

A New Place for Stories: Blogging as an Environmental History Research Tool Dolly Jørgensen

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Digital history has been understood as writing the history of computing, relying on digitally available source material, using digital tools for analysis or presentation of data, or disseminating research through digital media. At first glance, blogging, or more properly ‘web-logging’, the practice of writing discrete entries called posts on a website which are then displayed in reverse chronological order, would seem to be just another digital mode of research dissemination. Within the academic sphere, research blogs are primarily assumed to be dissemination vehicles for either one’s own research or discussion of others’ more traditionally published research (e.g. Powell et al., 2012; Schema et al., 2012). But over the course of three years of blogging about my research project ‘The Return of Native Nordic Fauna’, I have found that committing to a research blog fundamentally altered my research process and my scholarly publications.

My project is a cultural history of animal reintroduction focused on the Scandinavian case studies of European beaver and muskox, but as I have worked on the project it has expanded to encompass re-wilding and de-extinction as contemporary ideas for bringing back nature. My work is situated as an environmental history in that it seeks to better understand the complex relationship between humans and the non-human natural world. Because I started this project while working in an ecology and environmental science department, the scholarly publications that have resulted from my research reach across disciplinary boundaries with some appearing in natural sciences journals and others in humanities/social science venues.

There is nothing inherent in ‘The Return of Native Nordic Fauna’ that would predispose it toward digital media. Unlike the earliest scholarly analysts of blogging, Torill Mortensen and Jill Walker, who worked on online gaming, my project is not about online material, internet communities, or digital data (Mortensen and Walker, 2002). The project and its scope is an environmental history, not in any way a digital humanities endeavor. The decision to use a blog was based on the idea that it would be a knowledge dissemination tool. I had never thought of my blog as a community-building tool or history discussion forum, which has been touted as a major reason for blogging research (such as Bonetta, 2007 and Wilkins, 2008). Indeed, my blog does not generate a large amount of discussion through the comment feature, although there has been some discussion on other social media networks like Twitter and Facebook. I was not anticipating that it would modify my research process and certainly would have agreed with Mortensen and Walker (2002, p. 254) who claimed, “we are not positing that writing a weblog will change the articles we publish in scholarly journals,” even while recognizing blogs as potential influences on research. Now I think differently.

In this chapter I present an experiment: five pseudo-posts about blogging. I call them pseudo-posts because unlike the true online format of a blog, clickable links and embedded visuals are not possible. Yet I’ve tried to simulate the reading of a blog

through indicated links (they are underlined and you can find the web addresses in the footnotes) and writing style. Each pseudo-post uses the title of one of my 2013 posts as a launching point and explores how blogging changed the process of my environmental history research.

Post #1, 1 January 2013: Launch of research blog

To kick off the New Year 2013, I launched my research blog¹. My project, funded by the Swedish research council Formas, was just beginning. I had written in the proposal that I would make a research blog as a form of research dissemination, the standard way of envisioning a blog. But I had never written one before, so I wasn't entirely clear what it would look like. I made no mention in my first post about how much I would blog, but I had a personal commitment to post twice a week. I did that the first year, then changed to once a week in 2014. Although that amount of writing may sound substantial, keep in mind that I was working 100 percent on research at the time.

Because I made that (internal) commitment to write a post twice a week, I forced myself to immediately work through material. In my prior research projects, I had operated in a more divided 'phase' mode. I collected material, then I analyzed it, then I wrote about it. Sure, I didn't hold everything until the end without looking at, but I didn't make a concerted effort at analysis until after a fair chunk of material was in hand. For 'Return of Native Nordic Fauna' the process was different because the steps had to be much more integrated and happened simultaneously. A frequent blogging schedule forced me to do analytical and writing work often and early.

At the very beginning I did not have enough primary source material to write about my particular cases, so I tried to place my future work into contemporary debates about wildness, conservation policy, and the historian's work. By the end of the first month, I had gathered enough to tell short histories of beaver skeletons², hunters as godfathers³, and roaming muskox⁴. It was not always easy to figure out what to write about twice a week that first year, but material always seemed to pop up that was interesting because I was continually gathering, analyzing, and writing.

[Fig. 1. A postcard dated 24 September 1919 sent to the director of the Skansen zoo offering to sell the family's pet badger to the zoo. A gem I found in the Nordiska museet archive and blogged about (<http://dolly.jorgensenweb.net/nordicnature/?p=151>). Photograph by author.]

