

# The Polar Cultural Heritage as a Tourism Attraction A Case Study of the Airship Mooring Mast at Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard

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Article abstract

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# The Polar Cultural Heritage as a Tourism Attraction

## A Case Study of the Airship Mooring Mast at Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper explores the use of narratives in the transformation of historic sites in the polar regions into attractions and consumable tourism products. The analysis is based on a case study of visitation to the airship mooring mast built at Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard, for the 1926 “Amundsen-Ellsworth-Nobile Transpolar Flight” of the airship *Norge*. The questions addressed in this paper are: How does cultural heritage in the polar regions operate as a tourist attraction? What is the role of tourism narratives in creating a tourism attraction? Direct observations constituted the main research method. Based on Dean MacCannell (1976) and Neil Leiper (1990), a tourism attraction is a system comprising a tourist or human element; a nucleus or central element; and a marker or informative element. Tourism narratives enable the different elements of the tourism attraction system to “click” together into a coherent whole. Through narratives, the mast becomes a place of significance and a symbolic marker of the North Pole and polar exploration. The application of this approach to other sites in Antarctica and Svalbard is discussed.

*Key words:* Cultural heritage, Svalbard, Spitsbergen, polar tourism, tourism attractions, tourism narratives.

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How does cultural heritage in the polar regions operate as a tourist attraction? What is the role of tourism narratives in creating a tourism attraction? These are the questions addressed in this paper, which explores how historic sites in the polar regions are transformed in attractions and consumable tourism products through the use of narratives. The analysis is based on a case study of visitation to the airship mooring mast (the mast) built at Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard, for the 1926 “Amundsen-Ellsworth-Nobile Transpolar Flight” of the airship *Norge* (figure 1). The mast is known locally as “Amundsen’s mast.”

Polar tourism combines two global processes: the long-established use of the polar regions as resource frontiers (Sugden, 1982), and the centrifugal tendency of the tourism system that constantly expands into new areas (Cohen, 1984: 382). Consequently, certain sites that have particular natural, cultural heritage or other attractions become tourism destinations where organized visits take place on a regular basis through the tourism season. According to Gregory J. Ashworth and Brian Graham (2005: 7), heritage “is that part of the past which we select in the present for contemporary purposes, whether they be economic or cultural (including political and social factors) and choose to bequeath to a future.” More

succinctly, “Heritage denotes everything we suppose has been handed down to us from the past” (Lowenthal, 2005: 81). Historic sites—a tangible form of cultural heritage—are the subject of specialized polar tourism and also a component of mainstream tourism itineraries, complementing the “menu” of tourist attractions offered to customers. For the purposes of this article, a historic site is defined as any location that demonstrates past human activity, evidenced by the presence of artefacts, ecofacts, features, structures, or other material remains (Kipfer, 2007: 50).

In Antarctica and Svalbard, historic sites are among the most visited of all sites (Roura, 2008a: 59). Historic sites are attractive to tour operators for several reasons. They may have originally been established because of logistic advantages such as having a safe anchorage or comparatively easy access. Unlike iconic Arctic fauna, for example polar bears or walruses, historic sites can reliably be found in the same place year after year. However, as noted by Brian Schiffer (1987), sites are not static but subject to transformations resulting from both natural and cultural processes. Importantly, historic sites often have material remains (there is something to show) and a history (there is a story to tell).



**FIGURE 1:** Tourists at the airship mooring mast at Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard (photo: Ricardo Roura).

In his analysis of the semiotic of attractions, Dean MacCannell (1976: 109-110) suggested that tourism attractions are signs, that is, they represent something to someone. He defined a tourist attraction based on the empirical relationship between a tourist, a sight (the subject of sightseeing), and a marker (information about a sight). Significance is given to the sights by means of information, in turn giving sense to the tourism experience. Sights can become markers themselves, and certain sites interest tourists because of their markers rather than the intrinsic qualities of the sights. Based on Dean MacCannell (1976) and Clare Gunn (1972), Neil Leiper (1990: 371) developed the concept of attraction further to include tourism activities other than sightseeing. He defined a tourism attraction as a system comprising three elements: “a tourist or human element; a nucleus or central element; and a marker or informative element. A tourist attraction comes into existence when the three elements are connected.” Neil Leiper (p. 382) further suggests that each of the elements is an important part of the attraction system; *e.g.*, a place with no visitors would not be regarded as a tourist attraction.

This model will be applied with regard to the airship mooring mast at Ny-Ålesund, and to other historic sites in Svalbard and Antarctica. Let it be stressed that the cultural heritage discussed in this article consists of non-indigenous historic sites that are protected under applicable legislation. Plainly the polar cultural heritage can be more broadly defined and include intangible as well as tangible elements.

The Archipelago of Spitsbergen is situated in the eastern part of the Arctic basin, at latitude 80° N on average, and approximately 1000 kilometres from the North Pole (figure 2a). The archipelago is now usually known by its Norwegian name of Svalbard.

