

Paula Spjelkavik

Facilitating tourism to vulnerable destinations

A case study of the proposed gondola development in Sula Municipality

Master's thesis in Globalisation and Sustainable Development

Supervisor: Gunhild Setten

May 2024



Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

Paula Spjelkavik

Facilitating tourism to vulnerable destinations

A case study of the proposed gondola development in Sula Municipality

Master's thesis in Globalisation and Sustainable Development
Supervisor: Gunhild Setten
May 2024

Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Social and Educational Sciences
Department of Geography



Abstract

Tourism is one of the world's fastest growing industries and an important source of economic growth. As a branch of tourism, nature-based tourism is rising in popularity, drawing increasing numbers of visitors to nature destinations around the world. However, the growth of nature-based tourism is happening in parallel with the increased awareness of what is termed the 'nature crisis', which describes the loss of nature and extinction of species that is occurring globally. This thesis delves into the intricate interplay between nature-based tourism, the 'nature crisis', and local community dynamics through a case study of a proposed gondola project in Sula Municipality, in Norway. The study explores a paradox inherent in nature-based tourism: by facilitating improved access to nature, nature-based tourism can harm the very nature that it seeks to showcase.

The thesis explores this topic through a comprehensive literature review, document analysis, and interviews with various stakeholders, including local politicians and actors working on the project. By examining the perceptions of stakeholders on the gondola development, the study sheds light on different opinions regarding the development of infrastructure in nature and the balance between tourism promotion, economic development, and nature conservation. While proponents of the gondola argue for its potential economic benefits, opponents raise concerns about its detrimental impact on local biodiversity and landscape aesthetics. The study highlights the importance of incorporating local perspectives in decision-making processes to mitigate conflicts. Furthermore, it discusses how well local governments are able to incorporate nature conservation and sustainable development practices within local planning. The study underscores the need for clearer guidelines and regulations at both national and local levels to address the challenges posed by nature-based tourism. The study advocates for a holistic approach that considers not only economic gains but also nature conservation and social well-being.

Sammendrag

Turisme er en av verdens raskest voksende næringer og en viktig kilde til økonomisk vekst. Som en underkategori av turisme, er naturbasert turisme en gren som øker i popularitet, og stadig flere turister oppsøker naturdestinasjoner rundt om i verden. Fremveksten av naturbasert turisme skjer parallelt med at kunnskapen om det som kalles 'naturkrisen' øker, en krise som beskriver et enormt tap av natur og utryddelse av arter som skjer globalt. Denne oppgaven fordyper seg i det komplekse samspillet mellom naturbasert turisme, 'naturkrisen' og lokalsamfunnets dynamikk gjennom en casestudie av et foreslått gondolprosjekt i Sula kommune i Norge. Studien utforsker et paradoks ved naturbasert turisme: ved å tilrettelegge for bedret tilgang til natur, kan naturbasert turisme skade den samme naturen som den ønsker å vise frem.

Oppgaven utforsker dette temaet gjennom en omfattende gjennomgang av relevant litteratur, dokumentanalyse og intervjuer med ulike aktører, inkludert lokale politikere og aktører som jobber på gondolprosjektet. Ved å utforske aktørenes meninger rundt gondolbyggingen belyser forskningen ulike meninger om utvikling av infrastruktur i naturen og balansen mellom turisme, økonomisk vekst og naturvern. Mens forkjempere argumenterer for gondolens potensielle økonomiske fordeler, er motstandere bekymret for dens skadelige innvirkning på lokalt biologisk mangfold og landskapets estetikk. Studien fremhever viktigheten ved å inkludere lokale perspektiver i beslutningsprosesser for å minimere konflikter. Videre diskuteres det hvorvidt lokale myndigheter klarer å inkorporere naturvern og bærekraftig utvikling i lokal planlegging. Studien understreker behovet for tydeligere retningslinjer og forskrifter, både på nasjonalt og lokalt nivå, for å håndtere utfordringene som oppstår av naturbasert turisme. Studien argumenterer for en helhetlig tilnærming som ikke bare prioriterer økonomisk vekst, men også naturvern og sosialt velvære.

Acknowledgments

This thesis was written as a final submission for the two-year long master's program Globalisation and Sustainable Development by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Writing this thesis has given me the opportunity to dive into a topic of my interest, a process that has been both challenging and educational.

I would like to thank my supervisor Gunhild Setten for providing me with good feedback, knowledge, and counseling throughout the whole process. I would also like to thank the interviewees who participated in this study and provided me with valuable insight into the case study. Lastly, I would like to thank my friends, family, and classmates for supporting me through these months and contributing with interesting conversations and suggestions for the thesis.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	I
SAMMENDRAG	II
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	III
LIST OF FIGURES	V
LIST OF TABLES	V
1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 BACKGROUND FOR THE THESIS.....	1
1.2 CHOICE OF STUDY	2
1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	3
1.4 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS	4
2. THE IMPACTS OF NATURE-BASED TOURISM IN NORWAY	5
2.1 THE GROWTH OF NATURE-BASED TOURISM.....	5
2.2 NATURE-BASED TOURISM AND THE ‘NATURE CRISIS’	6
2.3 NATURE-BASED TOURISM IN NORWAY: NATIONAL CHALLENGES AND MEASURES	8
3. LITERATURE REVIEW	13
3.1 THE HUMAN-NATURE RELATIONSHIP	13
3.2 DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO EXPLORING THE OUTDOORS	15
3.3 LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES.....	17
4. CASE STUDY	21
4.1 SULA MUNICIPALITY	21
4.2 THE FLAKK GROUP AND DEVOLDFABRIKKEN	23
4.3 THE GONDOLA PROJECT.....	26
4.4. OBSTACLES AND RISK ASSESSMENTS.....	30
5. METHODS	35
5.1 RESEARCH DESIGN.....	35
5.1.1 Interviews.....	36
5.1.2 Document Analysis	38
5.2 ANALYZING DATA	39
5.3 LIMITATIONS AND QUALITY OF RESEARCH.....	39
5.4 RESEARCHER’S POSITION.....	41
6. RESULTS	43
6.1 THE MOTIVATION BEHIND THE GONDOLA PROJECT.....	43
6.2 THE PLANNING PROCESS.....	47
6.3 CONSIDERATIONS TOWARDS NATURE CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT.....	52
6.4 THE LOCAL CONFLICT.....	58
7. DISCUSSION	63
7.1 THE MOTIVATIONS AND PRIORITIES BEHIND THE GONDOLA.....	63
7.2 IN WHAT WAYS ARE NATIONAL GOALS REFLECTED?	67
7.3 WHAT ARE THE POSSIBILITIES FOR NATURE-BASED TOURISM TO BE SUSTAINABLE?	69
8. CONCLUSION	73
LIST OF REFERENCES	75
APPENDIX 1	81
APPENDIX 2	84

List of Figures

FIGURE 1: AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE GONDOLA GOING FROM DEVOLDFABRIKKEN TO RUNDEHORNET.....	21
FIGURE 2: MAP OVER SULA.....	22
FIGURE 3: DEVOLDFABRIKKEN IN LANGEVÅG	24
FIGURE 4: ILLUSTRATION OF THE GONDOLA GOING FROM DEVOLDFABRIKKEN.....	25
FIGURE 5: THE PLANNED DEVELOPMENT AT THE AREA SURROUNDING DEVOLDFABRIKKEN	25
FIGURE 6: THE PLANNED DOWNHILL SKIING SLOPES	26
FIGURE 7: THE PLANNED ZIP LINES.....	27
FIGURE 8: THE PLANNED HIKING TRAILS AND VIEWPOINTS	27
FIGURE 9: ILLUSTRATIONS OF THE CHANGES IN THE GONDOLA ROUTE.....	29
FIGURE 10: ILLUSTRATION OF THE TOP STATION.....	32

List of Tables

TABLE 1: PRESENTATION OF THE INTERVIEWEES.....	38
--	----

1. Introduction

1.1 Background for the Thesis

Tourism has become a huge industry and a crucial part of the modern, global life. The industry involves a series of actors, such as airlines, hotel chains, and travel agents, and has contributed to economic growth for both whole countries and local communities (Lanfranchi et al., 2014). Tourism is expected to remain an important source of economic growth, as the travel and tourism GDP is predicted to grow by 5.8% on global average each year between 2022 and 2032 (Binggeli et al., 2023). The tourism industry has also grown immensely in Norway, which is the focus area of this thesis; it has become the country's fifth largest export industry (Innovation Norway, 2021, p. 9) and is predicted to be an important industry in Norway's process to phase out the oil industry and invest in other areas for economic growth (Vestlandsforskning, n.d.).

The most popular form of tourism in Norway is nature-based tourism; tourism organized around outdoor experiences and activities, or visits to iconic nature sites (Fredman et al., 2012). Nature experiences is something that more and more tourists seek when traveling, and Norway can offer spectacular mountains, fjords, waterfalls, and glaciers. Through the right to roam (Allemansretten), Norwegian nature is available for everyone to use (Regjeringen, 2021a) and spending time outdoors is part of Norwegian culture and traditions (Bang, 2022). I will describe the right to roam further, and its relevance to the thesis in Chapter 2.

In parallel with the growth of nature-based tourism, more research is being done on what is now termed the 'nature crisis'; a global crisis concerning the loss of fertile soil, water resources and forests, along with a massive extinction of species (Jones, 2024). Though the tourism industry can contribute to positive effects such as economic growth, value creation, and employment, making it an important investment to create attractive local communities and satisfied citizens, it is also putting large pressure on nature and ecosystems (Bang, 2022). To lessen the pressure on nature and the environment, the Norwegian Government, along with the other UN member countries, signed a deal in 2022 to preserve 30% of the world's nature and sea by 2030 (Reisemålsutvalget, 2023). And more specifically for the tourism industry, Norway has taken initiative to develop sustainable tourism nationally, by measures such as commissioning a national tourism strategy for sustainable tourism (Innovation Norway, 2021) and creating Reisemålsutvalget, a committee devoted to developing sustainable travel

destinations (Regjeringen, 2023b). Despite these measures, the Norwegian Government has received criticism for lack of control of development projects around the country, and for allowing too much loss of nature (Støstad et al., 2024). Simply put, this lays the foundation for disagreements between those who wish to prioritize economic growth and developments, and those who wish to preserve Norwegian nature.

The purpose of this master's thesis is to explore nature-based tourism in Norway, its effects on Norwegian nature, and in local communities. More concretely, the thesis will investigate the plans for a gondola development in Sula Municipality in Møre og Romsdal (see Figure 2) in order to illustrate some of the paradoxes and local disputes that nature-based tourism creates: the nature that the tourism depends on is the very nature that will be put under heavy pressure in the development of the gondola.

1.2 Choice of Study

Norway has several national strategies and goals for creating a sustainable tourism industry and are also a part of the UN deal to preserve nature and end the extinction of species (see Chapter 2). By choosing a case study which represents an example of a, by now, representative tourism project, I wanted to explore whether the national strategies and goals are present in a local project.

I have chosen to explore nature-based tourism through a case study at Sula Municipality, in the county Møre og Romsdal, where a gondola-project has been proposed. The project is initiated by the local actor, the Flakk Group, and it is currently being reviewed in a collaboration between the Flakk Group and local politicians in Sula Municipality. I will go further into the details of the planning in Chapter 4.

The study is highly relevant to the paradox of nature-based tourism and the nature crisis, as assessments have concluded that the construction of the gondola, along with trampling from the increased number of tourists, will cause damage to the local ecosystem (iTrollheimen, 2022; Rådgivende Biologer AS, 2022). Yet, after receiving these assessments, the local politicians have decided to move forward with the project. The national goals and strategies come into play through the intervention of the County Governor, which is the State representative in Norwegian counties and is responsible for following up decisions, targets

and guidelines from the Parliament and the Government (Statsforvalteren, 2024). Through the involvement of the County Governor, I am able to study an example of how local governments relate to decisions made at the national level. Additionally, the project has caused dissatisfaction in the local community, as some feel the gondola will negatively affect both their homes and their possibilities for outdoor recreation. The case of the proposed gondola in Sula therefore reflects the complexity of such tourism projects and allows me to investigate both the impact of tourism at a local level and the involvement of national authorities.

1.3 Research Questions

The research questions for this study stem from the intersection of the nature crisis and the growth of nature-based tourism. They are formulated to explore the motivations, implications, and sustainability considerations surrounding the proposed gondola project in Sula Municipality. The questions address critical aspects of tourism development, environmental conservation, and the alignment with national sustainability objectives:

- What is the motivation behind the proposed gondola, and in what ways is Sula Municipality weighing economic interests in tourism against the imperative of conserving nature and biodiversity?
- In what ways does the proposed gondola at Sula reflect Norway's goals to become a sustainable tourism destination?
- What are the possibilities for nature-based tourism to be sustainable?

The first question seeks to uncover the underlying motivations behind the proposed gondola project in Sula. Specifically, it aims to investigate the driving forces behind this initiative, exploring whether economic interests in tourism outweigh considerations for nature conservation and biodiversity. By delving into the stakeholders' perspectives and decision-making processes, this question illustrates the complex interplay between economic development and environmental considerations.

Secondly, the study aims to discuss in which ways the proposed gondola project at Sula reflects Norway's aspirations to become a sustainable tourism destination. This research question examines the project's compliance with Norway's national strategies and goals for sustainable tourism, including aspects such as environmental protection, community

engagement, and responsible tourism practices. It investigates whether the project aligns with Norway's commitments to preserve nature and promote sustainable tourism development.

Lastly, the study explores the possibilities for nature-based tourism to be sustainable. By investigating the case of the proposed gondola in Sula along with relevant literature, the research examines strategies and practices that can foster sustainable nature-based tourism. It investigates innovative approaches, such as slow adventure tourism and inclusive community engagement, to promote tourism activities that minimize environmental impact while maximizing economic and social benefits.

By addressing these questions, the study aims to contribute to the discourse on sustainable nature-based tourism and add valuable knowledge that can inform decision-making processes at local and national levels. The research questions are answered through seven qualitative interviews with five local politicians and two private actors from the initiator of the project and the consultant company responsible for the area zoning plan and associated expert assessments, combined with document analysis. I will explain the choice of methods further in Chapter 4.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis consists of seven chapters. In the next chapter I will define the concepts relevant for the thesis, such as nature-based tourism and the nature crisis. I will also go more into detail on the current situation of Norwegian tourism and the Government's work to develop sustainable tourism. In Chapter 3 I will present relevant theory concerning the human-nature relationship, the challenges that come with nature-based tourism and the debate around local governance within sustainable development. Chapter 4 goes more into detail on my chosen case study, and in Chapter 5 I present the methods I have used. Chapter 6 presents the result from my collected data, which will be discussed further in Chapter 7. The last chapter, Chapter 8, presents the conclusion of my study and recommendations for future research.

2. The Impacts of Nature-based Tourism in Norway

In this chapter, I will explain further the concepts introduced in Chapter 1; I will present definitions of nature-based tourism and explore the different ways that this can be conducted. Additionally, I will explain how the nature crisis is connected to nature-based tourism, and what this interplay looks like in a Norwegian context.

2.1 The Growth of Nature-based Tourism

Nature-based tourism is a branch of tourism that has grown to be very popular. Fredman et al. (2012) have collected several definitions of the term and found that contemporary literature associate nature-based tourism with elements such as recreation, adventure, (perceptions of) untouched nature, protected areas, and activities connected to nature. Kuenzi and McNeely (2008, p. 158) define nature-based tourism simply as “the segment in the tourism market in which people travel with the primary purpose of visiting a natural destination”.

A reason for why nature-based tourism has become so popular can be described by the theory of ‘ecopsychology’, which connects humans’ health to the environment (Roszak, 1993, in Stevens, 2010). According to ecopsychology, since our bodies are a natural thing, we respond positively to natural environments, therefore our well-being is dependent on spending time in natural environments (Roszak, 1993, in Stevens, 2010). As a growing part of the human population is becoming urbanized, and people are experiencing less nature in their everyday lives, it makes sense that humans seek natural destinations when going on a holiday. This will be a break from everyday urban life and could work as a boost for the mental health.

Nature-based tourism is known for having benefits for local communities, such as contributing to local economies, fostering local identity, and it may help people connect with their cultural and natural heritage. As these benefits have become more visible, more and more local governments and tourism organizations have taken measures to make themselves desirable destinations (Winter et al., 2020). However, a rapid growth of visitors may also cause challenges, especially to nature in local communities, which I will explain further in Chapter 2.2, Because of this, the goal when developing a place into a nature destination is to provide visitors with quality experiences and expand economic opportunities, while at the same time protect natural and cultural resources (Winter et al., 2020, p. 2).

2.2 Nature-based Tourism and the ‘Nature Crisis’

Despite the positive effects from nature-based tourism, the industry also comes with some challenges. One of the dilemmas and paradoxes of nature-based tourism is the fact that tourists tend to seek those destinations that are less developed and untouched, to get a feeling of being out in the wild, and to re-connect with nature. However, it might be exactly those places that are the most vulnerable to human interference (Lanfranchi et al., 2014). Several Norwegian nature destinations have experienced severe consequences from tourism, such as pressure from overcrowding and littering, along with a lack of tourism management. Because of such challenges, there is a concern around the growth of nature-based tourism (Innovation Norway, 2021). The growth of this industry, and the awareness of its consequences, is also happening in parallel with the increased knowledge about what is termed the ‘nature crisis’ (Jones, 2024).

The ‘nature crisis’ is a global crisis based on the fact that nature is declining all around the world at rates never before seen in human history; soils are becoming infertile, water sources are drying up, and we’re experiencing a massive loss of species (Jones, 2024, p. 1). Based on numbers from the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF, 2022), the world's animal populations has been reduced by 69% since 1970, one third of the world’s forests has disappeared, and one million species are in danger of going extinct. To prevent these consequences, in 2022 Norway and the other UN member countries signed a deal for nature. The deal agrees that we will preserve 30% of the world’s nature and sea by 2030, restore 30% of damaged nature and stop the extinction of species. This deal is considered a milestone in the work to preserve nature (Reisemålsutvalget, 2023, p. 28), and of key importance for the future of nature-based tourism.

The nature crisis is a human-made crisis, and the major drivers are changes in land and sea use, climate change, pollution, exploitation of natural resources, and invasive species. The consequences of these changes are affecting plants and animals, but also has major impact on the lives of people around the world. The loss of nature damages the ecosystems in which we are all dependent on, which has direct impact on our economies, livelihoods, food security, and the general health and quality of life (Jones, 2024).

Zielinski et al. (2023) explain that the nature crisis is being viewed as an independent problem. One example is that the global UN meeting “Conference of Parties” (COP) has one

official conference on climate change and a separate one on biodiversity. Zielinski et al. (2023) consider this misleading and argue that the nature- and climate crisis are directly connected and should be viewed as an overall environmental crisis and global health emergency. Plants have the natural ability to capture carbon dioxide and are therefore an important part of the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. When plants are lost through deforestation and changes of land use, this ability is lost, and the climate crisis escalates. As the climate crisis is warming up the planet, this again affects forests and plants that cannot survive in warmer temperatures, or that are directly destroyed in forest fires (Vasseur et al., 2024). This goes to show that biodiversity and the climate is equally affecting each other, and that one can't solve one issue without the other.

The nature crisis is a relatively new term; in Norway it was first written about in media in May 2019 after the UN launched a major report on the condition of the world's ecosystems. The term has gained quite a lot of attention since, and is often used in debates concerning land use management in Norway (Bjærke & Andersen, 2023). The nature crisis gained more attention in Norway in the beginning of 2024, as the broadcasting corporation NRK released a news report where they had mapped all the nature intervention in Norway over the past five years. The result showed that we sacrifice 79 square meters of untouched nature per minute (Støstad et al., 2024). What is problematized in this report is how these nature intervention projects are happening within their own municipalities, and there is no overall plan or an overview picture of all the projects in the country. The municipalities decide for themselves if they want to initiate a project, and according to the report, this often happens despite advice and assessments from scientists and professionals (Støstad et al., 2024).

The nature crisis is connected to the climate crisis, but according to Bjærke and Andersen (2023), what separates them is that the climate crisis is caused by processes happening in the entire atmosphere, but the nature crisis is caused by local processes. These local processes are happening on such a large scale that we can now see it all over the globe – it is therefore both a local and a global issue. The news report from NRK resonates with this as it shows how all of the “small” local projects around the country become one big threat to Norwegian nature when you see them all combined.

As Norwegian tourism mainly is based on moving around in nature, this will eventually cause wear and tear. Tourists are often not aware of how much impact this makes, as studies have

shown that humans' ability to see wear and tear is less developed than our ability to notice more visible pollution, such as littering (Wolf et al., 2019). Because it takes a lot of time for some species to grow back after being stomped down, trampling might completely change the ecosystem if it goes on for a long time (Pescott & Stewart, 2014). This is both a danger to the nature and the tourism industry as damage on nature will lessen the quality of the product offered (Regjeringen, 2017). Several national icons in Norway are already under pressure from all the visitors and the Norwegian Government has suggested measures of management of traffic in nature through information, labeling and simple infrastructure. Also, physical adjustments such as better signs, clear paths, or paving of path-sections. However, it is challenging because such efforts are in conflict with the right of public access or other public interests such as cultural heritage or nature conservation (Innovation Norway, 2021; Regjeringen, 2017).

