Anne Gry Gudmundsdotter Sturød

The snow, the horse and the mountain
Towards a pluriversal understanding of natures and nature-based tourism in Kyrgyzstan

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A PhD dissertation in
Cultural Studies

Preface

When I was in Kyrgyzstan[1] for the first time in the summer of 2005, I was there as a tourist together with my boyfriend. I had briefly been acquainted with this mountainous country in Central Asia as part of a course I followed in post-Soviet studies at the University of Oslo. Intrigued by the fact that I knew hardly anything about this part of the world, and curious about this complex region stuck in between east and west both geographically and politically, I decided to go to explore the area myself.

Prior to the trip, I bought the Odyssey Guidebook on the Kyrgyz Republic (Stewart and Weldon, 2004), which opens with a welcoming note from Askar Akaev, the first president of Kyrgyzstan (1991–2005). The guidebook warmly recommended a stay with the donor-driven NGO Community Based Tourism (CBT) to experience the "real Kyrgyzstan" (Stewart and Weldon, 2004: 200). Curious to explore the authentic nomadic life and the celestial mountains, for which Kyrgyzstan was promoted, we booked a trip to the remote alpine lake of Song Kul.

When arriving at Song Kul Lake I was breath taken, partly due to the high altitude but mostly due to what I found as spectacular nature surrounding this lake located at an altitude of more than 3000 metres above sea level. Beautiful mountainous landscape surrounded the lake, some of the snow-capped peaks stretching more than 4000 metres above sea level. The young, rather unexperienced guide Azamat, told us, however, that this was *nothing* compared to the scenery he would show us the following day, a few hours' ride away from the lake. Hence, our expectations were high but after six to seven hours in the saddle, the excitement turned to disappointment: Azamat's spectacular scenery turned out to be a valley with a windy dirt road leading down to something which very well could have been any small pine forest in my native country of Norway. We got off the horses and took some photos, but to Azamat's disappointment we

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[1] While the country is officially called the Kyrgyz Republic, it is also commonly and colloquially known as Kyrgyzstan. I use a variation of both names.

rejected his suggestion to ride further down the valley and into the forest. We rather wanted to go back to the spectacular mountainous area around the lake. The ride back to the yurt camp at Song Kul felt like an eternity.

This trip in 2005 was the start of a lengthy engagement with Kyrgyzstan. The experience later got me thinking about my own expectations and perceptions of nature. It also got me thinking about Azamat's expectations and eager to show us his perception of beauty, which in this case differed from mine. It moreover led me to think how perceptions of and relations to nature differ between people and cultures and also perhaps that it might change.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation has involved many human and non-human agents who in their relation to me, and in one way or the other, have contributed to making the dissertation what it has become:

I would first and foremost like to thank all my Kyrgyz informants, colleagues and friends for their immense help. I could never have completed this without their contribution, insights, assistance, hospitality and patience: Chong rakhmat!

Furthermore, I am very thankful to the PhD-committee at the University of South-Eastern Norway for granting me the opportunity to pursue a PhD and believing in my project. A special thank you goes to Aase Haukaas Gjerde and Helge Gjermund Kaasin, for giving me the time and space to do what I am passionate about. For that I feel very lucky!

I am deeply grateful to my principal supervisor Professor Inger Birkeland, who has guided me down this rocky path. She has pushed me, challenged me and supported me in every possible way, and I am truly, very thankful! I would also like to thank my co-supervisors Associate Professor Ingeborg Nordbø and Professor Hanne Svarstad who have given useful input and support throughout the process. In addition I would like to thank Professor Gudrun Helgadottir for giving me both personal and professional guidance, as well as other colleagues, PhD-scholars and friends at USN who have given me words of support and smiles at the coffee machine, even when I did not smile back.

Of all the people that have been with me on this journey, my family is who I want to thank the most. I am forever grateful to Ylva, Jenny and Magne who came with me to Kyrgyzstan. These months gave us all memories for life and even though it was not always easy, we will still remember these days as happy ☺. I would also like to thank the Grødahl-Eriksson family for coming all the way from Norway to share wonderful days with us. Our friends and family who took care of our house, cat and other practicalities

when we were away, should neither be forgotten. A very special thank you goes to you, mamma.

