoming magical in making particular narratives seem like the only viable solution (Verran 2010).

Natural resource management institutions produce natures that others cannot avoid evoking. By referring to specific paragraphs in international laws, new realities are constituted (Riles 2001, Pottage and Mundy 2004). Moreover, the existence of multiple and heterogeneous bodies of conventions – both national and international – enables a situation where all parties can refer to several terms and entities – as documents, parts of conventions, and paragraphs – that may legitimise and confirm their arguments. In other words, there is an inherent flexibility to the apparently rigid production of text in bureaucratic practice (Riles 2001). Within this maze of possible narratives, the ones to succeed are those that create a strong sense of reason, a sense of being the only possibility – as Cronon (1991) says, what becomes true is what makes the artificial real. In order to foreground one narrative to the exclusion of others, one must make this heterogeneous mass of bits of nature singular – certain parts are omitted, others are cited, and documents circulate with admissions and omissions. Annelise Riles says that to study bureaucratic practice we must follow the governing practices as if they were routes in a map. We must observe the roads and landscapes being made, which routes people take, and the ones that become ignored (Riles 2001: 13). What is foregrounded and backgrounded is essential to our understanding.

In the article about establishment process of the national park – “Blåfjella-Skjækerfjella nasjonalpark: Naturforvaltning som produksjon av natur/sted” (Ween 2009) – both the natural resource management institutions and the Sami interests made use of different sections of national and international legislation to evoke their respective natures and places (Riles 2001: 13). Eventually, the Ministry of Environment succeeded in producing the nature that became real, namely “the largest remaining piece of connected wilderness in Southern Norway”. This nature then became physically inscribed in place: signs were posted, walking tracks were made, reindeer were fenced off, parking lots and tourist facilities

were built; all serving to reinforce the artificial made real, the entity “Blåfjella-Skjækerfjella National Park”.

In the second text – “Enacting Human and Non-Human Indigenous Salmon, Sami and Norwegian Natural Resource Management” (Ween 2012) – the Ministry of Environment failed. In both cases, the Ministry’s position was contested, but in this second case, the Ministry never managed to produce a narrative with sufficient authority. In this article I suggested that the reason why this failed was because of the Ministry did not succeed in concealing existing discontinuities in their narrative, nor the presence of other narratives.

In the bureaucratic documents that followed the Ministry of Environment’s suggestion of new regulation of sea salmon fishing, numbers were introduced at several points in the argumentation. Numbers were included in the text to demonstrate the value of Norwegian wild salmon, positioning the number of wild salmon in Norway and elsewhere in the world to illustrate national and international concerns. When an endangered species was established, numbers were put into use connecting the wild salmon with economic value. The use of numbers made apparent that sports fishermen practicing catch and release (rather than Sea Sami fishermen) would be the most sustainable use of the fish. Most importantly, numbers served to make this grand narrative appear apolitical.

These efforts of making salmon into a vehicle for tourist sports fishing almost succeeded in concealing the competing narrative, emphasising the need to protect the equally endangered Sea Sami and their rights. To remove all doubt, the Ministry of Environment commissioned a research report – used by the Directorate of Nature Management – to argue that there no longer was such a thing as Sea Sami people, nor culture. However, this is where it all went wrong. The efforts to conceal the existence of the Sea Sami became too reductionist and too heavy-handed. Protests from the Sea Sami, Sami politicians, the Sami Parliament and a number of prominent researchers became so loud that it was impossible to present Sea Sami culture as having vanished. In the end, the proposed re-regulation was dropped (Ween 2012).

The Directorate of Natural Resource Management’s webpage announcing the lack of existing Sea Sami culture (and hence the lack of need for concern of non-sports fishing uses of the salmon) became a “mammoth”, and can no longer be found on their webpages, unless one really wants to. In this case, the Directorate did not succeed in making one nature appear apolitical since sufficient amounts of very articulated people did not support the bureaucratic extermination of the Sea Sami. The existence of an alternative narrative, the Sea Sami rights narrative, served to naturalise human–salmon relations instead of the sports fishing narrative drawn up by the Directorate.

We find similar stories of political controversies also in Law’s writing (2004b). His article about the foot and mouth epidemic in the UK in 2001 draws upon similar competing models between the



common good and the relevant collective; involving assumptions of the relations between centre and periphery, local and national interests, and knowledge (Asdal et al. 2008: 8). As in the case of the UK governmental response to the Foot and Mouth epidemic, my Sea Sami/sea salmon controversy included a similar kind of

structural failure. Such an unsuccessful attempt can be explained by its excessive compliance with the documents produced by the government itself, and the lack of social reflexivity or understanding that their summary of the research report could not make an indigenous group disappear.

## Conclusion

By following the trails of bureaucratic documents produced in the course of natural resource management stories, I have traced how new natures and new kinds of Saminess were brought into being. I am aware of the disadvantages of this kind of work. Although there is a larger community of ANT-inspired anthropologists out there with an interest in documents and bureaucratic procedures – for instance Strathern (2000), Riles (2006), Pottage and Mundy (2004) –, this topic is often claimed to be dry material and not as appealing as other kinds of anthropology. Furthermore, bureaucratic practice is also difficult to translate from one language to another. In this case, it is challenging to describe Norwegian bureaucratic practice using a vocabulary that works in English.

My articles show how in different bureaucratic processes what is circulated – bits of texts, legal documents, numbers, and citations – can become part of different narratives. Some will remain and others disappear, but likewise, they could reappear as part of the same or other controversies. In these bureaucratic practices, circulation is important in itself. We all know the saying: "Just because you are paranoid doesn't mean there isn't someone trying to get

you". There might be reasons to be paranoid, but documents, laws, conventions, and policy documents also contribute to their own circulation. Moreover, there is more to the production of winning arguments in a controversy than succeeding in naturalising, to make singular by using bits of texts and numbers. As I have illustrated, not any kind of outrageous argument works (although some do), even if they might be connected to the right issue. Narratives must also be consistent and make sense in connection with other competing narratives.

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