Norwegian outdoor tourism campaign shelved over environmental fears

A Norwegian tourism campaign aimed at promoting the country as a destination for outdoor activities has been suspended after warnings that opening up the country's "right to roam" laws to mass tourism could lead to environmental destruction.

Allemannsretten – which gives Norwegians the legal right to camp, swim, ski and walk freely in nature, regardless of who the landowner is – provides the basis of *friluftslivet* (outdoor life), seen as foundational to the mountainous country's culture.

But an initiative to extol these benefits to international tourists has met with strong criticism. Regional tourism bosses say it could lead to a surge of unregulated traffic and camping, putting too much pressure on the natural environment.

Innovation Norway, owned by the Norwegian state, said it had wanted to "highlight the part of Norwegian culture that is about using nature" by putting outdoor activities at the centre of the campaign.

Tourism bosses in northern and western Norway say they are already experiencing the effects of overtourism, however. Some called for the initiative to be suspended while they assessed any potential impact on commercial tourism, resulting in Innovation Norway halting the campaign.

Interest in the the Nordic region as a whole has risen this summer as tourists have sought cooler destinations amid high temperatures in southern Europe. While tourism boards are aiming to capitalise on the surge in interest, many in Norway have urged caution.

Stein Ove Rolland, the CEO of tourism board Fjord Norway, said: “We certainly want visitors to enjoy our nature, but we prefer it to happen through well-organised sustainable offerings provided by competent experienced companies within the tourism industry. This is to ensure that our amazing nature can be enjoyed by locals and visitors for decades to come.

“We believe that marketing outdoor activities to a growing international holiday and leisure market can be risky because it may lead to more people wanting to explore vulnerable natural areas on their own. This can result in wear and tear on nature, increased littering, and could potentially lead to accidents and rescue operations.”

As interest in tourism to Norway has grown, there has been a rise in the number of camper vans parked inappropriately, as well as litter and “general wear and tear on nature”. Rescue operations to find tourists lost in the mountains have also increased.

Dag Terje Klarp Solvang, the general secretary of the Norwegian Trekking Association, which has recorded high international visitor numbers this year, said hiking could be a “very sustainable way of being a tourist” but the country needed to be prepared to handle visitor numbers before inviting them.

“Too many people without being prepared can cause great damage to nature and the people living close to the actual spots being highlighted,” he said.

Aase Marthe Horrigmo, of Innovation Norway, said in a statement on the suspension of the campaign that some stakeholders had expressed concerns during preparatory work over increased tourism in vulnerable nature and the management of visitors in popular destinations. She said the decision to suspend was “to continue our dialogue with the county

municipalities and destination companies that were sceptical of the idea, to ensure that we had fully understood and considered their concerns" and because discussions this year meant it had missed the spring window for filming.

"It is important to encourage tourists to behave responsibly in Norwegian nature. We also want to inspire people to visit our country and discover amazing experiences that will create memories for life," she said. "We will continue the dialogue with the travel industry and believe this is a concept that will encourage potential tourists to embrace the philosophy behind *friluftsliv* and ultimately encourage them to treat our unique nature with care and respect."

Bente Lier, the general secretary of outdoor recreation organisation Norsk Friluftsliv, said although it welcomed tourists to Norway, nature must be protected with a clear strategy for visitors before they were invited. "This includes a clear plan for where to channel them to where we have the capacity, how to meet them and how to introduce them to nature," she said. "We cannot invite 30 guests if the table is set for four.

"It is important to know that with *allemannsretten* or roaming rights also comes the obligation to show respect to nature. In short: we shall not leave any trace. This is something we learn in Norway when we are children – from family or at school – but it is not that obvious to many international tourists."

Source: The Guardian