However, despite the importance that all these *humans* have had in fulfilling my goal, this dissertation would never have become what it has, had it not been for the places, the objects and the animals which I have explored in my articles. So even though thanking these non-human agents perhaps sounds strange, it still feels right for me to do so as I am indebted to their characters, features, visual appearance and most of all their ability to connect to me. Although they do not speak, I believe I somehow have been able to give them a voice through the insight brought forward in my research.

Anne Gry Gudmundsdotter Sturød

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Abstract

Tourism has become one of the most common strategies for economic development in many poor countries. Moreover, tourism has become a force of globalization not only contributing to the mobilization of people and economic development but also to the spreading of values, information, knowledge and perceptions. While tourism is considered to be one of the fastest-growing industries in the world, nature-based tourism and eco-tourism are claimed to be one of the fastest-growing niches within tourism. At the same time, there is a move of tourism flows away from the traditional tourist destinations towards new and "unexplored" destinations. One of these destinations is the former Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan, located in Central Asia.

This research project asks the question: *"How does nature-based tourism contribute to changed perceptions and relations to nature in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan?"* To explore this question, I look at the practices related to nature by humans, but also how nature and the non-human agency of nature affect and relate to humans; that is, how the materiality of nature is able to change human practices. I look at some very concrete material objects, namely the snow/coal, the horse and the mountain.

Based on my empirical material and interpretations of this, I have found that perceptions and relations to nature *do* partly change when tourism starts to develop. However, perhaps more than *changing* perceptions and relations to the nature, nature-based tourism contributes to *adding* new perceptions and relations to nature, through new ways of enactment in the world. Nature-based tourism thus becomes a way for human and non-human actors to come into the world or "being in the world" both through new practices and new knowledge. These new ontologies do not necessarily replace each other, or exist separately from one another; they may actually co-exist and evolve within one another.

Keywords: Nature, nature-based tourism, Kyrgyzstan, Actor Network Theory, Political Ecology, the pluriverse

List of papers

Article 1

Sturød, A. G. (2019). From coal to cool. Reordering nature in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. *Tourist Studies, Vol 19* (2)

Article 2

Sturød, A.G; Helgadottir, G. & Nordbø, I. (2019). The Kyrgyz horse. Enactments and agencies in and beyond tourism. *Current Issues in Tourism*. DOI: 10.1080/13683500.2019.1626813

Article 3

Sturød, A.G & Birkeland. I. The political ontology of Kyrgyz mountains. Manuscript submitted to *Cultural Geographies*.

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1 Introduction

Tourism has become one of the most common strategies for economic development in many poor countries (Kennedy and D'Arcy, 2009; OECD, 2009; UNDP, 2011; UNWTO, 2012a). This was once more manifested by the UN, which declared 2017 as the *Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development* [2] (UNWTO, 2017a). It has become widely acknowledged that tourism does not only affect a country economically, but socially, politically, culturally and environmentally (see for example: Mathieson and Wall, 1982; Mbaiwa, 2005; Pigram and Wahab, 2005; Pizam and Milman, 1986; UNWTO, 2017b).

While tourism can be studied from a business-oriented perspective, it can also be understood as a broader socio-cultural phenomenon. As such, tourism can be studied as a force of globalization, which not only includes mobilization of people and economic development but also the spreading of values, information, knowledge and perceptions. Tourism has moreover proved to be an effective way of creating stories, self-consciousness and national identity (Frew and White, 2011), a mirror to the outside world about the supposed uniqueness and proud past of a nation. However, national or even local tourism development is often strongly connected to processes at a global level, far away from the place, object and people affected by tourism development. Tourism can therefore be understood as a powerful tool of political and cultural influence between geographies of different scales. Moreover, it can be understood as a phenomenon that influences people, objects and places both in a material sense and in a non-material sense, through changes in perceptions and practices. This invites us to study tourism and its complexities in a critical and reflexive manner.

