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# **Creating a Turquoise Ocean of Green Values and High Quality with Norwegian Ecotourism**

- A Case Study of Strategic Reputational Management


in a small group of Tourism SMEs.

Ellen-Johanne Kvalsvik


Master's Thesis in Nature-Based Tourism

## Abstract


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 Ecotourism is steadily growing worldwide, and Norway are often pointed out as a leading ecotourism destination. Yet, businesses certified with the quality label Norwegian Ecotourism struggle reaching out to the ecotourist in the niche market. I examined six former and current certified companies. I have studied how they manage their own and their common reputation through the organisation. I refer to cases of identity drift (Ravasi and Philips 2011), legitimacy gap (Sethi 1978), crisis of legitimacy (Lawrence et al. 1997), conformity trap (Antorini and Schultz 2005), which are mines in a reputational mine field that they unwittingly stepped into. This led to a common tragedy (Hardin 1968), because they were not aware of the reputational interdependence (King et al. 2002) of the industry. This is further presented in an expanded form by Barnett and Hoffmann (2008). Furthermore, I have asked them why they chose to certify the businesses in the first place and why decisions of re-certifying has varied between businesses. I discuss why strategic reputation management is important for SMEs to reach into market niches. Finally, I have made an assessment of Reputational Capital (Fombrun and van Riel 2003) and Market Value of the companies and the quality label Norwegian ecotourism. I propose to look into the various business strategies, such as Ocean Strategy (Porter 1998, Kim and Mabourgne 2005, Hou 2007, Chanchaochai 2012, Aithal 2016).

Key words: Ecotourism, reputation management, common reputation, reputational interdependence, business strategy, labelling, nature-based tourism.

 Ecotourisme ne cesse de croître dans le monde entier, et la Norvège sont souvent fait remarquer en tant que destination de l'écotourisme leader. Pourtant, les entreprises certifiées avec le label de qualité Ecotourisme norvégienne lutte tendre la main à l'écotouriste dans le marché de niche. J'ai examiné six sociétés anciennes et actuelles certifiées. J'ai étudié la façon dont ils gèrent eux-mêmes et leur réputation commune à travers l'organisation. Je me réfère à des cas de dérive de l'identité (Ravasi et Philips 2011), l'écart de légitimité (Sethi 1978), crise de légitimité (Lawrence et al., 1997), la conformité piège (Antorini et Schultz 2005), qui sont des mines dans un champ de mines de réputation que ils ont intensifié leur insu dans. Cela a conduit à une tragédie commune (Hardin, 1968), parce qu'ils ne sont pas conscients de l'interdépendance de réputation (King et al., 2002) de l'industrie. Cela est en outre présenté sous une forme élargie par Barnett et Hoffmann (2008). En outre, je leur ai demandé pourquoi ils ont choisi de certifier les entreprises en premier lieu et pourquoi les décisions de re-certification a varié entre les entreprises. Je discute pourquoi la gestion stratégique de la réputation est importante pour les PME à atteindre dans des niches de marché. Enfin, je l'ai fait une évaluation de la réputation de la capitale (Fombrun et van Riel 2003) et la valeur marchande des entreprises et le label de qualité norvégienne écotourisme. Je propose de se pencher sur les différentes stratégies commerciales, telles que Ocean Strategy (Porter, 1998, Kim et Mabourgne 2005, Hou 2007, Chanchaochai 2012, Aithal 2016).

Mots clés: Ecotourisme, gestion de la réputation, la réputation commune, l'interdépendance de réputation, stratégie d'entreprise, l'étiquetage, le tourisme axé sur la nature.

 Økoturismen er i stadig vekst på verdensbasis, og Norge har blitt kåret som et ledende mål for økoturisme. Likevel sliter de sertifiserte økoturismebedriftene i Norge med å nå frem til økoturisten. I denne studien har jeg undersøkt seks tidligere og nåværende sertifiserte bedrifter. Jeg har gått nærmere inn på hvordan de har forvaltet sitt omdømme, både internt og eksternt gjennom organisasjonen. Jeg viser til tilfeller av identitetsdrift (Ravasi and Philips 2011), legitimitetsgap (Sethi 1978), legitimitetskrise (Lawrence et al. 1997) og konformitetsfelle (Antorini and Schultz 2005), som er miner i et omdømmefelt som de uforvarende har gått inn i. Dette har ført til en felles tragedie (Hardin 1968), fordi de ikke var bevisst på effekten av omdømmefellesskapet (King et al. 2002). Dette fellesskapet er presentert i en utvidet form av Barnett and Hoffmann (2008). Videre har jeg sett på hvorfor de valgte å sertifisere seg som økoturismebedrifter i utgangspunktet, og hvorfor noen fremdeles henger med. Jeg diskuterer hvorfor strategisk omdømmeforvaltning er viktig for små og mellomstore bedrifter for å nå ut i nisjemarkeder. Til slutt har jeg gjort en vurdering av omdømmekapitalen (Fombrun and van Riel 2003) og markedsverdien til firmaene og kvalitetsmerket Norsk Økoturisme. Jeg foreslår å se nærmere på ulike forretningsstrategier, som strategiske oceaner (Porter 1998, Kim and Mabourgne 2005, Hou 2007, Chanchaochai 2012, Aithal 2016).

Nøkkelord: Økoturisme, omdømmeforvaltning, omdømmefellesskap, intern omdømmeavhengighet, forretningsstrategi, merking, naturbasert reiseliv.

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## Introduction

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“Not everything that can be counted counts,  
and not everything that counts  
can be counted.”  
- Albert Einstein

Norway is known for its pure nature and environmental engagement. The Independent Traveler (independenttraveler.com 2016) rates Norway as one of “Top Five Destinations for Ecotourism”, arguing that

*...Their remote location and strict environmental regulations have helped preserve the pristine beauty of Norway's famous fjords, with their snow-capped mountains, tumbling waterfalls and crystal-clear waters... As an international leader in environmental policy, Norway has taken care to protect its unique coastline by regulating the fishing, whaling, sealing and petroleum industries...*

Looking at this argument one may think that ecotourism in Norway has evolved successfully. Well, it's not that simple! It seems like evaluation is done by different criteria.

Ecotourism is commonly known as a way of facilitating tourism that takes into consideration local customs, nature, cultural heritage, environment and community. It is a segment under sustainable tourism, and it may create possible value chains through market differentiation. Defining ecotourism as a tourism concept has not been an easy task though (Sirakaya 1997, Butler 2009, Aas and Haaland 2010, Aall 2014). The haze makes it hard for the serious ecotourism businesses to reach out to the right customer, the ecotourist. Tangeland and Aas (2011) show that the main activities of the contemporary tourist are firmly linked to the natural environment and its secondary activities involve learning, recreation, and adventure activities in natural surroundings. Monitoring done for Innovation Norway in 2008 showed that the ecotourism customer is at an average age of 40, has high education, high environmental engagement, wants to learn about local customs, have high travel experience and good economy (dagensperspektiv.no 2016). If you succeed in reaching this customer, ecotourism can be a prosperous business idea. Some argue that it is the fastest growing segment of a global tourism industry and in 2011 it recorded more than US \$1 trillion in total receipts (Honey 2008, UNWTO 2012).

To reach out to the right customer in a blurry market space one has to know how to strategically manage ones reputation. Reputational management is a mine field of errors to walk into (Sethi 1978, Lawrence et al. 1997, Antorini and Schultz 2005, Ravasi and Philips 2011), and it is not enough to manage your own reputation you also need to take into

consideration the reputation of an entire industry (Barnett and Hoffman 2008) to avoid the “*tragedy of the common*” (Hardin 1968). In order to succeed, the businesses must figure out how to strategically balance their differentiation in reputation to reduce competition without compromising their legitimacy (Deephouse 1999).

Certification systems may be established to assure quality and true environmental awareness for different niches in tourism, for instance in ecotourism and sustainable tourism (Honey 2002; Haaland & Aas 2010). In Norway such a system has been in working progress since 2004. In 2008 the first companies was certified as Norwegian Ecotourism Businesses. Today, the certification system is handled by “Hanen”, a countrywide organisation representing rural/farm tourism, locally farmed food and inland fisheries. They are currently evaluating the certification system, trying to recruit more businesses, firstly from within the members of “Hanen”.

In this case study, I have looked closer into a selection of ecotourism businesses that has in common that they have shown a particular strong engagement during the years of Norwegian Ecotourism. I have studied how they manage their own and their common reputation through the organisation. It is not the performance of the businesses in themselves that is of interest to this study, but their assessments, reflections and decisions in this regards. I have discussed why strategic reputational management is important to reach out in the market of ecotourism. Finally, I have gone through the literature of strategic management, and especially the different Ocean strategies (Porter 1998, Kim and Mabourgne 2005, Hou 2007, Chanchaochai 2012, Aithal 2016). I suggest that it may be useful to look into these to perform strategic reputational planning. The following questions has been of key concern:

*Why have they chosen the strategy of getting certified as a Norwegian Ecotourism Business?*

*To what extent and how is it implemented in their daily strategic reputational management?*

*Why do they remain certified as a Norwegian Ecotourism business, even though the organisation has been less active for the last two years?*

*What could be the possible prosperities for the Norwegian Ecotourism businesses in “Hanen”?*

*Why is strategic reputational management important to the Norwegian Ecotourism Businesses?*

*How may White Ocean Mixed Strategy enhance performance of strategic reputational planning in Norwegian Ecotourism businesses?*

# Theory

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## The reputation platform

To understand reputational management one must understand the reputation platform according to classic theory in the field, including the connection between organisational identity and the platform. Described by Van Riel and Fombrun (2007), a reputation platform is the basic position a company implements when it presents itself to internal and external recipients. Such platforms are designed to create specific associations with organisations in the minds of the recipient. They form the basis through a "Sustainable Organisation Tale" (Brønn and Ihlen 2012).