Frequent writing had two unanticipated effects on my research. First, I found a new voice. I did not want my blog to be long, involved research articles, but I also wanted to avoid the micro-post of a little thought. Instead, I focused on pieces that would be in the 500 to 1000 word range—something I could write in a few hours including looking up material. While short by academic publication standards, these were by no means "half-thought, naked ideas" (Mortensen and Walker, 2002, p. 267) or even "fieldnotes-in-public" (Wakeford and Cohen, 2008, p. 307). Fast and short(ish)

¹ <http://dolly.jorgensenweb.net/nordicnature>

² <http://dolly.jorgensenweb.net/nordicnature/?p=70>

³ <http://dolly.jorgensenweb.net/nordicnature/?p=106>

⁴ <http://dolly.jorgensenweb.net/nordicnature/?p=129>

writing meant that I would ‘talk’ the post in my head. I wrote them basically in the same way that I would say it out loud. This opened up a whole new world of historical writing for me because I didn’t feel I had to wordsmith every sentence. I did not have to have exactly the right phrase or the most erudite word choice. I could just be me. This has made my writing in all situations, even academic ones, flow better and feel more natural.

Second, I got in the habit of looking for good stories. My research blog is a collection of stories. Some are more narrative than others, but all of them tell a tale. This has carried over to the way I write now in more traditional publications. I am more interested in finding a good story and telling it in an interesting way than I ever had been before. As someone trained originally in engineering, I had tended to be factual rather than compelling in my writing. I can see that blogging is helping shift my writing toward the narrative.

Post #30, 4 April 2013: The hidden reintroduction

I was looking at a scan of the letterhead used by Peder Jensen-Tveit, the Norwegian supplier of beavers for the reintroduction efforts in Sweden, which had been sent to the Natural History Museum (London) when I noticed something odd. Under Jensen-Tveit’s name and address, there was a list of items that he could provide, including living and stuffed beavers, crania, and skeletons—all things I would expect—but also on the list was “bæverbiller (*Platypsyllis Castoris*)”. I had no idea what that was, except that obviously by the name it was related to beavers. Doing some quick online searches, I discovered that the “beaver beetle” is a louse found only on beavers.

If I had been thinking only about traditional scholarly publications, there would have been no reason to look further into the matter. But because I was also writing a blog, I decided that it might be interesting to write a post about “beaver beetles” since Jensen-Tveit had sold them (or tried to sell them). Why would Jensen-Tveit think someone would want to buy a louse so much that he would list it on his letterhead?

[Fig. 2. The earliest published drawing of *Platypsyllus castoris*. Reproduced from J. Le Conte, On Platypsyllidæ, a new family of Coleoptera, *Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London* (1872), 799–804.]

I dug deep into the history of the louse and it turned out that this little critter was a controversial discovery of the nineteenth century. Much scholarly ink had been poured out about who had found it first, which beavers it had been found on, and whether it was a beetle, a louse, or something else. In this search I also noticed that there had been a number of papers published in the last 20 years claiming finds of ‘the first’ beaver beetle in a particular area. As a historian working on beaver reintroduction, I could see a connection: beavers had been absent in much of Europe for hundreds of years so of course there were no beaver beetles until reintroduction projects brought the beavers back. The lice had hitched a ride on the beavers.

I wrote up a blog post with the information I’d gathered, calling the beaver beetle story a hidden reintroduction⁵. The story, however, nagged at me because it showed how recent scientific finds of the beaver beetle had failed to account for

⁵ <http://dolly.jorgensenweb.net/nordicnature/?p=429>

environmental history. I decided to work up an article about the louse and its history. This meant significant more research into entomology practice of the nineteenth century and even a site visit to the Naturhistoriska riksmuseet in Stockholm to see their *Platypus castoris* specimens (of course, I [blogged about the visit](#)⁶). After back and forth negotiations with the major journal *Conservation Biology*, I ended up publishing a more broad review of parasite co-reintroduction from a historical standpoint rather than the beaver beetle case study (Jørgensen, 2015b).