Based on this knowledge, one can see that tourism and the nature crisis are highly interconnected, especially through the growth of nature-based tourism. It is a complex situation, as nature-based tourism is entirely dependent on natural destinations but is at the same time posing a threat to these destinations through issues of overcrowding and littering, which contributes to the pollution and destruction of habitat that defines the nature crisis. This paradox will be discussed further throughout this thesis.

2.3 Nature-based Tourism in Norway: National Challenges and Measures

The main goal the Norwegian Government has for the tourism industry is increased value creation within a sustainable framework (Regjeringen, 2021c). To achieve this goal, Innovation Norway was commissioned by the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries to develop a national tourism strategy for Norway to ensure a sustainable tourism towards 2030. The strategy "Big impact, small footprint" aims to maximize the positive impacts of tourism while minimizing its negative effects, such as pressure on vulnerable nature, wildlife, and cultural treasures, with the overarching goal of ensuring sustainable and responsible tourism growth for the benefit of both present and future generations (Innovation Norway, 2021). The strategy states that one of Norway's biggest challenges is the large volume of people arriving in parts of the country where there is not a proper system to handle all the visitors – this can typically be harbors in the districts that welcome lots of cruise ship arrivals, without facilities for management, such as public toilets and trash bins. The strategy recognizes that tourism

development impacts Norwegian nature in several ways, and that in moving forward we will need better guidelines for land use management in connection with holiday homes and activity facilities in the mountains and seaside, such as skiing, climbing parks or boat rental. The guidelines for land use will also be defined by climate change, which will affect how we can and should manage our land, and in this regard, there is already an ongoing debate on the boundaries for tourism facilitation (Innovation Norway, 2021).

Additionally, due to Norway's growth as a tourism destination and the above-mentioned consequences that has come with this, a travel destination committee, Reisemålsutvalget, was established in 2021 to further develop the tourism industry. In 2023 they delivered a report on sustainable development of Norwegian travel destinations (Regjeringen, 2023b). Reisemålsutvalget (2023, pp. 9-10) is not aiming for a big growth in the number of visitors, as Norway is already experiencing a high number of tourists, but rather focus on developing attractive local communities and profitable businesses.

The report from Reisemålsutvalget (2023) is requesting a bigger focus on visitor management in Norway, meaning better strategies to prevent and avoid the negative consequences from tourists. Consequences are listed as increased pollution, damage to nature, more littering, and overcrowding. It specifies that today there is no national authority working on policies for visitor management, and that the work that has been done in the field is mainly targeted towards national parks and national tourist trails (Reisemålsutvalget, 2023). There are however some challenges concerning visitor management in Norway; the 'right to roam' (Allemannsretten), is anchored in the Outdoor Recreation Act (Friluftsløven) of 1957, and gives everyone the right to roam the countryside no matter who owns the land (Bang, 2022, p. 4). This secures the public a right to nature but creates challenges when it comes to management or financing. One can for example not make users pay entrance to a site, something that could have financed the management of that site (Reisemålsutvalget, 2023). The right to roam is an important principle, because nature in Norway is viewed as a public good. Public goods are characterized by the fact that it is not possible to prevent someone from using the goods. However, it is stated that one should not reduce the value of the public goods or spend it all. This requirement is not always upheld within tourism, as mass tourism and overcrowding may reduce the quality of the nature where it is based (Reisemålsutvalget, 2023).

However, and according to Reisemålsutvalget (2023), due to the increased efforts against climate change, travelers are more aware when it comes to sustainability and the environment, which might lead to changes in the choices they make when travelling. This assertion resonates with a tourist survey conducted by Innovation Norway in 2021, to map tourists' preferences when travelling in Norway. The survey is based on interviews with over 8000 tourists, both foreign and Norwegian. When asked about sustainability, 38% of foreign travelers and 20% of Norwegian travelers answered that they take nature and the climate into account when planning their holidays. Additionally, 15% of foreign tourists and 5% of Norwegian tourists answered that they had excluded some destinations, transport, or experiences from their plans out of consideration for the nature and/or climate (Innovation Norway, 2023, pp. 49-50). The survey also revealed that nature is generally a big priority; three out of four foreign tourists answered that they wanted to experience nature on their travels in Norway, and the most popular places to visit was mountains and fjords (Innovation Norway, 2023, p. 25). The most popular activity amongst foreign tourists was walking/hiking, and the most popular amongst Norwegian tourists was experiences of nature (Innovation Norway, 2023, p. 24). Based on this survey one can assume that tourists value Norwegian nature highly and that it may also affect a site or activity positively economically if it is environmentally friendly.

Lastly, another issue discussed by Reisemålsutvalget, is that a big share of tourists in Norway come from cruise ships. This industry comes with several challenges; cruise ships release a lot of climate gas emissions, there is a big amount of people going ashore at the same time, and they don't contribute a lot to value creation at their destinations (Reisemålsutvalget, 2023, p. 16). A calculation from the Norwegian Institute for Air Research shows that cruise ship tourists have a footprint of 101 to 176 kilos of CO₂ per person per day. With their consumption, they spend about 3 to 5 NOK per kilo of CO₂, which is low compared to tourists traveling with other forms of transportation, who spend from 9 NOK to 45 NOK per kilo of CO₂. It is assumed that transportation accounts for 75% of emissions when travelling, so by using means of transportation with less emissions, one can increase consumption from tourists and still reduce the total carbon footprint (Innovation Norway, 2021, pp. 44-45). Reisemålsutvalget argue that we need to evaluate how much cruise ship tourism is wanted in Norway (Reisemålsutvalget, 2023).

In conclusion, nature-based tourism in Norway presents both opportunities and challenges when seen in the connection with the nature crisis. Defined by its focus on nature destinations and activities, Norwegian tourism offers economic benefits and opportunities for local development while simultaneously contributing to environmental degradation and habitat destruction. Efforts to promote sustainable tourism growth, such as the "Big impact, small footprint" strategy and initiatives by Reismålsutvalget, aim to reduce these negative impacts while maximizing the positive contributions of tourism. In the next chapter I will go further into exploring in what ways humans connect to nature, through everyday life and tourism, with the aim of understanding why the nature crisis has reached its current state.

3. Literature Review

In this chapter I will present existing literature relevant for my thesis. The literature delves into the relationship between humans and nature, a dynamic that has evolved over time, and has faced new changes with the rise of urbanization. I will present theories on how the distancing from nature may weaken our emotional connection to nature and impact our ethical considerations and behaviors towards the environment. Moreover, I examine the implications of these dynamics within nature-based tourism, especially in Norway. I will present alternative ways of operating tourism, that are argued to be more environmentally sustainable, as well as exploring different views on local versus national governing in relation to tourism and nature conservation. This literature will also be used in the discussion in Chapter 7.

3.1 The Human-Nature Relationship

According to Pyle (2003), over the last decades there has been an increased focus on humans' relationship to nature, due to the shift in how we live. Before the world was industrialized, people lived more in direct contact with nature and had more knowledge about the flora and fauna surrounding them. An urban shift begun with the industrial revolution and escalated after the second world war when more people moved to the city for work. Several researchers believe that this shift in our connection to nature has a lot to say in relation to the state of the environment (Pyle, 2003).

In 2023 56% of the world's population lived in cities, and this number is expected to grow (The World Bank, 2023). Along with the urban population growth, the extent of urbanized land will grow: Numbers from The World Bank (2023) expect that we will add 1.2 million km² of urban areas by 2030, which puts pressure on natural resources and landscapes. Based on maps of human population density and human footprint, the global average of how far people lived from low-impact areas grew with seven percent from 2000 till 2020. During the same period 125 out of 133 countries experienced a decline of city forest cover (Cazalis et al., 2023, pp. 89-90). The decline in humans' contact with nature is a field where research is quite new and limited, but existing research suggests that less experience of and direct contact with nature is resulting in a weaker emotional connection to nature, while more extensive experience of nature is increasing the chances of adopting a pro-environmental behaviour (Cazalis et al., 2023).

The “Extinction of experience” (Cazalis et al., 2023) describes this process of people becoming disconnected from nature because of a lack of experience with nature. These experiences include both direct outdoor activities and indirect contact with nature through books, movies, etc. Such experiences can shape our values, which are especially affected in the early years of life, representation of nature for children is therefore important to increase environmental concern for future generations. But based on an analysis of Disney and Pixar movies, which are amongst the most popular for children, from 1937 to 2010 there was a decrease in representation of nature and animal species, and an increase in portrayals of human-made settings (Cazalis et al., 2023, p. 88). A consequence of this can be that from the first years of life people are learning to value human-made products more than the natural surroundings.

Jena (2024) argues that there is a huge gap between humans’ knowledge of the environment and our behaviour towards it; humans are dependent on nature and have had knowledge about the environmental problems facing it, which scientists have termed a crisis, for a long time. However, despite having this information, we act indifferent to what happens to the environment. Jena implies that the reason for this is how much our society values money:

“One of the major causes of such inconsistent human behavior is the tendency to evaluate everything in economic terms. The value of an object is how much we are required to pay for it. There seems to be a spillover of such an attitude even in case of things that are not economically evaluable, like air or water, to the extent that we forget the distinction between free and priceless. Nature is not free but priceless, considering how much depends on it” (Jena, 2024, p. 160).

Jena (2024) implies that nature cannot be measured on the same level as other resources because nature is the source of all life. In this view, humans are expanding urban areas and initiating construction projects that are adding great pressure on the natural resources in which our own existence is dependent on. This is a paradoxical situation in which humanity is entirely dependent on the earth’s resources, but at the same time seem to show an indifference towards the fact that we are spending them at a non-sustainable speed.

The relationship between humans and nature is, hence, partly an ethical issue, with questions regarding humans’ rights and responsibilities towards the earth and the other species living on

it. Jena (2024) argues that because we live so separate from nature, and because we view nature mainly as an economic resource, we lack a sense of responsibility towards nature. We therefore need a change of our ethical framework. She uses the anthropocentric theory “deontology” to demonstrate that we have different senses of duty when it comes to people and nature. In human relations the difference between right and wrong is quite clear; if a child is hungry, you feed them, if someone is hurt you help them, and this feeling is inherent in us. However, because we lack an emotional connection with nature, we throw garbage outside and trample on vegetation, ignoring the consequences this has for our surroundings. Jena (2024) moves on to present alternative views, such as the biocentric approach, which argues that all living beings deserve the same consideration (Curry, 2011 in Jena, 2024, p.161). Or the view of ecocentrism, where the ecosystem is the main concern and everything else has a value based on what role it plays in the ecosystem (Berenguer, 2010 in Jena, 2024, p.161). Both of these views are dependent on a more emotional connection to nature, which then can give nature more value than simply being a source for economic growth.

3.2 Different Approaches to Exploring the Outdoors

The Norwegian culture of spending time outdoors is tied to the romantic movement that began when the union between Norway and Denmark ended. Norwegians began to build a national identity, and Norwegian nature became the focus of both painters, musicians, and poets (Vigane & Sæther, 2020). This was strengthened by explorers such as Roald Amundsen, who displayed Norwegians as tough people who are close to nature (Flemsæter et al., 2015). This image has drawn travelers to Norway since the early 19th century (Vigane & Sæther, 2020).

With the new focus on tourism’s negative impacts on nature, new developments have taken place within the tourism industry to show more consideration towards nature. One example of this is ‘ecotourism’ which has developed as a more focused nature-based tourism, and as a response to what has previously been the norm within tourism (Lanfranchi et al., 2014). Ecotourism is known for supporting nature conservation, while simultaneously promoting local development. It allows visitors to learn about the natural features of a place, and the importance of preserving the local ecosystems. A common argument in the description of ecotourism is that it seeks to minimize the negative impact on the natural environment in

which it takes place. Ecotourism also promotes local and indigenous cultures and their traditions (Lanfranchi et al., 2014).

A similar strategy to ecotourism is the idea of ‘slow adventure’. Slow adventure stems from the phenomenon of ‘slowness movements’, which is a response to the speeding up of society. The concept aims to focus on the quality and meaning of life, and to value slow rather than fast processes of consumption and production (Varley & Semple, 2015). Varley and Semple (2015) transfer this idea to tourism through the concept of slow adventure, which is a celebration of the human experience, and is especially connected to being outdoors. Slow adventure aims to give the tourist a high quality, authentic experience, and the goal of the journey is to be present and in connection with the landscape, rather than to just focus on getting to a destination. Varley and Semple (2015) argue that this kind of tourism is highly compatible with Nordic countries which are lightly populated and known for its wild nature.

However, there are doubts as to whether these new forms of tourism are successful in reaching their goals. Lanfranchi et al. (2014) argue that there are several case studies reporting cases where ecotourism does not have its desired effect. Some believe that tourism can never be eco-friendly because any kind of tourism will have a negative effect on nature (Băltărețu, 2013 in Lanfranchi et al., 2014). Additionally, even though nature-based tourism, slow adventure and ecotourism have created more focus on sustainability within travel, it is not a guarantee that such tourism is sustainable. Greenwashing has become an issue in several industries, including tourism. More and more people look for environmental or ‘green’ travel companies when booking travels, making sustainability a selling point. A focus on the environment can therefore be used as a marketing strategy to increase the number of costumers to a company or the number of visitors to an area (Lanfranchi et al., 2014). Jones (2024) present examples where tourism companies portray their products and services as nature positive for business gains or highlight specific features to make their entire business seem nature positive. One example was a developing cruise port in Grand Bahama Island, where the developer stated that they wished to build the port in a sustainable manner, meeting environmental standards, and that they would preserve a 100-acre wetland area as part of the project. What the cruise port report failed to mention was that the facilities had a capacity of welcoming two million guests annually and would include extensive hospitality developments that would cause environmental damage (Jones, 2024). This example illustrates how companies can choose to advertise only the positive sides of a project and take the attention

away from the more harmful parts, making it difficult for the regular traveler to know which companies to trust.

3.3 Local Governance and the Development of Local Communities

Nature-based tourism is typically set in smaller local communities, in contrast to urban tourism, and there are discussions concerning how this affects local environments. In one view, Lanfranchi et al. (2014) suggest to develop a symbiotic relationship between the locals and their natural area, in the sense that the locals protect the nature and in return they get access to it and its resources. If this is done right tourism development may be welcomed with open arms, as it can increase employment and economic growth. It can also lead to the locals experiencing a higher appreciation of their nature and an understanding of the fact that it is finite. This can inspire the local population to become protectors of their natural resources and promote more environmentally friendly measures, because if the nature is lost, the benefits are lost as well (Lanfranchi et al., 2014). However, if one tries to restrict the locals' access to these areas, they might turn to resentment and anger. Lanfranchi et al. (2014) therefore argue that it is unlikely to get the local population on board with the plans if they are not involved and listened to – they need to get some benefits from the development.

On the other hand, there are several scholars arguing that local governing is not always the way to go. In the case of nature conservation, strategies are often developed at an international or national level but are to be implemented at a local level. According to Kostka and Hobbs (2012) this is not always the most efficient approach to ensure sustainable practices. They explain that local governments sometimes lack the will to implement national strategies because they conflict with their own priorities and interests, such as economic growth, employment, and social stability. This can lead to compromises and trade-offs that may undermine the effectiveness of sustainability policies. Additionally, local governments might have limited resources and expertise, which can hinder effective policy implementation (Kostka & Hobbs, 2012). This may be further complicated when private actors are involved. When it comes to tourism developments, the initiative to develop often comes from actors who have more resources than the local governments (Lanfranchi et al., 2014). This may result in a lack of control for the local governments and can feel intrusive to residents.

On another note, Mottiar (2016) presents a different narrative to this concern for private actors and their motivations; he argues that tourism entrepreneurs are typically portrayed as driven solely by financial gain, but he finds that the relationship between an entrepreneur and a local community is much more complex than that. For one, the entrepreneurs are often members of the local communities in which they want to develop a tourism business, making them personally invested. Mottiar's research aims to show that the entrepreneur is often largely motivated by a wish to make a positive impact on the local area by increasing visitation and creating sustainable businesses. In many cases, the entrepreneur is making very little profit in the first years of business, and sometimes the benefits don't really affect their generation at all. However, they are still motivated by a more long-term perspective, that will provide benefits to future generations. They recognize that the survival of the destination is crucial for their success. The entrepreneur also supports existing businesses by usually choosing to collaborate with locals, as they share common ambitions and visions (Mottiar, 2016).

In Norway, tourism is important for smaller municipalities. Many places struggle with having an aging population, as the younger generations move out and there is little migration into the municipality. In the Norwegian Government's strategies for regional development, tourism is stated as one of the pillars as it can increase economic growth and job opportunities, which are important factors to make a place attractive (Amundsen, 2012). Additionally, the Planning and Building Act (Plan- og bygningsloven) assign a lot of responsibility to local governments within tourism projects; the local governments are responsible for weighing the different interests against each other and make decisions and frameworks for the parties involved (Innovation Norway, 2021, p. 42). That said, tourism is an unstable industry. It is easily affected by trends that can change quickly, and these trends are hard to predict (Amundsen, 2012). It is also unstable concerning the number of visitors. In the main season, which usually is summer, tourist sites can be crowded with tourists, and local businesses like hotels and cafes are swarming with guests. In the down-seasons however, which usually is during winter, there may be few or no tourists. This makes it hard to run a business that is dependent on tourism, and some businesses end up closing parts of the year and hiring seasonal workers for the busy periods (NHO Reiseliv, n.d.). One of the goals of the Norwegian Government is to spread out the number of visitors throughout the year, as this will reduce both the social and the environmental challenges at tourist sites (Regjeringen, 2021c).

A different perspective on the need for tourism and local development is that of Cruickshank (2014), who claim that in Norway and other Nordic countries, there is a political portrayal of local communities as “dying” because they cannot keep up with the globalizing world. However, Cruickshank (2014) is not sure this is true and argue that we have so much focus on urbanization and economic growth that we might forget the value of local societies. He is afraid that the portrayal of local societies as “dying” might become a self-fulfilling prophecy. According to Cruickshank (2014), to develop local communities in a better way we should rather listen to the local populations and their needs. He presents an example of the Norwegian municipality Bykle, who in an attempt at increasing the local population chose to invest in tourism. A skiing destination was developed within the municipality, which became a big success, and the municipality did experience a population growth; however, the growth mainly happened in the area surrounding the skiing destination. While the skiing destination gained new stores, hotels, cafés etc., people living elsewhere in the municipality felt neglected and experienced worsening conditions. By presenting this case, Cruickshank (2014) suggests that development projects like this might not benefit the local population, and might not be what the local population wants, Many people choose to live outside of cities because they want the quiet and want to have more space. As stated by Cruickshank (2014, p. 9): “good local development cannot be measured only by economic growth and the size of the population, one must also ask whose development this is.”

In a study from Northern Gudbrandsdal in Norway, Lindberg and Veisten (2012) conducted a research on preferences for a gondola development. In that case the gondola would affect a reindeer habitat. The study compares the preferences of locals with those of non-locals, as previous research has suggested that they often have different preferences when it comes to development facilities. In some cases, the local population of rural areas want development and oppose conservation policies that make it harder to utilize their land. In other cases, the local population may oppose development that degrades the quality of the local environment. Non-locals might also have strong opinions, especially when it comes to nature development, individuals have gotten engaged in environmental cases both at a national and international level. In the study at Gudbrandsdal the preferences for a gondola were tied to environmental concerns; results revealed that those who were less concerned about impacts on reindeer habitat were more positive towards the gondola. Additionally, both locals and non-locals claimed to incorporate environmental concern into their choices and all respondents were opposed to scenarios that involved increased loss of habitat. However, the research concluded

that despite the environmental concern, both locals and non-locals would generally support the gondola development, due to the increased opportunities of experience and the economic benefits for the local area. This conclusion suggests that even though people are concerned for the environment, many are not willing to give up their own benefits for the sake of environmental protection.

In exploring the intricate relationship between humans, nature, and tourism, this chapter has shed light on a variety of perspectives and challenges. What is a recurring theme is that there is a need to find a balance between economic growth and environmental protection, as different forms of nature-based tourism are growing in popularity. It is also important to find good systems for managing tourism; balancing the role of local governance with national strategies, while also listening to the local populations' wishes. These issues will be further discussed in relation to the proposed gondola at Sula, which will be presented in the next chapter.

4. Case Study

This thesis investigates a proposed nature-based tourism project in Sula Municipality (Figure 2), where the private investor Flakk Gruppen AS (the Flakk Group) is proposing to build a gondola to the mountain top Rundehornet (725 m.a.s.l.) at Sulafjellet with an associated restaurant. The proposal has caused disagreements both between local politicians and the local population of Sula, as the gondola will do harm to the biodiversity of the mountain, while also directly change the look of the mountain, which is located close to the town center, and affect the homes of some of the inhabitants (Figure 1).