The islands had no indigenous populations and human presence began in the 17<sup>th</sup> century following discovery by Wilhem Barentz in 1596, which was followed by waves of activity, including exploration, natural resources exploitation, World War II confrontations, science, and tourism (Sugden, 1982: 283-285). Svalbard is subject to the 1920 Treaty Concerning the Archipelago of Spitsbergen, which grants the sovereignty of the islands to Norway while maintaining equal rights for all contracting parties, subject to Norwegian laws. Ny-Ålesund (78° 56' N, 11° 56' E) in Kings Bay (Kongsfjord) is a former Norwegian mining town turned into an international research centre (figure 2b). Ny-Ålesund is owned and operated by Kings Bay AS, a Norwegian Crown company.

Between 1926 and 1928 three expeditions departed from Ny-Ålesund attempting to reach the North Pole by air: Richard E. Byrd's flight in 1926; the “Amundsen-Ellsworth-Nobile Transpolar Flight” in 1926; and Umberto Nobile's *Italia* expedition in 1928 (Amundsen and Ellsworth, 1927; Litchfield, 1927; Nobile, 1961; Nelson, 1993). The first attempt took place in a fixed-wing aircraft, and the latter two in airships, lighter-than-air crafts lifted by a gas and propelled by engines. These expeditions will be described briefly as narratives about them are central to the case study discussed here.

Richard E. Byrd's was the first of these attempts. He and a co-pilot departed Ny-Ålesund on May 9, 1926, in a trimotor airplane named *Josephine Ford*. After a harrowing 19-hour flight, Byrd returned to Ny-Ålesund claiming to have reached the North Pole (1968: 233). However, Byrd's statement was brought into question within minutes of his return (Driveness and Jølle, 2006: 273), thus beginning a controversy that lasted for decades. A recent examination of his navigation notes,

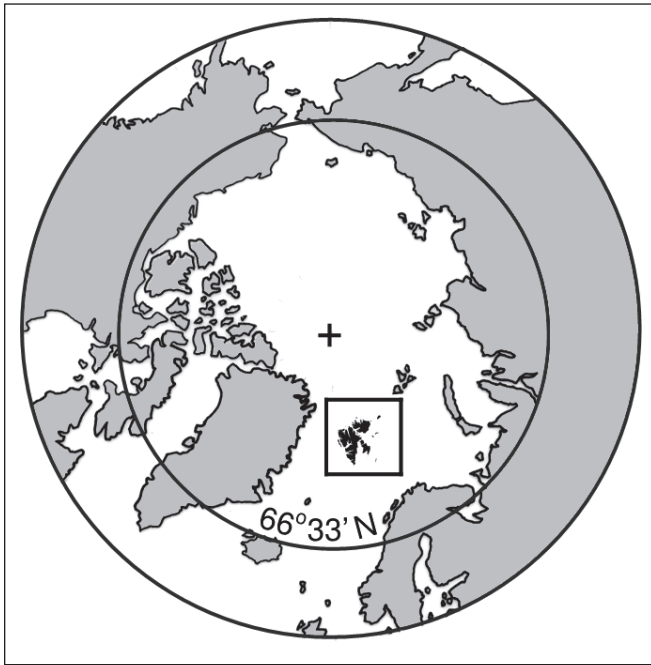


FIGURE 2a: Location map of Svalbard (source: Ricardo Roura).

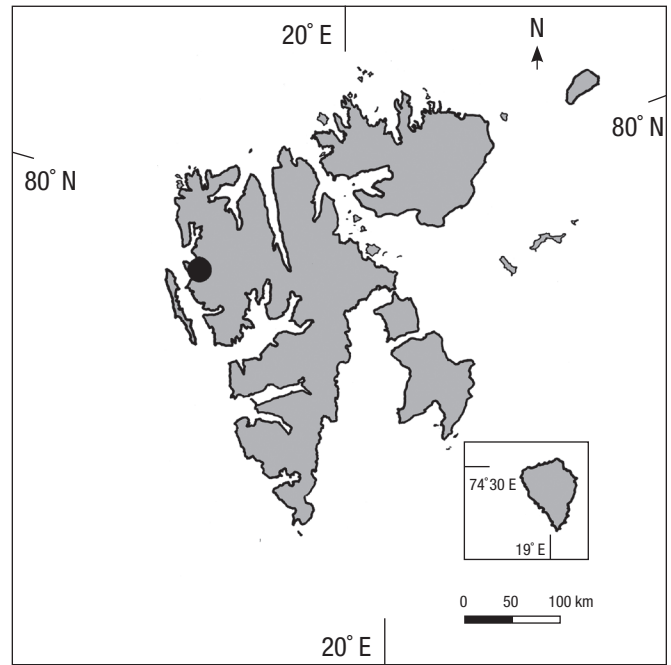


FIGURE 2b: Location map of Ny-Ålesund (source: Ricardo Roura).

which had been lost for years, established beyond doubt that the *Josephine Ford* did not reach the North Pole in 1926 (Rawlins, 2000).