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[2]The question if tourism is sustainable at all, given the link between air transport, CO_2 emissions and climate change, is beyond the scope of this thesis and has been thoroughly discussed elsewhere (see for example Cohen, Higham and Cavalier 2011; Gössling, Hall, Peeters and Scott, 2010).

1.1   Nature-based tourism and eco-tourism

While tourism is considered to be one of the fastest-growing industries in the world, nature-based tourism and eco-tourism are claimed to be one of the fastest-growing niches within tourism (Balmford, Beresford, Green, Naidoo, Walpole and Manica, 2009; Kuenzi and McNeey 2008;). Based on a thorough review, Fredman and Tyrväinen (2010: 179) conclude that there is no universally agreed definition of nature-based tourism. However, in previous research, nature-based tourism is defined as activities that people do while on holiday, which focus on engagement with nature and usually include an overnight stay (Silvennoinen and Tyrväinen, 2001). When it comes to the term eco-tourism, I use the definition developed by The International Eco-tourism Society (TIES), which defines eco-tourism as *"responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education"* (TIES, 2015). I thereby understand eco-tourism as a niche within nature-based tourism.

However, although widely promoted as a development strategy, nature-based tourism and eco-tourism has been subject to much critique (e.g. Charnley 2005; Duffy 2002; Honey 1999; Kiss 2004; Lindberg, Enriquez and Sproule, 1996). In particular, nature-based tourism or eco-tourism has been criticized for being a new form of neo-colonialism (see for example Hall and Tucker, 2004; Lacey and Ilcan, 2014), where values between Western development agencies with a nature conservation agenda are in conflict with local inhabitants and their daily needs and desire for economic growth. Akama's (1996) study of nature-based tourism in Kenya, for example, shows how eco-tourism initiatives are dominated by Western environmental values, which differ from the local values, and where top-down Western management practices are in conflict with local needs. Meletis and Campell (2007: 853) argue that a "*Western-influenced, pro-preservation and anti-extraction conception of eco-tourism, [masks] the heterogeneous nature of peoples, places, and activities that compose eco-tourism"*. They moreover argue that the promotion of eco-tourism as being 'non-consumptive' is an

inaccurate definition that might have severe consequences for both environments and people.

Hinch (1998) argues that Western environmental morals are not necessarily compatible with the worldviews of many indigenous people. Other studies, such as Coria and Calfucura (2011), argue that eco-tourism development projects often fail to be implemented successfully due to lack of financial resources, management skills and infrastructure. Several studies have moreover concluded that many eco-tourism projects in reality do not provide economic benefits to the local community (Cohen 2002; Coria and Calfucura 2011; Haller, Galvin, Meroka, Alca and Alvarez, 2008; Wells 1992). Other studies argue that eco-tourism contributes to a continuation of colonial power structures and marginalization of vulnerable groups (Duffy 2008; Hartwick and Peet, 2003; Southgate and Sharpley 2002). Fletcher (2009; 2014) observes that eco-tourism is both practiced and promoted predominantly by white, professional-middle-class members of post-industrial Western societies through the production of a "romantic wild" (Fletcher 2014). Jamal and Stronza (2009) moreover call for a perspective on eco-tourism development that is not determined solely by academics, capitalist markets, conservationists or NGOs but also by locally defined and culturally embedded relations and meaning. Jamal and Stronza argue that the impacts of the macro-level international conservation policies are negotiated in the realm of the material and cultural practices at the local level and conclude that the locals change their cultural practices related to nature, as conservation knowledge arrives. In line with this, Cater (2006) holds that eco-tourism is a cultural construct based on Western ideas of nature conservation.

These studies are just a few examples of the literature that I have drawn upon in the work with this thesis. The above is by no means meant as a thorough or complete literature review on nature-based tourism as a development strategy, as this has been done by others (see for example: Campbell 1999; Spencley 2003). The studies are mentioned because they point to important questions of concern when it comes to

nature perceptions and practices and how these are shaped by culture, history and geo-political contexts. It moreover feeds into a wider debate on nature understood as a social construct, which gained increasing attention from the 1980s onwards and which I will return to in Chapter 3: *The study of nature.* This debate has brought up some very important questions related to how power and knowledge determine our perceptions and practices towards nature.