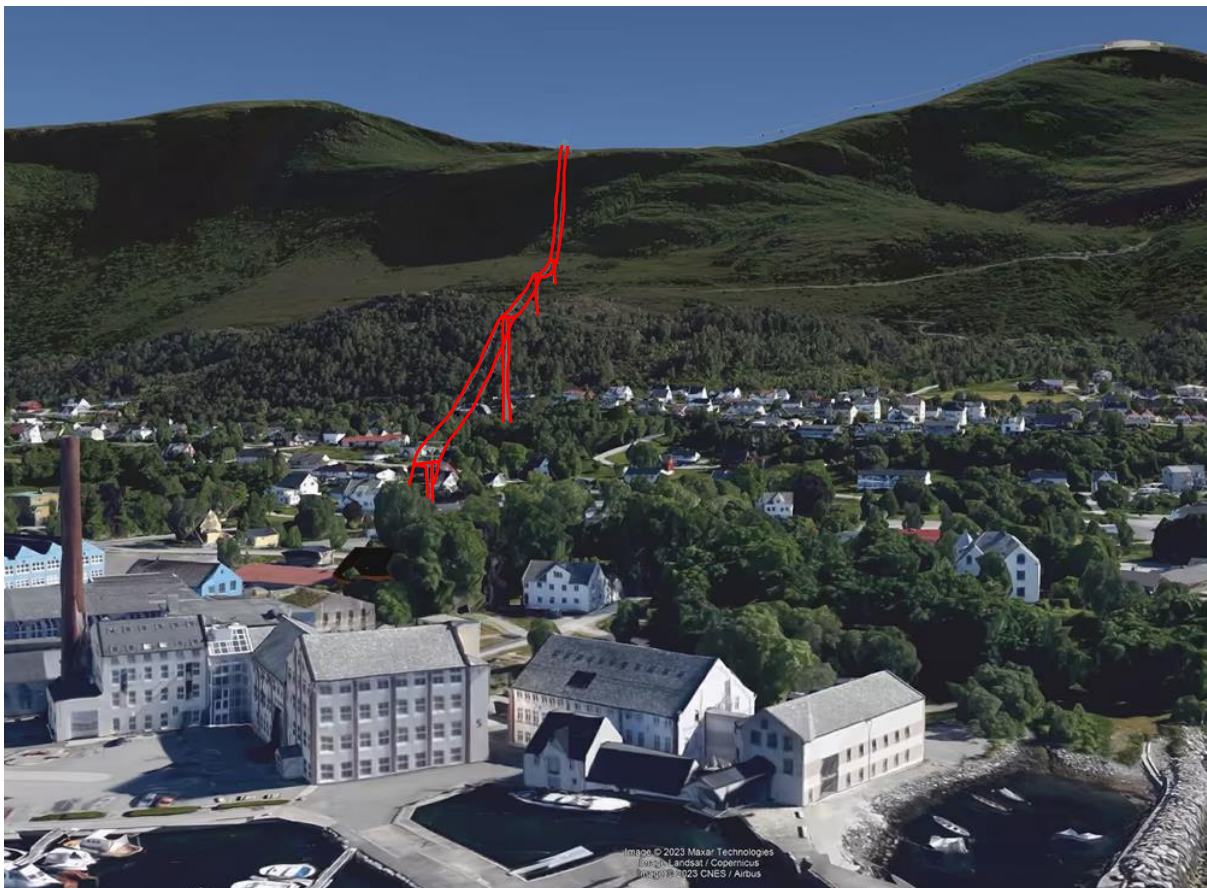


Figure 1: An illustration of the gondola going from Devoldfabrikken to Rundehornet. I have highlighted the masts and cables for better visibility (Trovåg, 2023a).

4.1 Sula Municipality

Sula Municipality is located in the county Møre og Romsdal (Figure 2). The municipality consists mainly of the island Sula, where the municipality center Langevåg is located, but also a few smaller islands further north in Borgundfjorden (Thorsnæs, 2023). By the end of 2023 Sula had a population of 9720 inhabitants, a number that has grown steadily over many years

and is expected to continue to grow; by 2030 the population is expected to be 10 243 people (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2023b). Half of the population lives in the municipality center, Langevåg (Sula Kommune, n.d.-b). The municipality has a big share of commuters, in 2023 2961 people commuted out of Sula to work in Ålesund and other surrounding places, (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2023b).

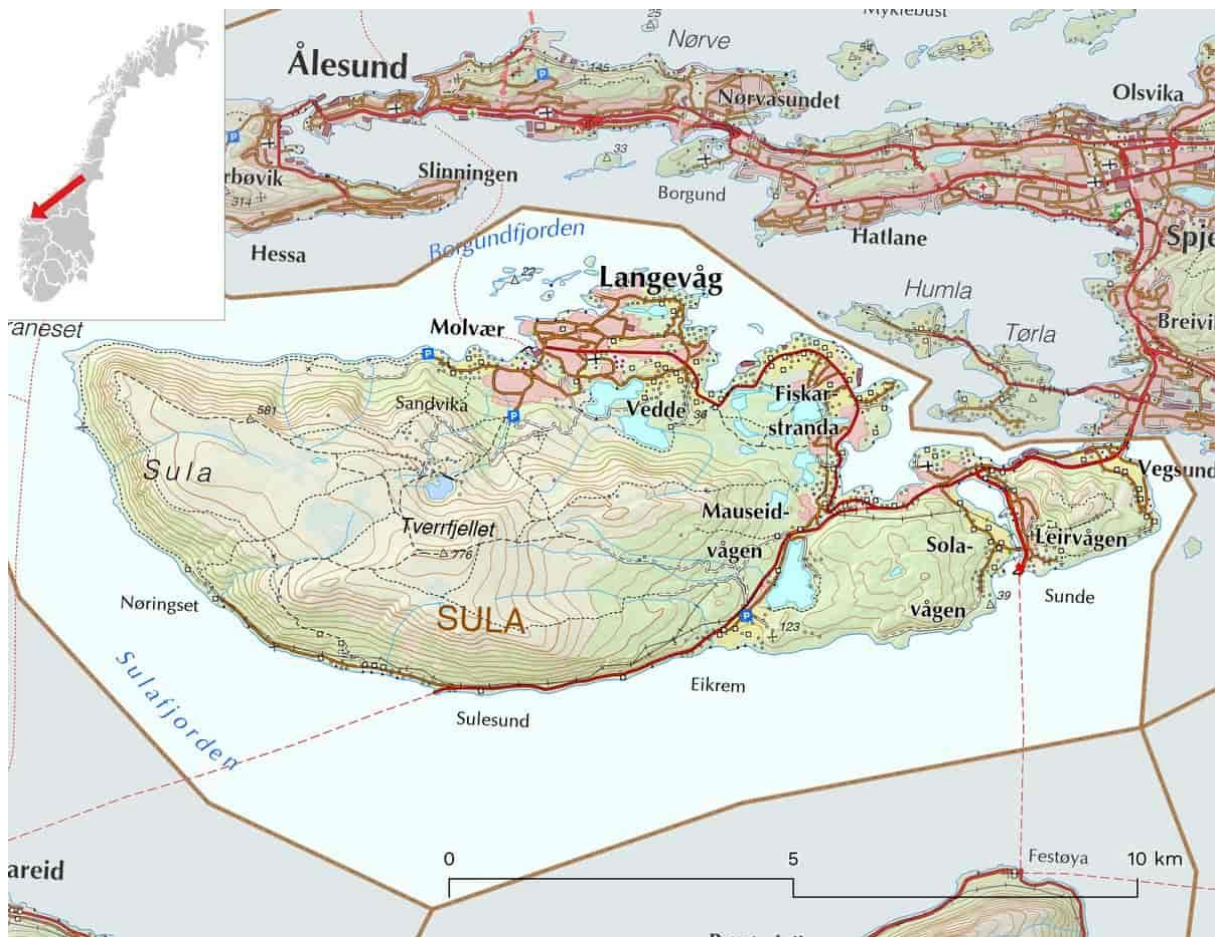


Figure 2: Map over Sula. Sula is located at the West Coast of Norway, just south of Ålesund. The municipality consists of the island Sula, and a few surrounding islands in Borgundfjorden (Store Norske Leksikon, 2023).

Sula Municipality is promoting themselves as a place focused on culture and open-air recreation, with one of their goals being that Sula Municipality shall be the leading cultural and outdoor municipality in the Ålesund region with active residents who experience empathy and identity (Sula Kommune, n.d.-b). The focus on outdoor recreation is reflected in the municipality's landscape, as they have a lot of low-impacted nature; the municipality has a total area of 57km², where only 0.87km² is covered by buildings, and 0.76km² is covered by roads (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2023b). The mountain Sulafjellet is a popular destination, which is located close to the municipality center and is easily accessible for hiking all year round.

The municipality also offers good conditions for fishing and an archipelago with several beaches (Sula Kommune, n.d.-a).

4.2 The Flakk Group and Devoldfabrikken

The gondola project is initiated by the Flakk Group, a local firm that was established in 1933 and has played an important role in Sula ever since they acquired the local business O.A.Devold Sønner in 1989, which later became Devold of Norway (Flakk Group, n.d.-b). In addition to owning Devold of Norway, the Flakk Group is a successful firm who owns several companies within both composites, zero-emission energy, building components, travel and hospitality, real estate, textile, and aviation (Flakk Group, n.d.-b).

Devold is one of Norway's oldest textile companies, producing woolen garment for all ages (Tobiasson, 2023). The history of Devold, as summarized by Devoldfabrikken (n.d.-a), started in 1853 when the entrepreneur Ole Andreas Devold established 'O.A.Devold Sønner'. The first Devold factory was located in Ålesund, but as the business grew and they needed more power, they moved to Langevåg in 1868. In Langevåg, Ole Andreas Devold built the factory called Devoldfabrikken (Figure 3), and an accompanying power station, which was one of Norway's first power stations producing electric power. As a result of Devoldfabrikken moving to Langevåg, Langevåg started to grow as an industrial town and eventually got a hospital, church, kindergarten, stores, etc. Devoldfabrikken is therefore highly valued in Langevåg as the main driver for the town's development (Devoldfabrikken, n.d.-a).



Figure 3: Devoldfabrikken in Langevåg (Devoldfabrikken, n.d.-a).

In 1989, the Flakk Group acquired O.A.Devold Sønner from the Devold family, and started developing it into 'Devold of Norway', as it is known today. As the company grew, they started outsourcing the production, and by 2002 all production was moved to Lithuania. Eight years later, in 2010, the Flakk Group wanted to take use of the old factory building, Devoldfabrikken, again and therefore reopened it as a cultural center with shops, cafés and spaces for art (Flakk Group, n.d.-b). Devoldfabrikken has again become a central part of Sula and Langevåg as they provide work and office spaces for locals. In 2020, Devoldfabrikken had more than 550 000 visitors and provided up to 200 workplaces (Flakk Group, 2020, p.5). However, the future of Devoldfabrikken is said to be uncertain; they are experiencing increased competition, especially from online shopping, and therefore need to take action to ensure continued business. It is therefore planned that the gondola will start at Devoldfabrikken (figures 4 and 5), and one of the goals of the project is to attract more people to Devoldfabrikken and increase the activity and profit of the center (Flakk Group, 2020).

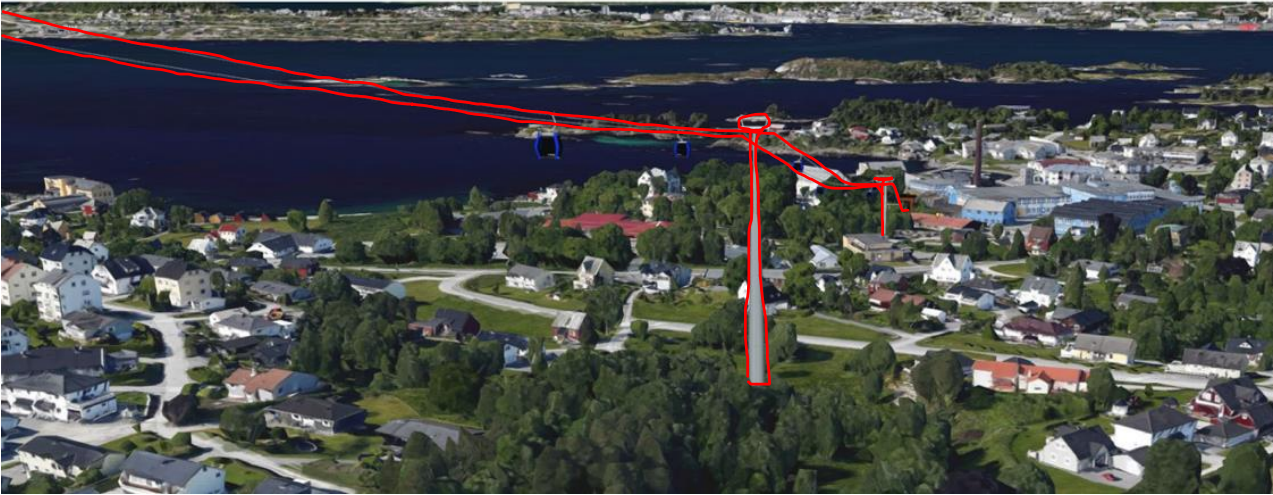


Figure 4: Illustration of the gondola going from Devoldfabrikken. I have highlighted the masts and cable for better visibility (Nordplan, 2023, p. 142).

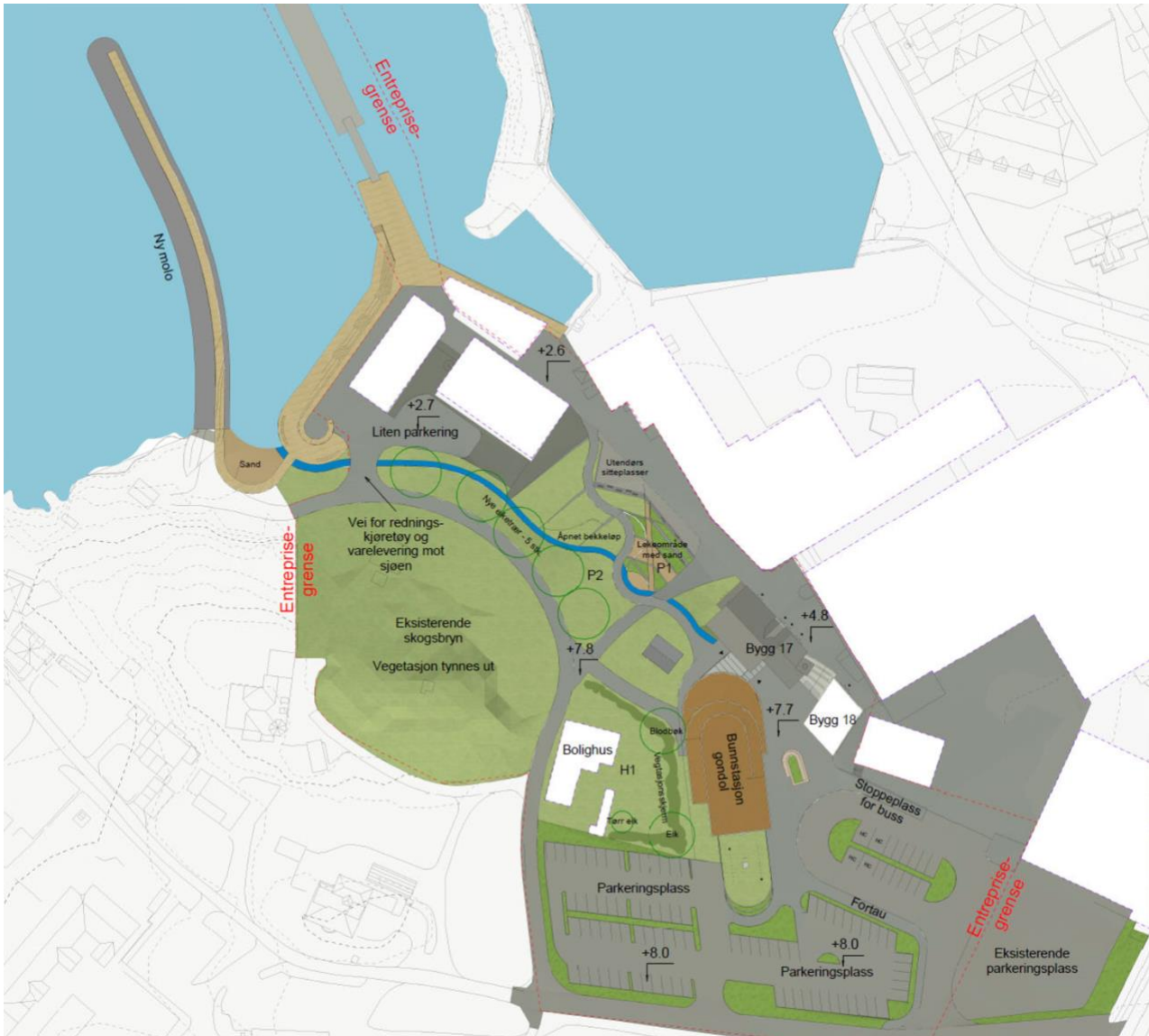


Figure 5: The planned development at the area surrounding Devoldfabrikken (Nordplan, 2023).

4.3 The Gondola Project

The gondola project was first made public in October 2019, when the Flakk Group was in the early stages of planning (Trovåg, 2023c). Almost a year later, in December 2020, the Flakk Group presented a proposal to Sula Municipality to build a gondola from Devoldfabrikken in Langevåg up to Sulafjellet (Flakk Group, 2020). The original proposal, presented in 2020, included a gondola with 14 masts and 31 gondola carriages. The bottom station would be at Devoldfabrikken, and the top station would be a Rundehornet. At the top station there would also be a restaurant. In addition, there would be tracks for cross-country skiing, facilities for downhill skiing (Figure 6), three zip lines (Figure 7), and hiking tracks with corresponding viewpoints (Figure 8) (Flakk Group 2020).

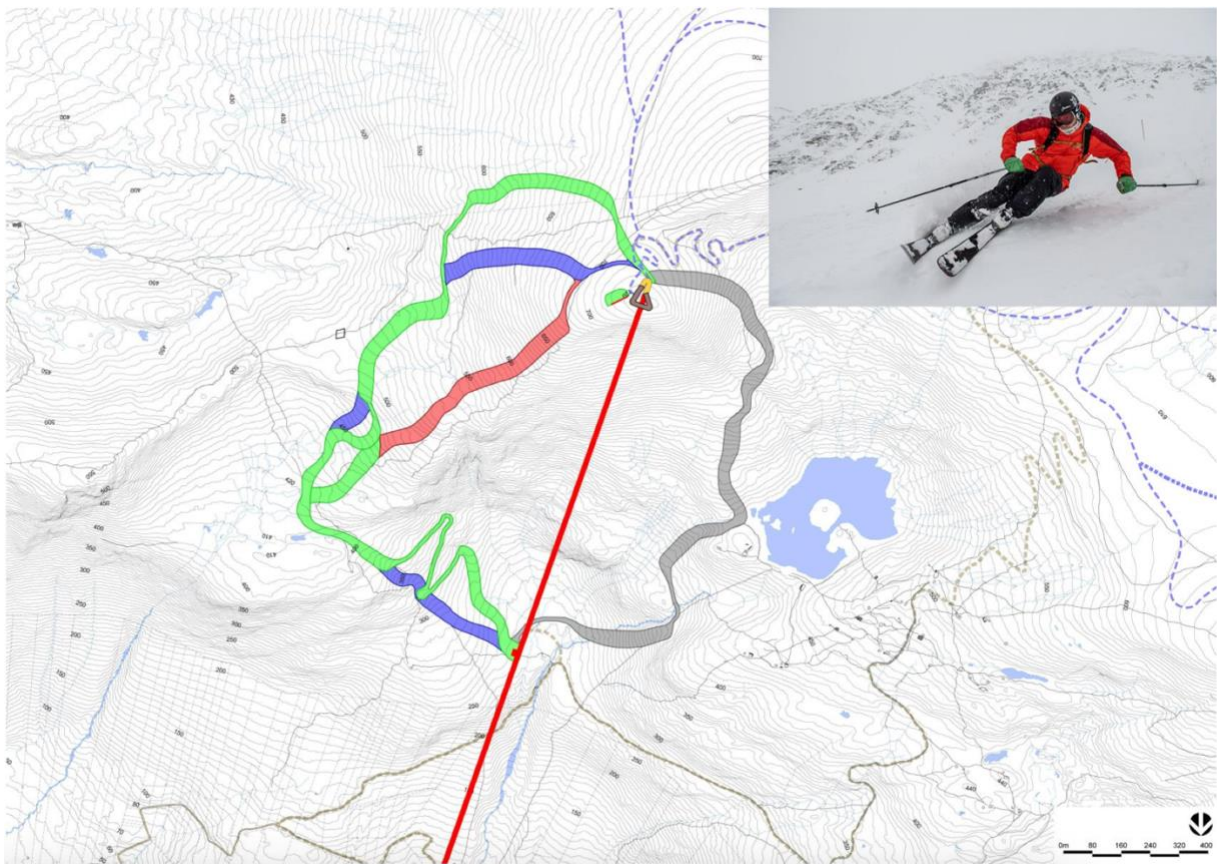


Figure 6: The planned downhill skiing slopes (Flakk Group, 2020, p.35).