The “Amundsen-Ellsworth-Nobile Transpolar Flight,” in the airship *Norge*, departed from Ny-Ålesund on May 11, 1926, two days after Byrd’s attempt. The *Norge* reached the North Pole on May 12, 1926 and continued on to Alaska (Amundsen and Ellsworth, 1927; Nobile, 1961). The role and relative contribution of each of the expedition’s leading members—Roald Amundsen, Lincoln Ellsworth, and Umberto Nobile—was the subject of some debate, not least among the participants themselves. It is not the intention here to contribute to that debate, simply to outline their roles succinctly. Roald Amundsen, who—among other polar exploration feats—had led in 1911 the first expedition to reach the South Pole, conceived the transpolar flight and provided his name and expertise in polar exploration. His official job was to look for new land as the airship flew over unknown parts of the Arctic Ocean. Lincoln Ellsworth, a US national, was a key expedition sponsor, and nominally the expedition’s “leader of the scientific work and navigator.” The airship’s pilot was the Italian air force colonel Umberto Nobile, who had designed and built the *Norge*, and flown it from Rome to Kings Bay (Amundsen and Ellsworth, 1927: 128; Nobile, 1961; Driveness and Jølle, 2006: 267-276).

Relations between Roald Amundsen and Umberto Nobile were tense from the start. Roald Amundsen and Lincoln Ellsworth (1927: 127-128) regarded themselves as the expedition leaders, whose job was to select the best people for the various posts and ensure that the “whole machinery” was in working order. An airship captain’s role was to assist the leaders with flying the airship rather than to take command of

the expedition. Umberto Nobile (1961: 92-93) rejected being treated as a “hired pilot” (as Amundsen described him) and thought that he should be regarded as a joint leader, given his central role in the expedition and the fact that Roald Amundsen knew “absolutely nothing” about airships. After the trip, Amundsen and Nobile fell out with each other (Nelson, 1993; Driveness and Jølle, 2006).

Following the 1926 transpolar flight, Umberto Nobile organized a new airship expedition under his command on the airship *Italia*, which was an improved version of the *Norge* (Nelson, 1993). The *Italia* departed Ny-Ålesund on May 23, 1928 and successfully reached the North Pole 20 hours later. Weather conditions prevented the planned landing at the North Pole, and a decision was made to return to Svalbard. On May 25, the airship crashed on the sea ice at about 290 miles NE of Kings Bay. Ten people survived the crash. Radio signals asking for rescue were picked up 12 days after the accident, triggering an international rescue effort that lasted several weeks. Roald Amundsen joined the rescue with tragic consequences: his chartered flying boat disappeared in the Barents Sea. Eventually, a rescue plane was able to land at the survivors’ camp on June 21. By then some survivors had started a trek to Svalbard. Umberto Nobile, who had sustained injuries and was expected to assist with the rescue operation from Kings Bay, was reluctantly the first to be evacuated. The rescue plane returned to collect more survivors but crashed on its second landing on the sea ice. The Soviet vessel *Krasin* rescued the remaining survivors almost three weeks after Nobile had been flown out, which time he spent as a virtual prisoner in an Italian warship at Kings Bay. The Italian fascist government demoted Nobile, who was forced into exile until 1943. The press, particularly in Norway, accused him



of cowardice. His name was cleared before his death in 1978, and his polar achievements eventually recognized (Nobile 1961; Nelson, 1993; Aas, 2005).

There are relatively few material remains at Ny-Ålesund of these dramatic events, of which the airship mooring mast is the most conspicuous.

## Methods

Several research methods were used to study tourism at historic sites in Svalbard and Antarctica between 2002 and 2008 (Roura, 2008a: 58). These can broadly be categorized as unobtrusive research methods (Webb *et al.*, 1966; Lee, 2000). Fieldwork for this case study was conducted during June–July 2007 while based at the Netherlands Arctic Station at Ny-Ålesund. Direct observations (Martin and Bateson, 1983; Veal, 1992; Bruner, 2005; Pearce, 2005), complemented by photography (Collier and Collier, 1986 [1967]),

constituted the main research method. Tourist landings at Ny-Ålesund take place almost daily during summer according to a pre-established schedule, from which it is possible to determine which groups of tourists will visit the mast. Overall, six groups of about 40–50 tourists each were observed closely (*i.e.* from within the group). Observations started just before the guided visit began, and ended as the group returned to the settlement 30–45 minutes later. Four different guides led the groups (two guides visited Ny-Ålesund twice during the observation period). Several more groups were observed opportunistically from the distance. Both approaches provided complementary perspectives of individual and group behaviour.