I wrote about the beaver beetle because a blog gives the researcher the freedom—the intellectual room—to explore topics that are slightly off-topic without feeling that it is a waste of time. Then, because I opted to pursue the beaver beetle story for my blog, I ended up writing a scholarly article in a top-notch journal. A traditional article had its start in making a hidden story visible on my blog.

Post #64, 31 July 2013: On the time I drank castoreum

In July 2013 I had the opportunity to try a special liquor made by infusing alcohol with the castoreum glands from a beaver. When I saw the beverage [BVR HJT](#)⁷, which is the only commercially available version of this drink, and is short for bäverhojt (literally ‘beaver shout’ in English), for sale as a shot in a restaurant in Gällivare, Sweden, I knew I had to try it.

In my research on beaver reintroduction, it had been unavoidable to think about the beaver’s near extinction in Europe and one of the primary products of the beaver hunt was castoreum. Historically castoreum was infused in alcohol and taken as a medicine for a wide variety of ailments, from headache to epilepsy. I didn’t know much about ‘beaver gall’ (as it is called in Sweden) but when I saw the BVR HJT, I recognized it as the modern version of medicinal castoreum, albeit for a non-medical use. So I bought a shot and drank it.

In the days before blogging, that would have likely been the end of the story. It would be an experience to mention over dinner with friends or perhaps tell other environmental history colleagues at a conference. Drinking castoreum was not immediately applicable to my scholarly writing on reintroduction, so it might have faded into oblivion. But in the blogging era, I got to write about it.

In [my post](#)⁸, I not only described the experience of drinking castoreum, but I also set it into historical context. I had to do some quick reading about the history of this particular medicine, turning up references to it in ancient and medieval literature as well as in 19th century medical practice. While I had read a few things about castoreum before deciding to write the post—mainly from my own primary sources about beaver reintroduction in Sweden—most of what I wrote about was new to me. I had to do new research, research I’d previously not thought I would do, in order to write the post.

[Fig. 3 A pair of castor sacs from an adult beaver containing pungent castoreum on display at Elvarheim Museum, Åmli, Norway. Photograph by author.]

⁶ <http://dolly.jorgensenweb.net/nordicnature/?p=1542>

⁷ <http://losmith.se/sprit/bvr-hjt/>

⁸ <http://dolly.jorgensenweb.net/nordicnature/?p=1015>

Since then I've written several posts about castoreum, including an impromptu search of newspaper advertisements⁹ and pointing out the difference between castoreum and castor oil¹⁰. These teasers have gotten me interested in writing a cultural history of castoreum at some point, but I do not know if it will ever make it into a print publication. By pursuing the story of castoreum on my blog, my research agenda expanded.

During historical research, historians often run into side stories, things off the main track. We may collect some document scans or photographs, but they often end up as dust-collecting bites on the computer with nowhere to go in a 'proper' publication. The research blog, however, gives the historian a place for those stories.

What's particularly fascinating about my post on drinking castoreum is that it has been the most popular post on my blog. It had been viewed 1,994 times as of 5 October 2015. A big chunk of those—nearly 500—came in March 2014 when an article on National Public Radio (NPR) titled 'Does beaver tush flavor your strawberry shortcake? We go myth busting'¹¹ linked to my post because it discussed bäverhojt. I continue to get 50 to 60 hits a month on my post, often through the NPR link. NPR did not interview me for their article, yet my work as an environmental historian had a mark on the presentation of a news story. Some NPR readers know more about castoreum and its history through my post than they ever anticipated. Side note: There is a similar story with my post Wild boar woes¹² which comes in as my second-most read post because it was linked to in a Reddit thread about a photograph of a wicked-looking Norwegian wild boar. You never know in what context your research will show up.

Post #80, 7 October 2013: Museum menageries

My project design included examining how reintroduced animals are presented to the public in zoos and museum exhibits. I was interested in finding out how animal histories are told in those settings. While text is important in those settings—what is said, or often not said, about the species' history and relationship to humans—the visual is just as key. The visual is read like a text.

Luckily, a blog is a visual space. Unlike the standard academic article or book which might have one image for every 4000 or 5000 words, my posts have at least one for every 500 words. Part of the reason for that is that it is easy to use images in the digital blogging platforms, but more important is that every post should have a 'highlighted image', which is a standard functionality of most blogging layouts and shows up in social media contexts, and posts should be visually interesting to readers.

