

To Hel and Back:
Linking Communities through Nordic Waterways

Growing threats to the climate with resulting floods, droughts and human disasters beg the question “are we all endangered species?”. Peering deeper into what links our communities to the environments we belong triggered a travel journey into Nordic water worlds, and the habitats we all share. With the ever expanding Red List of endangered and extinct species developing into a Green list of our threatened global ecosystems, this study seeks to join in efforts to identify community based solutions.



It began and ended with WATER.

From the air were images of ice, water, snow — puzzle pieces of days gone by and futures unknown all related by one molecule of hydrogen and two of oxygen. Torrential downpours of freezing rain greeted my arrival to a stunning Icelandic topography. Visions of spending the day in leisurely hikes up to cascading waterfalls shattered, going instead to warmer places. In Iceland that means hot springs. On this birthday occasion, it meant the Blue Lagoon.



Traversing the geologic fault line between European and North American plates, age-old poor mining practices severed a thin dividing line separating surface and ground water tables. This inadvertent release from the underground resulted in the discovery of healing springs of water with high levels of calcite, once an industrial zone; now a main tourist destination.

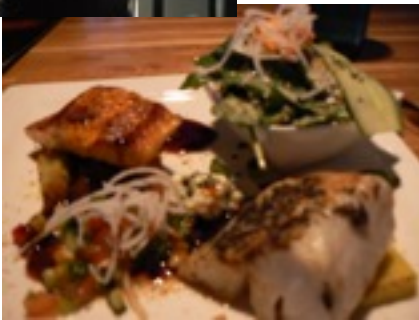


And then there were the Icelandic horses. Priding themselves on housing more native horses than people, an Icelandic horse that leaves the country cannot return as a purebred. The striking strides of these pony size animals make the common trot into a therapeutic massage with their gate moving side to side instead of up and down.

Moving gracefully over difficult terrain, these horses led me among the geology and hydrology of earthen slopes, traversing remnants of volcanic fire and glacial ice.

Seaward coastlines then led to the inland shores of Lake Myvatyn, a glacial lake draining ages of snow into sensitive wetlands, with native fish, birding trails, and rich volcanic soils. It is also the only other location in the country for calcite laden hot spring waters as in the Blue Lagoon. Fault lines between the North American and European continents sneak upon you as you traverse this rugged terrain. Local hospitality and faire was abundant as residents proudly hosted me in guest houses, restaurants and nature adventures.

The Saga, or stories of this region abound with history and nature and tout a picturesque encounter linking generations. However it did not account for the expected exponential increase of visitors in such a wild region. The quest for ecologically based tourism has begun.



Guarding habitat means first identifying vulnerable areas. Fresh water fish were the local speciality here as Iceland continues to be the only Scandinavian country with wild native fish to be found in local waters. Bread is baked in natural hot spring ovens and used in local restaurants, bringing the underground waters to dining tables.

The spring high seas did not stop our whaling voyage and the diverse species found there, or the snow laden adventure into the outback seeking some of the most wildly beautiful waterfalls I have ever seen. Fields of white link the snowy outback to the fire and ice topography that identify this region.



Connections from fresh water to marine environments led us back to the ocean shores. A roadside stop was met with song as I joined the Faro Islands choir en route back to the ferry and our voyage connecting communities by waterways continued on the ride across national boundaries in the sea.

A community apart but so linked in, the Faro Islands proudly touts an olympic size community pool preparing all ages for their water laden lives. Music abounds with the slightest prompting to break out in song and concerts galore singing their connection with this rugged environment. Stopping so briefly on their shores brought hopes of returning to experience the fullness of this rich culture.



In the seaward path to Norway, and one of the best social services economy in the world, Denmark hosts its own history, modern vs. traditional cultures. A living history village tells the story of days gone by but between the lines lie their



shielded place in the Second World War. Denmark now opens its doors to many. Bordering pressures of growing development, partners included hotels and an antique hot spring spa seeking to counter a contrasting urban expansion. Housed also by refugees, an underground network of those seeking asylum from political oppression was unveiled, adding hidden creativity and color to the mix.

Sensitive hydrological ecosystems brought us to the gateway of the Arctic circle, and the hub of

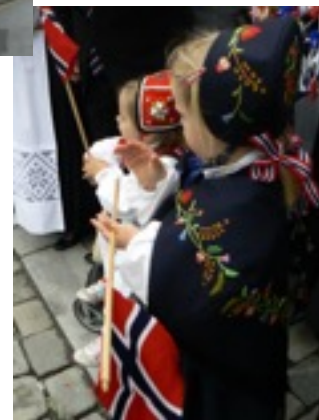


Bergen, Norway. But surrounded by Nordic culture and environments, our first encounter was with the New York Fire Department, and those who had served on the day of 9/11. These familiar faces had arrived in Norway to seek engines, linking our emergency services across continents.



National Day abounded with costumes and musical marches in the streets, commemorating regional cloth-

ing and memories of a time when all was made by hand; rather than oil. A day long boat ride opened up the myriad of local Fjords that mark this region.





Traveling along waterways from Bergen to the Arctic Circle and beyond, through habitat historically supporting native species, the local fish were absent, now replaced by fish farms in this once thriving resource based economy.



With flights to catch, we had counted on the regional train system to link our water to air. A train system relied upon for regional connections, suddenly brought to a halt by landslides and torrential rains. Roads blocked and tracks destroyed, we were obliged instead, to go to Hell, Norway, that is... Local hotel compassion came to the rescue when we were stranded in Hell. Hell turned out to be a friendly place.



Following the road to Hell, we stumbled upon petroglyphs of times gone by, with flows of water again connecting the generations. These works of art from another people who inhabited these lands, depicted wildlife such as

reindeer and fish still found in more wild areas.



Arriving In Seattle, once again greeted by water and the reminder of a Native history coupled



with the connections through the depth of watersheds. Participating in the Tribal Canoe Journeys in North America Puget Sound linked the Petroglyphs from Norway with these First Generation explorations.



Linking generations of natural areas and peoples across political boundaries and time, we can join forces in honoring and conserving these resources that sustain us, and work together in common solutions.