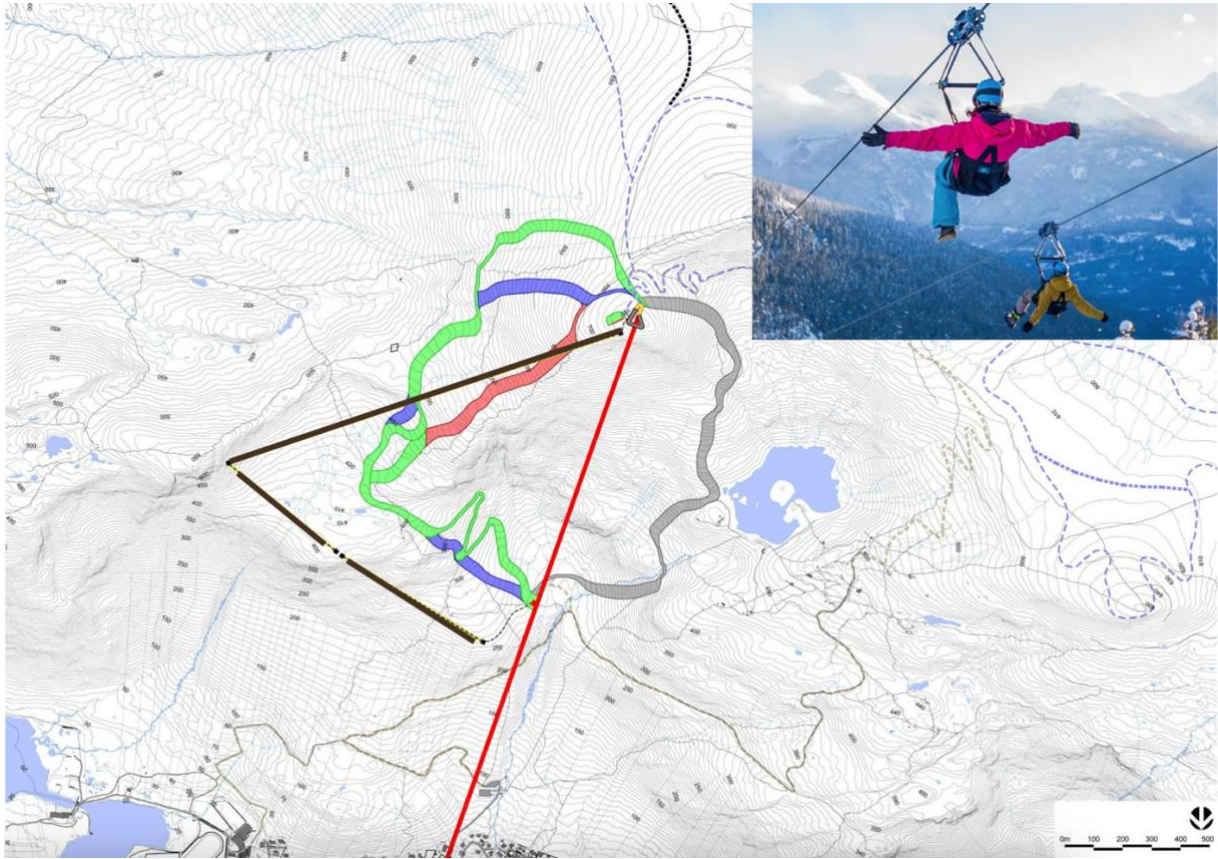


Figure 7: The planned zip lines. There are three zip lines in total, with a total length of 2,5km (Flakk Group, 2020, p.36).



Figure 8: The planned hiking trails and viewpoints (Flakk Group, 2020, p.37).

The plan specified a focus on sustainability and included the UN sustainable development goals 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, 7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all, 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation, and 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Some of the efforts proposed to make the project more sustainable was to re-establish the power station at Devoldfabrikken to create renewable energy, to make the top station energy friendly, to use zero emission snow groomers and snowmobiles, and to reverse roads that are created during the construction work (Flakk Group, 2020, pp.51-55). The construction costs were estimated to be 400 million NOK and the yearly income from the gondola, the restaurant, and the activities was estimated to be 60 million NOK (Flakk Group 2020).

The initial proposal caused negative reactions amongst some locals in Sula. In December 2020, after the first proposal was presented, a group of locals marched up Sulafjellet with torches to show their discontent (NRK, 2020). Several inhabitants would be directly affected by the gondola as it would run directly over their rooftops, this caused a concern for the well-being of locals. This conflict was addressed in the initial presentation, which said that homeowners within a 20-metre limit will be entitled to discretionary compensation for damage and inconvenience (Flakk Group, 2020, p.59).

The project was discussed by the Municipal Council in Sula in March 2021. There were different opinions within the Council as to whether they should move forward with the project. In a plan from 2015 concerning the domain of the municipality, the main area intended for the gondola was designated for agricultural, nature and open-air purposes, and part of it for holiday homes (Sula Kommune, 2021b, p. 7). Despite the discussion, the Municipal Council voted to start working on an area zoning plan, and thereby take the project one step further. This included that the project would undergo an environmental impact assessment (Sula Gondol, 2021). The purpose of an environmental impact assessment is to clarify the effect of plans and measures that may have significant impact on the environment and society, and to ensure an open process so that all affected parties are heard (Regjeringen, 2023a). However, the requirement for the project to proceed was that the Flakk Group had to present another route, as the Municipal Council would not approve the one previously suggested because of the number of affected homes (Sula Gondol, 2021).

An area zoning plan is the responsibility of the municipality, but as stated by the Planning and Building Act §12-2 they have the option of handing over the responsibility to a private company (Sula Kommune, 2021b, p. 8). The municipality decided that the responsibility to make an area zoning plan proposal would be entrusted to the private company and initiator of the project, the Flakk Group, due to financial reasons and lack of work capacity within the municipality. This agreement was approved in May 2021, when the Flakk Group had presented a new alternative route – Route B, that affected fewer houses and was set higher above the ground than the previous route (Figure 9). In Route B a middle station is added in the mountain side, a necessary measure to make the new route work (Sula Kommune, 2021a). The Flakk Group hired the planning consultant firm Nordplan to make the are zoning plan (Sula Gondol, 2024b). However, the municipality also played a part in the area zoning plan, as the purpose, content, design, organizing, distribution of costs, and the area included in the plan was to be agreed upon between Sula Municipality and the Flakk Group. Additionally, the final plan had to be approved by the municipality for the project to be realized (Sula Gondol, 2021).

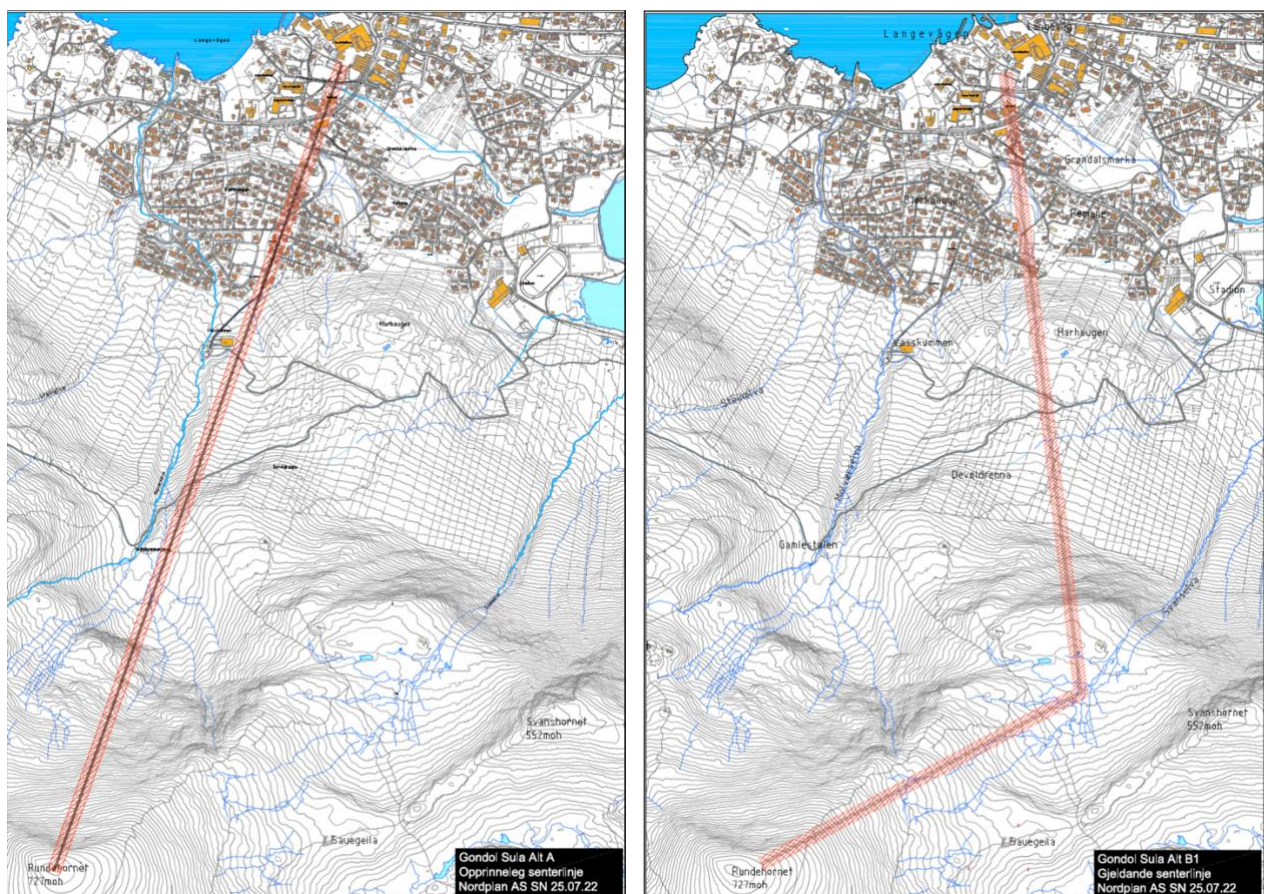


Figure 9: Illustrations of the changes in the gondola route. The illustration to the left shows the original proposal, route A, the illustration to the right shows the updated proposal, route B. The red area shows the houses located within 40 meters of the routes (Nordplan, 2023, pp. 85-86).

4.4. Obstacles and Risk Assessments

In November 2021 the County Governor (Statsforvalteren) got involved. The County Governor warned that they might have objections to the plans out of consideration for the untouched nature in the area and the opportunities for outdoor recreation, stating that the establishment of a gondola to Sulafjellet changes the value of experiencing untouched nature for many users (NRK, 2021a). Yet, in February 2022 the Municipal Council approved the first area zoning plan for Sulafjellet (NRK, 2021b). This plan presented the ideas for the project at this stage and the work that was to be conducted. It also stated that the initiative holder would lead a dialogue with the affected parties, including the affected homeowners, elected political representatives, and local groups and associations, such as a local riding club or the newly formed opposition organization called Vern om Sula (Protect Sula) (Nordplan, 2021, p. 17).

The subject of the wellbeing of affected homeowners got increased attention at the meeting in February 2022, when a member of the municipal council informed that several of the affected residents had experienced a worsened mental health due to the uncertainty of the project; some had gone into sick leave, and some had even been hospitalized. The council member requested to add a report in the preparatory work on how the gondola development has impacted the health of the people affected – this suggestion was voted down. However, they did decide to add that the affected homeowners who choose to sell their property would be given a full compensation (Sula Kommune, 2022, pp. 3-6). After this meeting, the Flakk Group could continue their work on a more detailed zoning plan for the gondola, which they sent to the municipality in September 2022. The plan calculated that the project will create 75 new workplaces, and 45 of those will be in Sula Municipality (NRK, 2022). In October 2022 the municipal council voted to submit the proposal for public consultation (Sula Gondol, 2022).

The area zoning plan included several impact assessments exploring different aspects of the project, such as danger of avalanche, quick clay, noise impact, and local economic repercussions (Sula Gondol, 2024a). Assessments that are of particular importance in this thesis are those concerning biodiversity and outdoor recreation. The biologist firm Rådgivende Biologer was hired by Nordplan to make an environmental impact assessment concerning biodiversity and natural resources. The assessment divided the planning area into 18 sub-areas and categorized the value of each area. The value reflects how important the sub-areas are in a national perspective, and the value is higher where there are threatened species

or species particularly important to the local nature. Out of the eighteen sub-areas, four areas have ‘very high value’, nine areas have ‘high value’, two have ‘medium value’, and three areas have ‘some value’. There are discovered several types of threatened wetland, mountain heath and coastal heath, and some hollow oaks. Some are also termed ‘selected habitats’, meaning that they are considered especially important (Rådgivende Biologer AS, 2022). Additionally, the assessment calculated that the gondola would do ‘serious environmental harm’ to one area, ‘considerable environmental harm’ to four areas, and ‘some environmental harm’ to six areas. It states that the biggest negative impact from the gondola is the use of mountain heath and wetland, significantly increased traffic, and consequent wear and tear from year-round use. The overall impact on biodiversity was assessed as moderately negative (Rådgivende Biologer AS, 2022).

Norplan also hired iTrollheimen to make a risk assessment specifically concerning birds at Sulafjellet. This assessment (iTrollheimen, 2022) also revealed negative environmental impact from the gondola. Out of 38 observed types of birds, eight are red-listed species, and three are selected species. The assessment states that there is limited research on the effect of gondolas on birdlife, but based on similar constructions with wires one can assume that there is a risk of collision. The assessment also considers the planned activities; the alpine skiing facilities might have a greater impact on birdlife, both indirectly through the impact on and reduction of plants and vegetation, and more directly through light pollution. Birds are also affected by increased traffic of people, and the increased activity in the construction period. The overall impact is considered ‘moderately negative’ because two out of four sub-areas in the assessment might experience significant environmental damage (iTrollheimen, 2022).

These assessments are part of the reason for why the County Governor was involved again in February 2023. The County Governor raised objections to the area zoning plan, stating that it will cause environmental damage to the mountain, and that it will cause harm to both threatened birds and plants. In addition to that, there was also worries about how much it will affect the public health of people in Sula (NRK, 2023). Based on these objections, the Flakk Group made further changes in the plans to decrease the impact of the project. In the first plan they included a comprehensive planning area, to keep the opportunities open for alternative routes and solutions. As the plan now was more detailed, they were able to reduce the planning area from 5651 acres to 1308 acres, removing the area that will not be used (Nordplan, 2023, p. 8). Further changes within the new plan involved moving a mast away

from the housing area, they removed both the cross-country and alpine skiing installations completely, which included removing the snow-production, physical infrastructure, and terrain work. They also reduced the amount of walking trails between the middle and top station, they removed the viewpoint by the middle station, and they removed a facility for wastewater treatment. Additionally, the design of the top station has changed from the original plan and is now designed to be more integrated into the mountain side (Figure 10) (Nordplan, 2023).



Figure 10: Illustration of the top station. The top illustration shows the original design, as proposed in 2021. The bottom illustration shows the updated and current design (Nordplan, 2021, p. 1; 2023, p. 20).

However, despite attempts from both the Municipal Council and the Flakk Group to move the project forward, the County Governor stood by their concerns and recommended to put an end to the project after its second round of hearing. The County Governor emphasized that Sulafjellet has value because of its untouched nature, and that it is therefore not likely that they will be able to solve the conflicts related to the project (Trovåg, 2023b). This is still the current state of the project. The next potential update is anticipated on May 21st 2024, when there is a potential extraordinary meeting of the Municipal Council (Trovåg, 2024). These developments will be happening after the delivery of this thesis, and further updates will therefore not be addressed herein.

The gondola project is a complex case that has caused a lot of engagement both within the local community of Sula and outside of it, because of the objections from the County Governor. I will go further into the different aspects and considerations of the project in Chapter 6, through interviews with seven involved actors. But first, in Chapter 5, I will present and explain my choice of methods.

5. Methods

In this chapter I will discuss my choice of methods. Methods are chosen based on the aim of the research, and the aim of this study is to investigate how nature-based tourism and nature conservation is connected in a local context in Norway. Because this is not something that can be measured in numbers, a qualitative study is the appropriate choice. A qualitative study is recommended when the aim of the research is to find out how processes work, what people's opinions are, or why people do what they do (Hay & Cope, 2021, p. 95).

5.1 Research Design

When beginning to work on my thesis, I wanted to explore the expansive realm of nature conservation. As this is a wide topic and I only had one semester to write the thesis, I found it necessary to refine my focus to make the project more manageable. This led me to narrow it down to the intersection of nature conservation and nature-based tourism, ultimately choosing to examine the intriguing case of the proposed gondola project in Sula Municipality. A case study is used to exemplify a bigger topic, process or structure (Hay & Cope, 2021). I found the gondola project in Sula to be a compelling example of nature-based tourism initiatives in Norway, a topic of significant discussion across the country due to similar projects emerging elsewhere.

To explore this case, I found it necessary to use document analysis, a method where the researcher examines and interprets documents to develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009). Documents such as impact assessments, area zoning plans, and other policy documents related to the gondola proposal provide critical contextual information. They offer insights into the project's background, historical roots, and the conditions shaping the development of nature-based tourism initiatives. Document analysis is often used in combination with, or as a supplement to other qualitative research methods (Bowen, 2009). I have used document analysis in combination with data collected through interviews, enriching the research with a comprehensive understanding of the case.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with individuals involved in the project. This approach allowed me to ask consistent questions to all interviewees, which makes it easier to compare responses. At the same time semi-structured interviews give room for some flexibility,

allowing the conversation to vary based on the knowledge and position of the interviewee (Hay & Cope, 2021).

By combining document analysis and semi-structured interviews, I aimed to gather comprehensive insights into the motivations, perspectives, and implications surrounding the proposed gondola project in Sula. This methodological approach will enable a nuanced exploration of the interplay between tourism development, conservation goals, and local decision-making processes within the context of nature-based tourism in Norway.

5.1.1 Interviews

I ended up with seven interviewees who agreed to participate in the study, each chosen to provide diverse perspectives on the proposed gondola project in Sula (Table 1). Among these interviewees, five are local politicians and elected members of the Municipal Council in Sula, who are the ones responsible for overseeing the project's progress. I chose to talk to local politicians because they have comprehensive insight into the project's evolution, from its startup to its current stage. Moreover, these politicians hold decision-making authority regarding the project's progress, making their perspectives essential for understanding the priorities and considerations driving the decision-making process.

In my interactions with the local politicians, I encountered diverse viewpoints. Three of the politicians expressed support for the gondola project, while two were opposed to its implementation. I believe this diversity of perspectives enriches the interviews, shedding light on the underlying conflicts and arguments surrounding the project.

Additionally, I interviewed two private actors who are working on the project. One interviewee is working for Nordplan, the consulting firm responsible for the gondola's design and the associated area zoning plan. Nordplan has also engaged specialist consultants crucial to the project's development. The second private actor is employed by the Flakk Group, the initiative holder spearheading the gondola project. These private actors offered valuable insights into the planning process and the technical aspects of the gondola initiative.

While alternative approaches, such as interviewing members of the local population in Sula, could have provided insights into community preferences, I prioritized engaging with local politicians and private actors due to my focus on understanding the project's development

process. This decision allowed me to delve into the motivations, challenges, and considerations shaping the gondola project from the perspectives of key stakeholders actively involved in its planning and execution.

The interviews followed a funnel structure, where one begins with general questions and then afterwards turn to the particular experience of the interviewee (Hay & Cope, 2021). I began with asking the interviewees to tell me about themselves and their involvement in the project, before delving more into their perceptions and thoughts. The questions were then structured around three primary themes: (1) the interviewees' roles in the Sula gondola project, (2) perspectives on sustainable development, nature conservation, and tourism facilitation, and (3) public response to the project. The full interview guide is included as an appendix at the end of this thesis for reference.

The Interviews were conducted between February and early March 2024, and are therefore based on the status of the project during that period. There has not been any subsequent progress since the interviews, due to ongoing objections from the County Governor, and as mentioned in Chapter 4 there will not be further progress before the submission of this thesis.

Before conducting the interviews, I did a test interview with a fellow student. A test interview can help the researcher try out the language and clarity of the questions asked, and to practice listening to the interviewee (McGrath et al., 2019). Given the geographical distance between myself and the interviewees, all interviews were conducted digitally using Microsoft Teams. Conducting digital interviews may present some challenges, including potential issues related to signal quality or digital disruptions. Fortunately, I encountered only one technical issue during the interviews when an interviewee momentarily lost connection and exited the Teams meeting. However, we promptly reconnected and resumed where we had ended. Overall, I am appreciative of the digital interview format as it saved considerable time that would have been otherwise spent on travel to Sula. Additionally, it made it easier to fit the interviews into the schedules of the interviewees.