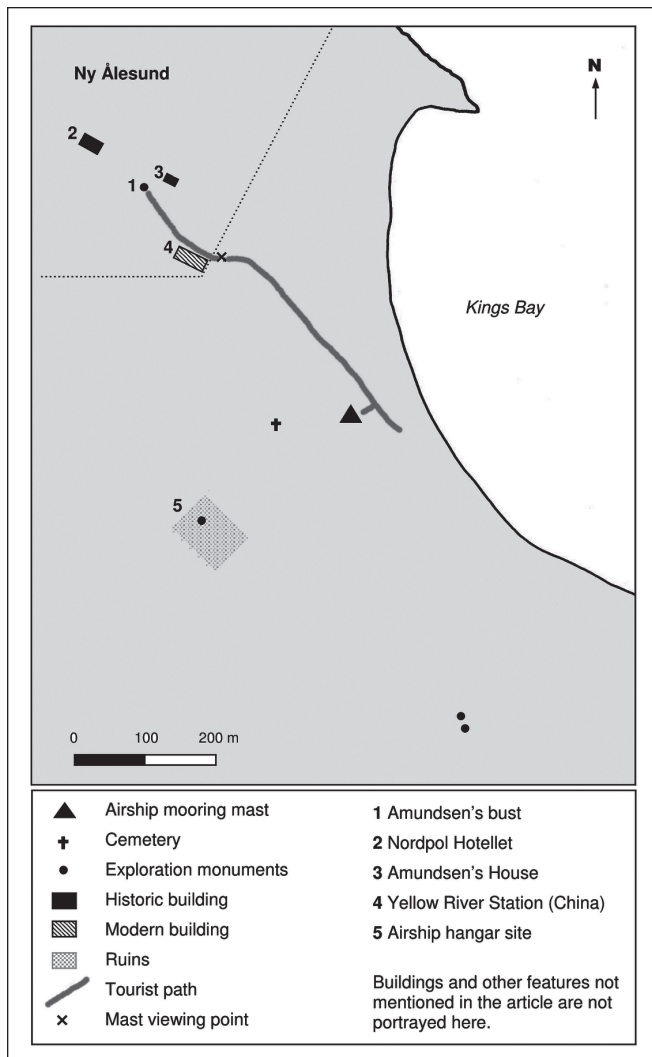
Observations were conducted from an etic perspective. This means that behaviour was described regardless of the apparent motivations or perspectives of the visitors (Pearce, 2005: 3–4). Observations followed an *ad libitum* sampling pattern in which whatever was visible and seemed relevant was recorded (Martin and Bateson, 1983: 84). Access to each group was negotiated on case-by-case bases with the expedition leaders, who in all instances allowed observation of the visit. The investigator's presence was not concealed from the tourists, although efforts were made to blend with the group rather than to stand out. For instance, observations were memorized and photographed rather than written down, thus outwardly the investigator's behaviour mimicked that of the tourists. Detailed field notes were written back at base immediately after each visit was completed.

Particular attention was paid to narratives about the historic events associated with the airship mooring mast as delivered by the tour guides in English. Following Dean MacCannell (1976: 110), narratives are regarded as markers—that is, information about a specific sight (or nucleus). Variations in the narratives shaped the version of historic events that was transmitted to different tourist groups. The content of each of the narratives, as transcribed in field notes, was analyzed to identify the individual components of the narrative—the various stories within the story (Bryan and Bernard, 2003). The key themes concerned the expeditions and actors that were included in each narrative. A different type of marker consists of the inscriptions of several memorials to the 1926–1928 transpolar flights, which were also documented and analyzed.

## The Nuclei: The Airship Mooring Mast at Ny-Ålesund and Associated Cultural Heritage

Heritage assets, both tangible and intangible, are the foundation of heritage/cultural tourism (Timothy and Boyd, 2003; McKercher and du Cros, 2002: 7). The main historic assets at Ny-Ålesund related to Arctic exploration by air are the airship mooring mast and associated cultural heritage (figure 3).

A mooring mast is a structure designed to anchor the airship to the ground when it is not in flight for the purposes of personnel access, loading or replenishing the craft, or for standing down between operations. The mooring mast allows the airship to rotate on a horizontal plane, according to wind direction, just as a vessel at anchor. This enables an airship to tie up to the mast and wait for favourable wind conditions, for



**FIGURE 3:** Sketch of Ny-Ålesund showing cultural heritage features associated with polar exploration by air and contemporary tourism (source: Ricardo Roura).



**FIGURE 4:** Tourists at the airship mooring mast. A history lecture was interrupted to watch a pod of beluga whales (*Delphinapterus leucas*) swimming in the fjord (photo: Ricardo Roura).

example to be moved into a hangar. The mooring system must be capable of making the craft secure under all likely weather conditions. That requirement influences both the technique adopted for mooring the aircraft and the determination of the mast's structural strength (Litchfield, 1927: 84; Howe, 1999: 301). Thus, an airship mooring mast is a substantially more complex engineering structure than it first appears to the layperson.

The mooring mast at Ny-Ålesund was one of three erected for the 1926 Transpolar flight along the path between Rome and Kings Bay (Nobile, 1961: 22). The mast is located some 300 metres to the southeast of Ny-Ålesund and just outside the settlement's limits. It consists of a triangular vertical metal tower approximately 14 tons in weight and 35 metres high. Each side of the mast is six metres wide at the base, and is fastened to each corner to a 40-ton concrete block (Höver, 1927: 37, 43). A ladder on the inside of the mast reaches to a platform located near the top from where airships could be accessed. At the top of the mast there is a masthead, which is a rotating locking mechanism used to fasten the airship to the mooring mast.

Associated features include the remains of the airship hangar and some buildings that were in use in 1926, notably Amundsen's house and the "Nordpol Hotellet" where some expedition members and journalists stayed. These buildings, which are still in use, are legally protected, as are the mast itself and the hangar remains. Norway's 2001 Svalbard Environmental Protection Act protects structures, sites, and movable historical objects predating 1946, as well as some more recent cultural remains that are of particular historic or

cultural value (Det Kongelige Miljøverndepartement, 2001). In addition, several memorials commemorate historic flights from Ny-Ålesund (figures 4 and 5).

