



The importance of social context for hay meadow restoration in Norway

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Working group 4: Biodiversity in rural production landscapes

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Historical hay making in Norway

A matter of survival



1900s: We see 8 men working with scythes and a women raking in the background. The horse-drawn mower is in place and the haymaking is underway. The picture belongs to the Beitstaden Historielag's picture collection.

Historical hay making in Norway

Critical institutions:

- “Society of duty” (children involved)
- *Grannelag*: the nearest neighbours who would meet together voluntarily when mutual help beyond that of daily needs was required.
- The *bedlag* incorporated the *grannelag* and was made up of a wider ring of farms. The boundaries were often defined by geographical features (e.g., fjords or rivers).
- Determined by the size of the work, hay meadow management was often conducted through a *dugnad* in the *grannelag* or *bedlag*.
 - *Dugnad*: a type of voluntary work carried out as a community, traditionally involving a social gathering



Photo: Einar Linderud/Oslo Museum (1959).



Photo: Line Johansen

The issue: The need for restoration

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- Over the last decades: steady decrease in biodiversity and the loss of many rare species
- Nature Restoration Law: “ensure the recovery of biodiverse and resilient nature across the Union territory” (EU, 2024, 1).
- UNEP’s 2022 goals of restoring 30% of degraded ecosystems by 2030.
- Long-term success is particularly important
- Voluntary Agri.Env. schemes have not been very successful in preventing biodiversity loss
- Payments of billions of Euros in subsidies to farmers have not maintained traditional landscape management in much of Europe or Norway. Instead: declining
- The question is – why is this the case?

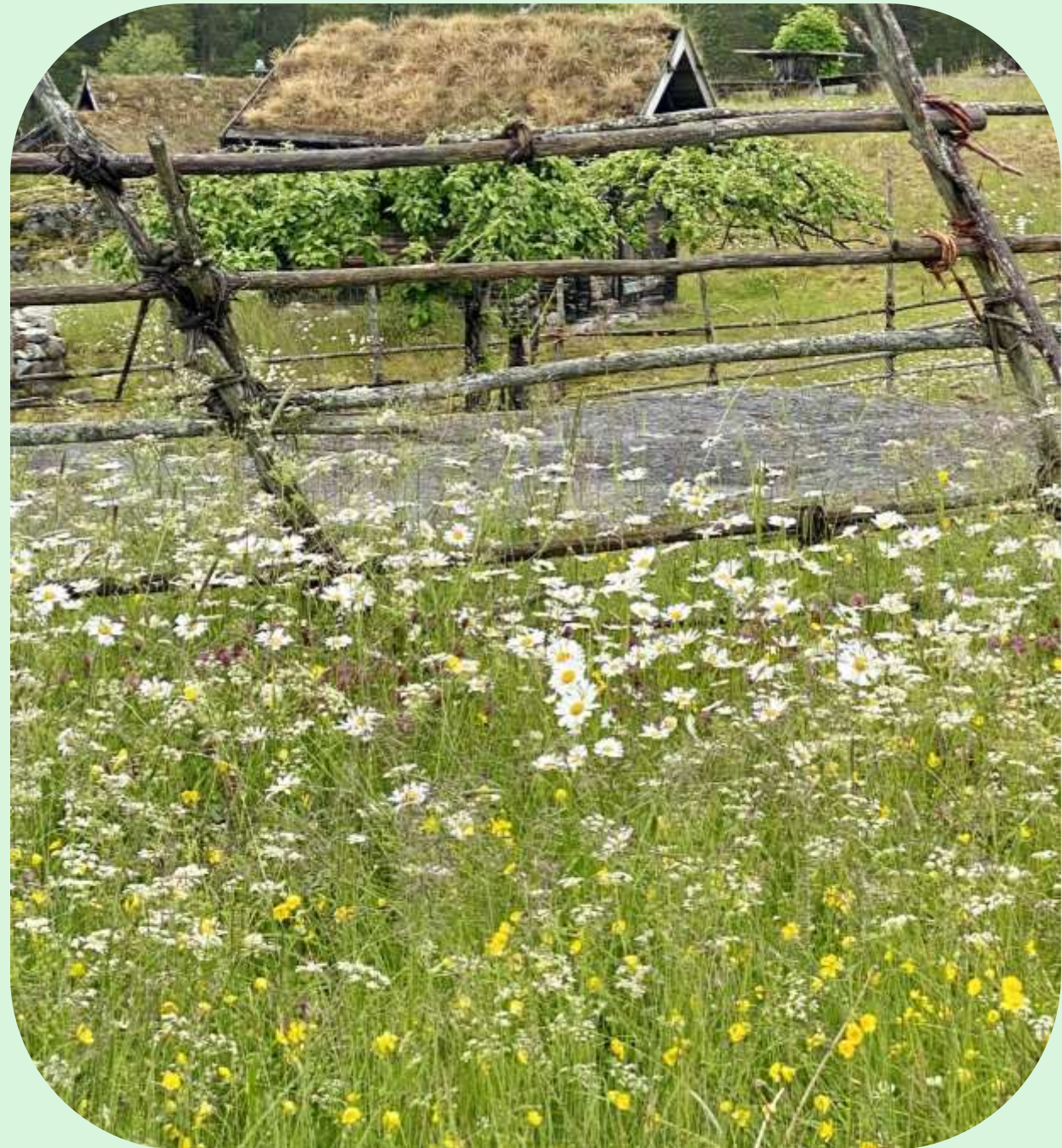
The study – hay meadow restoration in Norway

