

North Atlantic Forum 2017: Traditions and Transformations  
September 13-16, 2017  
Bø, Norway

Report by Dr. Laurie Brinklow, Prince Edward Island

I had the privilege of attending the [11th North Atlantic Forum](#) conference in Bø, Norway, September 13-16, 2017, hosted by the University College of Southeast Norway (USN), the European Society of Rural Sociology, and Sustainable Life in Bø.

The [North Atlantic Forum \(NAF\)](#) has its roots back on my home island of Prince Edward Island: in 1998 the Institute of Island Studies hosted the first NAF in order to disseminate the results of our North Atlantic Islands Programme, which looked at lessons and best practices from other North Atlantic islands in the areas of primary and secondary industries, tourism, the knowledge economy, and governance. Ever since, the NAF has been held every two years – back and forth across the Atlantic – with the 2015 one held in Summerside, PEI, in collaboration with the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation.

This year's theme was "Traditions and transformations in the sustainability of rural communities: balancing living culture and nature." The first keynote speaker, Alastair McIntosh from the Isle of Lewis in Scotland, set the scene with his heartfelt talk: "The role of deep imagination in community empowerment." His talk ranged from the forces of globalization to the deeply personal – addressing personal psychology, spirituality, and the power of place when attempting to effect change. He used the Scottish island of [Eigg](#) as a case study: in 1997, the residents of Eigg worked together to purchase the island after generations of private ownership.

The move to include the natural sciences in our research communities through eco philosophy was the topic of the second keynote speaker: Dr. Skúli Skúlason from Holar University in Iceland. He used biology as a case to address the philosophy of science and the potential that diversity in nature – in scholarship and practice – affords us as researchers. The third keynote, Dr. Inger Birkeland from USN, addressed the meaning of culture in sustainability discourses, posing it as alternately the fourth leg of sustainability to seeing sustainability *as* culture. The fourth and final keynote speaker, Dr. Carlos Levinton from Argentina, reminded us of the role and challenge of universities in mending the broken economy of poverty and inequality: the reason why we are seeking models for sustainable local and global development in the first place.

Over 60 paper sessions ranged from the impacts of infrastructure, such as Prince Edward Island's Confederation Bridge, on society to tourism and its impacts – in rural Germany, Scotland, Iceland, Norway, and in the country of Georgia; from cultural identity in heritage tourism to the empowerment of women in rural development; from the importance of groundwater in maintaining healthy ecosystems to creating marine-protected areas to mitigate against the effects of human settlement; from the impacts of climate change upon institutional investments and the corresponding financial consequences to community-supported agriculture as a sustainable alternative to industrial agriculture and global food systems involving producers, consumers, and other related businesses. We even had a wine-tasting evening, where we got to learn about the fledgling wine industry in Georgia, where Baia

from [Baia's Wine](#) told us how her family still uses traditional methods for growing grapes and making wine; and in Norway, where Joar Sættem offers a wine "experience," where he urges visitors to his rural Telemark vineyard [Lerkekåsa](#), to relax "down through the shoulders, out through the nose."

The pre-conference tour was particularly memorable. We visited the power station at Rjukan, upon which the 1965 film, *The Heroes of Telemark*, starring Kirk Douglas and Richard Harris, was based. During the Second World War the Nazis took over the station for its heavy water – from which it planned to build an atomic bomb. After two failed attempts to move the water, the plan was finally thwarted when the ferry carrying the heavy water was sunk. Serendipitously, on the day we drove by the lake, we could see the ferry and a small submersible in the lake, trying to recover some of the heavy water that was still at the bottom. Rjukan is also famous for its [mirrors](#): in the wintertime, when no sun reaches the town, three large mirrors installed on top of the mountain reflect sun into the town square where people congregate to soak up some Vitamin D.

It was an honour to be part of the NAF organizing committee: chair Guðrun Helgadóttir (USN), Annette Bischoff (USN), Anne Gry Sturød (USN), David J. Douglas (University of Guelph), Ryan Gibson (University of Guelph), Sheila Downer (Memorial University), Per Ingvar Haukeland (USN), and Inger Birkeland (USN), along conference co-ordinator Kirsten Wieland-Houe (USN), did a marvellous job of putting together the program and providing wonderful hospitality. Looking forward to doing it all again in St. John's!

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#### SIDEBAR:

The new book *From Black Horses to White Steeds: Building Community Resilience* (Island Studies Press 2017), edited by Drs. Laurie Brinklow and Ryan Gibson, is a peer-reviewed collection of chapters that came out of the 2015 NAF/CRRF Conference in Summerside. With four of the authors in attendance, the North Atlantic Forum in Bø was the perfect opportunity to talk about the changing the narrative of rural communities: from being perceived as marginal to showcasing the strength of local initiatives, the impacts of collective power, and re-envisioning local assets. Conference chair Dr. Guðrun Helgadóttir (University College of Southeast Norway) and Laurie are currently working on the call for papers to come out of NAF 2017; the plan is to have a book to launch in two years' time at the NAF/CRRF conference set for 2019 in St. John's, NL.