In various parts of the world there is a scatter of material remains and memorials that are associated with the 1926-1928 transpolar flights. Some of these have become local tourist attractions themselves partly because of this association. These include an airship mooring mast at Vadsø, Norway; replicas of memorials at Ny-Ålesund located in Alaska and elsewhere; and the icebreaker *Krasin*, now a museum in St. Petersburg, which contains a permanent exhibit on the rescue of the 1928 *Italia* expedition. The recently opened Spitsbergen Airship Museum in Longyearbyen, Svalbard's largest settlement, contains a collection of items and documentation related to the airships that operated from Svalbard.

### The Tourists: Organized Visits to the Airship Mooring Mast

Tourism in Svalbard began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the first organized commercial cruise in 1871 (Conway, 1906: 302). Ny-Ålesund became a popular destination during the years immediately preceding World War II as the farthest north point of call (Polunin, 1945: 82). Tourism began to increase following the opening of an airport in Svalbard in 1975, and then with the Norwegian government designation of tourism as one of three priority areas for Svalbard in 1990 (Viken and Jørgensen, 1998; Norway 2004: 3).

Currently cruise ships visit Ny-Ålesund from late May to mid-September. Visits are almost on a daily basis and, at the height of the season, there may be two or three passenger





**FIGURE 5:** Roald Amundsen's bust in the centre of Ny-Ålesund, with Nordpol Hotellet in the background (photo: Ricardo Roura).

landings a day, with simultaneous landings occurring fairly frequently. Nearly 30,000 shipborne passengers landed at Ny-Ålesund in 2007, about three times the figure estimated in 1998 (Governor of Svalbard, 2006: 6; Kings Bay AS, 2007). At present, tourists visiting Ny-Ålesund are allowed to walk through a 1.5 kilometre “nature, research and cultural heritage” trail around the settlement and visit the mining museum, the post office, and a shop. Outside the settlement they may visit the airship mooring mast, when accompanied by polar bear guards. Based on the passenger capacity of ships used by companies that organize guided visits to the mast, it is estimated that about 10,000 passengers could have visited the mast in 2007, which would make it one of the most visited historic sites in Svalbard.

The logistics of moving tourist groups of different sizes within a certain time determine whether or not tourists may visit the mast. The polar bear risk is low, yet armed guards are needed for the visit—for instance, a polar bear was reported to be swimming towards the mast just as a group of tourists was visiting it, hastening their return to the settlement (personal observation, June 24, 2007). The passengers of ships with smaller passenger capacity (*ca.* 50-100 passengers) are usually used in guided visits to the mooring mast. However, not all passengers on any given cruise join the guided visit, particularly during poor weather conditions. Passengers from larger ships can view the mast from the edge of the built-up area, some 300 metres away (figure 3). Sometimes groups from both large and small ships coalesce at the viewing point simultaneously, generating confusion among tour guides and tourists as to who may visit the mast and who is not allowed.

Notwithstanding the historic focus of the visit, the historic elements are only a component of visiting the mast. Judging from the tourists' behaviour—for instance, the choice of photographic subjects—, flora, fauna, and landscapes are attractions too (figure 4). In most of the visits observed for this case study there were a few tourists who stood somewhat apart from the rest of the group and/or turned their back to the tour guides during lectures.

### The Markers: Narratives of the Transpolar Flights

The airship mooring mast is a deceptively simple structure that, however, is difficult to interpret since most visitors would have never seen an airship. Understanding how such structure is linked to the operation of an airship may not be immediately obvious. For instance, a visitor apparently believed that the mast had been *part* of the airship and asked a guide (twice) if it had been returned to Ny-Ålesund after the North Pole flights (personal observation, June 26, 2007). Consequently, understanding the practical and historic role of the mast requires markers. On-site markers are provided as tour guide oral narratives and, more succinctly, as inscriptions in various memorials.

There are several modalities of delivering verbal information to those who visit the mast. Usually the group gathers at Amundsen's bust in a crossroads of the settlement (figures 3 and 5), where the guide delivers an introductory lecture. Then the group walks to the mast where the story is completed (figure 4). This is usually punctuated by an interlude at the Chinese station to examine the concrete dragon statues that guard its door. Sometimes the guides stop two or more times before reaching the mast, each time giving some additional information and slowly building up momentum to the story prior to a grande finale at the foot of the mast. Most groups gather on the south side of the mast, where a memorial plaque is located, but some gather on the north side and sometimes overlook the plaque altogether. In some instances, however, the guides do not deliver a lecture at all but simply respond to the questions of those who are interested.

Several approaches are available to transform a cultural asset into a consumable tourist product. These include mythologizing the asset, building a story around it, and showing a direct link between the past and the present (McKercher and du Cros, 2002: 128-132). Several of these tactics are at play at Ny-Ålesund. The airship mooring mast, with its dramatic history of success and tragedy, is easy to mythologize so that it becomes a place of significance. It may be regarded, as described by a guide, as “one of the ten, or perhaps five, most significant historic sites in the Arctic” (Roura, 2008a: 59). In addition, some narratives contrasted present day tourism travel in the polar regions with the past days of polar exploration, with their obvious differences in purpose, comfort, and risks.