A strong reputation platform relies on visualization of the company's history, strategy, identity and a reputation that reaches out to internal and external recipients (van Riel and Fombrun 2007). Brønn and Ihlen (2012) states that the organisation that wants to build a good reputation must start by taking a closer look at "*who it is*" and "*what it is*", i.e. find their identity. Identity is a relational phenomenon. It is about interaction and relationships between people (Kvåle and Wæraas 2006)). An organisation cannot exist without the stakeholders who contributes in the building of it, as well as their relationships and perceptions of the organisation from within. Brønn and Ihlen (2012) distinguishes between visual identity, organisational identity and corporate identity.

The visual identity consists of the symbols and identification systems that businesses use (Brønn and Ihlen 2012). It is this that primarily creates the first impression of an organisation. Brønn and Ihlen (2012) states that visual symbols clearly can be powerful communicators themselves. However, it may be difficult to understand all aspects of identity, and for that reason it is easy to be trapped by emphasizing the visual, rather than to correct internal problems within the organisation.

Organisational identity is about "*who we are and what we stand for*" (Hatch and Schultz 2000), not to mention what we want, what we want to stand for and who we want to be (Ravasi and Philips 2011). Organisational identity can be linked to both legitimacy and reputation. It is thus considered to be an essential element in efforts to create or define a reputation platform (King and Whetten 2008).

Business identity is about "*who and what we say we are*" (Brønn and Ihlen 2012). This form of identity is further externally directed. It's about how the organisation expresses and differentiates itself to stakeholders. It is an overall expression of what the organisation is, what it stands for, what it does, how it does that and where it is heading.

Multiple identities can coexist comfortably within a single company, although they are somewhat inconsistent. Ravasi and Philips (2011) says that if one is not aware that "*misalignments*" can occur, it may cause a gradual loss of clarity and consensus, leading to a "*drifting identity*". Another pitfall in establishing a reputation platform is "*the conformity trap*", which describes the reality that despite an organisation's ambition to produce a unique and differentiated brand, it ends up on the opposite hand (Antorini and Schultz 2005).

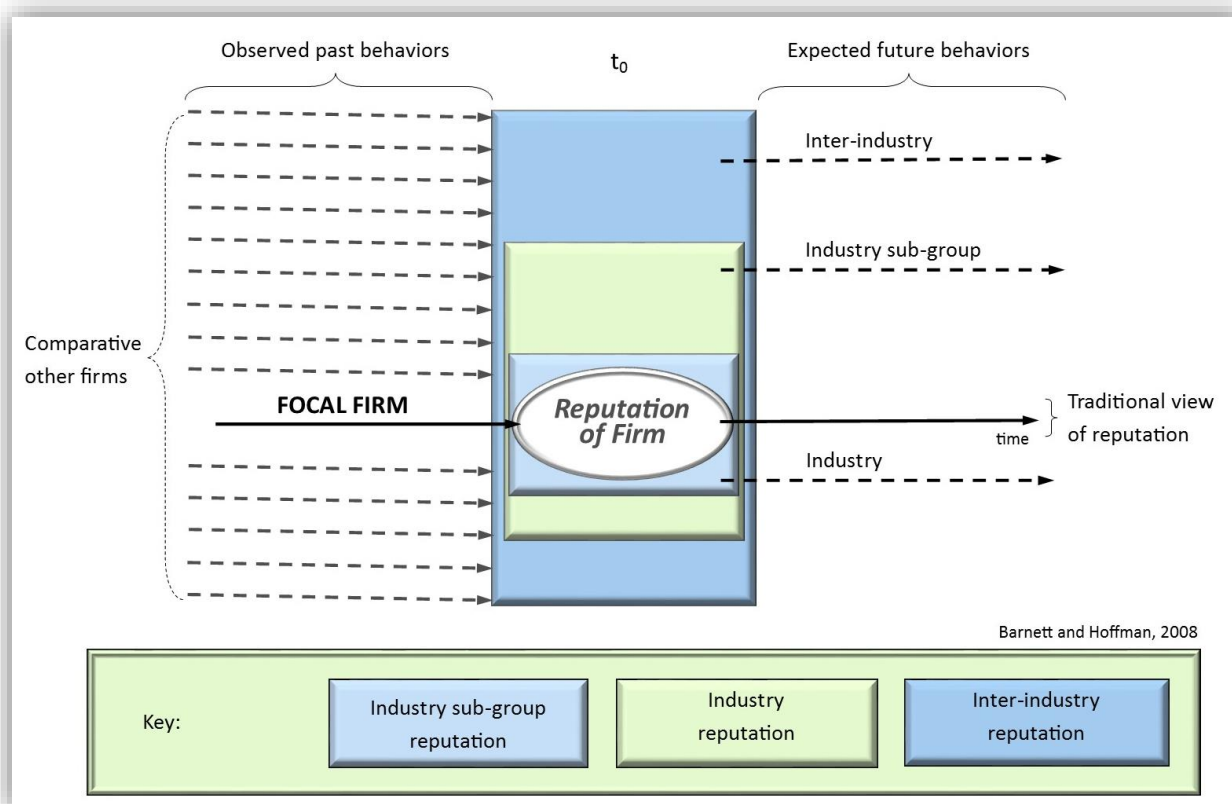
Deephouse (1999) outlines a tension between the need to be similar while being different to other firms. He concludes that competition will reduce the benefits of similarity and that legitimacy increases the flow of resources that enable a business. "*The strategic balance exists in the point where moderate differentiation in reputation leads to reduced competition, while the company maintains its legitimacy*" (Deephouse 1999: 162). To manage one's reputation in relation to the stakeholders and customers, one must create a strategic balance between legitimacy (similarity) and reputation (uniqueness) (Deephouse 1999). King and Whetten (2008) states that both the reputation and legitimacy are perceptions of an organisation's actions based on stakeholder evaluation. To align the two sizes "*What we want to be*" and "*what we are*" the questions need to be given attention. Legitimacy problems occur when there is a difference in expectations and social perceptions of corporate behaviour (Lawrence et al. 1997). This is understood as a "*legitimacy gap*" by Sethi (1978), and the width of the "gap" depends on the firm effort to manage the legitimacy.

### An expanded view of Corporate Reputation

Barnett and Hoffman (2008) presented an expanded view of reputation. The narrow view is that the firms' reputation at a point in time is the sum of how behaviours are perceived among stakeholders prior to that point in time. They establish that the actions of other firms also have impact on the firms' reputation, shown by the dashed lines on the left side in Figure 1. How far the customer is able to distinguish the firm from the total industry depend on the insight of the customer. Generalisation is easy when you don't have enough information to distinguish separate firms. This is a burden the individual firm has to risk, being part of a total industry or inter-industry, or being committed and marketed as a part of an industry sub-group. To gain legitimacy to an entire industry the organisations must have support from a wide range of stakeholders and their actions must be congruent with societal expectations (Lawrence et al. 1997). Stakeholders may not differentiate between firms, characters or actions, at times including the whole international industry, causing the firms of the industry to share a common reputation (King et al. 2002).

Yu and Lester (2008) considers an industry as a network where spill-over effects may occur. They argue that “the more frequent communication ties between two organisations, and the more similar the network positions and types of network ties between these organisations, the more likely they are to resemble one another and share common perceptions of reputation from stakeholders.” This may have both positive and negative effect, forcing firms to manage their shared reputation while also trying to keep a distance from rivals. Especially when it comes to situations as observed by Fombrun and Rindova (2000:85) “*a crisis for one is a loss for all; your reputation is partly your company's, partly your industry's.*” In such a case the reputation serves as a common resource that affects all members (Wæraas 2014). An individual member will benefit from depleting the resource, but all members must carry the cost of doing so, resulting in “*the tragedy of the commons*” (Hardin 1968).

This is not a problem that can easily be solved at firm level, rising the need to decide whether to be similar or different from the rest. Firms may interact through organisations in order to get recognition and to legitimate practises and structures (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Standards and practises to assure legitimacy may be institutionalised through organisations (Aldrich and Fiol 1994).



**Figure 1.** The expanded view of reputation (Barnett and Hofmann, 2008).



## Understanding the reputation of ecotourism

Few subjects in the academic study of travel and tourism have reached a higher level of dispute, disruption and polarization than the discussion of the concept “*ecotourism*” (Butler 2009). The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) was established in 1990 (ecotourism.org 2014). The purpose was to make tourism a tool in realization of sustainable development in society (Haaland and Aas, 2010). TIES defines the term “*ecotourism*” (ecotourism.org, January 2016) as

*“Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education”.*

The New York Times Travel section selected “*ecotourism*” as buzzword of the year in 2006. In a note they referred to Higgins (2006) describing the success of ecotourism “*as a strategy for economic growth.*” This description of the business popularity was both a blessing and a curse (Ezaki and Bricker 2012). The blessing of greater awareness of the concept strengthen the movement and their work, but the curse was the buzzword status leading to potential for misleading messages, deceptive marketing and non-authentic performance, often labelled green-washing. Aall (2014) tries to sort out the main lines by asking “*What’s in a name?*” He differentiates between environment-sensitive and environment-dependent tourism, then further segments these into three levels of environmental awareness – narrow, deep and broad. Ecotourism is characterised as environmental-sensitive, reducing environmental impacts of tourism, and to a deep level of awareness.

