Perceptions of high resilience to climate change in northern Norway: Consequences for community adaptation?

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Abstract

It is increasingly understood that cultural values, beliefs and world views drive, facilitate, and are shaped and affected by climate change. Conversely, studies also find that culture, without necessarily signifying an open resistance, create barriers for acknowledging anthropogenic climate change (e.g. Kahan 2012), and for adaptation to environmental and societal impact. Therefore, investigating salient cultural foundations may provide a better understanding of how and why non-action is considered an adequate response across communities, sectors and institutions. This connects with studies showing that perceptions of high community and/or individual resilience to change may increase vulnerability and thereby decrease resilience (Burningham et al., 2008; West and Hovelsrud, 2010.) Perceived resilience can affect a community’s ability to adjust and engage available resources in a community (one dimension of community resilience), and may cause complacency and the systems to remain in an undesirable state (Nelson et al., 2007). Our long term field studies from northern Norway show consistencies across a number of communities that people perceive themselves to be resilient and able to adapt to the challenges they are faced with, because they always have. We will discuss how the perceptions of being resilient may be problematic. Resilience is not a static property, so even if a community is resilient today, resilience in the future cannot be assumed. Furthermore, we cannot assume that the changes that are adapted to today will be the same ones that require adaptation in the future. This is why learning is crucial, and why being in tune with local needs and engaging the local attachment to place is needed to enhance future resilience. This fits squarely within the literature recognizing that communities are not homogenous entities, but constituted by individuals with different beliefs, goals, values and social roles which shape how they interpret, perceive and act upon knowledge about climate change (Heyd 2008; Crate 2008; Hovelsrud et al, In Press). Such societal heterogeneity is reflected in narratives and discourses. The narratives of resilience that are found throughout the north, reflect cultural values and a world view that are called upon in discussions about the impacts of climate change on individuals and livelihood activities such as fisheries or hunting. The cultural repertoire, particularly in northern Norway, includes the emphasis on the “vi står han av” narrative (ability to handle hardship). This is reflecting deep seated perceptions of individual and local resilience, closely linked to the high natural variability in the resource base and climatic and societal conditions. We will discuss whether such values may affect adaptive capacity and resilience to climate change,
and whether new narratives and discourses are needed. If the perception is that no action is required, vulnerability may increase, resilience may decrease and efforts of societal transformation may be hampered.

**Keywords:** Adaptation to climate change, adaptive capacity, resilience, tranformation, narratives, discourse, innovation, learning, community engagement, sense of place