Narratives about the mooring mast are polyvocal—stories change and evolve as they are retold. Key differences in the narratives observed for this research included:

- All narratives described the *Norge* expedition, and most provided some background on the history of exploration of the polar regions, sometimes going as far back as the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas. Some narratives also told the full story of the *Italia* expedition (figure 6).
- The claims of Robert E. Peary (1906), Dr. Frederick A. Cook (1908), and Admiral Richard E. Byrd (1926) to have been the first to reach the North Pole by land or air were critically examined in most lectures, and sometimes these explorers were labelled as “liars.”
- The first people to actually set foot on the North Pole were variously identified as one (or four) unnamed

Soviet sailors; the US national Ralph Plaisted (1968); and Briton Wally Herbert (1969). These had arrived at the North Pole in nuclear submarine, snowmobile, and dog sledge, respectively.

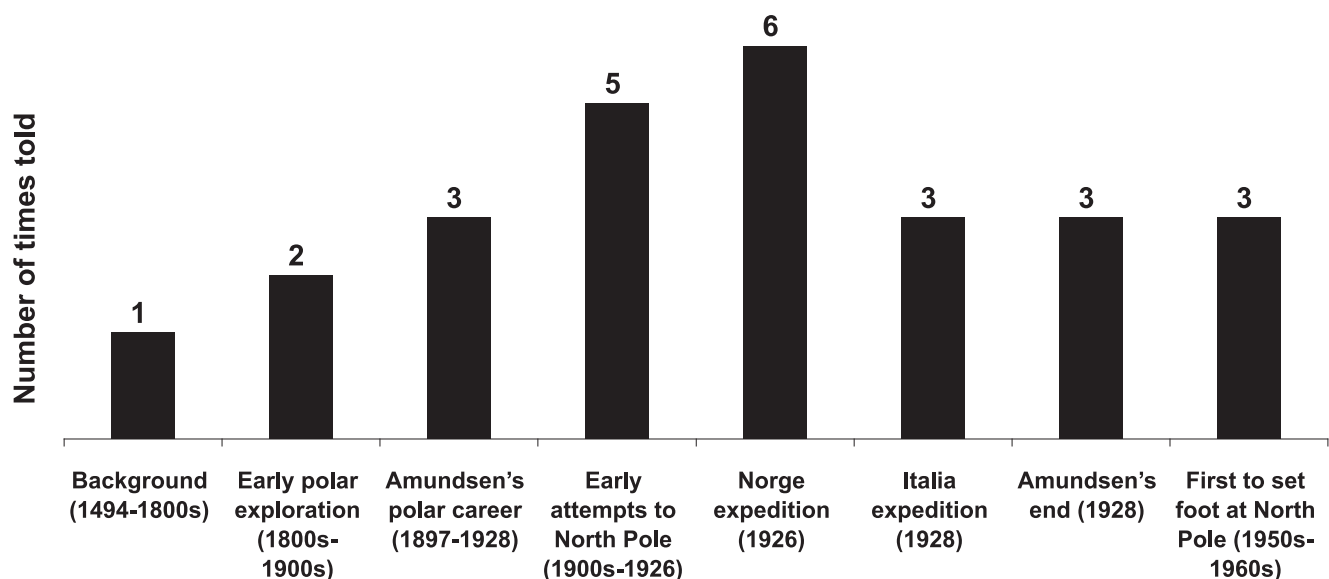
- Roald Amundsen was always portrayed as an experienced polar explorer, and in some narratives his polar career was reviewed from the beginning. While he was seldom criticized, he was not warmly described either. In other narratives his role in the transpolar flight was described as symbolic rather than practical. “He was sitting in the cabin looking at the [sea] ice and taking notes. What of?” (personal observation, June 28, 2007). Still other narratives suggested that Roald Amundsen’s failed attempt to rescue the survivors of the *Italia* disaster, which cost him his life, resulted from a desire to protect his public image rather than from a willingness to help Umberto Nobile.
- Lincoln Ellsworth was a major sponsor of the transpolar flight and in some narratives this gave him a higher status than Umberto Nobile’s. He was usually portrayed in passing, as a wealthy and somehow vain person who unnecessarily delayed the *Norge*’s departure date because he wanted to reach the North Pole on his birthday, May 12—which he did, thus enabling Richard E. Byrd’s attempt two days before.
- Umberto Nobile was sometimes portrayed as little more than a footnote—just an unnamed Italian pilot. Unsympathetic narratives disregarded his role in the expedition and sometimes subtly ridiculed him; his position as a military man in Italy’s Mussolini made him suspected of chauvinism; and the fact that he had been the

first to be evacuated from the *Italia* wreck implied weakness of character if not cowardice. That type of narrative appears to be inspired, in part, in Roald Amundsen’s own opinion of Nobile (see, e.g., Aas, 2005: 5-6). In contrast, sympathetic narratives emphasized Nobile’s achievements of flying airships from Europe to Spitsbergen, let alone across the High Arctic, and justified his early rescue from the *Italia* as a rational decision.