Björk (2000) and Weaver (2005) suggests that the term “*ecotourism*” over time has been used in such a wide range that it is no longer a homogenous phenomenon, but a complex and synergetic collection of social, ecological and economic dimensions, reflecting a core idea. Sirakaya (1997) pointed out that one was heading down a dangerous track, and that the term itself was in danger of being corrupted by what he defined as “*pseudo-ecotourism*”, a term that has been connected to “*greenwashing*”. Greenwashing occurs when businesses disconnects from actual problems and real motives and ambitions are masked by language and terms (Meyer and Rowan 1977). However there is a sliding transition from “*greenwashing*” on one hand and a philanthropic social responsibility on the other hand (Crabtree and Black 2007, Carroll 1991, Brønn and Ihlen 2012). TIES included interpretation and education to their definition in January 2015 and re-evaluated their principles to “*provide more clarity, eliminate the ambiguity, and therefore reduce the greenwashing and wrongful interpretations being practiced by in the tourism industry*” (ecotourism.org 2016).

To maintain the legitimacy of ecotourism businesses, and to keep “*ecotourism*” as a successful concept, Honey (2002), pointed out that guidelines and standards have to be made

available to all stakeholders. Guidelines and standards have developed into codes of conducts and certifications. Several certification systems have been developed in attempt to “*mark a general high product quality as well as an indication of environmentally, economically and socially sound products*” (Haaland and Aas 2010:375). Hansen (2007) show how more than 60 certification programs were developed in the nineties, and the number have continued to rise.

The experience of a “*crisis of legitimacy*” described by Lawrence et al. in 1997, has played an essential role in managing the common reputation of ecotourism in the international market. Unless organisations involved in the development of ecotourism are perceived as legitimate by key stakeholders, they will be unable to ensure needed resource flows and political support (Lawrence et al., 1997). This is an especially difficult problem in ecotourism since, in bringing together environmental concerns and commercial tourism, it is depending on the support of a particularly diverse group of stakeholders.

## Oceans of Strategy

Fombrun and van Riel (2003) describes a company's market value as a composition of four forms of capital, the physical, the financial, the intellectual and the reputational. The physical is the replacement value of the company's non-financial tangible assets, and the financial capital are the liquid financial assets of the firm. The intellectual capital consist of the unique knowledge and the unique skills that one may find among the employees, and the reputational capital consist of brand equity and stakeholder relationships. To successfully build reputational capital one must be visible, distinctive, authentic, transparent and consistent (Fombrun and van Riel 2003). Fombrun and von Riel (2003) concludes that reputation capital matter because they affect strategic positioning. Corporate strategy is defined as the positioning and relating of the organisation to its environment in a way which will assure its continued success and make it sure from surprises (Ansoff 1987). Business strategies are more commonly used in larger companies, while SMEs seldom has formal strategic plans (Storey and Greene 2010).

There are many business strategies that a firm may choose from to navigate in the mine field of reputational management. Kim and Mabourgne (2004:1) states that “*competing in overcrowded industries is no way to sustain high performance.*” Their analogy divides market space into red and blue oceans. The red ocean is the market where your goal is to outperform your rivals in order to harvest greater shares of current demand (Porter 1998). As the market space gets more crowded, there are reduced prospects of profit and growth. “*Products turn into commodities, and increasing competition turns the water bloody* (Kim and Mabourgne,

2004:2).” Blue oceans are unknown market space where competition is made irrelevant by creating a leap in value for both buyers and the company itself. Value and cost are separated in blue oceans, and differentiation and low cost are pursued simultaneously.

Hou (2007 in Aithal 2016), on the other hand, describes a contemporary strategy, the Green Ocean Strategy. This refers to creating opportunities from environmental risks and pressures, environmental awareness among consumers, and environmental design, marketing and technologies. It is about companies taking care of the environment as their business and making profits along the way. Chanchaochai (2012 in Aithal 2016) suggest a fourth kind of strategy, the White Ocean Strategy. The concept is more concerned about People, Planet, Profit and Passion, and profit is of least concern of the four. Both White and Green Ocean Strategies have the same objective of preserving environment and hence society. Aithal (2016) argues that neither of the strategies alone will bring the company to success. A combination of strategies, which he calls White Ocean Mixed Strategy, is more aligned with contemporary market development. In Figure 2 below, I have given an outline of the difference:

Red Ocean Strategy (Porter 1998)	Blue Ocean Strategy (Kim and Mabourgne 2005)	Green Ocean Strategy (Hou 2007)	White Ocean Strategy (Chanchaochai 2012)	White Ocean Mixed Strategy
Compete in existing market space	Create uncontested market space	Cultivate green market space	Cultivate the responsible customer market	Facing competition, decreasing the competition, improving the environment and minimizing the wastage without compromising quality and profit.
Beat the competition	Make the competition irrelevant	Engage the self-competition	Social interaction and awareness	Supports each and every aspect of organizational success and hence will become role model to other organisations
Exploit existing demand	Create and capture new demand	Exploit new demand	Pursuit People, Planet, Profit and Passion	Gives equal importance to competition, monopoly, environment, long term sustainability and survival in a given situation along with long term profit
Make the value-cost trade-off	Break the value-cost trade-off	Decouple the green-growth trade-off	CSR and circular economy.	It is more than CSR in the sense that it supports organizational CSR activities by providing higher sustainable profit to the organisation
Align the whole system of a firm's activities with its strategic choice of differentiation or low cost.	Align the whole system of a firm's activities in pursuit of differentiation and low cost	Align the whole system of a firm's activities in pursuit of growth and sustainability.	Align the whole system of a firm's activities in pursuit of sustainability and passion.	Align the whole system of a firm's activities in pursuit of organisational survival, sustainability and profit.

**Figur 2.** An overview of four Ocean Strategies and the White Mixed Strategy.

In the tourism industry, your product is often a collage of tangible and intangible resources. Selling intangible assets challenge the firm to describe them in a manner that is understandable, interesting and meaningful to the customer. This is especially important to consider when you try to reach customers in a niche that differentiate from other niches by value creation, like ecotourism. Given the nature of ecotourism reputation, as described

above, reputational management is not only a necessary task, but rather the task that will decide your long-term survival. It has to be given a thorough strategical thought in order to prevent your strategy from plucking your feathers instead of making you fly. However, reputational management has not been given much attention in ecotourism research. By leading you through the turbulence of establishing an ecotourism niche in Norway, I want to bring the attention to how sensitive ecotourism is to strategical reputational management, and doing the right strategic moves may create strong market relations with the right customer. The Ocean Strategies are examples of strategies to use when fronting high quality and green values.

## Methods

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### Design

Designing the research is closely related to the objective of the study, i.e. the research questions. I have chosen to do a multi-case study (Johannesen et. al. 2011, Yin 2014). This choice was first made upon observing two facts and possible consequences:

1. The small number of eco-certified businesses in Norway, only 20 in 2016, and high possibility of not having saturation or possibilities of generalisation.
2. A busy seasonal industry and problems with recruitment of informants for interviews in the period of time available.

Yin (2014) says that “case study research would be the preferred method, compared to others, in situations where the research questions are “how” and “why” questions...one has little or no control over behavioural events...and the focus of study is a contemporary phenomenon”. This suits my interest in the particular phenomena of staying true to the criteria of Norwegian Ecotourism Certification System.

I have done a pre-study where information was collected by both informal personal interviews with Innovation Norway and “Hanen” and web-research. In the main study I started with a literature review forming the base of my research questions. Upon this I posed the research questions (Appendix 1) and objectives, as recommended by Yin (2014). The results depends on semi-structured interviews on Skype and telephone with six informants conducted during the winter 2015/2016, that each reflect different stages or have played a different role in the history of Norwegian Ecotourism. The outcome of their assessments, reflections and decisions is of course mirroring their individual experience through this history. I have interviewed only one representative in each of the case firms, the manager of the firm. Appointments for the interviews were all made in advance, at a time freely chosen by the informants. The interviews took 1-1.5 hours. In addition to this I have done internet research on the case firms' web pages, Facebook accounts and in Norwegian media. I also did general search on “Norwegian ecotourism” and “ecotourism Norway”, in text and pictures, to gain a general overview.

This study has resulted in large amounts of information, and to sort things out I had to print most of the information on to paper. The interviews was printed out on different coloured paper, using one colour per firm. I read through them, using pilot markers to highlight important words and content. Then I cut out important pieces, categorized them and put them up on the wall. After moving them around under different headlines and questions, I gave the

interviews the same colours in my computer and categorized quotations in separate documents similar to what I had played out on the wall.

In my analysis I chose to work with the cases first separately as in a multiple-case study. I wanted to see if there were some variations in how strategic reputational management is conducted in everyday life, and why the strategy of eco-certification is chosen. How does the phenomena unfold in practice within each of the case units? The multiple-case design has advantages in that evidence may be more compelling. It resemble a “replication” design, but at the replication has different underlying views (Yin 2014).

### Design Quality

To be sure whether it was possible to answer my research question, research design and interview questions were thoroughly thought through and discussed with my supervisors. Informants were oriented first by e-mail and then during the interview about my research questions and my position as a researcher. Most important I clarified my intentions of the study, and the possibility to contribute to the knowledge of ecotourism, the challenges of implementation in practice and possibly produce solutions that can positively contribute to their individual and collective reputation in the long term. It was particularly important in this study to inform and emphasize, to informants that it was the business and the organisation I was interested in.

The study does not address the allocation of accusation and guilt, but seeks to bring information from the companies to raise the academic debate in relation to the balance between theory and empirical data. All information that was useful to ensure transparency towards the informants was prepared in advance, so that they had the opportunity to give informed consent. Although not all the information that emerges were sensitive, it was important to offer informants anonymity. This is not easy, given they are so few businesses. Even so, I have given them pseudonyms in my analysis to maintain the overview of the research material. The interviews was completed in Norwegian, recorded and transcribed in full. Translation was carried out after I had picked out the statements that could shed light to the research questions. It is not an easy task to translate statements from Norwegian to English, because of semantic challenges. I have translated to my best ability in order to present the meaning of the statements, without changing too much of the words and sentences.