Interviewee title	Role	Work status	Position
Interviewee 1	Local politician and member of the Municipal Council	Full time politician	Opposed to the gondola
Interviewee 2	Local politician and member of the Municipal Council	Full time politician	In favor of the gondola
Interviewee 3	Local politician and member of the Municipal Council	Part time politician	In favor of the gondola
Interviewee 4	Local politician and member of the Municipal Council	Part time politician	In favor of the gondola
Interviewee 5	Local politician and member of the Municipal Council	Part time politician	Opposed to the gondola
Flakk Group Employee	Employed by the Flakk Group		In favor of the gondola
Nordplan Employee	Employed by Nordplan		In favor of the gondola

Table 1: Presentation of the interviewees.

5.1.2 Document Analysis

To gain deeper insight into the planning process, I conducted an extensive analysis of several relevant documents. Document analysis involves studying materials that have been produced without the researcher’s direct involvement, meaning that the documents are secondhand data. Document analysis is mostly used in combination with other research methods, such as interviews where the researcher gathers firsthand data (Bowen, 2009).

Specifically, I examined area zoning plans produced by Nordplan on behalf of the Flakk Group, carefully comparing the versions published in 2021 and 2022 with the updated version from 2023 to track changes within the project. Additionally, I reviewed meeting minutes from sessions with the Municipal Council, presentations by the Flakk Group, and various risk and impact assessments. Given the nature-focused emphasis of my thesis, I prioritized analyzing the environmental impact assessment over other reports, such as those addressing ground conditions or avalanche risks.

To track the developments of the project I also reviewed numerous news articles from the national broadcasting corporation NRK, as well as local newspapers such as Sulaposten and Sunnmørsposten. These sources provided valuable contextual information and ongoing updates related to the proposed project, from the beginning of the project up till the current status. Reading these articles helped me to get an overview of the project before conducting the interviews, which helped me feel prepared for the interviews and allowed me to ask clarifying questions if something was unclear from the portrayal in media.

5.2 Analyzing Data

The interviews were transcribed shortly after being held. I first tried to use an automatic transcription-program, but quickly realized that the program struggled to transcribe properly what the interviewees said, possibly because the interviews were conducted in Norwegian with diverse Norwegian dialects. I then found it easier to transcribe the interviews myself. This also allowed me to analyze the answers as I transcribed them, which possibly spared me some time in the process of coding. I transcribed the interviews in Norwegian, and then translated consecutively only the parts that I chose to directly quote in the thesis.

The data has to be analyzed to make sense in regard to the research in question. I chose to conduct a thematic analysis to sort my data, a method where the researcher recognizes patterns within the data, and then bases the analysis on the emerging themes (Bowen, 2009). This was suitable for my research because the interviews were semi-structured, and all interviewees were not asked the exact same questions. It was therefore more beneficial to sort the data into different themes, and compare the data based on these. The collected data was sorted into four themes, similar to those in the interview guide: The motivation behind the gondola project, the planning process, the considerations towards nature and sustainable development within the project, and the local conflict.

5.3 Limitations and Quality of Research

I experienced some challenges in finding interviewees, as it was difficult to get responses. I contacted 22 people via email or phone, who are in some way connected to the project. Three people declined the request, while 12 people never replied. However, when I started getting a few responses I used 'snowball sampling', where existing participants recruit or suggest other

subjects who they consider relevant to the case (Hay & Cope, 2021, p. 100). I eventually ended up with the seven interviewees introduced in Chapter 5.1.

As is touched upon in Chapter 4 and described more in detail in chapters 6 and 7, the gondola project has become quite a heated conflict in Sula. This became clear quite soon as I was reading the local newspapers, as well as going through Facebook groups made for those for and against the project. Sula is a small place, which makes conflicts like this even more visible. This conflicted situation has been in the back of my mind when working on the thesis and is part of the reason for why I chose to make the interviewees anonymous – it might make interviewees feel more comfortable expressing their opinions on the matter. The terms of the interviews were agreed upon in a declaration of consent signed by the interviewees. The declaration of consent is also included as an appendix at the end of the thesis for reference. However, as Sula is a small place, and there for example is a limited amount of people in the Municipal Council, it is difficult to ensure 100% anonymity. But as agreed upon in the declaration, I have changed the names of the interviewees, and have refrained from sharing personal information about them.

Further on, I sent in a form to Sikt, the knowledge sector's service provider, to get permission to conduct the research. The personal data that I have processed is in line with the permissions I have gotten from Sikt. Also, to follow the guidelines of my university, the interviews were recorded using the application Diktafon, which transfers the recordings directly to the webpage Nettskjema, where they are safely stored. The transcriptions and analyses of my interviews are stored at my home directory on the NTNU server, where only I have access.

There were also some challenges related to language. While my English language skills are quite advanced, I do not have much experience with political terms, and therefore had to spend a lot of time on finding the right translations. I eventually found two Norwegian-English dictionaries provided online by the Norwegian Government, that translates words related to the Parliament and The Planning and Building Act. Most of my political translations have been based on these dictionaries (Regjeringen, 2021b, n.d.-b).

5.4 Researcher's Position

A researcher should be aware of their positionality when conducting research. Positionality refers to the researcher's position in relation to the topic that is being investigated. The researchers background, ideology, class or gender are all examples of features that can impact the research (Hay & Cope, 2021). It is usually a goal to be objective when conducting research, however, some argue that you can never be fully objective (England, 2014). Our understanding of the world, the questions we ask, and what we choose to study is dependent on our position in the world. The researcher can benefit from keeping this in mind when working, as being aware of your positionality makes your research more reliable (England, 2014).

The topic of this study is chosen because of my interest in the ongoing nature- and climate crises. I have a personal interest of the topic as I have grown up in a small municipality where tourism has become a bigger and bigger focus. As a result of this I have seen an increase in infrastructure as a measure to facilitate tourism. The visual change this has made on the natural scenery of my hometown has opened my eyes to see how many similar projects are happening around in Norway, and how often the value of untouched nature is being downgraded in favor of economic development. Despite the fact that I have personal experiences connected to the topic of my thesis, it was important for me to remain as objective as possible in my work.

With this in mind, the next chapter will present the results from the interviews, which display diverse perspectives and opinions on the gondola project. Analyzed documents are sometimes used to supplement the responses and provide context.

6. Results

In this chapter I will present the results from the thematic analysis, based on the answers from my seven interviews. This chapter is structured by the selected themes: the motivation behind the project, the planning process, sustainable tourism and nature conservation considerations, and the local conflict. Notably, the respondents' diverse professional backgrounds and individual perspectives played a significant role in shaping the depth and breadth of their responses, providing nuanced perspectives on various aspects of the project. Because the interviewees are anonymized, they are named Interviewee 1-5, Flakk Group employee and Nordplan employee (Table 1).

6.1 The motivation Behind the Gondola Project

The current area zoning plan mentions three main purposes for the project: (1) to create a good foundation for extended year-round outdoor activities at Sulafjellet, for all ages and skill levels, (2) to strengthen Sula's position as a tourism destination and to increase the value creation at Devoldfabrikken, Langevåg, and Sula Municipality, and (3) to carry out the development with consideration and mitigating measures for the natural environment and residential areas (Nordplan, 2023, p. 6).

When asked about the purpose of the project, all seven interviewees mentioned Devoldfabrikken. There is a gratitude towards the Flakk Group for renovating this building from the old factory that it was, into the shopping- and culture center it is today. Several interviewees reminisce to what it used to look like before and show appreciation towards the changes that the Flakk Group has made: *“When I was young and walked past Devoldfabrikken at night it looked like a haunted house. It was completely dark with broken windows; it was very scary at that time. But now it has become a magnificent building”* (Interviewee 2).

The center hosts stores, cafés, art spaces, a museum, and office spaces, you can also rent locations for special occasions (Devoldfabrikken, n.d.-b). In addition to that, it hosts the office spaces of about 200 people (Flakk Group, 2020). However, the Flakk Group has voiced publicly that Devoldfabrikken is not going financially as well as they hoped, and that if they continue to go into deficit, they will not be able to continue running the center. While most interviewees sympathize with this and are worried about it, two of them experience the

statement to be more like a threat or a leverage to make people support the gondola, they are not really concerned about the profit of the center:

“It’s a fabricated notion that started to show after people on social media talked about it. Of course, they have been running at a loss for a long time, but the Flakk Group is a large group that moves money here and there. The fact that they say they are making a loss, I don’t attach too much importance to that, because he is a businessman who, after all, is doing well. I don’t believe that he would have continued to develop it further and invested money into Devoldfabrikken if it wasn’t worth it in the long run, businesspeople don’t do that” (Interviewee 5).

Even though increased activity and easier access to Sulafjellet is one of three stated purposes in the area zoning plan, only two of the interviewees mention this as the purpose of the project. They rather view the project as a financial investment. One can, however, make a separation between what they mention as the intended purpose, and what they think of as positive side-effects. Four interviewees mention accessibility to the mountain and making it easier for people to spend more time outdoors as positive side-effects:

“The mountain will be more accessible for cross-country skiing for instance. And it will no doubt make it possible for groups who are not able to get up there today, to go to the top. One shouldn’t dismiss the effect of that, I’m not just talking about those who are in a wheelchair and can’t walk, there is also an age group that can no longer get up on the mountain by themselves” (Nordplan employee).

The interviewees give the impression that Sula is a quiet place. Part of the reason for this is the big share of commuters in the municipality; in 2023, 58,8% of the employed population in Sula was commuting to work in neighboring towns, making them the municipality with the highest percentage of out-commuters in Møre og Romsdal (KommuneProfilen, 2023b). Additionally, Sula is an island and therefore an end stop; they don’t have the possibility to attract visitors from people passing through. If they want to increase the number of visitors, they need extra measures, and a big tourist attraction could have that effect. Four of the interviewees mentioned that part of the purpose of the gondola is to create more life and activity in the rest of the town as well, not just Devoldfabrikken. If the town gets more visitors

and activity, that can also lead to more jobs and can be a reason for people to live and work in Sula:

“I’ve gotten signals from younger people saying that they can imagine exciting jobs her. That is what people want, but there isn’t a lot of that if you don’t do anything new. Further ahead I’m thinking we could build a culture house and a culture scene. That could be realized in the long term, but not without an attraction that we need and lack today” (Interviewee 4).

However, not all interviewees shared the opinion that Sula needs more visitors. One interviewee argued that Sula is quite a successful municipality. For the past twelve years, more people have moved into the municipality than out of it, giving them a steady population growth from 8675 people in 2014 to 9720 people in 2023 (KommuneProfilen, 2023a). In comparison, 10 of the other 26 municipalities in the county have experienced a population decline over the past ten years (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2023a). This suggests that some people are happy living in Sula the way things are now. Two of the interviewees are afraid that the gondola project might ruin this positive development – they believe that the closeness to nature and the opportunity to be “alone” in nature is a big part of why people want to live in Sula:

“I think there are many people who move here, instead of living in Ålesund for example, because they can commute and work in Ålesund and then they get to live in Sula and use the mountains, and forests, and nature that is here. You lose some of that when you get both a big gondola and a lot more tourists walking around” (Interviewee 1).

“It is positive to bring more people to Sula, but not that kind of mass tourism, because they damage the values that actually makes people want to come here” (Interviewee 5).

When talking about what kind of visitors they want to attract, several interviewees mention cruise ship tourists to be a big part of the target group. According to the original presentation of the project, they are calculated to be one third of the visitors. The other two parts are locals and other tourists (Flakk Group, 2020). This goal does not match the report from the

Norwegian Tourism Board (2023), which states that we should aim for less cruise ships in Norwegian fjords. Ålesund was Norway's biggest cruise ship harbor in 2023, welcoming 283 cruise ships with 654 625 passengers in total (Kystverket, 2024). This is a high number of visitors for a city of 58 000 inhabitants (Ålesund Kommune, 2024). The plan for the gondola involves that the cruise ship tourists will dock in Ålesund and then be brought to Sula by emission-free boats (Nordplan, 2023). One interviewee from the municipal council was skeptical towards this as it might increase the cruise ship arrivals in Ålesund further. She does not believe that Ålesund has the capacity to accept more ships than they do today (Interviewee 5). Two other interviewees showed skepticism towards the cruise ship business for other reasons, acknowledging that it is not good for the environment. Yet, they both argued that we still need to facilitate it, with the argument being that we still need the business:

“I’m not in favor of mass tourism. I am actually very much against Ålesund being a large cruise port, but that is more personal. Nationally, we should have less cruise traffic, I think it is old-fashioned. But we must have some tourism if we are to survive” (Interviewee 2).

On the other hand, others saw the big amount of cruise ship arrivals in Ålesund as a positive factor in relation to this project; it secures a tourist flow, and a gondola is a good fit for cruise ship tourists who might be docked only for a few hours but still want to get a look at the Norwegian mountains: *“We’re not worried about them [cruise ship tourists] using the gondola. They’re going up to look at the view, drink their coffee and eat their “svele”, or whatever the tour operator ordered, then they’re going back down”* (Flakk Group employee).

In summary, the proposed gondola project in Sula aims to achieve multiple objectives as outlined in the area zoning plan, including enhancing outdoor activities at Sulafjellet, bolstering tourism to strengthen local economic value, and executing development with care for the natural and residential environment. While there's consensus among interviewees that the maintenance of Devoldfabrikken is a central part of the motivation for the project, the opinions differ over how important that is. There are concerns about potential impacts on Sula's quiet character and nature accessibility, with debates over the desirability of attracting more visitors, particularly cruise ship tourists. These

discussions underscore the complex considerations involved in balancing economic development with preserving Sula's unique natural and cultural assets.

6.2 The Planning Process

I have described the steps of the planning process in Chapter 4. The current chapter goes more into the interviewees' thoughts and opinions on the process, and what they experience to be the main considerations during the process.

As previously explained, the responsibility for the preparatory work has been given to the initiative holder, the Flakk Group. This way of working is new for both the local politician interviewees and the one from the Flakk Group. The interviewee from the Flakk Group feels that this process has been a bit complicated, and the responsibility shifts between the municipality and the initiative holder:

“This is a private zoning plan which means that the initiative holder hires the necessary professional resources, but they work for Sula Municipality. It's a bit of a double game. I have never come across this exact part of a regulatory process before” (Flakk Group employee).

Similarly, a local politician doubted this arrangement, but her concerns were more related to the credibility of the work. She was not sure that the consultants hired for the project are able work completely independent from the ones who hired them:

“In that kind of case management process, you get quite a few weaknesses, because you have an initiative holder who sets quite a lot of the terms themselves, and who buys the services from other consultants, and they have an interest and an obligation towards their customer first and foremost. As long as it is not the municipality that is the customer, the consultancy company will of course also place the most emphasis on what their customer wants, and then they stay within the legislation. And then you get a big gap where the municipality's needs and demands are not taken care of in any way” (Interviewee 5).

However, the Flakk Group interviewee did not agree with this concern, he is aware that there has been a debate around it, but he could assure that the consultants are working independently: *“I don’t agree that the initiative holder influences the expert consultants. They have been completely autonomous; they have free budget funds to obtain what they need. We haven’t interfered in any other way than facilitating for them”* (Flakk Group employee).

The planning process has lasted over four years and according to the interviewee who is employed by the Flakk Group, they have spent almost 30 million NOK thus far in the planning process. He further explained that he has worked on several similar projects before, but he has never experienced an area zoning plan as comprehensive as this one. He thinks of the detailed process as both positive and negative. The positive side is all the feedback they have received, as the feedback has helped form the project into what it is today: *“Consultation rounds works. In the last consultation round we had, we received 267 inputs (...) Several inputs have led to us reviewing parts of the project again and largely adjusted, changed, minimized, etc. to achieve the best possible result”* (Flakk Group employee). The negative side, according to the Flakk Group interviewee, is how long lasting and expensive the process is, and how much money one has to put into a project before one even knows if it is going to happen. He is afraid that this is a hindrance to a lot of projects in smaller towns, and that the consequence is that only the ones with the most financial capital will be able to carry out a project:

Every time we make more or less significant changes, a number of reports must be revised and updated. If we move a mast or adjust a road there are many consequences. Our experience is that it costs 25-30 million [NOK] to complete an area zoning plan. You must have the resources to be able to carry that lot, whether you win or lose in the final sprint. And the facility, with high style and high quality, will cost between 700 and 900 million [NOK]. You won’t find that in all towns in Norway. It requires capital, it requires persistence, and it requires a willingness to take risks (Flakk Group employee).

Some of the local politician interviewees also made reflections around the time and money invested into the project. As previously explained (Chapter 4), the County Governor has made it quite clear that it is quite unlikely that the project will be approved due to the damage it will do to nature and the possibilities for pursuing outdoor activities, they will not be able to find

measures to reduce the consequences to these issues. This makes it unlikely that the project will be approved in the next round of hearing. The municipality then has the choice to either end the project there or take it further to the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development (Kommunal- og Distriktsdepartementet) for a final decision, who are in charge of the Planning and Building Act that the project has to follow (Regjeringen, n.d.-a). One interviewee expressed that it is difficult to end the project now, because it has been going on for so long, and the initiative holder has already invested so much into the project:

“I think we will go to mediation instead of ending it now, because the Municipal Council has let this developer spend so much money. It could have been stopped a long time ago, they didn’t have to send it forward last time if they were absolutely sure that we weren’t going to do this, but they have done that and then I don’t think it is reasonable to say that we will not try to take it all the way to the ministry” (Interviewee 2).

Another local politician interviewee explained that she believes that a lot of people in the municipality carry that opinion, but that she does not agree. She argues that the project should have been shut down when the County Governor and the County Municipality (Fylkeskommunen) was first involved, because they have advised to end the project since the beginning. She believes that it is too easy for municipalities to override the national guidelines that the County Governor is working to uphold: *“the national goals and requirements are relevant and important, and they have an impact here, but the impact does not take effect quickly enough, and it does not stop the processes well enough”* (Interviewee 5).

The consequences the gondola-project will have on nature in the area is presented in the environmental impact assessment from the biologist firm Rådgivende Biologer. The impact assessment states that the project will have negative consequences on the nature of the area, and that they found several red-listed or protected species of plants that will be affected (Rådgivende Biologer AS, 2022). This assessment is part of the reason for why the County Governor has advised to not go through with the project. When asked about this assessment, the answers amongst the interviewees varied. While the two opponents of the project believed that this assessment was a confirmation that this project should not be carried out, others argued that you have to see this report in relation to the other reports and prognoses, and then

make a decision based on the total equation; does the project do more harm for nature than it does good for Sula's society?

“Let's say that it is very harmful to a type of plant, then you have to see that in relation to the other reports which may say that this is positive for the development of the area. There will be reports going both ways” (Nordplan employee).

Some local politician interviewees acknowledged the report and that the project may have some consequences but explained that they don't really think of the consequences as that vital, with statements such as *“My personal opinion is that in relation to the size of Sulafjellet, the impact is acceptable”* (Interviewee 4). Another local politician believes that it is possible to go through with the project, but also take measures to protect nature: *“If the project is to be, of course we have to listen to the experts in the field, and then we have to do our best based on that”* (Interviewee 3).

For now, it is the objections from the County Governor that is the main challenge. The objections are based on three main concerns: the damage the intervention will have on ecosystems and threatened species, the degradation of Sulafjellet as a recreational area for locals, and that several areas of the plan are not considered to be elaborated well enough, for example the noise level for residential areas or the consequences the project will have for public health (Statsforvalteren, 2023). A couple of the interviewees were worried that the County Governor puts too much emphasis on the negative sides concerning the nature-damage, and does not take into account the positive effect this will have on Sula society:

“We acknowledge all the environmental considerations and outdoor life considerations that the County Governor emphasizes, but then you simply have to ask whether the County Governor is able to emphasize everything? If they manage to balance the very strict focus that we now have on nature, environmental protection, and outdoor life, if they manage to see how bad such an intervention is in relation to what the gain is?” (Nordplan employee).

This opinion was shared by one local politician who also wished that the County Governor would see both sides of the coin. However, he pointed out that he was not surprised by the

negative feedback because: *“one of their tasks is to be critical, you see many other projects around Norway where the County Governor has come out and said that they do not recommend it”* (Interviewee 3).

While some wish that the municipality was able to have a bigger say in the decision, two local politicians were pleased that the decision is in the hands of those higher up in the system. They believe that it is easier for the County Governors to be objective in these cases, and that they can see the bigger picture and make sure that projects around Norway follow national politics and goals. Additionally, one of them argued that if more responsibility is given to the municipalities, that will increase their workload:

“As a politician myself, I certainly do not want more local governance, because that means that I have to sit down and learn all these rules that exist at national level. I would much rather those who set the rules at national level set the rules and put them into a system so that I don’t have to struggle with it” (Interviewee 5).