- On closing the presentation some guides commented that Roald Amundsen’s death fitted his life as an explorer, and speculated that he would have approved, or at least not minded, to end up his life in a risky Arctic mission: after his many achievements as a polar explorer, Amundsen had nothing left to accomplish. The guides emphasized that this was purely a speculation on their part; as the Italian proverb goes, *se non è vero è bene trovato* [even if it is not true, it makes a good story].
- Some narratives had minor theatrical touches. For instance, while standing at the foot of the mast, a guide described—accompanying the narrative with gestures—how Roald Amundsen and his companions climbed up the mast to board the *Norge*, waved farewell to the crowd below, and took off. That performance enlivened storytelling; however, the mast was not in fact used for the 1926 flight, and period photographs show the *Norge* resting on the ground just before departure. This underscores that tourism lectures are more about the performance of storytelling than about accurate historic content.

The memorials that are most accessible to tourists are a Norwegian bust of Roald Amundsen at the centre of the village, where guided visits to the mooring mast begin, and an

FIGURE 6: Component stories of six narratives about the airship mooring mast



SOURCE: Ricardo Roura.





**FIGURE 7:** The wardroom of Robert F. Scott's *Terra Nova* Hut at Cape Evans, Ross Island, Antarctica, last inhabited in 1917 (photo: Ricardo Roura).

Italian plaque at the mast itself, where most visits end (figs. 4 and 5). The inscription in Amundsen's bust commemorates the first transpolar flight over the North Pole, "carried out by Roald Amundsen and his men, including an American, Lincoln Ellsworth, in the airship *Norge*," and bears the flags of Norway and USA. The inscription contains no references to Umberto Nobile or to any Italian involvement in the *Norge* flight. Such omission was noted in Italy when the bust was dedicated in 1976 (Aas, 2005: 9). The inscription in the 1983 Italian plaque portrays the flags of the three countries and commemorates the "glorious achievement of human endeavor" of the 1926 transpolar flight and names Amundsen, Ellsworth, and Nobile as well as, generically, "the crew of the airship *Norge*."

Markers act as the catalytic element, linking the human and nuclear elements of an attraction system (Leiper, 1990: 378). The mast is a plain, utilitarian structure, and in the absence of markers some people fail to realize its historic significance. The quantity and quality of information provided to the tourists may vary significantly depending on the different modalities in which the information is transmitted, as described above. For instance, a group of tourists looked briefly at the mast and went on to visit the small cemetery nearby (which, while interesting, lacks the iconic quality of the mast). The group's guide admitted not to know much about polar history (Roura, 2008a: 59).

Through tourists' narratives, the airship mooring mast becomes a tourist attraction system and a symbolic marker of the North Pole and of polar exploration. However, it is a matter of chance what version of the story any tourist group is told, or what inscriptions any individual tourist may notice. In some narratives the mast is primarily about Roald Amundsen and his achievements (hence "Amundsen's mast"), while in others it is about polar exploration and key polar explorers. Tourists may not notice a dissonance between oral

narratives since they will normally listen to only one version of events (of course, tourists may have a previous knowledge of the mast's history or may pursue such knowledge after the visit). With regard to the memorials, it is likely that tourists will pay more attention to the vehicles that carry the inscriptions, which are sights (or nuclei) in themselves, rather than to the inscriptions they contain.

Regardless of the various versions of historic detail, as long as the narratives describe adequately the broad historic events, the mast emerges as a place of significance that, in tourism terms, translates as a place worth visiting. Arguably this is the main objective of the tourism narratives. Conversely, the absence of a narrative is likely to result in lesser appreciation of the monument's historic significance by the tourists and in a defective tourist attraction system.

### Polar Cultural Heritage as Tourism Attraction Systems

By treating tourism attractions as systems, Neil Leiper (1990: 371; see also 1979) suggests, they can be integrated conceptually within systemic models for tourism. The framework of tourism attraction systems is applicable to the tourism systems in the polar regions, including destinations that are significant because of their cultural heritage.

The tourism systems in the polar regions have characteristics of their own, which derive from the regions' remoteness, isolation, and harsh climate. Most tourists will travel in organized forms of tourism, and many nuclei in the polar regions would not necessarily become a tourist attraction by the choice of individual tourists that are "pushed" to visit those sites (see Leiper, 1990: 380-381). Rather, polar tourists in mainstream organized trips will be taken to wherever tour operators find suitable, given a range of significant practical constraints such as weather and ice conditions, and more prosaic concerns such as the time available between meals. Tour operators play a role in the transformation of historic assets of the polar regions into consumable tourist attractions, taking tourists to well-known sites as well as making the most of opportunities as they arise. For instance, the mast is visited partly because it is at Ny-Ålesund, where there is a range of other attractions and passenger ships call anyway, and partly because it has the essential elements—sights, stories, and tourist access—that enable it to be turned into a tourism attraction.