While the popularity of nature-based tourism and eco-tourism is growing, so is the demand for new and exotic destinations. Elmahdy, Haukeland and Fredman (2017) find that a growing middle class, more flexible working hours and more demand for physical activity during leisure time, leads to an increased exploration of exotic natural destinations. One of these new destinations is Kyrgyzstan, a small landlocked country in Central Asia. The former Soviet state has in recent years experienced a rapid growth in tourism and was ranked among the top five destinations to visit in 2019 by the influential travel book publisher *Lonely Planet* (Lonley Planet, n.d.) After the collapse of the Soviet Union, and as part of a transition towards a market economy, Kyrgyzstan managed to attract the attention of foreign aid organizations, realizing the potential of Kyrgyzstan as a tourism destination. With its beautiful nature, rich fauna, and mountainous topography, Kyrgyzstan was soon promoted as a tourist destination of adventure, nature, and eco-tourism (Allen, 2006; Palmer, 2006). As in many other parts of the world and as part of the environmental policy effort, nature conservation has been linked to nature-based tourism and eco-tourism. This is evident in several strategy documents and assessments, such as "Assessment of biodiversity in Kyrgyzstan", a report developed by USAID, which states that eco-tourism should be considered as one of the initiatives to ensure nature conservation (Chemonics, 2001).

Today the Kyrgyz government regards tourism development as one of the main steps for sustainable development of rural areas and job creation in Kyrgyzstan (NCSDK n.d., Shokirov, Abdykadyrova, Dear and Nowrojee, 2014). Moreover, in 2016 the World Travel and Tourism Council predicted that Kyrgyzstan is the country in the world where

tourism will grow the fastest in the period 2016 to 2026 (WTTC, 2016). This shows the potential effect that the tourism industry might have on the Kyrgyz economy.

The impact of tourism on nature is particularly interesting to study in Kyrgyzstan, given that nature is the number one selling point when it comes to attracting foreign tourists to the country. Whereas other countries along the former "Silk Road"[3] can promote themselves with architecture and archaeological sites, Kyrgyzstan has few such sites. Instead the natural resources of the country are considered as having great development potential for tourism and recreation (Kantarci, Uysal and Magnini, 2015; Schofield 2004; Thompson, 2004). However, Kyrgyz nature also has a meaning and value beyond that of hard currency. Mountainous landscape and nomadic traditions, with a focus on harmony between man and nature, has come to play an important role in the Kyrgyz national identity discourse (Nasritdinov, 2008; Petric 2015; Schofield and Maccarrone-Eaglen, 2011).

So far, there has been relatively little research on tourism as a socio-cultural phenomenon in Central Asia, let alone nature-based tourism in Kyrgyzstan (but for exceptions see: Allen, 2006; Nordbø, Turdumambetov and Gulcan, 2018; Palmer, 2006). Studies from other regions, discussing how nature-based tourism and eco-tourism effect local communities, have therefore inspired the work with this thesis. Although Kyrgyzstan is not categorized as a developing country but rather a transition[4] country, I have drawn upon literature on tourism in developing countries as I find many of the same discourses and conflicts from these studies at play in Kyrgyz tourism development.

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[3] The Silk Road is the name of the ancient trade route from the Middle East/Europe to China. The term has recently been relaunched as a regional tourism brand for the countries along the route through the Silk Road Programme (UNWTO, 2012b)

[4] The term transition country is widely used for previous socialist countries that are/has been undergoing reforms towards market liberalisation (UN, 2014).

1.2 Research question

The research question of my thesis is: "*How does nature-based tourism contribute to changed perceptions and relations to nature in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan?*"

The research question is timely to raise given a move of tourism flows away from the traditional tourist destinations in Europe and America, towards "new" and "unexplored" destinations. Kyrgyzstan has become one of these new destinations, located outside the beaten track of most Western travellers but with an up and coming status as a destination for nature-based tourism and eco-tourism. Similar to other countries with rapid growth in tourism flows, it is a country that is experiencing changes, not only physically but also socio-culturally. Knowledge about how these changes occur and what consequences they have, for human and non-humans, is important not only in understanding tourism as a phenomenon but also in order to better plan and develop for tourism in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere.