## Analysis

### Ecotourism in Norway

In 2004, the Norwegian Centre of Green Practice (GRIP) started a pre-study to develop ecotourism in Norway in cooperation with World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) and Innovation Norway (GRIP Annual report 2004). The study was led by senior advisor Lone Lamark at GRIP. Main focus was to develop guidelines, a credible certification scheme with high quality, networking, training and a marketing plan for nature based tourism businesses in Norway (Lamark 2010, slide 13, at slideshare.net 2016). This was done according to governmental wishes of increasing attention to environmental awareness in use of nature and alpine areas and the concern for guidelines in connection with such use.

Considerations, guidelines and the ten major principles (Table 1) were based upon TIES global principles. In addition they took on the consideration of Norwegian conditions and traditions.

Ten major principles of Norwegian ecotourism	Seven primary principles to define an ecotourism business in Norway
<p><b>Preserving Nature, Culture and Environment</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Cultural wealth</b></li> <li>2. <b>Physical and visual integrity of the landscape</b></li> <li>3. <b>Biological diversity</b></li> <li>4. <b>Clean environment and resource efficiency</b></li> </ol> <p><b>Strengthening of Social Values</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. <b>Local quality of life and social value creation</b></li> <li>6. <b>Local control and commitment</b></li> <li>7. <b>Work quality for tourism employees</b></li> <li>8. <b>Guest satisfaction and safety; quality of experience</b></li> </ol> <p><b>Economic Viability</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. <b>Economic viable and competitive tourism destinations through local value creation.</b></li> <li>10. <b>Economic viable and competitive tourism businesses.</b></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. It is nature and culture based and has ecotourism as its primary philosophy throughout its business.</li> <li>2. It actively contributes in protecting nature and culture, and has substantial knowledge of its own environmental impact and always practice a precautionary attitude.</li> <li>3. It strives towards a maximum possible sustainable operation, balancing ecological, cultural, social and economic precautions.</li> <li>4. It contributes positively in local community, uses local work force, local services and goods, working for increased cooperation and a general corporate social responsibility.</li> <li>5. It contributes to protection of listed buildings and has place customization, local architecture and specialisation as general effort choosing materials and solutions.</li> <li>6. It demands especially high standards of hosts and guides. Interpretation and education are central features of products.</li> <li>7. It offers memorable experiences and establishes meeting grounds giving co-workers and guests insight to local culture, community and environment.</li> </ol>

**Table 1.** Principles that defines ecotourism in Norway (ecotourismnorway.no 2014)

A separate definition to the development of Norwegian ecotourism was established (ecotourismnorway.no 2014):

*“Ecotourism is enriching experiences of nature and culture, facilitated by responsible tourism businesses with consideration of their guests, the environment and the local community in which they are a part of.”*

Further on, the Norwegian Ecotourism Association describe the values of ecotourism to be rooted deeply among Norwegians. Living in pace with nature and performing in outdoor activities contributes largely to the Norwegian heritage. Ecotourism is therefore linked to the Norwegian identity, and the social responsibility concerning nature and culture is part of our common heritage. This is reflected throughout the seven primary principles of what defines a Norwegian ecotourism business (revised in 2012).



**Figure 3.** The Norwegian Ecotourism Quality label.

The certification system was launched in 2008 with just over 100 criteria. As a late joiner to international ecotourism certification, criteria was said to be strict measures in order to maintain high quality and to avoid assumptions of “greenwashing”. Once approved, certified ecotourism businesses could use the quality label (Figure 3) for up to three years. To renew the certification, the business must submit a new application, pay the application fee and undergo an additional site visit by the auditor. Norwegian

scientists have been questioning the process and the purpose of establishing the label Norwegian Ecotourism (Aas and Haaland 2006, Haaland and Aas 2010) and the performance of the businesses in practice (Aall 2014). Haaland and Aas (2010) refer to a wide range of criticism of the certification system, asking if certification really makes a difference, especially if there is not a third party auditing. To be perceived as legitimate there must be more ambitious goals to the process than showing of a logo or seal. In Norway the auditing has been performed by Lone Lamark AS.

The Norwegian Ecotourism Association was established in 2010. Innovation Norway was the driving force of the organisation, providing funding, assisting in networking, reputational management, marketing and recruitment of new members. However, the goal was that the system and the certification should be self-sufficient and that support from IN was temporal in the construction face. In 2014 there were twenty-five certified (newly or re-certified) businesses labelled by Norwegian Ecotourism. Additional five businesses were certified during the first period, but chose for different reasons, not to re-certify. A handful of businesses never got certified mainly because of strict criteria in use of motorized boats and



snow mobiles. Strict criteria was believed to be the main reason for absent recruitment of certified businesses and thus members to carry the organisation further.

The organisation Norwegian Ecotourism reached a crossroad in 2014 when Innovation Norway pulled out. The certification process was taken care of by Lone Lamark AS, and was still operational. The substantial networking, education and branding that the members of the Norwegian Ecotourism Association had been responsible for, was endangered. The businesses themselves were not able to run the organisation, forcing it towards a turning point in 2014.

The responsibility of the certification system was then handed over to “Hanan” in 2015. The Norwegian Ecotourism Association was dissolved, after a year of silence. Another year of silence went by, leaving the members with both frustration and mistrust for not seeing results from a lot of hard work that they had put into the organisation and the individual certifications, not to mention the fee they had payed. Some of the members left the organisation, while about 20 newly and re-certified businesses still remained.

### Presentation of the informants

Table 2 provide a short overview of the informants and firms, their products, location dependence, seasons, when they first certified and status of re-certification.

Pseudonym	Umberto	Tor	Therese	Fabiola	Fiona	Sigrid	Norwegian Ecotourism 2016
Sex, age and role in firm	Male, 63, manager, farmer, interpreter	Male, 61, manager, guide, instructor	Female, 41, manager, guide, trainer	Female, 53, manager, interpreter	Female, 61, manager, interpreter	Female, 71, manager, guide, teacher, interpreter	Dissolved 2015, certification system is handled by Hanan
Products	Total eco-package: housing, food, activities, courses	Adventure, activities, guiding, courses	Total eco-package: housing, food, activities, courses	Lodging, interpretation, activities	Total eco-package: housing, food, activities, interpretation	Guiding, ecosophy, activities, interpretation	Preserving Nature, Culture and Environment, Strengthening of Social Values and Economic Viability
Location Dependence	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Local society, history and nature is important
Seasons, main season	All	All, main summer	All, main winter	All, main spring and summer	All, main summer	All, main summer and autumn	All
First certified	2008	2008	2011	2008	2011	2008	2008
Status of re-certification	New firm, not certified	2014	2016	2016	Awaiting	2015	20 firms

**Table 2** Presentation of informants with their firms and of Norwegian Ecotourism.

The informants are experienced people that have been around for a while. Their love of nature, culture and their local community is prominent in what they do. The other informants describe Umberto and his wife as promoters of the certification system and the Norwegian Ecotourism Association. From their farm they have built a total eco-package with housing,

their own grown vegetables and activities that they are particularly passionate about. Fiona was one of the first to engage at the time GRIP managed the ecotourism project. She built a total eco-package from ground up, considering how to restore an old factory on ecological values. There was a professional athlete, and made a living of her sport and hobby. Going into companionship with her husband, a well known chef, they built the total eco-package based on their passion for local food, nature and culture. Fabiola started by renting out houses close to a popular activity site. She has recently invested in a service building and are still building her firm towards the total package. Tor and Sigrid are each located in a top Norwegian destinations. These two have strong networks towards hotels, and often meet the great variety of other eco-labels that are used in Norway. Competition is hard at their destinations, but they have found their niche and are offering high quality and green values.

### A Market Strategy in Realization of Sustainable Tourism in Norway?

The purpose of making ecotourism a tool for realization of sustainable tourism (Haaland and Aas 2010) led to large engagement from the mother organisations in the beginning

*...they establish Norwegian Ecotourism with fire and flames engaging eight enthusiastic companies, creating a lot of attention to it... (Umberto)*

This was two years after Higgins (2006) had described ecotourism as a strategy of economic growth, and may be that contributed to the enthusiasm? As Honey (2002) recommended guidelines and standards were made in Norway to maintain legitimacy. Several other countries had done this before, and among them Sweden (Haaland and Aas 2010). It was discussed if Norway should adopt the Swedish system, or join forces with Sweden. The suggestions was dropped because Sweden has a system that certifies products instead of the total company

*...it may be that they have fifty snow mobiles on one side of the building and a dog sledge or five on the other side... (Tor)*

It seemed like a double standard and not authentic to the Norwegians. In light of the discussions, criticism and scepticism of ecotourism in international literature (Siriakaya 1997, Björk 2000, Weaver 2005, Aas and Haaland 2006, Haaland and Aas 2010, Ezaki and Bricker 2012, Aall 2014) the Norwegian Quality Label developed quite strict criteria.

*...criteria are pretty strict...and if any businesses are environmentally aware it must be the eco-certified ones...the others are just "superficially aware" ... (Fabiola)*

The criteria provide strong legitimacy to quality orientation and environmentally, economically and socially awareness, as described by Haaland and Aas (2010). This may differentiate the companies from competitors.

*...when you have gone through all the criteria then there has to be quality...we are better than those who are not certified...after having gone through that process, then you are automatically best... (Therese)*

Criteria are available online, available to all competitors. One may think that any other company can copy them and implement them to the same standard, without being audited or certified. So it's not a warranty against competition, but it's hard to imagine anyone going through the process not wanting customers to know about it somehow, hence the label. The process is described as hard and some criteria are still under discussion. Some criteria were so strict that they excluded businesses from certifying

*...we were 8-10 firms at the time, and only six of us made it, and the reason why they fell out was that they couldn't fulfil particular criteria... (Fiona)*

Several of the other informants refer to this. One criteria that was especially discussed was concerning how much motor power their boats could have. Arguments of off-shore activities and danger if weather got bad led to a slight change, but still excluded some businesses. The use of snow mobiles to make tracks in deep snow and hence making it easier for sled dogs to run was not accepted. At its best there were 25 businesses that met all of the 100 criteria. The strict criteria contributed to strengthen their organizational identity (Brønn and Ihlen 2012), and it gave them a strong tool for reputational management (Fombrun and van Riel 2007).