Having the ability, and indeed the requirement, to post pictures along with my text on the blog has changed the way I collect photographs. When visiting a myriad of

⁹ <http://dolly.jorgensenweb.net/nordicnature/?p=1062>

¹⁰ <http://dolly.jorgensenweb.net/nordicnature/?p=2360>

¹¹ <http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2014/03/26/293406191/does-beaver-tush-flavor-your-strawberry-shortcake-we-go-myth-busting>

¹² <http://dolly.jorgensenweb.net/nordicnature/?p=234>

museums¹³, I now take photographs of the displays from all kinds of angles. I want to try to see the stuffed beavers or muskox as representations of landscape, as representations of a species, and as individual animals who lived and died. Watching my daughter take photos of the muskox family on display at the Polar Museum in Tromsø, Norway, reiterated how the visual mattered in the understanding of the story. The photographs I collect are so much more than documentation of a particular exhibit's layout. They try to capture the visual story.

On my blog, I have analyzed some of the stories I encountered from my museum and zoo visits, from the muskox who didn't belong in a Svalbard diorama,¹⁴ to Bruno the bear as transgressor,¹⁵ to the darkness of a room of extinct animals¹⁶. In each case, the visuals matter as much if not more than the text. The need to have images on my blog made me more sensitive to the power of the image. It reoriented my research to incorporate the form not just the substance of the reintroduction stories. In other words, how the reintroduction story is told matters.

[Fig. 4. A muskox displayed in a diorama of the Svalbard archipelago even though the population introduced there died out in the early 1980s. Frösö zoo, Sweden. Photograph by author.]

My first significant field work expedition for the project took place in June 2013. As part of that trip I stopped by the Vitenskapsmuseet in Trondheim, Norway, to see if they had any muskoxen on display. The muskox I encountered on the second floor moved me and I took several photos of the stuffed, still animal, including a selfie. One photo I took of it was awarded a prize in the A Snapshot of the Field 2013 competition of the Network in Canadian History and Environment (NiCHE)¹⁷. I reflected on the muskox encounter on my blog:

Within a dusty exhibit titled 'Natur-miljø' (Nature environment) on a dimly lit balcony-style floor, I saw this secluded muskox standing in the corner. It is a descendent of muskox caught in Greenland and reintroduced to Norway in the 20th century. It seemed to cry out for attention to break its dreadful loneliness with the words poignantly written by curators on the ground: 'Just touch me!' (*Bare ta på meg!*) And indeed it appears to have been touched many times over the years, as almost all of its qiviut, the muskox's softest and most valuable wool, was missing from the middle of its back. Like many other visitors to the museum, I touched the muskox, but in addition to hair, I could feel the cold plastic form over which the skin had been stretched to make the mounted specimen standing before me. In my tactile encounter in the corner, reaching out and touching the muskox exposed how unnatural nature often is.

Even only six months into blogging, I had already become attuned to the visual as a key element of reintroduction stories. My data collection strategy reflected the search for a something to share on my blog. I had encountered this muskox and its hair

¹³ <http://dolly.jorgensenweb.net/nordicnature/?p=1186>

¹⁴ <http://dolly.jorgensenweb.net/nordicnature/?p=850>

¹⁵ <http://dolly.jorgensenweb.net/nordicnature/?p=1087>

¹⁶ <http://dolly.jorgensenweb.net/nordicnature/?p=2269>

¹⁷ <http://niche-canada.org/>

because I was thinking about the form of the story. Blogging changed my way of seeing.

Post #88, 13 December 2013: Migrant muskox

In December 2013 I presented my second talk about the reintroduction of muskoxen in Scandinavia. The first had been a standard 20-minute academic conference paper given in August, but this was a longer colloquium presentation at the Rachel Carson Center¹⁸ in Munich. The presentation, titled “Naturalised national identities: Migrant muskox in northern nature,”¹⁹ offered a reconceptualization of muskox reintroduction as an environmental migration. I wanted to find out what would happen if I treated the muskoxen like the subjects of studies in human migration. I built up the talk in large part based on material I had blogged.

The first part of the presentation focused on the capture and forced relocation of muskox calves from Greenland to Sweden and Norway. I had explored much of its material in two previous posts: one about the context of the great Greenland hunt²⁰ to capture muskoxen and the other on the specifics of the expeditions of 1899 and 1900²¹ by Alfred Gabriel Nathorst and Gustaf Kolthoff, respectively, to capture calves.