Furthermore, when talking about the objections from the County Governor, several of the interviewees who are positive towards the gondola pointed out how little development has been happening in Sula compared to other municipalities. Some found it unfair that, for example, the neighboring municipality Sykkylven has gotten permission to build thousands of cabins. Sula has been strict with developments in nature, such as cabins, so far and the interviewees expressed that they feel like they therefore should be allowed to go through with this one project, with statements like *“why can’t we have one destination, when other municipalities are allowed to make a living from, for example, cabin development, which destroys a lot?”* (Interviewee 2).

As shown through these interviews, the planning process for the proposed gondola project has revealed a range of perspectives and challenges, and the County Governor’s objections have added complexity to the decision-making process. The ongoing debate reflects broader questions about governance and decision-making, with differing views on the roles of local versus national authorities in shaping development outcomes.

6.3 Considerations Towards Nature Conservation and Sustainable Development

Nature conservation has been a recurrent topic in Sula; it is a central part of the County Governor's objections to the gondola and is also a perspective that is promoted by several organizations that have become involved with the project, such as the local organization Vern om Sula and the national nature conservation organization Naturvernforbundet (Naturvernforbundet, 2023; Vern Om Sula, n.d.).

When talking about the aspect of nature conservation and sustainability in the project, all interviewees agreed that the project would do damage to the nature in the area. The difference lies in how bad they think it will be, and how much emphasis they choose to put on this issue. The two interviewees who are opponents of the project were not in doubt, arguing that the well-being of the environment should come before all else:

“Nature creates the foundation for everything, it creates the foundation for all life. What we know is that we previously did not understand how important nature is, now we have come to the point where we know that it is very important, but we still do not know everything. We just know that we have to tread carefully, and that should be enough to ensure that we now think completely new and completely differently” (Interviewee 5).

For those interviewees who were positive towards the gondola, they argued for how one can justify the negative consequences it has on nature. One argument that was repeated by many was that Sulafjellet is not an untouched area, there are constructions there already and it is therefore not right to promote it as untouched nature. Several interviewees also react to the fact that the previous developments on the mountain did not meet a lot of resistance, even though they also did damage: *“there are constructions in this area already – there are some radio antennas and there are cabins, and no one has really raised a problem with that, everyone thinks it's fine”* (Interviewee 4). Another interviewee thinks that people react more to the gondola because of its scale, and that other developments were perceived as less damaging, a fact that she does not agree with:

“We have made some trails with gravel on the mountain that are several kilometers long. They are built to get more people to go to the mountain, for the sake of public health, but it has also taken a lot of area and wetland. It has taken

up as many acres as a gondola, but nobody reacted to that because it wasn't as spectacular” (Interviewee 2).

The interviewee from the Flakk Group informed that they consciously chose to place the top station at the peak that is least used as a hiking destination on Sulafjellet, and that has been most affected by humans from before, with about 50 cabins, a 7km long gravel trail, and a 100-year-old power dam.

All of the five interviewees who support the gondola especially mention the existing and the planned cabins at Sulafjellet as an argument. A local politician interviewee informed that there are 101 cabins in total at Sulafjellet, and that there has been made applications for dozens more (Interviewee 2). She also argued that when choosing which construction projects to accept, the municipality should consider which projects benefit the most people. For her it makes more sense to build one big project that is accessible for the public, rather than allowing private people to build cabins:

“Instead of using 60 acres on privatization and many small cabins, it is perhaps more justifiable to use 60 acres on public purposes. And the consequences are probably greater in areas where they build cabins, because there is much more wetland, while up at the top of the mountain there is mostly rock. So overall, if you are going to think of the environment, social sustainability, and economic sustainability, then it will be more appropriate to build a destination that many people can use” (Interviewee 2).

As a measure to spare nature, this interviewee suggested to go through previous zoning plans and exchange area that is set aside for cabins, and use that for the gondola instead, which she considers to be a more forward-looking project. In that way they won't touch any more nature than what is already planned. However, on the topic of cabins one interviewee did not agree with this viewpoint. She claims that the cabins are used frequently as a justification for the gondola, but she does not think that these constructions can be compared: *“these cabins are 15-25 square meters, there is no road up to them, there is no running water or water drainage, it's not a footprint with the same effect as a gigantic gondola installation with 150,000 visitors per year” (Interviewee 5).* Similarly, another interviewee finds the gondola to

be a completely different disturbance to the surroundings than the cabins, and expresses a concern at what the future will look like if we allow too many of these big constructions:

“How do we want Sula to be when our children grow up? Now they have iPads and screens up to their faces from birth, and then they shouldn’t even get the opportunity to go to the mountains in their local area without meeting a bunch of tourists and a giant steel construction. They don’t get to experience that peace there either” (Interviewee 1).

As mentioned, a big part of the expected tourists will first arrive in Ålesund, who welcomed over 600 000 cruise ship passengers in 2023 (Kystverket, 2024). One interviewee mentioned that the two mountain destinations Sukkertoppen and Aksla in Ålesund have experienced severe damage to the terrain because of the high amount of people hiking there. She argued that if the gondola is built and Sula evolves to be a bigger tourist destination, then they can relieve some of the pressure from the destinations in Ålesund: *“It will be more sustainable over time if you can spread it over three destinations, instead of just the two that aren’t really facilitated”* (Interviewee 2). Another interviewee also mentioned that they can relieve pressure from Geiranger, because during the tourist season dozens of tourist buses go from Ålesund to Geiranger. He believes that it is more sustainable to bring those tourists to Sula by electric boats, and on the gondola driven by electric power, rather than to send them on 2,5-hour long bus rides to Geiranger (Interviewee 3).

Several interviewees agree that it is important to facilitate tourism to prevent extensive damage to nature. They argue that tourism has come to stay, and rather than to fight that one should do the necessary measures to adjust to tourism. One local politician emphasizes that most of the traffic will go in the air, from the bottom station to the top station, therefore you avoid a lot of the worst damages, which are wear and tear from people walking. Another local politician added that with the gondola there will be necessary infrastructure to receive that many visitors, such as trash bins and toilets. Similarly, the employee from Nordplan explains that he does not understand why people speak of gondolas as such a bad thing in relation to nature, he rather thinks of it as an answer to how we can receive a lot of tourists without doing too much damage:

“One of our biggest selling points in Norway is nature, and tourists want to come and experience nature, so a gondola is not a bad answer to letting a lot of people experience nature without letting a lot of people go out into nature uncontrolled. It’s an incredibly small footprint divided by the number of people who get to experience Norwegian nature” (Nordplan employee).

The project has taken measures to meet the demands of the County Governor and make the development more sustainable. The interviewee working for the Flakk Group informed that they have carried out a comprehensive climate emission analysis which showed that they will have practically zero emissions during daily operation, because the gondola will be run by electric power that they produce in their own power plant. However, the production period will have an impact; the emissions from the production will be about twice as much as the car traffic in Sula Municipality emits each year: *“But we release it once and the car traffic releases it every year”* (Flakk Group employee). They have also reduced the size of the area in use a lot since the original idea: *“we have removed intended alpine ski facilities, ski slopes across the mountain, and a good number of trails, and we have made a construction road temporary instead of permanent”* (Flakk Group employee). Additionally, the Flakk Group has taken the responsibility to enforce hiking trails surrounding the top station to avoid trampling. They have also taken the initiative to restore nature elsewhere in the county to make up for the nature that is affected in Sula. One example is an old alpine facility in Spjelkavik, where the Flakk Group has offered to do the work to remove the infrastructure and restore the nature back to its natural state:

“We say that if we mess with 60 acres on the mountain [Sulafjellet], we are looking for 60 acres we can return. It doesn’t help the birds that live where we set up masts, but it does something to the total equation and the CO2 emissions” (Flakk Group employee).

While some view these measures as positive and use them to illustrate an environmental focus in the project, one interviewee was less convinced. She believes that these measures are strategically promoted to make the project seem more sustainable:

“It is presented as sustainable, which I believe is a misuse of the word sustainability. I believe this is a type of greenwashing, because it is not

sustainable, it cannot be a sustainable measure when you damage undisturbed nature, destroy red-listed nature habitats, and inflict the highest degree of nature damage and environmental damage in areas” (Interviewee 5).

Norway has signed an agreement to preserve 30% of the world’s nature and sea by 2030, restore 30% of damaged nature and stop the extinction of species (Reisemålsutvalget, 2023, p. 28). When asked whether this affects the project, the interviewees agreed that this agreement is not directly a part of their plans. However that is where the County Governor comes in, as their role is to follow up decisions, targets and guidelines from the Parliament and the Government (Statsforvalteren, 2024). Again, there was a separation between the five who support the gondola and the two who do not. The two who are opposing the project had the most opinions on this matter. They both expressed that they think there should be clearer guidelines around nature conservation, down to the local levels as well, to make sure this agreement is followed:

“When I look at the fact that Norway was not only involved in signing that nature agreement, but that they were a driving force behind getting the agreement in and signed by all the other countries, then I think Norway also should follow up with further strengthening the regulations and administration in Norway” (Interviewee 5).

The other interviewee who is opposed to the project also believes that municipalities have too much freedom to decide whether or not they want to take this agreement into account when planning projects:

“The question is how much responsibility you want to take as a municipality for this percentage. Do you see it as your responsibility as a politician to stop this destruction of nature or do you see it as something that others can do and that you don’t have to do it yourself? It is about a sense of duty. I, for my part, believe that we should of course take that into account” (Interviewee 1).

More directly linked to this project is the environmental impact assessment from Rådgivende Biologer. Within the area that is to be used for the gondola, the assessment lists three habitats as vulnerable, two as close to extinct, two as severely threatened, and two as “selected

habitats” which are habitats that have been given a status as particularly important (Rådgivende Biologer AS, 2022). One of the opposing interviewees was impacted by this assessment, but disappointed by the lack of effect it had within the municipality:

“The assessment has affected the project, but it has not turned those who are on the yes-side. We who are on the no-side have become even more certain that we are right. But I find that a lot of people don’t care that much about it and don’t pay much attention to it, and that’s really sad” (Interviewee 1).

This was backed up by the other opposing interviewee who felt that the assessment should have had a bigger say, and that as things are now it is too easy for them to ignore it: *“it’s far too easy to say that ‘yes, I see that this has a negative consequence, but I don’t care about that’”* (Interviewee 5). As an alternative to the gondola-plans, this interviewee suggested another form of tourism that she believes would fit Sula better. She explained that when she has had visitors from other countries, they are mostly interested in the simple pleasures that Norway has to offer:

“Those who come here are interested in lying in a hammock in the forest, they are interested in going for a walk in the forest without seeing any other people, they are interested in going fishing or staying in a cabin without running water, that you have to use a rowing boat to get to. They are looking for these experiences that are different from what you are used to. That’s why I think it’s wrong to drive them up and down in a gondola to eat in a restaurant, because you’re not giving them the experience that they’re interested in” (Interviewee 5).

While this interviewee believes that Norway on a national level has to get better at promoting that kind of slow tourism, other interviewees had different thoughts about Norway’s challenges within tourism. The Nordplan employee emphasized how important the tourism industry has become, and that it is an income that can lead us away from being dependent on the oil industry. However, he also emphasized that every municipality has to decide how many tourists they can accept. The Flakk Group employee agreed that tourism has become very important, and that the best thing we can do in Norway is to facilitate it in a good enough way:

“I think the most important thing we should do, at the risk of sounding like I’m going to build gondolas everywhere, but maybe it is precisely that type of measure that limits and organizes the use of nature. With good planning, good organizing, and good follow-up, you ensure that many people get a nature experience that they would not otherwise have, without causing unnecessary wear and tear on the natural landscape” (Flakk Group employee).

In conclusion, the discourse surrounding the proposed gondola project in Sula is deeply rooted in conflicting views on nature conservation and sustainability. While proponents highlight the potential benefits of increased tourism and the need for accessible public destinations, opponents emphasize the irreplaceable value of untouched nature and the urgency to adhere to global conservation agreements.

6.4 The Local Conflict

An issue that seemed to disturb all the interviewees is the local conflict that has grown in Sula because of this project. The perceptions of the conflict were more personal and emotional than when discussing the other themes. The conflict evolves around both the nature-aspect, and the fact that several people will be personally affected by the gondola because it will go straight above their houses. It has evolved into quite a hostile environment between those who support the gondola and those who are against it.

Even though the area zoning plan has been revised to affect fewer houses, there are still several people who will have the gondola running straight above their homes. There is a discontent with this, both because they don’t want the view of the gondola, and because they worry about tourists looking into their gardens and houses from the gondola. For those affected, the project feels intrusive and threatening, but those who live further away might not be as involved in the matter: *“those who are affected, they are very much against it and stand on the barricades, while those who live further away don’t have those strong opinions on the matter”* (Interviewee 2). Some of the interviewees express strong concern around how this might affect those involved, and consequences have already started to show in the municipality, as the Municipal Doctor has reported on a worsening mental health amongst the local population:

“They have gone for years not knowing if they will live in the house they live in or if they have to move, if they have to have the gondola going above them, or if they can afford to buy a new house. There are many aspects that they think about and worry about. I know people have gotten sick from it” (Interviewee 1).

On the other side, some interviewees believe that this issue has been blown out of proportion, saying that people have to see things in a bigger perspective: *“There is a war in Gaza, there is a war in Ukraine, while here we are talking about a gondola that might go above someone’s house”* (Interviewee 4). Another local politician emphasized that those affected will be compensated for the inconvenience by the Flakk Group and will get their money’s worth if they choose to sell their houses and move (Interviewee 2).

The opposing opinions amongst the interviewees reflect some of the different opinions amongst the local population. The debate has been going on since the project was first proposed. Since then, there has been Facebook groups formed for and against the gondola and there have been several events hosted on both sides. Amongst the local population the debate has become quite hostile, according to the Flakk Group employee:

“There has been enormous engagement on Facebook. There have been public meetings, there has been a meeting with supporters and opponents, there has been a torchlight procession. And there have been a lot of discussions in households and between households. There are some who say that families are divided, and there are some who say that their neighbors no longer greet them” (Flakk Group employee).

The responses have been expressed on Facebook, in newspapers, in meetings, and in conversations locally. There has not been any official survey to see how many are for or against the project, but the interviewees have made guesses based on the amount of people in each Facebook Group, and based on the most recent municipal election, where the gondola project was central:

“The parties that have shown a positive attitude towards the gondola got 75% of the votes. They had 70% from before, so it wasn't very shocking, but it was still a

clear manifestation that people voted for the parties who were positive towards the gondola” (Flakk Group employee).

Several interviewees explain that the choice to not conduct a survey was intentional, because the case has become so complicated. Several interviewees feel that a survey or voting wouldn't do any good, because the case still has to be decided by politicians, and in collaboration with the County Governor. A voting would therefore not have any real effect:

I am strongly against a voting. Because the case is so conflicted and there are so many nuances and information that you don't get unless you read all the thousands of pages, and very few people do that. So, you won't be able to use the outcome of such a vote for anything really (Interviewee 5).

All interviewees said that they try to stay out of the debates themselves, to remain objective and factual. However it is a small community, and many of the local politicians have experienced the consequences of the disagreement themselves, some mention angry emails, some mention conflicts within the family, and some have felt threatened by members of the local community: *“I felt that certain politicians were held hostage in this case, there was tremendous pressure. There was harassment, media frenzy and the whole package”* (Interviewee 4).

Once again there is a clear distinction between the two who are opposed to the gondola and the rest of the interviewees. While Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 5 feel that this conflict and the negative effects it has had on some residents' health is also a reason to end the project, others feel that this situation is inevitable: *“Sometimes we need to make decisions that not everyone likes. We will never be able to shield everyone from everything or make everyone happy. We have to see the big picture and make the decision that we think is right”* (Interviewee 3).

While the conflict started out as being mainly about the affected homeowners, it has evolved to include the nature aspect to a larger degree. Many of those who are opponents of the project are so because they don't want an interference with the nature of Sula. When talking about this aspect of the conflict, one interviewee said that she feels like the debate is even worse when it comes to this:

“There is a much clearer clinch there because people are not so afraid of hurting someone. Because when it comes to the issue of the homes, you basically say ‘I don’t care if you lose 3 million on this’. So, in that area people moderate themselves more than they moderate themselves in the discussion about nature”
(Interviewee 5).

Some local politicians express that it is not easy for people on the no-side and the yes-side to come to an agreement when it comes to impact on nature, because they have fundamentally different opinions: *“Those who are opposed think that it [nature impact] is completely unacceptable, it is out of the question. Those who are in favor understand the concern but believe that you have to endure a little”* (Interviewee 4).

As shown through the interviews, the local conflict over the proposed gondola project has become heated, with strong emotions on both sides. Even though some changes have been made to reduce the impact on people’s homes, many residents are still unhappy, and the same accounts for people’s attitudes towards the project’s impact on nature. This conflict is affecting several interviewees, making the decision process heavier. While some interviewees believe it is important to consider the project's benefits and make tough decisions, others worry about its effects on people and nature. This topic, along with the rest of the interview results will be discussed further in the next chapter, where I will also use the literature presented in Chapter 3.

7. Discussion

In this chapter I will discuss the findings from my collected data in relation to the theory presented in Chapter 3. The research questions are the framework for my discussion:

- What is the motivation behind the proposed gondola, and in what ways is Sula Municipality weighing economic interests in tourism against the imperative of conserving nature and biodiversity?
- In what ways does the proposed gondola at Sula reflect Norway's goals to become a sustainable tourism destination?
- What are the possibilities for nature-based tourism to be sustainable?

7.1 The Motivations and Priorities Behind the Gondola

In examining the motivations underlying the proposed gondola project in Sula, it is evident that the project's proponents are driven by an interplay of economic considerations, community development, and different perceptions about the value of nature. The gondola project, as outlined in the area zoning plan, aims to enhance accessibility to Sulafjellet, to make Sula a more prominent tourist destination and thereby boost local value creation, and to carefully consider environmental and residential impacts in the process (Nordplan, 2023, p. 6). This section will delve into the motivations of the interviewees, who are all actors involved in the project, either as local politicians or from the private companies the Flakk Group and Nordplan. Furthermore, I will discuss what they perceived to be the motivations of the initiative holder. The discussion will focus on whether these perceptions align with the objectives outlined in the area zoning plan and will be contextualized with existing research on the subject.

Initially, all interviewees agreed that the gondola project aims to enhance the financial value creation at Devoldfabrikken, the center owned by the initiative holder, the Flakk Group (Chapter 4). Given the historical significance of Devoldfabrikken in Sula, it is understandable that interviewees express concern about the uncertain future of the center. However, their levels of concern vary; while five interviewees express genuine concern about the center's viability and are under the belief that the center might be forced to close down without the gondola, two interviewees view the situation at Devoldfabrikken as more of a leveraging

tactic to facilitate project approval. Furthermore, one interviewee questions whether the center is doing as badly as portrayed in the media.

Significant emphasis was placed on the potential local value creation that the project could bring to Sula. Several interviewees expressed hopes that the project would stimulate local economic activity, lead to increased development, generate more jobs, and provide a boost to local businesses. Given that the primary motivations among the interviewees revolve around increasing income at Devoldfabrikken and in Sula Municipality, this project is largely driven by economic considerations. However, when discussing the benefits of this project it is also necessary to acknowledge its negative consequences. Notably, the objections from the County Governor, which have halted the project, highlight the imperative of considering the environmental aspect in the decision-making. All interviewees acknowledge that the gondola will have adverse effects on local ecosystems. Viewing this situation through the lens of theories on the human-nature relationship, one can recognize Jena's (2024) reflections. Some interviewees believe that accepting some loss of nature is justified by economic growth and societal development. This aligns with Jena's observation that humans often perceive nature solely in economic terms, resulting in unsustainable practices and a disregard for nature's intrinsic value.

The dominance of economic growth as a primary motivation also aligns with findings from previous studies on similar cases. The study conducted by Lindberg and Veisten (2012) on the preferences for a gondola development in Gudbrandsdal revealed that both local and non-local respondents expressed strong opposition to scenarios involving significant habitat loss, underscoring a shared concern for environmental impacts. Despite these concerns, the research suggests that the gondola development would still garner support due to its perceived experiential and economic benefits for the region. Similarly in my study, several interviewees expressed a dissatisfaction with the negative impacts on nature but believed that it had to be accepted at the expense of, what they consider, much needed value creation.

However, economic gain is not the sole motivation under discussion. Several interviewees emphasize that attracting more tourists to Sula would bring more "life" into the town. They describe Sula as quiet and calm, with limited offerings for the local population. Mottiar (2016) explores the role of entrepreneurs in local societies, such as the Flakk Group in this case, and challenges the conventional view that entrepreneurs are solely profit-driven. Based

on his study Mottiar (2016) found that entrepreneurs often engage in local cooperation to increase visitor numbers and enhance the destination's reputation, prioritizing community development and long-term sustainability over pure profit-seeking. This underscores the interconnected relationship between entrepreneurs, their enterprises, and the sustainability of rural destinations. Interviewees who find Sula unfulfilling as it is today express gratitude toward the Flakk Group for revitalizing and further developing the municipality.