The certified businesses have employees of high specialised competence concerning their main activity. They are either academically trained, have instructor skills or leading competition skills, all of them with many years of experience in what they do. The establishment of the Norwegian Ecotourism Association became a place to meet likeminded people

*...those who participate in the meetings, those that I know, are particularly engaged in the environment...maybe we are a group of similar people seeking together... (Fiona)*

Their competence and skills contributed to a strong organizational identity (Brønn and Ihlen 2012) of people, quite sure of "who they were" and "what they wanted".

*...in '83 I studied environmental science at Blinderen, and back then we were not recognised students...it was just idealists...but all that we said back then...it has come up now... We Told You So!... (Fiona)*

They created a strong network of competent and enthusiastic people, supporting and lifting each other up

*...those who run these eco-certified businesses...they are really accomplished people...and it is always fun to cooperate or being advised or exchange experience with competent people...then you learn all the time... (Therese)*

*...they are highly knowledgeable people...their company means a lot...its inspiring... (Sigrid)*

Remember that these companies are SMEs, and the largest of my informant firms have four employees. To be a manager in such a small business might be lonely. Help from consultants are seldom used. So having an opportunity to meet people, with may be the same challenges, must be satisfying. Unfortunately they were to internally focused and lost touch with the stakeholders (Brønn and Ihlen 2012)

*...we have created a lot internally in Norwegian Ecotourism, but we never managed to tell people what that was... (Fiona)*

Innovation Norway was probably commercially interested in a more traditional way. They were said to present the companies in a traditional way, not understanding the complexity of ecotourism and the green niche market.

*...we left for others to manage marketing...we left for others to do the external evaluation of us...our description of our self were not precise enough...we were never capable of explaining what we really do...everything corroded according to efforts...our enthusiasm did not rub on to those in permanent positions without any haste.....we sat waiting for two years watching the train of novelty disappear in the horizon... (Tor)*

They also had slightly different goals than the certified businesses, bringing the organisation to a crisis of legitimacy (Lawrence et al. 1997). It is an understatement to say that SMEs and large organisations work on slightly different pace

*...if I should have customized my business at the same pace as public services I'd be bankrupt a long time ago...they don't have the ability to see the change in the market place until way past it happened...public service are consistently firefighting...and they are never there when it burst into flames...(Tor)*

The crisis led to closure of resource flows and lack of political support, as described by Lawrence et al. 1997). They had different expectations to the amount of outcome that should be harvested from the effort they put in, especially the ones that had invested the most. In this case it was probably caused by political priorities between projects in the mother organisation. That was of course not easy to understand among the certified companies, given the enthusiastic start to the project

*...work done by our mother organisation has been quite modest...they have unconsciously given us a cold shoulder...because we have been so few, and not a punchy organisation...we have not been noticed and not prioritised in their work... (Fabiola)*

Innovation Norway, who was meant to pull out eventually, had to let go before the organisation had set

*...and then they let go, leaving it to Hanen...in the beginning we had faith, but as nothing happened it became a great disappointment...what is tragic is that ecotourism as to destination and experience are really large internationally, and is also what's growing the fastest...the large tour operators must have wondered "What happened to Norwegian Ecotourism?"... (Umberto)*

As the reputation of the Norwegian Ecotourism Association faded, so did the reputation of the label that was reputational dependent upon the organisation. This brought the certified businesses into a tragedy loss of Common reputation (King et al. 2002). Was all the hard work of the certification process for nothing?

### A Business Strategy of Ecotourism Certification

There are several reasons why the firms have chosen to certify their businesses. Primarily, they want to be visible to the "right customer", the defined ecotourist, the responsible, engaged and financial secure customer. These customers want quality, knows quality and are willing to pay for what quality cost.

*...and we want the "green conscious customers", and quality, people that want quality, people with higher education, who knows what they want and are passionate about nature and wild life... (Fabiola)*

The other kind of customer they would prefer, is the "contemporary tourist" who thrives by learning something new through activities in nature and at the local destination (Tangeland and Aas 2011). Tor has a nice reflection around the background of his customers.

*...the right customer is of course one that has chosen us because we are an ecotourism business, BUT perhaps we do a better job with people who do not know what an ecotourism business is, and who are amazed by what we offer and thus are interested in ecotourism... (Tor)*

The mix of these two types of customers are favorable, and joining the certification system and the Norwegian Ecotourism Association was a strategy to reach out and create a shorter market line to that particular market.

*...that was why we made this in the first place, to create a shorter marketing line, but marketing ran over us and made the premises of the product instead of the product making premises to marketing... (Tor)*

As far as the managers know, few ecotourist have visited the certified businesses. Trine admit that she really doesn't ask the customers about it either. Fabiola says she know of one, because of his concern about energy loss in the sauna. The question that needs to be asked is of course how realistic is the description of the ecotourist that was monitored in 2008 to the 2016 season? As environmental awareness increases, one might think that people changes and so do markets. The "contemporary tourist" is naturally their main customer, and they have no idea that they have purchased a product form an eco-certified firm when they arrive. They are

being told during the stay, and they are positively surprised. To the businesses it's a bit frustrating, because what should be their main "bait" is not seen until the customer is "landed". Secondly, the certification system seem to be a confirmation of their identity. The managers of these six ecotourism businesses are passionate and stubborn people when it comes to the environmental issue.

*...these are rock hard businesses, who wants a lot...I think there are many good stories surrounding these firms, and they are extraordinary stubborn people...some of the top people are found in these firms...crème de la crème... (Fabiola)*

They look like they are searching for higher goals through their businesses focusing on future prospect for the planet. Focus on interpretation and learning aligns well with both the Norwegian and the international definition of ecotourism. The certification system has brought them to a higher awareness of how they perform their business according to the values in Norwegian Ecotourism. Making them more legitimate as ecotourism businesses (Lawrence et al. 1997). To some extent, the certification process give them tools to cope with challenges that they meet in their everyday work with ecotourism. Thirdly, they need to have more income, as profit is essential to running a business. Fabiola is very transparent about her intentions.

*...It is to visualize the expertise that exists among these businesses or in these businesses and the added value you get by choosing this type of business as a customer...it is important to be seen...and it is about being a more sustainable business...to us it is about getting more money... (Fabiola)*

Only Umberto mention the increase in market space that ecotourism has had, and he points at possibilities that might be there. I wonder how this increase has been measured, when the ecotourism concept is so hard to grasp. In addition to that the ecotourist isn't a standardized concept either, constantly changing.

*...through their eternal market monitoring...they're useless...simply because they're always outdated... (Tor)*

Shouldn't the aim of marketing be the companies own definition of the "right customer"? The managers have long experience in situ and have developed a certain "gut feeling" towards the market and would probably have a lot to bring to the table when marketing strategies are developed. This further leads to my thoughts of the fourth reason to be certified. What I see in my material, is the need to be organized to show as an SME in the market place. This is not easy when you are small and alone (Brønn and Ihlen 2012), as several of them mention. Joining forces with likeminded people creating an organisation could be a way to enhance forces. In addition, as we have heard earlier it also lift things up, it inspire and engage to perform better.

*...it is important to have someone to spar with and to talk to and having new ideas...getting confirmation of you doing things right...someone outside yourself giving you feedback...it's really hard to do quality checks to your own business... (Tor)*

*...our meetings was a place to lift up and develop things...there were strategy discussions and exchanging of experience from work with criteria...these were enthusiastic people... (Umberto)*

All in all, their efforts have not been wasted. It might have been a weak strategy in selling their products to the “right customer”, but they gained organisational control, and sorted out their paperwork. They learnt more about ecotourism performance and strengthened their network.

### Implementation of strategic reputational management

As far as I can see, there is no formal strategic reputational management in any of the businesses. To some extent, there are reputational management, but it is quite traditional in the way of using home pages, Facebook, local media and stands at events. Three of the businesses uses the label on their welcoming page, other than that the description of their engagement in ecotourism is quite modest. Booking.com and FlipKey.com serves them well, and especially through reviews from earlier customers.

*...I think the Jungle Telegraph had played the essential role in this matter... when it comes to Booking.com, they give us reviews...no one can give us reviews unless they have been here...and we have a rating of 8.8 of 10, that is very good, and we had a lot of good reviews, and I think that this has great impact, because all of a sudden we have a lot of Italians...and I thought “why on earth” ...so I started to investigate our reviews, and then you can search the countries where they come from...and I discover that they have given very good reviews close to 10 and below... (Fiona)*

TripAdvisor is not that reliable, because anyone may put in a review without even being there. Beautiful pictures of nature is used, but it does not say anything about to what criteria they certify. Nor about the deeper thoughts that lay behind their work. The visualisation loose power because it does not stand out to all the other businesses in the sustainable tourism market (Brønn and Ihlen 2012). They do have legitimacy as nature-based tourism businesses (Fredman and Tyrväinen 2010) but their reputation as ecotourism businesses has stepped straight into “the conformity trap” (Antorini and Schultz 2005). The visual identity (Brønn and Ihlen 2012) does not show the strong internal organisational identity, and their business identity suffer from lack of clear textual identification when it comes to ecotourism.

*...they say that “wow...that was a great picture, we just have to highlight that” and then they forget that the picture doesn't say...it doesn't carry any message according to what we do... (Tor)*

*...interpretation is of course important...that is what the guest see...the guest doesn't see if I deliver the garbage in green or grey bags and stuff... (Therese)*

They do not manage to show “*who they are*” and “*what they do*” (Brønn and Ihlen 2012) on that particular matter. There is no consensus in “*Who and what they say they are*” between the businesses and this may confuse the stakeholders.