But why Kyrgyzstan? This is a question I have often been asked throughout the last four years. There are several reasons why I chose Kyrgyzstan to conduct my research, some which can be answered from a personal point of view, while others are related to the topic I wished to explore.

First, Kyrgyzstan is a country which I have come to know from various engagements since 2003. My curiosity about this region first started with Russian and post-Soviet studies at the University of Oslo from 2003–2005. Following this, I visited the region both as a tourist during the summer of 2005 and later for a three-month field research in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as part of my MA thesis in Human Geography about water management in Central Asia (Rønningen, 2006). After a period of engagements in other post-Soviet countries (Russia, Estonia) I once more got the chance to work closely with Kyrgyzstan as a project leader for a joint educational cooperation

between the University of South-Eastern Norway (USN), three universities in Kyrgyzstan as well as three universities in Georgia.[5]

Second, and as referred to above, Kyrgyzstan is an interesting country in which to do research on changes and impacts of tourism, as international tourism is still a relatively new phenomenon. Unlike many other places in the world, one can still find certain places and people there who have yet to be exposed to international tourism. This gives ground to explore how tourism encounters contribute to processes of change and how this impacts understandings and relations to nature.

My initial idea was to study a tourism development cooperation carried out by the Norwegian Trekking Association (Den Norske Turistforening, DNT) in Kyrgyzstan. This was an initiative sparked off at the Global Mountains Summit in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek in 2002. During the summit the Kyrgyz president at the time, Askar Akaev, asked the Norwegian delegation for help to develop mountain tourism (Løseth, 2006). The most concrete result of this idea was the establishment of the Trekking Union of Kyrgyzstan (TUK), an organization which offers various day tours, mostly in areas nearby Bishkek. Although I do include empirical material based on participant observation from several trips with TUK in Article 3, I did not end up making the TUK-project a central focus of my research. This is due to the fact that TUK targets upper- and middle-class Kyrgyz as well as expats living in Bishkek, while my interest has always revolved more around how tourism contributes to change in rural communities where tourism is a new phenomenon and is developed as part of the livelihood. My interest is also more on the local communities that are encountered with tourism, than on the tourists.

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[5] This is an ongoing project which is financed by the Norwegian Agency for International Cooperation and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education (https://diku.no/). The project aims to foster cooperation in the field of sustainable tourism and involves student and staff mobility, course development, summer schools, etc.

Third, although the volume of tourism studies from Kyrgyzstan has increased throughout the last decades (see for example Alkadyrov, 2008; Boz, 2008; Jenish, 2017; Kantarci et al. 2015; Sypataev 2004; Thompson and Foster 2002), very few have critically examined the consequences of tourism on local communities (but for exceptions see Allen 2006; Palmer 2006; 2007, Schofield and Maccarrone-Eaglen, 2011). Moreover, a report developed by the Mountain Societies Research Institute explicitly calls for more research about eco-tourism in Kyrgyzstan, especially related to economic and socio-cultural sustainability (Shokirov et al., 2014). Allen's (2006) study makes an excellent contribution to the latter, discussing the impact of tourism developments on local communities in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Allen's study nevertheless lacks an analysis of how community inhabitants who are not directly involved in the tourism industry are affected by tourism development. Allen (2006: 272) writes: *"Their experiences can undoubtedly provide more diverse data that highlights how communities and individuals cope with changes caused by State policies and the actions of outside actors".* To engage with and bring forward voices of those not directly involved in tourism themselves, has thus been an important inspiration for my work. This is also in line with what Wooden and Stefes (2009:56) has noted as a general lack among scholars doing research in Central Asia, namely "work that has greater depth and that offers a clear picture of cultural political elements".

