

Official statement from Backyard Svalbard regarding the new environmental regulations

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To Klima og Miljødepartementet and Justisdepartementet.

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Backyard Svalbard AS is a small company in Longyearbyen, and member of Svalbard Reiselivsråd. We are daily taking tourists in Svalbard, and we have the philosophy of going without motorized vehicles. Our guides are all certified for doing the guided tours.

We will with this document underline some of our thoughts around the new regulations for consultation.

Shortly; we demand the new regulations to be withdrawn and replaced with others where the new ones are built upon greater basis of knowledge.

Secondary; we want the consultation given from Visit Svalbard to be followed.

With these new rules, Backyard Svalbard (and probably most others) as a company doesn't have capacity to keep running for many reasons.

Imposing such regulations on serious tour operators when not imposing them onto tourists themselves will only lead to more tourists going out in the field on their own, which, in the long run will lead to more damage to the nature and more incidents or accidents with little to not experienced people going out in the field without the necessary knowledge.

A few parts make sense, but our general feeling is that most of the rules were written down without much local knowledge.

Local guides that have been here for years have the experience to handle most of the situations that can happen out in the field on Svalbard, and with such regulations and conditions they will either not be able to or not want to work anymore.

Furthermore, the local guides are the best advocates for respectful tourism as they already follow the regulations for nature protection that are in place, and many companies have their own rules and routines that are going stricter than the regulations in place.

The regulations regarding proximity to wildlife such as polar bears or walruses do not make sense, as on the terrain, we are not always able to see them from such distances (for several reasons : hidden in the terrain, whiteout weather,...). Walruses are also very relaxed animals that show clear signs of angst if approached too closely, which experienced guides know how to interpret and will react to correctly.

Limiting hiking to only the existing paths would mean only a handful hikes around the city are doable as it's the only place where slight paths exist. Of course, it makes sense to encourage people to use the paths where they exist, but for the rest, encouraging people to hike on vegetation free areas if possible

as it's already done, and pushing for small groups is, in our view, a much better way to protect the local nature.

When it comes to the rule of carrying a rifle and flare gun for polar bear protection as soon as one goes on a tour past the polar bear warning sign, it's already what all local companies do, and what most local inhabitants do on their private excursions. It doesn't make much sense to make it mandatory for all activities conducted beyond the polar bear sign, as that would mean any car driving out of the safe area would have to be equipped, even for only a quick transfer to the airport and such activities, and especially as it is rare to have polar bears in the direct surroundings of the city.

Another thing is the necessary application 3 weeks ahead of time for conducting any guided tour outside the boundaries of the city. As it is with the nature of tourism, most guiding companies have their tours booked quite late, generally no more than a week before the excursion happens, so having to apply for it such a long time ahead would in practice mean forbidding any guiding by local companies outside of the city.

These are only a few examples of how the new rules would kill any of the safe and respectful guiding that local tour operators have been working on developing in the past years.

With the new regulations of application and reporting, there is too huge demand for administration for any civil or organized tours. That is not what we intend to do, we want to be outside doing guided tours, not being in an office. This will affect more costs for administration both for us and for the Sysselmaster.

Our general view on the new rules how they stand at the moment is that they would destroy us as a company and likely a majority of the guiding on Svalbard as it currently is, and that it would push away most of the guides living in and operating from Longyearbyen nowadays (it is the case for several of our guides), which would lead to a massive loss of relevant experience and to an increase of damaging tourism and of necessary rescues.

Conclusion:

We demand that the process starts over again involving the parts that are involved. The Miljødepartment and JD should definitively gather more information around the topic before stating new laws. The product of an involvement of the companies involved shall result in more real consequences that might be affected caused by the new bill.

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