[Fig. 5. “A shot muskox bull” from East Greenland. Reproduced from Gustaf Kolthoff, *Till Spetsbergen och Nordöstra Grönland år 1900* (Stockholm: Skoglunds förlag, 1901), page 192.]

The second part placed the reintroduced Norwegian muskoxen in the social landscape as dangerous immigrants. I included verses from a poem written by a woman who had decided she could no longer walk in the mountains because she feared a muskox attack. It was a poem about loss²² that I had first published in its entirety (in my own translation from Norwegian) on my blog in October 2013. The talk continued with stories of muskoxen who actually attacked people, although always because they felt threatened by humans who approached too close. The material was drawn extensively from my post “When curiosity kills”²³ from June that year which had told the 1964 death of Ola Stølen, the first victim of an attack by reintroduced muskox.

The final section examined the reaction to the Norwegian muskoxen which crossed the national border into Sweden in 1971. I re-appropriated information which I had uncovered on the Swedish parliamentary debates over muskox when I wrote a post about the April 2013 release of a female muskox²⁴ to supplement the Swedish herd.

My academic presentation in Munich was heavily indebted to online text I had previously written. For each post, I had worked through a set of primary materials, reaching out and gathering necessary sources. When it came time to write the

¹⁸ <http://www.carsoncenter.uni-muenchen.de/index.html>

¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3NvbmikWnGo>

²⁰ <http://dolly.jorgensenweb.net/nordicnature/?p=1034>

²¹ <http://dolly.jorgensenweb.net/nordicnature/?p=664>

²² <http://dolly.jorgensenweb.net/nordicnature/?p=1235>

²³ <http://dolly.jorgensenweb.net/nordicnature/?p=747>

²⁴ <http://dolly.jorgensenweb.net/nordicnature/?p=652>

presentation, I wove together these stories into one narrative. The work did not stop there either—I expanded upon and modified my presentation to become an academic article that was published in the edited collection *The Historical Animal* (Jørgensen, 2015a). My blog does not exist as a stand-alone entity—it is integrated into my project as one of many forms of thinking through, writing through, and delivering the project as a knowledge product.

Closing thoughts about blogging as research tool

What I hope these five vignettes about my research blog experience shows is how a blog can be an integrated tool in research. Although blogs may provide space for research dissemination, discussion, or community building, I have found that the greatest effect of my blogging is a shift in my scholarly practice by embracing two central aspects of research blogging: writing often and sharing stories.

First, a blogging commitment means writing often. I have dedicated time to this writing—time which some might think could have been better spent on traditional academic publications, but I disagree. Writing often has improved the way I write, so that I have a much more narrative and talkative style than I did before. It modified the project's progression in that sources were continuously collected, analyzed, and written about. It has meant putting ideas out there before they are fully polished, and before they are formally published. Many people are afraid to do that, either for fear of changing their mind, being criticized, or having their ideas stolen. I have never experienced any of those things. Instead, writing on a blog has made my environmental histories more lively and well thought out. Doing historical research in public by showing the research process through a blog does not hinder traditional publication—it rather encourages and enhances it.

Second, a blog provides a place for stories. Like Cronon (1992), I believe environmental history needs to embrace storytelling. I have been attuned to the draw of a good narrative and the visual because of blogging. Both have affected how I collect data, as well as how I write about it. Many of the academic publications coming out of my project were first shared in short versions as stories. In addition to writing posts about my central research questions, I have found having the ability to write a post of under 1000 words about an off-topic but interesting subject liberating. I've felt more free to pursue the unusual, strange, or fascinating than I had when I was publishing only traditional academic works. This has had direct implications for my scholarship as these 'side stories' have turned into important academic outputs of the project. The stories I tell on my blog may or may not attract readers—it's often hard to predict how a post will be received. My experience does show, however, that once you put your research online, it takes on a life of its own. Others will link to it in posts, news stories, tweets, Facebook posts, and a myriad of other places that I had not expected. That too has to be embraced as part of sharing stories.

After writing 184 posts and nearly 137,000 words on my blog, I can say that it has been time well spent. I intend to write even more. Historians, who depend on writing and telling stories, would do well to think about integrating research blogs into their practices. Like me, they may find that they are better historians for it.

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