*...no-one knows what it is...what it means...it has been a bit difficult...What are we?...we need to get a clear message about what a Norwegian ecotourism business is...it's not prioritized from the government...it's just some people that thought it was important and worked a lot with it...they talk about sustainable tourism...there's a lot of pretty words but no action behind the talks... (Therese)*

When I ask them to define Norwegian Ecotourism and to describe its identity, I do not get the sentence that defines ecotourism in Norway, nor do I get a description of the primary principles nor the major considerations.

*...well, it is rather difficult, because I'm all that into it, but I know clearly to myself how to define it, you know... (Fiona)*

What I get from most of them are a collection of words that I have presented in a word cloud (Figure 4) below:



**Figure 4.** Word cloud of identifying words of Norwegian Ecotourism given by informants.

These misalignments (Ravasi and Philips 2011) drain them of consensus and their identity drifts. They have a clear definition to build upon, so the drift could easily anchor. Fabiola has a more straight forward definition of an ecotourism business:

*...it is SMEs in small places with enthusiasts that has a passion for the magical and good experience close to nature... (Fabiola)*

Still, being SMEs, spread all over the country, they needed help to develop a stronger market relation. This was part of the offer that Innovation Norway promised when initiating the Norwegian Ecotourism Association. The quality label was part of the market plan. Fabiola puts it very clearly:



*...It is to visualize the expertise that exists among these businesses or in these businesses and the added value you get by choosing this type of business as a customer...it is important to be seen...and it is about being a more sustainable business...to us it is about getting more money...we need to be lifted to have more customers...that's what it's all about ... (Fabiola)*

As stakeholders are not sure about “*who they are*”, they become unsure of “*what they want*” and “*what they stand for*”. Competitors make fun of the idealist or the stubborn reactionary manager. This might even effect the businesses reputation, as their reputation depends upon the actions of other businesses (Barnett and Hoffmann 2008), especially at their destination. If sayings from other firms hurt the reputation of one certified firm, it may cause a reputation tragedy to that firm. If this spreads to other areas in Norway and to the other eco-certified businesses, this may cause “*a common tragedy*” (Hardin 1968). It does not seem to be the case at the time. It is not a vicious rumour, but an effect of the lack of understanding at stakeholders and therefore has no power to spread. Being certified and re-certified after the criteria set there should not be any doubt about “*who the firms are*” and “*what they stand for*”.

*...we are anonymous, we are not noticeable.....we have not reached the market with information about what we are... (Tor)*

*...Norwegian Ecotourism is not really known... (Sigrid)*

The businesses also experience a rather uncommon “*legitimacy gap*” (Sethi 1978). There is a difference in what expectations the customer have and the social perceptions of corporate behaviour (Lawrence et al 1997) they get. Usually this kind of surprise is negative, but in the case of the certified ecotourism businesses, the customers seem to be irritated about no one telling them of the high quality and the green values in the firms before they ordered.

*...unfortunately we have too many customers stating that “Oh, if we only knew this was a place like this we would have stayed longer”, they have planned their holiday from place to place, you know, and those who want to prolong their stay...but because we are fully booked in summer, we are not able to offer them more... (Fiona)*

If they knew, they would have stayed longer, bought more of their products and planned their vacation differently. It is as if an “*inverted gap*” fills with enthusiasm, experiencing that they gained more for their money than they expected. This may of course give a positive market effect when reviews arrive.

*... many of our visitors comes back again, we have some repurchase.... well that's the best customers and they probably tell good stories about staying with us and it is the most important customer...they are people of higher education, with passion for bird life and nature in general and they have a well amount of money that they might spend...it's not camping life, so to speak...they pay for the quality that they get... (Fabiola)*

The Norwegian Ecotourism Association never managed to meet the expectations of their members when it came to establishment in the ecotourism market. Their financial support where too small to handle the marketing by themselves, and they left for Visit Norway to be their main channel.

*...they were "happy moments" people, selling by great pictures, but there was no message according to what we do... ...they were still selling "naked nature" and when visitors come here to experience that we are disturbing elements instead of some one that could contribute to the experience... (Tor)*

They were not lifted at the site, but put together with all the other businesses, resulting in another foot in "the conformity trap" (Antorini and Schultz 2005), with other green labelled businesses or the businesses in "Hanan"

*... I do not think we should just be mixed with the other companies in Hanan, somehow we are suddenly integrated with them and then ... what is the point ... it must be that we are rewarded for the work we have done and are doing in relation to being an ecotourism business... (Fabiola)*

They immediately saw that the ecotourists were never going to find them there. It was even harder to experience that all the hard work that they had put into the certification process was valued as any of the other green-labelled businesses, totally out of their league. The label had lost its market value, and brand quality became weak.

*...it's simply because we lack power of impact, it lacks punch in the travel industry... that being an ecotourism business leads to increased sales...that was why we made this in the first place, to create a shorter marketing line, but marketing ran over us and made the premises of the product instead of the product making premises to marketing... (Tor)*

In Table 3 I have evaluated the firms Reputational Capital and their Market Value (Fombrun and van Riel 2003). This is of course highly subjective matter, as reputation and market evaluations are. I have rated each feature with weak, medium and strong, and I have added some explanation to my thoughts. First, I present the individual firms, and then I have done the same with the label as I see it today. The visibility of the firms and of the label are medium for the individual firms, because they do manage in the industry, but do not reach out to the right customer. Distinctiveness is bound to their special location, combined with their activities based on their special skills and unique knowledge. They are not easy to copy because of the amount of intangible resources in the firm. Authenticity and transparency is strong. This is part of the certification criteria, so they have to meet these demands. Consistency is weak for some of the businesses because they have done concept changes. Tor has changed name to his company, but because that costed him too much he reorganised his businesses. One of them employs him and the other owns the equipment. Therese and her

husband has merged their companies to a new one. Fabiola has invested in a service building and have started to offer activities. There are two different company names connected to the business, and one may wonder what role they play. Umberto has shut down the business creating a totally new one, causing his consistency to be weak for a while.

Pseudonym		Umberto	Tor	Therese	Fabiola	Fiona	Sigrid	The Norwegian Ecotourism Quality Label 2016	
Reputation	Visibility	Medium, strong Home page	Medium, strong visibility at destination	Medium, strong locally and Home page	Medium, strong locally, at Booking.com	Medium, strong Home page and at Booking.com	Medium, strong towards established contacts	Weak, information old, scarce or irrelevant	
	Distinctiveness	Location, history, nature, hosting	Destination, activities, nature	Location, destination, activities, nature, hosting	Location, nature, history, hosting, interpretation	Location, history, interpretation, nature, hosting	Location, destination, interpretation, ecology, activities	Medium, nationally bound	
	Authenticity	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong, strict criteria	
	Transparency	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Weak, silent organisation	
	Consistency	Weak, new concept	Medium, two firms	Medium, new concept	Medium, further developed concept	Strong	Strong	Weak, to many organisational changes	
Market Value	Physical Capital		Farm, equipment	Equipment	Building, equipment	Buildings	Building, antiques, equipment	Equipment	None
	Financial Capital 2014 (proff.no 2016)		Not available, new concept	Not satisfying liquidity, profitability and solidity, medium equity	Weak liquidity, good profitability and solidity, very high equity	Very good liquidity and solidity, not satisfying profitability, high equity	Weak liquidity, profitability and solidity, high equity	Not available, pensioner, according to her it's like a hobby nowadays	Weak, relies on Hanen
	Intellectual Capital	Unique Knowledge	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong, also because of certification criteria
		Unique Skills	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong within member firms, medium in Hanen
	Reputational Capital	Brand Equity	New firm, weak	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local	Weak
Stakeholder Relationship		Medium, few ecotourists	Medium, few ecotourists	Medium, no ecotourists	Medium, no ecotourists	Medium, no ecotourists	Medium, no ecotourists	Medium, strong with those who are directly involved, but especially weak towards customers and competitors	
Goal of business strategy		Right customer	Right customer	Right customer	Right customer	Right customer	Right customer	More members, right market	
Competition		Weak	Hard	Medium	Medium	Weak	Medium+	Hard	

**Table 3.** Reputational Capital and Market Value for informant firm and the Norwegian Ecotourism Quality Label.

Fiona and Sigrid are still working within their concepts and have a strong consistency.

Overall, the businesses would need to be lifted to strengthen their reputation. This must be a main task for “Hanen”. The question is if “Hanen” have the same goals as the businesses, and if they will understand each other. Drifting around, not seen and understood it might be tempting to emphasise the visual to repair the reputation of the individual firms. It is crucial to the trust of their new members that they take care of the organizational problems first (Brønn and Ihlen 2012), and the reputation need to be strategically managed from inside out in the organisation.

The certification system seem to have lost its identity and added value, when some of the certified businesses say that it does not matter anymore, if they are certified or not. The reputation platform had one strong leg, the criteria, but as the certified businesses are starting to doubt, whether it makes a difference or not, it is in danger of dissolving.

*...in the beginning, I felt proud to be a part of it and I felt it was important that we had a label that signalled quality...it's somehow not that important anymore...I would not have participated in this if it wasn't that I saw the importance of us standing together and that we keep focus at these green values... (Fabiola)*

*...I do want to be a part of this...if one sees that the fee is too large to make a profit... to me that means a lot... (Sigrid)*

Some has left already:

*...synergies were too small, so there were no added value... (Umberto)*

*...it didn't mean as much as I had hoped... (Fiona)*

Right now the focus is at saving the remains.

### Remaining a certified business

The environmental awareness was one of the recruiting elements, and caused them to certify in the first place. Working through the criteria made them “*more consciously aware*” as Therese puts it, or “*self-disciplining*” as Sigrid say. Internally they work with a strong perception of their eco-identity they have become more aware of how to bring to attention the quality in what they do and the green values that they have rooted their business on.