Finally, and in order to answer my research question, I have drawn upon an analytical framework with concepts from both political ecology (PE) and actor-network theory (ANT). Surprisingly few scholars of political ecology and/or ANT have studied post-Soviet contexts (exceptions are Bruno 2011; Bolotova 2004) and in particular Central Asia/Kyrgyzstan (for exceptions see Agyeman & Ogneva-Himmelberger, 2009; Davidov, 2013; Fleming, 2014; Graybill, 2007; Wooden, 2017; Schmidt and Dörre 2011; Kronenberg, 2013). I therefore see an opportunity to contribute and extend a growing body of ANT-oriented tourism studies as well as the analytical approach of political ecology to studies in a region relatively unexplored both by tourism scholars as well as scholars of political ecology and ANT more in general. By this, I also follow up on Wooden

and Stefes (2009:51), who argues that Central Asian environmental studies are mostly policy driven, with little theoretical value and who calls for studies with "broader theoretical themes to allow comparability and insights into political realities". As I will discuss and argue first in Chapter 3 and later in Chapter 6, political ecology has helped me understand my research field in terms of how understanding of nature is culturally constructed through structures of power and knowledge. While this has been important, I also needed an approach that allowed me to focus on the materiality of tourism, i.e. actual objects of nature. For this I turned to concepts of ANT, and studies of human and non-human actors, or what the French philosopher Bruno Latour (1996) has termed "actants", and how they relate to one another.

1.3   Research design

I approach my research question through three articles where I look at three distinctly different materials of nature: **the snow, the horse and the mountain.** These particular objects or actants, are among the most featured in Kyrgyz' nature-based tourism, which makes them particularly interesting to study in relation to the research question. Moreover, they have become material objects of tourism within a relatively short time span, which makes them interesting to explore as it would be reasonable to think that tourism has exposed them to certain changes with regards to meanings, practices and values.

However, it was not a given from the start that I would focus on these objects. It was rather something which I gradually identified during the process, partly based on the empirical material which I produced during my field work. Although I will present the three articles and the findings later in Chapter 5, I will now give a brief explanation of how I ended up focusing on these particular objects:

In **Article 1**, the focus is on snow (as opposed to coal). This was something which came as a direct result of the first field research in June 2016, when I visited the up-and-coming ski destination Jyrgalan, a previous coal-mining town located in north-eastern

Kyrgyzstan. As I will explain later, this field research gave me very rich data material about how the surrounding nature has come to be perceived and used differently due to tourism. Intrigued by my empirical findings from this mountain village, I decided to write an article where I focused on changed perceptions and relations to snow, which has become one of the most important nature assets for tourism in this village.

In **Article 2,** the focus is on the horse. This article came as a result of a pilot research which was initiated by my colleagues, Associate Professor Ingeborg Nordbø and Professor Gudrun Helgadottir at the USN. Their empirical material, collected during a short field trip in Kyrgyzstan in 2015, became an interesting starting point to reflect on the horse, which without doubt is one of the most featured tourism resources of Kyrgyzstan and is heavily used for externally promoting the country. I was invited into the research project and was able to build upon the material collected by Nordbø and Helgadottir when I conducted my own field work in 2016 and 2017. Helgadottir also joined me in parts of my field work in 2017.

Article 3, which I write together with Professor Inger Birkeland, is perhaps the article thematically closest to my initial plan. As mentioned in the previous chapter I was intrigued about the Norwegian Trekking Association (DNT) project in Kyrgyzstan. I was particularly interested to find out if the Trekking Union of Kyrgyzstan projects, which aimed to increase mountain tourism in the country, led to changed perceptions of the mountains among the local population. As explained in Chapter 1.2, I chose not to focus on this project per se, but rather on the Kyrgyz mountains in general as I was not interested in nature perceptions of tourists and trekkers, which was the main target of the TUK-project.

1.4   Structure of the thesis

The thesis is structured in the following way: In the next chapter, **Chapter 2**, I will give a brief historical and geographical background of Kyrgyzstan, while **Chapter 3** gives an account of ontological and epistemological discussions with regard to the study of nature. This is also where I introduce the analytical approach and concepts which I use

in the articles. **Chapter 4** is dedicated methodology. Here I describe the two major field work projects that I carried out, I reflect upon my own role as researcher, I present the methods and empirical data used and I discuss ethical questions. **Chapter 5** gives a summary of the three articles, while **Chapter 6** discusses the results, presents the conclusion and contribution of the thesis.