On the other hand, two interviewees expressed disagreement with the notion that Sula should evolve into a tourism destination or that its current quiet state is undesirable. These interviewees align with Cruickshank (2014), who challenges the prevailing belief that exists in Norway and other Nordic countries, that local communities are diminishing in significance amidst urbanization and societal changes, and that they have to adjust to a changing world. Cruickshank (2014) questions whether these communities are genuinely "dying" or if this perception is shaped by political narratives. He argues that successful development should not be solely measured by economic growth but should prioritize meeting the desires of local residents. This sentiment resonates with one interviewee who questioned the necessity of emphasizing economic expansion in Sula, particularly given the municipality's sustained population growth and the community's apparent contentment with being 'quiet' and close to serene natural surroundings. This prompts broader questions about the imperative for continual growth in every locality versus the possibility of residents finding happiness in their current way of life.

As argued by Lanfranchi et al. (2014) it is a benefit for developers to get the local population on board with a tourism development. It is important to listen to them and that they get some benefits from developments happening in their communities, that way they are more likely to contribute and support it. Those residents who do not want more tourists and infrastructure in Sula are not gaining any benefits from the gondola; they will experience more wear and tear on local nature, and more people in the mountains, while the financial gain will mainly benefit the Flakk Group as the owners of Devoldfabrikken and the gondola. Meaning that these locals will get the disadvantages but not the benefits. As Lanfranchi et al. (2014) suggested, this might make them turn to resentment, as one can see in Sula through protests such as the torchlight procession. However, it is more complex than this because other locals are supporters of the gondola; they want more activity and visitors, and an increase of tourists can therefore be a benefit for them.

Another significant perspective is the viewpoint of tourists themselves. According to Innovation Norway's (2023) findings tourists traveling to and within Norway primarily seek nature-based experiences. They highly value nature and many prioritize environmental sustainability when selecting destinations or activities. This trend aligns with the principles of ecopsychology, which posits that human well-being is intimately linked to nature, and therefore spending time outdoors leads to positive psychological responses (Rozark, 1993 in Stevens, 2010). This raises the question of whether riding a gondola up a mountain to reach a top station with a restaurant truly constitutes an authentic nature experience. One interviewee expressed skepticism, arguing that in today's technology-driven world where we spend so much time in front of screens, she values the simplicity of hiking outdoors and immersing herself in nature without distractions. She perceives a gondola as potentially undermining this pure outdoor experience. Additionally, she asks what conditions we want our children to grow up in and expresses concern that there will not be any places left for them to experience pure nature. This reflects the theory of 'extinction of experience' which argues that humans' relationship to nature is changing because we are becoming disconnected from nature. It specifies that environmental concern is strongly shaped by experiences early in life, and it is therefore important that nature is present in children's lives. More constructions in nature will give fewer experiences of untouched nature for children and can make them value human-made settings more, decreasing their environmental concern. In contrast to this view, another interviewee views the gondola as a way to enable more people to appreciate Norwegian nature and does not believe it detracts from the enjoyment of outdoor activities.

The objective of enhancing accessibility to the mountain is outlined as one of the three purposes in the area zoning plan. While interviewees did not identify this as the primary motivation, several acknowledged it as a positive outcome of the project. They highlighted how it would enable individuals with disabilities or elderly to hike independently to access the mountain. Additionally, there are individuals capable of hiking but deterred by the mountain's steepness and distance, who would enjoy being able to hike only in the heights of the mountain. However, one must consider the potential wear and tear resulting from increased visitor accessibility, which is already a concern in several Norwegian tourism destinations (Regjeringen, 2017). This raises the question of whether access to nature destinations should be considered a universal right for all humans, and the answer to that depends upon one's perspective on nature. Jena (2024) presents different beliefs that can inform this perspective.

The theory of deontology claims that humans may prioritize the well-being of other humans above environmental considerations, reflecting a sense of duty that is perceived differently than towards other people. From this standpoint, facilitating human access to nature and the associated benefits of outdoor activities may take precedence over environmental preservation. Conversely, the two interviewees advocating for the preservation of Sulafjellet in its current state likely align more with the viewpoint of ecocentrism (Berenguer, 2010 in Jena, 2024). In ecocentrism, the ecosystem itself is the main concern, and decisions should revolve around preserving the ecosystem's integrity and health. This perspective places a stronger emphasis on environmental concerns and the intrinsic value of the natural environment over human-centric considerations.

7.2 In What Ways are National Goals Reflected?

I have previously (Chapter 2) outlined Norway's national objectives to transition into a sustainable tourism destination. Furthermore, Norway has committed to contribute to preserving 30% of the world's nature. To achieve these goals, effective implementation into various projects and developments across Norway is crucial. I have used the study at Sula to shed light on these goals.

The world is currently grappling with both the climate crisis and a nature crisis, two interconnected challenges highlighted by many scientists (Zielinski et al., 2023). Bjærke and Andersen (2023) explain that the nature crisis stems from local-level activities where various projects individually exploit pieces of nature without considering their broader ecological connections. Collectively, these projects contribute to significant nature degradation with far-reaching global consequences. The proposed gondola project in Sula serves as an illustrative example of such localized initiatives contributing to the nature crisis.

Due to the previously lack of comprehensive oversight of projects across different municipalities in Norway, we now see a development where big amounts of nature is being lost at the expense of construction developments (Støstad et al., 2024). In the case of Sula, the local government argue that since they have preserved a significant portion of the municipality's nature, going through with a few developments should be acceptable. One interviewee indicated contentment with preserving as much as 70% of Sula's nature, suggesting that there is room for development like the proposed gondola project within these

limits. However, this approach may not be equitable. If another municipality has already taken use of 80% of their natural areas, compensatory preservation efforts may need to occur elsewhere to achieve overall conservation goals. Because, as noted by Pescott and Stewart (2014) ecosystems take years to recover from disturbance and restoring degraded nature is challenging. In many cases we are not able to get nature back to its original state, leaving it irreversibly altered. Despite these ecological considerations, the perspective of municipalities may differ. Several interviewees from Sula expressed frustration as they perceived it to be unfair that other municipalities, which have significantly developed their nature, are receiving project approvals while Sula, which has preserved much of its nature, faces obstacles in initiating projects like the gondola. This disparity underscores a complex interplay between conservation efforts, local development priorities, and perceived fairness in project approvals across different regions.

This perspective resonates with the argument presented by Kostka and Hobbs (2012), that local governments tend to prioritize their own immediate needs, particularly economic growth, employment, and social stability. These priorities are emphasized in Sula due to concerns about limited job opportunities, as well as limited social and cultural offers for the younger population, a situation they hope to address with the gondola project. However, Kostka and Hobbs (2012) problematize this approach in the light of sustainable development, suggesting that local governance may not be the most effective path to achieve this. They argue that local priorities can lead to compromises and trade-offs that undermine sustainability policies. Moreover, they question whether local governments possess the necessary resources and expertise to effectively address these complex issues. This concern was echoed by an interviewee who expressed that local municipalities already face challenges managing various local issues and may find it overwhelming to also navigate national regulations related to sustainability. Furthermore, there is a broader question about the extent of control that private actors, such as the Flakk Group, has over the nature crisis. Can private companies effectively mitigate the negative environmental impacts associated with development projects like the proposed gondola? This raises concerns about the capacity and responsibility of private actors to address broader sustainability challenges beyond their immediate economic interests.

The recent news report *Norge i rødt, hvitt og grått* (Norway in red, white, and grey) from the national broadcasting corporation NRK highlighted the extent of nature loss occurring in

Norway. Using AI technology to map all ongoing projects across the country, NRK's news report represents the first comprehensive overview of this issue (Støstad et al., 2024). The report underscores a troubling reality: the Government lacks effective control over the myriad developments taking place. One interviewee expressed disappointment that the Government had not taken responsibility to make this overview themselves. Understanding the scope of nature degradation is essential for implementing the right conservation measures. This observation is echoed by an interviewee who says she finds it too easy for the municipality to disregard recommendations and objections from the County Governor in pursuit of the gondola project. Nevertheless, the ultimate fate of the project remains uncertain, as they have to continue negotiations with the County Governor, and possibly the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development.

Another noteworthy concern is the target group of the project, with projections indicating that one-third of visitors will be cruise ship tourists. This conflicts with recommendations from Reisemålsutvalget, who advises Norway to reduce cruise ship traffic due to its high emission rates (Reisemålsutvalget, 2023). This discrepancy underscores yet another instance where national objectives are not effectively integrated into local projects. Interviewees acknowledge the unsustainable nature of the cruise ship industry but argue that it remains crucial for attracting visitors, again revealing a prioritization of local economic growth over environmental considerations, as discussed by Kostka and Hobbs (2012).

The case of the gondola project in Sula contradicts Norway's objectives to conserve nature effectively. Despite receiving feedback from biologists, nature managers, and NGOs urging a halt to the project due to its negative impact on ecosystems and biodiversity, the municipality, in partnership with the Flakk Group, is continuing the project. If Norway aims to realize its goal of developing sustainable tourism destinations, we must take proactive steps to identify more effective methods of implementing conservation measures.

7.3 What are the Possibilities for Nature-based Tourism to be Sustainable?

One of the objectives of my research is to investigate the possibilities for nature-based tourism to be environmentally sustainable. The interviews display different opinions on this matter – some argue that the most effective way to sustain nature is by constructing necessary infrastructure, while others advocate for leaving it untouched.

Several interviewees emphasize that tourism has come to stay and therefore needs appropriate facilitation. This assertion aligns with global tourism growth trends, as demonstrated by statistics (Binggeli et al., 2023). Examples were mentioned by interviewees, such as Geiranger and popular hikes in Ålesund, that illustrate the challenges posed by sudden increases in the number of tourists, that these destinations were ill-prepared to manage. When discussing the future of tourism development, many interviewees stress the importance of establishing adequate infrastructure and systems to accommodate these visitors. It is well-documented that trampling and littering are significant issues associated with nature-based tourism, and providing essential facilities such as trash bins, toilets, and trails can help mitigate these impacts (Pescott & Stewart, 2014). Additionally, some interviewees expressed a concern that Norway's reputation as a tourism destination could suffer if it fails to implement robust systems to welcome and manage tourists effectively.

The gondola development includes facilitations to manage a big number of tourists, such as toilets, trash bins, and prepared trails. Additionally, the initiative holder has taken several measures to make the project sustainable, such as using renewable power, or promising to restore nature elsewhere to make up for the impacted nature in Sula. In the area zoning plan it is stated that the Flakk Group aims to make a sustainable tourism product that creates value for the locals and the region, while also taking nature and the local population into account (Nordplan, 2023). Similarly, when visiting the home page of the Flakk Group, the first thing one sees is the sentence: "Products and services that contribute to a sustainable future" (Flakk Group, n.d.-a). Both the Flakk Group and the gondola project is thereby promoted as sustainable. Several interviewees highlight these efforts, using it as arguments to support the implementation of the gondola. This was challenged by another interviewee who rather feels that these measures resemble greenwashing. This interviewee shares the view of Jones (2024) who warns that several companies choose to highlight the parts of a project that are sustainable to make the whole project seem environment-friendly, taking the attention away from the parts that are more harmful. This makes it more difficult for customers or travelers to know what is actually environmentally sustainable, and what is just being promoted as it.

Furthermore, two of the interviewees argue that tourists visiting Norway seek to encounter wild and untouched landscapes. They suggest that tourists might be disappointed with mass tourism experiences, such as being bussed into Geiranger and hiking with hundreds of others.

Instead, these interviewees advocate for a slower form of tourism, citing examples of foreign visitors who are amazed by simple pleasures such as drinking directly from a river or sleeping outdoors in a hammock. They argue that such experiences, though seemingly simple, are entirely unknown for many people. It therefore requires minimal effort to develop places into compelling tourism attractions. Furthermore, they caution against excessive construction and development, warning that these activities could undermine the unique qualities that makes Norway a unique destination. This viewpoint aligns with the concepts of slow adventure or ecotourism, which are developed as reactions to modern mass tourism. Ecotourism aims to promote nature conservation along with local development and wants to teach visitors about the area they are visiting, while making minimal impact (Lanfranchi et al., 2014). Similarly slow adventure tourism wants people to be more present and connected to nature and the destination they are visiting. It is a counterpart to our fast-paced society and participants are encouraged to adopt a stewardship mindset and exhibit responsible behavior towards natural resources (Varley & Semple, 2015). The two interviewees believe that by rather investing in a tourism similar to these concepts, Sula can keep their nature as it is, while still gaining more tourists. This can be a benefit for both locals and tourists.

By rather focusing on the kind of experiences suggested above, one can begin reimagining tourism in Norway, shifting away from mass tourism experiences and toward a more mindful and sustainable approach. This approach is also linked to the theory “extinction of experience” described by Cazalis et al. (2023), which posits that people are becoming increasingly disconnected from nature, leading to diminished concern for environmental issues. However, when people have more experiences of nature this may increase positive environmental behavior. Therefore, by promoting slow adventure or ecotourism and enabling people to experience Norwegian nature authentically, there is potential to enhance individuals’ appreciation and care for the environment.

As mentioned, several interviewees expressed genuine concern about the environmental impact of the gondola project, yet still support its implementation due to the experiential and economic benefits for the region. Interestingly, some interviewees exhibited self-contradictory views by emphasizing the importance of listening to experts within nature conservation and expressing satisfaction with the thoroughness of the zoning plan proposal. Yet, despite environmental assessments revealing significant consequences to nature and experts advising against the project, these interviewees expressed a desire to proceed with the gondola,

contradicting their earlier stance on listening to experts. This again underscores the point made by Kostka and Hobbs (2012) that local governments may struggle to remain objective when faced with developments that promise financial or social gains. A measure to make nature-based tourism more sustainable might therefore be to make clearer guidelines at a national level regarding interference with nature, and to ensure better systems to implement these regulations at a local level, making it harder for municipalities to disregard the importance of nature conservation.

In Sula, there is a strong emphasis on the potential benefits for the local population from the gondola project. However, studies on slow adventure tourism and ecotourism suggest that it is possible to develop a profitable tourism industry without excessively disturbing nature. Various researchers argue for the inclusion of social sustainability alongside environmental sustainability. For instance, Lanfranchi et al. (2014) argue that tourism, along with associated job creation and economic growth, may increase local appreciation of nature and promote environmentally friendly behavior, as it gives locals a goal of protecting the nature in which the tourism is based. This underscores the importance of considering local needs and perceptions when developing tourism as an industry in local areas, aiming for a sustainable and inclusive development that benefits both nature conservation and local communities.

In conclusion, the challenge of making nature-based tourism in Norway more sustainable involves navigating between the opinions of those who believe that our societies have to adjust to the growing number of tourists, and those who believe that tourism has to adjust to environmental concerns. While some advocate for robust systems and facilities to manage increasing tourist numbers, others emphasize the importance of preserving wild and untouched environments to meet tourists' expectations and promote a more authentic experience. This tension between development and conservation highlights the need for a balanced approach that prioritizes both nature conservation and visitor satisfaction. By promoting slow adventure and ecotourism, Norway can offer tourists meaningful connections with nature while fostering appreciation and stewardship towards the environment. Additionally, clearer guidelines at the national level and improved implementation at the local level can help ensure that development projects align with principles of sustainability and minimize negative impacts on nature. Ultimately, sustainable nature-based tourism should prioritize the well-being of both the environment and local communities, aiming for a harmonious and inclusive approach to tourism development.

8. Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have explored the intricate relationship between the need for nature conservation and the desire to strengthen the economy and attractiveness of local communities, using the gondola project in Sula Municipality to exemplify what is ultimately a huge dilemma. This concluding chapter will present the key findings and discuss their significance in relation to future research.

Tourism is a fast-growing industry, both internationally and in Norway, and with the emergence of nature-based tourism in particular, Norway is faced with both new opportunities and challenges. While nature-based tourism can have the effect of giving people a stronger connection to nature, and thereby increasing environmental knowledge and concern, it is also putting pressure on the destinations and areas in which it is based. Through this issue, nature-based tourism is connected to the ‘nature crisis’, which refers to the massive decline of nature and extinction of species which is occurring globally. The nature crisis is a factor that should be considered when developing the industry of nature-based tourism further.

Through the proposed gondola project in Sula, I have studied an example of a nature-based tourism project in Norway. The project aims to be sustainable, as demonstrated in the area zoning plan and through interviews, and several efforts have been made to lessen the impact on nature and decrease emissions. However, such efforts will not be able to remove the negative impacts completely. Expert assessments conclude that the project will have a negative impact on the biodiversity at Sulafjellet. The project therefore relies on how much emphasis the stakeholders choose to place on this issue and whether they believe the damage on nature is acceptable in favor of the societal benefits. Though there are some local politicians who do not support the development of the gondola, the majority of the Municipal Council in Sula has voted to continue the project. This decision illustrates that economic growth and societal development is their main priority.

Norway’s national goals and regulations regarding nature conservation are connected to the project through the objections of the County Governor, which has put a halt to the project. However, the Municipal Council’s opportunity to take the negotiations further, despite these objections, open for a debate on whether national regulations have enough effect on a local level. Previous research shows that local governments may struggle with prioritizing national

aims over their own needs, an assertion that is supported by this thesis. A measure to ensure that environmental concerns are prioritized to a larger degree might therefore be to create more strict guidelines for local governments to follow.

Ultimately, the gondola project illustrates the inherent paradox of nature-based tourism; that by facilitating for tourists to access and experience nature, such interventions are contributing to the degradation of that very nature. The thesis also discusses whether constructions such as a gondola, in fact align with the preferences of tourists, or if they would rather appreciate exploring a more wild and untouched nature. In that case, by exploring a tourism industry with less interventions in nature, one could benefit both tourists, local communities, and nature, and thereby creating a sustainable industry, both financially and environmentally.

This thesis contributes to ongoing discussions surrounding the ‘nature crisis’, a crisis that has gained increased attention in Norway. However, while there is a lot of existing research on the degradation of nature in relation to issues such as forestry or wind power development, I found less research on the correlation between tourism and nature degradation in Norway. With Norway’s investment in the tourism industry and the growing popularity of nature-based tourism I believe this will be an important research topic for future research.

Finally, there are several aspects that could have been included in this thesis, but limitations had to be made due to the given time limit. It would have been interesting to follow the gondola project further to observe its final outcome. If the project is approved that would open up for further reflections on the impact and effectiveness of national environmental goals. Further on it could have been interesting to include research on destinations that have invested in alternative types of tourism, such as ecotourism or slow adventure, to analyze whether they have been successful in creating more sustainable forms of travelling. By addressing these issues, Norway can work towards fostering a tourism industry that not only promotes economic growth but also safeguards the natural heritage for generations to come.

List of References

- Amundsen, H. (2012). Differing Discourses of Development in the Arctic: The Case of Nature-Based Tourism in Northern Norway. *The Northern Review*, 35, 125-146.
- Bang, K. (2022). Norway. Making Norwegian nature more accessible through design. Retrieved 29 March 2024, from https://sustainabletourism.cdn.prismic.io/sustainabletourism/0b22859e-7503-4c07-a73e-0951be4644d0_Norway_VISIONS.pdf
- Binggeli, U., Chen, Z., Köpke, S., & Yu, J. (2023). The future of tourism: Bridging the labor gap, enhancing customer experience. Retrieved 29 March 2024, from <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/travel-logistics-and-infrastructure/our-insights/future-of-tourism-bridging-the-labor-gap-enhancing-customer-experience#/>
- Bjærke, M. R., & Andersen, I. V. (2023). Naturkrisen – en global krise for lokal natur? *Nytt Norsk Tidsskrift*, 40(2-3), 94-104. <https://doi.org/10.18261/nnt.40.2-3.2>
- Bowen, G. (2009). Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9, 27-40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Cazalis, V., Loreau, M., & Barragan-Jason, G. (2023). A global synthesis of trends in human experience of nature. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 21(2), 85-93. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/fee.2540>
- Cruickshank, J. (2014). Stedsblind planlegging av lokalsamfunnet. *Plan*, 46(6), 4-9. <https://doi.org/doi:10.18261/ISSN1504-3045-2014-06-02>
- Devoldfabrikken. (n.d.-a). *Hvordan startet tekstileventyret Devold?* Retrieved 22 April from <https://www.devoldfabrikken.no/historien-var/hvordan-startet-tekstileventyret-devold/>
- Devoldfabrikken. (n.d.-b). *Om oss*. Retrieved 03 April from <https://www.devoldfabrikken.no/info/om-oss/>
- England, K. (2014). Producing Feminist Geographies: Theory, methodologies and research strategies. In S. Aitken & G. Valentine (Eds.), *Approaches to human geography. Philosophies, people and practices* (2 ed., pp. 361-372). SAGE.
- Flakk Group. (2020). *Destinasjon Sulafjellet Introduksjon*. <https://863599ba46.cldvaw-cdnwnd.com/e7f9d039741ca93be69de2353b75ee81/200000234-274aa274ad/Sulafjellet%20-%20Introduksjon%20kommune%2016.12.2020%20v4%20%28final%29.pdf?ph=863599ba46>
- Flakk Group. (n.d.-a). *Front page*. Retrieved 11 May from <https://flakk.no>
- Flakk Group. (n.d.-b). *Our History*. Retrieved 18 February from <https://flakk.no/timeline>
- Flemsæter, F., Setten, G., & Brown, K. M. (2015). Morality, mobility and citizenship: Legitimising mobile subjectivities in a contested outdoors. *Geoforum*, 64, 342-350. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.06.017>
- Fredman, P., Wall-Reinius, S., & Grundén, A. (2012). The Nature of Nature in Nature-based Tourism. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 12(4), 289-309. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15022250.2012.752893>
- Hay, I., & Cope, M. (2021). *Qualitative research methods in human geography* (Fifth edition. ed.). Oxford University Press.