Historic sites (nuclei) characteristics will determine how important narratives are to create a tourist attraction system. Some historic sites are "open" in that their physical frame (such as site type, function, or condition) enables visitors to understand them even with minimal markers. At this type of places the nucleus may also act as a marker in the sense of providing information about itself. For instance, the base of Scott's ill-fated 1910-1913 British Antarctic Expedition was the *Terra Nova* hut in Ross Island (figure 7). The hut, with its distinctive ambiance, is in itself a compelling sight and marker—a "time capsule" of the early period of polar exploration or "Heroic era."

Other historic sites, instead, will be more "closed," and most tourists will need a framework about their history and

uses to be able to grasp them. For example, some locations of the South Shetland Islands contain the remains of shelters used by sealers in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. These shelters, which are among the oldest cultural remains in Antarctica, have a fascinating history, but usually consist of low dry-stone walls that are almost invisible to the untrained eye. Similarly, much of Svalbard's cultural heritage consists of ruins or standing ruins—of equipment used for long-abandoned industrial processes, for instance—and would require interpretation to make sense to the casual visitor. For example, Smeerenburg on Amsterdam Island contains the remains of furnaces that are fairly identifiable as such, but little obvious evidence that those furnaces were used in the 17<sup>th</sup> century for industrial whale processing.

Markers are important not only to understand historic sites but also, in a practical sense, to protect them (Louwrens Hacquebord, Arctic Centre, University of Groningen, personal communication, January 15, 2009). Just as historic remains transform the tourist experience, regular visitation by tourists has the potential to transform historic features and their immediate surroundings (Roura, 2008a: 60-64), either by inappropriate behaviour or simply by wear and tear resulting from usual visitor behaviour. In that context polar tourism can be regarded as a cultural process of historic site (trans)formation (in the sense of Schiffer, 1987). Most visitors will try not to damage historic elements they regard as important, but may unknowingly damage those elements if they are not aware of their significance.

In addition, markers may be essential to underscore the significance of some historic sites that contain material remains that would normally be regarded as rubbish rather than artefacts, particularly if those remains potentially constitute an environmental hazard. Some tourists may dislike the lasting presence of cultural remains on the largely pristine polar landscape. Without the knowledge that those remains are protected, tourists may not regard them as a sight worth seeing. (See Roura, 2008b, for examples of the categorization of Antarctic material remains as “artefact” or “rubbish.”) For instance, the old mining area of Ny-Ålesund may look to the casual visitor like a vast industrial dumpsite, yet it is significant in a number of ways, including because it is a gravesite for the miners who died there and whose bodies were never recovered and, for that reason among others, it is legally protected.

The accessibility of nuclei to organized forms of tourism will determine whether historic sites become active tourism attraction systems. For instance, Scott's Terra Nova hut and other contemporary huts in the Ross Sea area of Antarctica are of obvious tourism interest, but only relatively small numbers of tourists are able to reach that remote area and, for conservation reasons, visitor numbers to the huts are capped at 2000 annually. Sealing sites in the South Shetland Islands are not currently active tourist attraction systems since they are for all practical purposes inaccessible to most tourists, and some are inside areas that are closed to non-scientists. The old mining area of Ny-Ålesund is near to the settlement, but organized tourist groups are presently not allowed to visit it for practical and safety reasons.

## Conclusions

Polar tourism, as an organized activity, is both systematic and opportunistic, and this influences both the selection of destinations (or sites visited) and that of attractions within a site. Tourism systematically visits places chosen because of their wildlife, history, scenery, or other attractions. It is opportunistic because it turns into an attraction anything that can be conceived as somewhat different, unique, and therefore worth seeing (Roura, 2008c). How does cultural heritage in the polar regions operate as a tourist attraction? Historic sites are attractive to tour operators because they constitute an essential complement to natural attractions. In addition, historic sites have the sights and stories that can be turned into attractions and consumable tourism products, provided that the sites are accessible to organized tours. Ny-Ålesund has attractions of its own, but visiting the airship mooring mast makes for a better tourism product and a more meaningful landing.

What is the role of tourism narratives in creating a tourism attraction? As John Urry (1992: 73) has noted, “the tourist experience involves something that is visually different and distinguished from otherwise mundane activities.” One of the key skills of the tour guide is to interpret the (sometimes) minimalist polar landscape so that tourists can actually “see” what might otherwise escape their eyes (Roura, 2008c: 115-116). Historic sites in the polar regions vary depending on factors such as site type, function, and condition. Some sites are easier to grasp than others in terms of what they were used for or what was their history. Particularly in the case of “closed” sites, such as the airship mooring mast at Ny-Ålesund, on-site tourism narratives enable the different elements of the tourism attraction system to “click” together into a coherent whole.

Tourism narratives recreate multiple and sometimes conflicting versions of polar mythologies of discovery and exploration. At Ny-Ålesund, as in other Arctic and Antarctic historic sites, tourists who listen to those narratives while standing around historic remains may be able to glimpse the polar regions as they once were for the early explorers: unknown, harsh, and dangerous, as well as alluring. Tourists may also realize that where they stand, however remote, is only the place from where journeys to yet more remote places began. Without markers the airship mooring mast may be regarded as a rusting metal structure standing outside an Arctic settlement, and tourists may simply walk by it. ■

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