2 Kyrgyzstan: Historical and geographical background

Kyrgyzstan is located in the region known as Central Asia, bordering Kazakhstan in the north, China in the southeast, Uzbekistan in the east and Tajikistan in the south. Located along what is known as the Great Silk Road, the region became an important transit area for trade between Europe and China as early as 220 BC (Boulnois, 2004).

Figure 1: Kyrgyzstan (source: US Central Intelligence Service)

Before Russian expansion into the region in the second half of the nineteenth century, the region was predominantly part of the Khoqand Khanate – a multi-ethnic state with the capital Koqand located in the Ferghana valley in what is today Uzbekistan (Chotaeva, 2016). In pre-Islamic religious and belief-rituals were related to nature and very tightly linked with the natural environment (Sahin, 2017). Islam started to spread in what is present day Kyrgyzstan in the late ninth and early tenth century.

With the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was created in 1918, followed by a civil war between the White and the Red Army ending in 1920. In 1924 the Central Asian region was delimitated and the Kara-Kyrgyz Autonomous Republic, renamed Kyrgyz Autonomous Republic in 1925, was established and marked what in modern terms would be called a nation (Chotaeva, 2016).

Prior to the Russian expansion into Central Asia, the Kyrgyz people were predominantly nomadic, practising transhumant migration with livestock breeding and herding in the mountain pastures during summer and settling in the valleys during winter (van Veen 1995). With Russian and later Soviet rule this changed. Nomadism and transhumant migration were thought of as "backwards" (Beyer,2016; Kreutzmann, 2012) and the Kyrgyz nomads were settled in collective farms during the 1930s and onwards (Petric, 2015). This has later become known as "the Great Break" where the attempt was to overcome the traditional forms of life (Prozorov, 2014).

The region has been a turbulent area in terms of various shifting reigns from the Turkic Era, throughout the Mongolian empire of Genghis Khan and up until the Russian expansion in the 19th century. The latter was accompanied by a subsequent struggle between Russia and Great Britain for control of the region, known as the Great Game.

After approximately seventy years of Soviet rule, the Central Asian states became independent in 1991. Unlike other Soviet republics, such as the Baltic countries, there had been little internal pressure for independence among the Central Asian republics and the new status as nation states came as somewhat of a shock (Tishkov, 1997). The status as an independent nation in 1991 was new and posed many challenges to the country, which was regarded as one of the poorest countries among the former Soviet republics. Due to the structural dependency between Moscow and the Soviet periphery, the disintegration of the Soviet Union had great impact on Kyrgyzstan (Spoor, 1999). GDP fell by 50 per cent in the period from 1991–96, and by the end of the 1990s 64 per cent of the population was living in poverty (World Bank, 2009).

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001 sparked off new geo-political struggles as Central Asia and in particular Western-friendly Kyrgyzstan, was seen as a strategic region in the US intervention in Afghanistan. A US military base was established at the Manas airport in Bishkek to serve US operations in Afghanistan. This was a cooperation very much disliked by Russia and which, after pressure from the Russian president Vladimir Putin, was abandoned in 2014 (Kucera, 2018).

Along with other former socialist countries, Kyrgyzstan is most commonly classified as a transition economy (UN 2014). The first president of the Kyrgyz republic, Askar Akaev, soon made a choice to bring his country from socialism to a market economy using a strategy of "shock therapy". One of the main priorities of Akaev, during the 1990s, was to establish an attractive foreign investment climate to promote rapid economic reform. By choosing a neoliberal development path, Kyrgyzstan gained a reputation in the West as a reform-friendly country and in return Akaev received substantial support by Western countries and international organizations that came to reform his country (Petric, 2015). Although having sought stronger links with Russia the last decade, Kyrgyzstan is often mentioned as the democratic lighthouse in Central Asia. Until 2019, Kyrgyzstan was the only country in the region which has had several presidents after its independence. [6] However, the country has also experienced periods of political instability, including two revolutions (2005 and 2010) where the sitting president was overthrown (ICG, 2015).