- Innovation Norway. (2021). National Tourism Strategy 2030. Big impact, small footprint. 1-88. <https://business.visitnorway.com/no/strategi-for-norsk-reiseliv/>
- Innovation Norway. (2023). *Turistundersøkelsen Sommer. Feriereisende i Norge sommersesongen 2023*. https://assets.simpleviewcms.com/simpleview/image/upload/v1/clients/norway/Turistunders_kelsen_sommer_2023_e67a4cac-7df2-47de-a254-f053e4ca9a0e.pdf
- iTrollheimen. (2022). *Supplerende kartlegging og revidert konsekvensutredning av fugl, Sulafjellet 2022*. https://www.sula.kommune.no/_f/p1/icd2de477-de2c-46cf-b2f3-b80f8e04213e/20220626-naturmangfold_konsekvens-fugl_itrollheimen-rapport.pdf
- Jena, A. (2024). Role of Ethics in Nature-Human Relationship: a Pragmatic Inquiry. *Problems of Sustainable Development*, 19(1), 159-163. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.35784/preko.5305>
- Jones, P. (2024). Nature Positive Tourism. *Athens Journal of Tourism*, X(Y), 1-14. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.30958/ajt.X-Y-Z>
- KommuneProfilen. (2023a). *Befolkning Sula*. Retrieved 8 April from https://www.kommuneprofilen.no/profil/Kommunefakta/Befolkning_kommune.aspx
- KommuneProfilen. (2023b). *Benchmarking*. Retrieved 8 April from https://www.kommuneprofilen.no/profil/sysselsetting/bench/syss_pend_bench.aspx
- Kostka, G., & Hobbs, W. (2012). Local Energy Efficiency Policy Implementation in China: Bridging the Gap between National Priorities and Local Interests. *The China Quarterly*, 211, 765-785. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741012000860>
- Kuenzi, C., & McNeely, J. (2008). Nature-Based Tourism. In O. Renn & K. D. Walker (Eds.), *Global Risk Governance. Concept and Practice Using the IRGC Framework* (pp. 155-178). Springer. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978-1-4020-6799-0.pdf#page=177>
- Kystverket. (2024, 18 January). *Cruisetrafikken økte i 2023*. Retrieved 8 April from <https://www.kystverket.no/nyheter/cruisetrafikken-okte-i-2023/>
- Lanfranchi, M., Giannetto, C., & Pascale, A. (2014). Nature based tourism: Natural balance, impacts and management. *Quality - Access to Success*, 15. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266388370_Nature_based_tourism_Natural_balance_impacts_and_management
- Lindberg, K., & Veisten, K. (2012). Local and non-local preferences for nature tourism facility development. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 4, 215-222. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2012.08.004>
- McGrath, C., Palmgren, P. J., & Liljedahl, M. (2019). Twelve tips for conducting qualitative research interviews. *Medical Teacher*, 41(9), 1002-1006. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2018.1497149>
- Mottiar, Z. (2016). The importance of local area as a motivation for cooperation among rural tourism entrepreneurs. *Tourism Planning & Development*, 13(2), 203-218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568316.2015.1076509>
- Naturvernforbundet. (2023, 8 February). *Angående områdeplan for Sulafjellet – bygging av Gondol Høringssvar fra Naturvernforbundet i Ålesund og omegn* <https://naturvernforbundet.no/content/uploads/sites/14/2023/02/NNV-Alesund-Horing-gondol.pdf>

- Nordplan. (2021). *Flakk Gruppen Områdeplan Sulafjellet*.
<https://innsyn.acossky.no/sula/wfdocument.ashx?journalpostid=2021026071&dokid=552990&versjon=1&variant=A&>
- Nordplan. (2023). *Områdeplan Sulafjellet*.
<https://innsyn.acossky.no/sula/wfdocument.ashx?journalpostid=2022048876&dokid=668665&versjon=1&variant=A&>
- NRK. (2020, 28 December). Markering mot gondol på Sulafjellet. *NRK*.
<https://www.nrk.no/mr/markering-mot-gondol-pa-sulafjellet-1.15305808>
- NRK. (2021a, 2 November). Statsforvaltaren vurderer motsegn. *NRK*.
<https://www.nrk.no/mr/statsforvaltaren-vurderer-motsegn-1.15713408>
- NRK. (2021b, 6 May). Vedtar områderegulering i Sula. <https://www.nrk.no/mr/vedtar-omraderegulering-i-sula-1.15485916>
- NRK. (2022, 29 September). Planene for Sula-gondolen er klar.
<https://www.nrk.no/mr/planene-for-sula-gondolen-er-klar-1.16121838>
- NRK. (2023, 9 February). Gondol negativt for naturen. https://www.nrk.no/mr/_-gondol-negativt-for-naturen-1.16290513
- Pescott, O. L., & Stewart, G. B. (2014). Assessing the impact of human trampling on vegetation: a systematic review and meta-analysis of experimental evidence. *PeerJ*, 2, e360. <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.360>
- Pyle, R. M. (2003). Nature matrix: reconnecting people and nature. *Oryx*, 37(2), 206-214.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0030605303000383>
- Regjeringen. (2017). *Meld. St. 19 (2016–2017). Opplev Norge – unikt og eventyrlig*. Retrieved February 27, 2024 from <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/meld.-st.-19-20162017/id2543824/>
- Regjeringen. (2021a, 13 October). *Allemannsretten*. Retrieved 7 May from <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/klima-og-miljo/friluftsliv/innsiktsartikler-friluftsliv/allemannsretten/id2076300/>
- Regjeringen. (2021b, 14 December). *Norsk-engelsk ordliste for plan- og bygningsloven (Begreper fra pbl 2008 i fet skrift)*. Retrieved 12 March from https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/plan-bygg-og-eiendom/plan_bygningsloven/planlegging/veiledning/planordlister/norsk-engelsk-ordliste-for-plan-og-bygningsloven-begreper-fra-pbl2008-i-fet-skrift/id2892109/
- Regjeringen. (2021c, October 4). *Reiselivspolitikken*. Retrieved February 21, 2024 from <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/naringsliv/reiseliv/reiselivspolitikken/id2677136/>
- Regjeringen. (2023a, 14 February). *Konsekvensutredninger*. Retrieved 22 April from <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/klima-og-miljo/innsiktsartikler-klima-miljo/konsekvensutredninger/id2076809/>
- Regjeringen. (2023b). *Næringsministeren mottok utredning om bærekraftig utvikling av norske reisemål*. Retrieved 4 October from <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/naringsministeren-mottok-utredning-om-barekraftig-utvikling-av-norske-reisemal/id2969835/>
- Regjeringen. (n.d.-a). *Kommunal- og distriktsdepartementet*. Retrieved 9 April from <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dep/kdd/id504/>

- Regjeringen. (n.d.-b). Norwegian English Dictionary. In Retrieved 12 March 2024, from <https://www.stortinget.no/globalassets/pdf/english/norwegian---english-storting-dictionary.pdf>
- Reisemålsutvalget. (2023). *Leve og oppleve. Reisemål for en bærekraftig fremtid* (Norges offentlige utredninger, Issue 10). <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/1d876bb6e74642908297a9e2bc981118/no/pdfs/nou202320230010000dddpdfs.pdf>
- Rådgivende Biologer AS. (2022). *Konsekvensutredning for naturmangfold og naturressurser*. Nordplan. <https://www.radgivende-biologer.no/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/3729.pdf>
- Statistisk Sentralbyrå. (2023a). *Befolkning og kvartalsvise endringer, etter region, statistikkvariabel og kvartal*. Retrieved 8 April from <https://www.ssb.no/statbank/table/01222/tableViewLayout1/>
- Statistisk Sentralbyrå. (2023b). *Sula (Møre og Romsdal)*. Retrieved 22 April from <https://www.ssb.no/kommunefakta/sula>
- Statsforvalteren. (2023, 9 February). *Ein gondol i Sulafjellet vil vere skadeleg for natur og friluftsliv*. <https://www.statsforvalteren.no/more-og-romsdal/plan-og-bygg/arealforvaltning/ein-gondol-i-sulafjellet-vil-vere-skadeleg-for-natur-og-friluftsliv/>
- Statsforvalteren. (2024, 16 January). *Om oss*. <https://www.statsforvalteren.no/nb/portal/Om-oss/>
- Stevens, P. (2010). Embedment in the environment: A new paradigm for well-being? *Perspectives in Public Health*, 130(6), 265-269. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1757913910384047>
- Store Norske Leksikon. (2023). *Kart over Sula kommune*. Geir Thorsnæs. Retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://snl.no/Sula>
- Støstad, M. N., Mon, S. T., & Solvang, R. (2024, 6 January). Norge i rødt, hvitt og grått. *NRK*. https://www.nrk.no/dokumentar/xl/nrk-avslorer_-44.000-inngrep-i-norsk-natur-pa-fem-ar-1.16573560
- Sula Gondol. (2021, 06 February 2024). *Kommunestyret 24.03.21*. Retrieved 16 March from <https://www.sulagondol.info/l/kommunestyret-24-03-21/>
- Sula Gondol. (2022, 18 November). *Offentlig ettersyn til 12 januar-23 - forlenget til 9 februar-23*. Retrieved 16 March from <https://www.sulagondol.info/l/offentlig-ettersyn-til-12-januar-23/>
- Sula Gondol. (2024a, 6 February). *Fagrappporter*. Retrieved 1 May from <https://www.sulagondol.info/reguleringsplanen/>
- Sula Gondol. (2024b, 6 February). *Reguleringsplanen*. Retrieved 1 May from <https://www.sulagondol.info/reguleringsplan/>
- Sula Kommune. (2021a, 6 May). *Områderegulering av eit større område på Sulafjellet og i Langevåg*. Retrieved 16 March from <https://863599ba46.clvaw-cdnwnd.com/e7f9d039741ca93be69de2353b75ee81/200000230-d4105d4107/Kstyret%20060521.pdf?ph=863599ba46>
- Sula Kommune. (2021b). *Reguleringsprosess - Destinasjon Sulafjellet mm*. Retrieved from <https://863599ba46.clvaw->

- cdnwnd.com/e7f9d039741ca93be69de2353b75ee81/200000231-b7dfbb7dfe/Kstyret%20240321.pdf?ph=863599ba46
- Sula Kommune. (2022). *Områdeplan Sulafjellet - Godkjenning av planprogram*.
<https://863599ba46.clvaw-cdnwnd.com/e7f9d039741ca93be69de2353b75ee81/200000229-e1324e1327/Kstyret%20090222.pdf?ph=863599ba46>
- Sula Kommune. (n.d.-a). *Aktiv Fritid*. Retrieved 22 April from
<https://www.sula.kommune.no/ny-i-sula/aktiv-fritid/>
- Sula Kommune. (n.d.-b). *Ny i Sula*. Retrieved 22 April from
<https://www.sula.kommune.no/ny-i-sula/>
- The World Bank. (2023, 3 April). *Urban Development*. The World Bank. Retrieved 25 January from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/urbandevelopment/overview>
- Thorsnæs, G. (2023, 1 June). *Sula*. Store Norske Leksikon. Retrieved 22 April from
<https://snl.no/Sula>
- Tobiasson, T. (2023, 23 November). *Devold of Norway*. Store Norske Leksikon. Retrieved 22 April from https://snl.no/Devold_of_Norway
- Trovåg, E. O. (2023a, 16 August). Blått valresultat kan gi gondol. *Sunnmørsposten*.
<https://www.smp.no/nyheter/i/mQw6gO/blaatt-valresultat-kan-gi-gondol>
- Trovåg, E. O. (2023b, 8 November). Gondol-saka: Stats-forvaltaren seier klart nei. *Sunnmørsposten*. <https://www.smp.no/nyheter/i/KnxKM5/gondolsaka-statsforvaltaren-seier-klart-nei>
- Trovåg, E. O. (2023c, 1 November). Ingen ville stoppe Flakk sine planar no. *Sunnmørsposten*.
<https://www.smp.no/nyheter/i/mBXOeg/ingen-ville-stoppe-flakk-sine-planar-no>
- Trovåg, E. O. (2024, 9 April). Har sett av dato til å mekle i gondolsaka – sjølv om det ikkje er fatta ja-vedtak. *Sunnmørsposten*. <https://www.smp.no/nyheter/i/RG37jW/har-sett-av-dato-til-aa-mekle-i-gondolsaka-sjoelv-om-det-ikkje-er-fatta-ja-vedtak>
- Varley, P., & Semple, T. (2015). Nordic Slow Adventure: Explorations in Time and Nature. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 15(1-2), 73-90.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15022250.2015.1028142>
- Vasseur, L., Hepworth, S., & Lacroix, C. (2024). Climate and nature crisis is also about the health of plants. *Botany*, 102(2), i-ii. <https://doi.org/10.1139/cjb-2023-0152>
- Vern Om Sula. (n.d.). *Ja til utvikling, men ikke til enhver pris*. Retrieved 10 April from
<https://vernomsula.no>
- Vestlandsforskning. (n.d.). *Turisme og klimarisiko: ein modell for korleis det norske reiselivet kan redusere klimautslepp og auke verdiskaping (TourRisk)*. Retrieved February 21 from <https://www.vestforsk.no/nn/project/turisme-og-klimarisiko-ein-modell-korleis-det-norske-reiselivet-kan-reducere-klimautslepp>
- Vigane, Å., & Sæther, E. (2020). Norwegian Friluftsliv: History, cultural practice and values. In P. Vidal-González (Ed.), *Hiking in European Mountains: Trends and Horizons* (pp. 15-31). De Gruyter.
https://books.google.no/books?hl=no&lr=&id=I4pnEAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA15&dq=British+climbers+in+Norway+in+the+1800s&ots=MtZNqcwRDE&sig=7_1_is2yAPCynEMFw5ewo4fVqdA&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false

- Winter, P. L., Selin, S., Cervený, L., & Bricker, K. (2020). Outdoor Recreation, Nature-Based Tourism, and Sustainability. *Sustainability*, 12(1).
- Wolf, I. D., Croft, D. B., & Green, R. J. (2019). Nature Conservation and Nature-Based Tourism: A Paradox? *Environments*, 6(9).
- WWF. (2022). *Living Planet Report 2022 – Building a nature-positive society*. WWF. https://media.wwf.no/assets/attachments/lpr_2022_full_report.pdf
- Zielinski, C., Abbasi, K., Ali, P., Barbour, V., Benfield, T., Bibbins-Domingo, K., Hancocks, S., Horton, R., Laybourn-Langton, L., Mash, R., Sahni, P., Sharief, W. M., & Yonga, P. (2023). Editorial: Time to treat the climate and nature crisis as one indivisible global health emergency. *International Journal of Health Governance*, 28(4), 329-334. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJHG-12-2023-159>
- Ålesund Kommune. (2024, 4 March). *Fakta om Ålesund*. Retrieved 13 April from <https://alesund.kommune.no/kommunen/fakta-om-alesund/>

Appendix 1

Declaration of Consent

Invitation to participate in research project

Facilitating tourism to vulnerable areas: A critical view on nature-based tourism in Norway

This is an invitation to you to participate in a master's degree project for the master's program Globalisation and Sustainable Development at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim.

The purpose is to examine to which extent nature and the environment is emphasized in planning for tourism in Norway. The proposed gondola on Sula is used as a case study to investigate this theme.

In this information letter, we give you information about the aim of the master's degree project and what participation will mean for you.

Purpose

The purpose of the master's degree project is to investigate how increased investment in nature-based tourism affects Norwegian nature. Norway attracts tourists primarily because of its nature, and as a result of this, gondolas, cabins and lookout points are being planned all over the country to facilitate increased tourism. This lays the foundation for conflict between those who want development and those who want to preserve as much untouched nature as possible. This master's project will investigate this conflict, as well as which processes and considerations must be taken when planning developments in Norwegian nature. The purpose is to investigate whether nature-based tourism can be sustainable.

Who is responsible for the research project?

The Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) is responsible for the project.

Why are you being asked to participate?

You are being asked to participate in this project because of your involvement in the proposed gondola project at Sula. I have contacted you based on information about the project that is available online.

What does participating mean for you?

If you choose to participate in the project, this means that I will conduct a personal interview with you. The interview will last approximately one hour. In the interview, I will ask questions about the assessments that have been made in advance of the planning at Sula, what the arguments are for and against building the gondola, and what environmental considerations

are taken into account in the process. Notes and audio recordings of the interview will be taken, which will be transcribed and analyzed for use in the master's thesis.

Participation is voluntary

Participation in the project is voluntary. If you choose to participate, all information about you will be anonymized. You are also free to withdraw your consent to participate at any time without giving any reason. There will be no negative consequences for you if you do not want to participate or later choose to withdraw.

Your privacy - how we store and use your information

We will only use the information about you for the purposes we have described in this letter. We treat the information confidentially and in accordance with the privacy regulations given by SIKT: [Sikt - Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research](#).

- Only I (Paula Spjelkavik) will have access to the information.
- I will replace your name and contact details with a code that is stored on a list of names that is separate from other data, so that your anonymity is safeguarded. The data material is processed in a separate storage area on NTNU's server.
- You will not be recognized in the published Master's thesis.

What happens to your information when we end the research project?

The project is scheduled to end on June 30, 2024. At the end of the project, audio recordings will be deleted.

Your rights

As long as you can be identified in the data material, you have the right to

- access the personal data is registered about you,
- have personal data about you corrected,
- have personal data about you deleted,
- be given a copy of your personal data (data portability) and,
- send a complaint to the Data Protection Commissioner or the Norwegian Data Protection Authority about the processing of your personal data

What gives us the right to process personal data about you?

We process information about you based on your consent.

Commissioned by NTNU, Sikt - The knowledge sector's service provider has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with the privacy regulations.

Where can I find out more?

If you have questions about the study, or wish to make use of your rights, please contact:

- NTNU at paulasp@stud.ntnu.no or Gunhild Setten (gunhild.setten@ntnu.no or telephone +4797636852).
- Our data protection officer: Thomas Helgesen.

- Sikt - The knowledge sector's service provider, by telephone +47 73 98 40 40 or at <https://sikt.no/om-sikt/kontakt-oss>

With Kind Regards

Paula Spjelkavik
Student

Gunhild Setten
Professor/supervisor

Declaration of consent

I have received and understood the information about the project *Facilitating tourism to vulnerable areas*, and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I agree to:

- participate in an interview

I agree to my data being processed until the project is finished, 30/06/2024.

(Signed by project participant, date)

Appendix 2

Interview Guide

Questions

Background information

Age

Gender

Profession (incl. professional background)

Theme 1: The project at Sula and the interviewee's role in the project

1. Can you describe your role in the gondola project in Sula?
What were your immediate thoughts on the project?
Which actors are involved?
2. Can you describe the purpose of the project?
What does the project mean for Sula?
3. What preparations were done before the project?
Environmental assessment, applications for building approval, any investigations, etc.
What was the result of these preparations?

Theme 2: Sustainable development, protection of land and facilitation for more tourists

4. According to the plan, Sulafjellet is to be developed into a tourist attraction, but this involves the loss of untouched nature. Norway has signed an agreement to protect 30% of the world's nature. Is this something you have to take into account in your planning?
If so, in what way?
5. Rådgivende Biologer AS concluded that the consequences of the gondola are assessed as moderately negative for the biodiversity on Sulafjellet. What does this conclusion mean for the project?
Can you say something about how this has affected the project?

How can nature be protected in such a project?

6. Norway also has a goal of reducing emissions of greenhouse gases by 50% by 2050.
Can you say something about how the gondola in Sula fits into challenges related to carbon emissions and sustainability?
Is there a focus on this in the planning?
If so, what measures are being taken to ensure that the plan is sustainable?
7. Can you say something about how local projects generally have to relate to national climate targets and guidelines?
8. What can be negative and what can be positive about attracting more people to Sula?
9. What do you think about the planning of similar projects around Norway?
10. How can nature conservation be weighed against economic growth and job creation in such projects?
11. The County Governor has made objections to the project. What does that mean for you?
How do you have to adjust?
12. In your opinion, what is Norway's biggest challenge when it comes to tourism?
What can be done to improve these challenges?
How can nature-based tourism be made sustainable?

Topic 3: Response from the public

13. What can you say about the public response?
Where has the response been expressed? (Social media, newspapers, hearings, etc.)
Have you conducted any surveys or other measures to get an impression of the public response?
How do you relate to the response?



 **NTNU**

Norwegian University of
Science and Technology