*...at least 15 years before this was a reality I worked consciously by arranging...making it easier for people to be environmentally aware in their visit to nature... I didn't have to do much to my business going in to ecotourism...it was mostly paperwork that was needed...I had to prove...I had to make routines to how I was following up and confirmed that we were doing what we did... (Tor)*

*...we were really an ecotourism business through our philosophy and our way of doing business...we kind of belonged there... (Fabiola)*

There are still some positive thoughts of how they may reach the right market place. They have put so much work into certification and the organisation, that they have a hard time letting it go. It need to cost more than it pay before they let go.

*...I think we need to strengthen it (the identity) in a way that ...if we have that particular label on our door...so that is what the guest are looking for...then we have reached a distance... (Therese)*

Not everyone is positive. Umberto lost his passion for the system and the association, and that is easy to understand. The other firms describe him and his spouse as driving forces, working hard to raise the organisation, and they did it free of charge. Nothing turns out burning flames than working passionate about something that is not perceived as legitimate by critical stakeholders, thus losing resource flows and political support (Lawrence et al. 1997).

## Prosperities for the Norwegian Ecotourism businesses in “Hanen”?

As the certification system is handed over to “Hanen”, Tor and Trine has engaged in activities to build the system from within “Hanen”. It looks as if they have faith in the possibilities to strengthen the value of the label and the certification system. The other three are waiting to see what happens, and are ready to engage if “Hanen” takes initiative. They highly value the company of the other certified businesses, and they would like to see the market channel that lead them straight to the right customer. They are still waiting for the “big lift” in marketing toward the right customer, bringing the right customer with more money into the business. The label is also a quality label that gives signal to tour operators about who is serious and not, and it may generate more customers.

*...we were handled by organisation after organisation with vacuums in between...there were never any continuity to the organisational work... (Fiona)*

It is a common opinion among the firms that if they were more certified businesses, their reputation would be stronger and more customers would choose them because of their engagement in ecotourism:

*...I just think that we need to be more certified companies...because if they who run this kind of businesses in Norway think it is important then we are more people that can tell that it is important...that would certainly strengthen us, right... we are 20 SMEs all over the country...it is clearly that we don't show...so for instance at Norwegian Travel Workshop in five years we could have our own green travel, for instance, stand or...where we are many businesses...that are willing to sell what we are supposed to sell...so yes, we need more businesses... (Therese)*

*...simply because then there would be more people on the inside working pro ecotourism instead of the lot on the outside working against it...but we miss the link between the marketing management and the right customer... if I had the right customer I wouldn't have to do “kinder garden education”...then I could do real jobs...the right customer is of course one that has chosen us because we are an ecotourism business, but perhaps we do a better job with people who do not know what an ecotourism business is and who are amazed by what we offer and thus are interested in ecotourism... (Tor)*

How is it possible to recruit more businesses? There are some suggestion that comes along:

*...I think information and dialog is some of what is the most important then...and there are a lot of businesses in Hanen that could be eco-certified without having to do much different in their own company, and I think they should be told... (Therese)*

*...why not establish a campaign from “Hanen”'s side that would contribute to visualising some of these “pearls” of Norway...I think there are plenty of good stories surrounding these businesses... (Fabiola)*

Evaluating the criteria and differentiating them is also a suggestion that they mention:

*... we have many “almost certified” in Norway, so if we had suited the criteria to each firm, we could have been more members and a stronger organisation... (Fiona)*

Suiting standards to different businesses, seems like a good idea to gain more businesses, but it could be a dangerous idea. Where should the line be drawn to maintain legitimacy (Deephouse 1999)? Other pitfalls are accusations of “pseudo-ecotourism” (Sirakaya 1997) and “greenwashing”, if criteria are suited to the business instead of the environment and the society (Meyer and Rowan 1977). The high standard or strict criteria are what differs the firms from most competitors. They refer to it as the most important issue of the quality that they want to offer to their customers:

*...I'm not a supporter of having a too wide eye of the needle...it doesn't come for free...I vouch for the criteria we have...I think the line should be drawn there, if there should be any meaning to it... (Umberto)*

*...if criteria were stricter we would not be many businesses...but I think it is very important that it is so difficult to do that work...or having that strict criteria because in the long run that's where we're all going to go...that is serious...but we also need to evaluate the results from it...that is what market is able to understand...are we willing to pay for it...we have a limit to pain that really must be considered... (Tor)*

Another possibility that one of them mention is to divide standards and criteria in to different levels like other countries do:

*...I think this is one of the areas were we failed the most...because everyone had to enter the highest level in one leap...and that causes many not to bother doing the job and don't want to do the job that is required, even though it's quite simple to get there, but harder to remain there...so there should be a system where we had something... like Iceland...or...Scotland who has a three level thing where you at one level say that you are interested and want to do something about it, until you reach the elite and do everything... (Tor)*

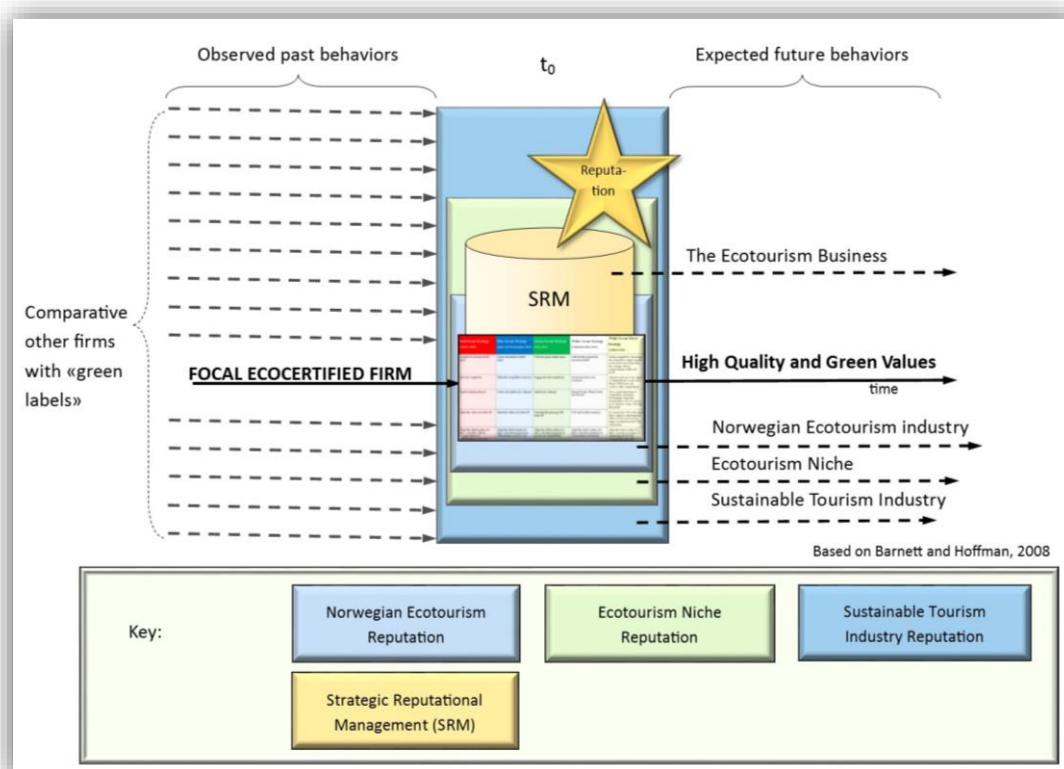
The system that is referred to with three levels are probably the British Green Tourism (greentourism.com 2016). They award the businesses that has made a commitment to sustainable practices, with a bronze, silver or gold label. All companies has been verified by a Green Tourism assessor. Ireland uses a similar system (ecotourismireland.ie 2016). Sweden, among other countries has levels in their certification system as well (Haaland and Aas 2010). The importance is that they look towards several different systems and get inspiration to innovate on their own system.

## A Turquoise Ocean Strategy

Business strategies are essential to larger companies (Storey and Greene 2010). In SMEs they are not that common. Storey and Greene (2010) says the reason is that strategy is not easy to construct and SMEs are often on resources to do it. Some even think they will manage well without it, and some do. If you think of building a business as constructing a building, the strategy would be the construction drawings. If you build a tree hut it might not be that important, but if you build a house, where you want to live your security will depend upon the

construction of the house. The plan will also show the design of the house, how it looks and how it suits to its surroundings, not to mention the function. If you think of it you would not run out to the stores buying all the furniture before you even planned the construction of your house.

As I have described earlier, the ecotourism market is a haze. It is not easy to define neither what the ecotourism industry is, what an ecotourism business does nor who the ecotourist is. If you are not even sure there is a defined ecotourism market place, then you need to innovate. This is the strength of strategic reputational management. It gives you an overview of the industry and your position in it. It maps all your abilities and lines out the possibilities for you. It keeps you from stepping on the mines we have heard of, and it will lift you up and lead you towards your goal – the reputational fame (Fombrun and van Riel 2003). Eventually it will make you more aware of the reputational interdependence in the tourism industry and strengthen you in times of Common tragedies (Hardin 1968) to the industries common reputation. I have tried to illustrate this in Figure 5.



**Figure 5.** Strategically reputational management of the common reputation of ecotourism businesses to become the brilliant star of reputational fame (Fombrun and van Riel 2003) (based on Barnett and Hoffmann 2008).

The Ocean Strategies have inputs that can be valuable to the ecotourism businesses to construct their common reputation and their individual ones. I have tried to find out which one of them would suit the situation best, and I suggest a new ocean, the Turquoise Ocean. It

is a mixture of features from the Blue, Green and White Oceans. I think it will suit better than the White Ocean Mixed Strategy, because it is more adapted to ecotourism SMEs, like the businesses of my informants.