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Norwegian Environment Agency:
Restoring hay meadows to reach UN
target

In depth interviews with 19 managers

This work is part of the project RESTORE (led by NIBIO),
funded by the Norwegian Research Council



Theoretical perspective: Relational Farming Systems Research

- Systems or practices that may be suitable at one point in history may be incompatible with others
 - *“Farming systems that are not compatible with the context in which they are embedded are not feasible, even if they can be successful in another space-time context”* (Schiere et al., 2012:15).
- Mainly: uptake of new technologies (before their time)
- We contend that the same is true for **attempts to implement old farming systems** that, while once perfectly adapted to regional social, cultural, economic, and environmental conditions, are now *after their time*.



Findings – understanding the influence of changing social context

Population
centralisation

Changes in social
values

**The changing
social context**

Changes in
socialisation processes

Changes to historical
infrastructures



Population
centralisation



Mowing-day at Furøya, Southern Norway (Photo: Furøya)

- Breakdown of community structures → changing neighbour and labour availability
- No more *Grannelag* or *bedlag* to invite at *dugnad*
 - Efforts to reconstruct social aspects of *dugnad* (e.g. festivals; music)
«... the more fun it is, the easier it is to get volunteer help, so I cook and prepare something substantial and bake a lot in advance on that wood stove, and I think it's important that those who come feel they're being well taken care of in terms of food»
 - Need planning
- Climate change: instable weather patterns
 - Mowing varies and makes planning more difficult
 - Hay not critical for survival – harvested and dumped
 - No great sense of relief

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Changes in social values

Norway's move from a «society of duty» to one of choice

- From strong commitments to family and farm to children not «showing any interest»

Impact of non-agricultural social policies, e.g. paid holidays

- «we don't know when we're going to cut» during summer holidays

Changing preferences for the structure of farm families

- “worked before with the extended family of 25 people”

Changing gender expectations

- Male farmers increasingly expected to care for children and family commitments = less time

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Photo: Nordlandsmuseet

Changes in
socialisation processes

“Growing up with it” as an essential part of creating enthusiastic managers

Current managers: Childhood memories of picnics on freshly mown meadows, working with neighbors while mowing, creating a love of plants, animals, and the landscape around them.

Socialisation process: sense-of-place, identity, habitus

Unpredictable weather, reduced community spirit, diminishing ecological quality, lack of equipment, hay worth nothing etc.

*«It's very depressing. And it's a chore, and **not** something you can take kids on who want to be happy, and who need motivation and joy of life ... you have to do it yourself”*



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Historical hay-making structures (e.g. barns for storage, drying racks, haystacks, machinery for production or transport) not an urgent necessity for the overall farm & often lacking
Manager had to build grindbygg to store *“hay press, the rake, [and] dry hay bales, after they have been pressed”*. Cost covered by manager, but *“is a building that I would never have needed if I had not been involved in hay meadow management.”*

Use of newer machinery (e.g. two wheel tractors, mowers, pasture topper) is conditional: available, should meet other needs, affordable, meadow not too steep (2 wheel tractors), flat enough (4 wheel tractors), machinery not too heavy, permitted in management plan.
Accessibility another issue: distance and location (steep and rocky hillsides)



Changes to historical infrastructures



Restoration of these areas becomes problematic

- Current agri-env. schemes are not following up questions such as how we can make meadow management enjoyable or how we develop communities to support these landscapes
- Voluntary restoration relies on enthusiastic landowners. When the task is no longer a fun social event, how do we create the next generation of “enthusiasts”?



There seems to be no good solution.

- Paying money to farmers is not enough
e.g. “We have tried a lot of different things – friends, contracting out, paying people, but *it doesn’t matter how much we pay because the people are just not there*”
- Societal change can make traditional management entirely unworkable
- Need to think about how we can protect the environment in a way that fits with broader society & farming systems
 - social values, changing environmental conditions, etc.

