

# The powers of visual representations in shaping and mediating land-use conflicts – example of a Norwegian scrollytelling news story

**Authors:** Helena Gonzales Lindberg and Aase Kristine Lundberg, Senior Researchers at Nordland Research Institute, Norway

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## Introduction

In Norway, there are extensive scientific knowledge, advanced control-mechanisms, and strict legislation in place to safeguard nature. Although the Government has set a goal to reduce human impact on nature, Norwegian municipalities are still planning for an estimated 40 percent increase in land-use changes in the coming years (Simensen et al. 2023). If municipalities keep prioritizing the building of more infrastructures, cabin villages, and green industrial projects, land-use conflicts are likely increase both locally, nationally, and in Sápmi<sup>1</sup>. Land-use conflicts arise when competing interests over access, territorial boundaries, governance structures, and development priorities spark tensions between different stakeholders, often reflecting deeper struggles over recognition, power, and belonging (Lundberg et al. 2019). Importantly, both material realities (e.g., access to land and resources), and socio-cultural realities (e.g. cultural values, ways of life, historical narratives, and perceptions of justice) give rise to disputes. In this article, we argue that these realities of land-use conflicts are made meaningful through visual representations that constitutive how people perceive and engage with the world (Rose 2023). For example, maps can construct the illusion of definable separated natural habitats, giving decision-makers a particular static outlook on ‘nature’ contra more dynamic, nomadic understandings of seasonal variabilities and animals’ movements (Lindberg 2021; Lundberg & Richardson 2021). Similarly, photography can create powerful visual narratives that trivialize industrial impacts on the environment (Vik 2017), undermining local protests against large infrastructural developments.

Our point of departure is that we need to question the powers of visual representations to further unpack the socio-cultural realities that continue to allow Norwegian nature to be lost bit by bit, instead of producing more maps, photographs, or municipal planning tools, thinking we can plan our way out of land-use conflicts (Löf et al. 2025). We do this by highlighting a recent example from the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation: a scrollytelling piece, *Norge i rødt, hvitt og grått* (“Norway in red, white, and grey”), which sparked a national debate on land-use and nature loss (Strøstad et al. 2024). This visually driven journalistic investigation used AI-generated satellite imagery to visualise the extent and speed of nature looks across Norway. It quickly became NRK’s most-read article ever, prompting discussions on responsibilities and restrictions on Norwegian municipalities’ land-use management, with several follow-ups in national and local media. Crucially, we also explore the opportunities embedded in visuals to promote critical thinking for achieving holistic, long-term sustainable land-use management and use of natural resources. We show how art and visual storytelling can challenge dominant narratives and inspire innovative responses to land-use challenges.

Our aim is to critically examine how different visual representations mediate competing interests, values, or claims in land-use conflicts. Thus, we ask: **How can visual representations in media shape and mediate perceptions of land-use conflicts** (exemplified by NRK’s scrollytelling story)? **And how can visual and artistic alternatives become tools for rethinking land-use conflicts?** We do a close-reading of the visual representations in the NRK scrollytelling story from 2024 to empirically examine how this piece can

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<sup>1</sup> Homeland of the Sámi indigenous peoples across northern Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia.

influence and constitute particular understandings and perceptions about nature loss and land-use conflicts in Norway. Scrollytelling is a common visual online storytelling format, often used by NRK and other online media, in which the story's visual and textual elements appear or change as the reader scrolls through a web-article (Oesch et al. 2022). We discuss how visual representations normalise nature loss and environmental degradation, and how they are used to construct, legitimize, as well as contest political priorities. Finally, we explore how visual representations, such as artworks and images, can be tools for rethinking land-use conflicts and fostering new ways of understanding the cultural and societal dimensions of environmental disputes.

### Why visuals?

Although, visual representations, such as maps, photographs, and art works can influence how nature, landscapes, and resources are understood and governed (see Mirzoeff 2011; Hongslo 2017; Movik et al. 2021; Astaburuaga et al. 2023), they are rarely addressed by scholars studying land-use management and planning, who often also ignore socio-cultural realities in land-use conflicts (Lundberg et al. 2019). Commonly, visuals are perceived as mere illustrations and seldom taken seriously as sites of power and meaning-making. A Norwegian example illustrates the knowledge needs to understand the power of visuals: In 2008, activists in Hardanger, Western Norway, altered a national iconic painting by adding electricity pylons and warning signs to protest large power infrastructure (Figure 1 left). Along with other visuals and the use of national costumes, this helped turn a local issue into a national debate (Hansen 2012). Although the pylons were built, the conflict gained national attention and fuelled opposition to further energy developments.



Visual representations examples. Sources: Facebook; Sámi-artist Anders Sunna, Strøstad et al. 2024