Blue Ocean Strategy (Kim and Mabourgne 2005)	Green Ocean Strategy (Hou 2007)	White Ocean Strategy (Chanchaochai 2012)	Turquoise Ocean Strategy
Create uncontested market space	Cultivate green market space	Cultivate the responsible customer market	Create low contested market space offering high quality and green values
Make the competition irrelevant	Engage the self-competition	Social interaction and awareness	Make competition irrelevant by unique competence and skills, social interaction and environmental awareness
Create and capture new demand	Exploit new demand	Pursuit People, Planet, Profit and Passion	Create and exploit new demand based on People, Planet, Profit and Passion
Break the value-cost trade-off	Decouple the green-growth trade-off	CSR and circular economy.	Engage in niche market, CSR and circular economy
Align the whole system of a firm's activities in pursuit of differentiation and low cost	Align the whole system of a firm's activities in pursuit of growth and sustainability.	Align the whole system of a firm's activities in pursuit of sustainability and passion.	Align the whole system of a firm's activities in pursuit of quality, sustainability and passion.

**Figure 6.** The Blue, Green and White Ocean Strategy emerged into a Turquoise Ocean. This strategy may be more suitable to ecotourism SMEs.

It is not realistic that there will be an uncontested market space to the ecotourism SMEs, but competition may be limited, even healthy and wanted. As long as the businesses are true to the criteria that provides high quality and green values to the customer, the repurchases will come. The unique competence and skills that strengthen their market value, in addition to the social interaction and environmental awareness, are intangible resources that will make competition irrelevant. It is of course there, but you are not affected by it. You need to innovate to stay ahead, but share your innovations and exploit the fact that you need to educate your competitors. Keep your competitors as network resources, and share the passion for your niche market. Certification criteria assures CSR and focus to circular economy. Sell quality, be sustainable and keep your passion. On top of that, you must be visible, distinctive, authentic, transparent and consistent (Fombrun and van Riel 2003).



## Concluding remarks

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The Norwegian Ecotourism Association stepped into a reputational mine field and died. “Hanen” inherited the certification system and the remaining businesses, but the complexity of the ecotourism industry was a surprise to them. In the silent year the certified businesses lost their faith in “Hanen”, and some of them left. The remaining businesses are awaiting the situation. Based on their interests, experience and the hard work that they put into certification, some of them still want to be certified as a Norwegian Ecotourism business. But to be honest, they don't actually need it in the way it is right now. To some it actually cost more than it pays. For the businesses to remain true to the system they have to be lifted into a market space where they meet the preferred “right customer”. Market value of the certified businesses have potential and reputational capital depends on visibility. They need to manage their reputation in a better way. “Hanen” put ecotourism on the agenda at the Annual Meeting in April this year, reaching out to their member businesses. The certified businesses thus have an opportunity to reach back to “Hanen” and reconstruct the system. To do that they would be more secure if they draw upon a strategic plan to manage their common reputation. I have suggested a Turquoise Ocean Strategy that may be more suitable to Ecotourism SMEs. This is still a strategy to be further developed.

### Further research

The United Nations (UN) has declared 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development (UNWTO.org 2016). Taleb Rifai, UNWTO Secretary-General, said that this declaration “...is a unique opportunity to advance the contribution of the tourism sector to the three pillars of sustainability – economic, social and environmental, while raising awareness of the true dimensions of a sector which is often undervalued”. I hope that the possibilities of ecotourism as a bioeconomic niche will be given more attention in that context. The link between the ecotourism business and the ecotourist must be looked into. As I sees it, they often do not align, making marketing difficult, especially for SMEs developing niches.

I have not been able to find similar studies that describe strategic reputational management in ecotourism SMEs, but I hope this study will inspire further studies to see if there are possibilities of generalization, especially in Sweden and other developed countries.

As for the Ocean Strategies I hope they will be further discussed in the light of sustainable tourism and especially ecotourism. Further research of implementations in ecotourism SMEs is also of interest.

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## Appendix 1

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Interview guide, in Norwegian.

Semistrukturert intervju, utført av masterstudent (meg) overfor en respondent fra hver analyseenhet.

Varighet er 1-1,5 timer.

Forskningsdesign

Multicasestudie av omdømmearbeidet rundt sertifiseringsordningen Norsk økoturisme, gjennom bruk av flere analyseenheter på firmanivå.

Tema

Omdømmet til sertifiseringsordningen Norske økoturisme.

Problemstilling

Hvilket arbeid gjøres på bedriftsnivå, blant nåværende og tidligere medlemsbedriftene for å styrke omdømmet til Norsk økoturisme?

Form

Studenten (jeg) møter respondenten alene via web-løsning til forhåndsavtalt tid og sted. Det gjøres notater og lydopptak. I etterkant transkriberes intervjuet og sendes respondenten for kommentarer, oppklaringer og tilføyelser.

Oversikt

### 1. Innledning/rammesetting (5-7 minutter)

- Uformell samtale
- Presentasjon av partene
- Presentasjon av intervjuets form og informantens rettigheter
- Informasjon om prosjektet og problemstillingen
- Introduksjonsspørsmål

### 2. Erfaringer (8-10 minutter)

- Overgangsspørsmål
- Avdekke erfaring og kjennskap til problemstillingen

### 3. Fokusering (45-60 minutter)

- Nøkkelspørsmål
- Oppfølgingsspørsmål
- Sjekkliste

### 4. Oppsummering/gjennomgang (10-15 minutter)

- Oppsummering
- Avklaring

### 1. Innledning/rammesetting (5-7 minutter)

Uformell samtale

Gir informasjon om problemstillingen

Bakgrunn og formål for samtalen

Forklar hva intervjuet skal brukes til

Avklar spørsmål rundt anonymitet og taushetsplikt

Avklaring iht bruken av begrepet Norsk økoturisme, som omhandler sertifiseringsordningen og ikke den tidligere organisasjonen.

Spør om respondenten har spørsmål eller om noe er uklart

Informerer om lydopptak og muntlig samtykke til opptak, som kommer med på opptaket

Starter lydopptak og får samtykke.

### 2. Erfaringer (8-10 minutter)

Avklarer og tar utgangspunkt i respondentens erfaring med eller kjennskap til temaet og problemstillingen.

Respondenten forteller litt om firmaet og hva de holder på med.

Respondenten forteller litt om sitt arbeid og sin rolle i bedriften.  
Når ble de medlem av ordningen, og hvorfor?  
Hvordan arbeider respondenten med omdømmet i bedriften?  
Hvor viktig er det for bedriften å gjøre noe som er unikt ift andre bedrifter?  
Hvor viktig er det å være en del av fellesskapet Norsk økoturisme? Medlem i Hanen?  
Sjekkliste eller oppfølgings spørsmål her?

### 3. Fokusering (45-60 minutter)

#### Nøkkelspørsmål (40-55 minutter)

Når vi ser på situasjonen rundt sertifiseringsordningen Norsk økoturisme i dag: Hvilke styrker og svakheter ser du (organisering, sertifiseringskriterier, NØ verdier, NØ definisjon)? Hvilken betydning har det for dette firmaet ditt?  
Hvilke utviklingsmuligheter ser du for NØ?  
Hvordan kan NØ styrke sitt omdømme? (For å tiltrekke seg kunder og evt. investeringer)  
Hva er det viktigste som skjer med NØ nå?  
Hva bør prioriteres rundt NØ fremover?  
Hva tenker du vil være de største utfordringene for NØ fremover?  
Hvordan skal de forskjellige aktørene bak NØ (Hanen, Innovasjon Norge, NHO Reiseliv, Lone Lamark AS) samarbeide for å styrke omdømmet til NØ? Hvordan bør dette organiseres?  
Andre aktører som burde vært trukket inn?  
Hvordan ser du at dette arbeidet kan påvirke din bedrift?  
Hva ønsker du deg ut av et slikt samarbeid?  
Hvem ser du som aktuelle målgrupper for dette arbeidet?  
Hvordan kan Hanen støtte opp om din bedrift i et slikt omdømmearbeid?  
Hvordan kan din bedrift bidra i et slikt omdømmearbeid (kunnskap, kompetanse, nettverk)?

#### Oppfølgings spørsmål eller sjekkliste (5-10 minutter)

Hva definerer NØ for deg? Hva tenker du er NØ sin identitet?  
Hva er den viktigste grunnen til å bygge et godt omdømme for NØ?  
Hvilken verdi ser du i å skape et godt omdømme for NØ fremfor hver bedrift alene? Hvilken forskjell utgjør samarbeidet gjennom NØ?  
Har du noen eksempler på noe som går veldig bra i blant NØ-bedriftene i henhold til sertifiseringsordningen?  
Har du noen eksempler på tapte muligheter eller ubenyttet potensial i NØ?  
Har du eksempler på miljømerkeordninger som du mener har et godt omdømme i Norge eller internasjonalt? Hvorfor?  
Hvilket inntrykk tror du dine kunder har av deg som bedrift? Har dette endret seg etter sertifiseringen med NØ? Tror du noen kunder kommer til dere pga NØ-merket?

### 4. Oppsummering/gjennomgang (10-15 minutter)

Jeg oppsummerer og trekker frem de viktige punktene som har kommet frem under intervjuet.  
Avklare misforståelser, spørre om man har forstått riktig dersom noe er uklart.  
Spørre om det er noe mer respondenten ønsker å legge til.  
Stoppe lydopptaket  
Takke for samarbeidet, og minne om anonymisering, utsending av transkribert intervju for gjennomgang, avklaring og tilføyelser.





Norges miljø- og  
biovitenskapelige  
universitet

Postboks 5003  
NO-1432 Ås  
67 23 00 00  
[www.nmbu.no](http://www.nmbu.no)