The rapid reforms of privatization backed and promoted by the World Bank and IMF, have led to a heavily indebted state where industry and agriculture have largely collapsed (Petric, 2015). The level of poverty is still high, especially in rural and mountainous areas with an increasing number of outbound work migrants (Eurasian Development Bank/UNDP, 2015) and the world's highest share of GDP based on remittances (35 per cent) (McCarthy, 2018). The migration has caused a situation of "brain drain" where many educated Kyrgyz leave to take better paid, but lower ranking jobs, in other countries, especially Russia (Thieme, 2012). Livestock is the main source of livelihood for people in rural areas with most of the farmers with no formal education within agriculture (Swinnen, Van Herck and Sneyers, 2011).

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[6] Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have also had changes in presidency, but in both cases, this was due to the death of the sitting president (Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan and Saparmurat Niayzov in Turkmenistan). Kazakhstan held its first ever presidential election in June 2019.

With independence, and in the void after socialist ideology, the Islamic religion has been revived. It is important to note, however, that various religious and belief rituals were formed among the Kyrgyz community and in the geography of Kyrgyzstan, with a mix of animism and Islamic beliefs.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, the socialist ideology was replaced by a new nationalist discourse where harmony between man and nature was seen as essential part of the Kyrgyz culture (Murzakulova and Schoberlein, 2009). Nomadic traditions were popularised as part of the cultural heritage and used in the new national discourse and are today portrayed as something positive (Kerven, Steimann, Dear and Ashley, 2012; Beyer 2016). Epics, in particular the grand national epic *Manas* but also lesser epics such as *Kojojash*, which had been condemned as too nationalistic and even religious, during the Soviet period, were now popularized. The epics have been interpreted as:

> … *strong ecological message to the people, i.e., to respect and preserve nature and animals by making proper use of them but not exploiting them. It shows that the people are not the masters of nature. It tells that we, the humans and animals alike, are all children of nature and that animals also have a soul and feelings like human beings and that they also love their children and family as we do* (Köēümkulkļz, 2004).

The break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 coincided with an increased global attention on environmental issues towards the turn of the century. It can be argued that this has empowered the Kyrgyz national discourse, emphasizing ancient nomadic beliefs of harmony between nature and humans. With the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 and global policy documents such as Agenda 21, much donor-supported activities in Kyrgyzstan during the 1990s were related to nature conservation, biodiversity and environmental sustainability. Many research reports on issues such as pasture degradation (Baibagushev, 2015; Kerven et al. 2012) were produced in the period after its independence along with various agreements, such as the UN Framework Convention

on Climate Change in 1992 and the Convention on Biodiversity which was ratified in 1996 (Ministry of Environmental Protection of the Kyrgyz Republic, 1998). In the Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, it is stated that despite the social and economic difficulties of the transition period, nature protection issues have been made a priority in state policy (Ministry of Environmental Protection of the Kyrgyz Republic, 1998).

The Rio meeting also contributed to putting mountains on the global environmental agenda. This awarded Kyrgyzstan a special place of concern, which together with president Akaev's extensive outreach to Western countries and donor organizations, gave Kyrgyzstan a position in the network of other mountain countries, such as Switzerland (Debarbieux and Rudaz, 2015). Switzerland was also the country that encouraged Kyrgyzstan to pay attention to the vulnerability of mountain issues and to engage in what UN declared *The International Year of Mountains* in 2002 (UN, 2000). Nature therefore became an important part in building the new national discourse of Kyrgyzstan, imposed from both national and international level. At the same time research claims that the Kyrgyz environment has suffered from extensive overgrazing, degradation of fragile mountain pastures and de-forestation resulting in dramatic losses of biodiversity resources and a need for immediate protection (Farrington, 2005).

Despite concern for issues of degradation, nature has become the number one selling point in tourism. This is evident in the Odyssey Guidebook for the Kyrgyz Republic, which opens with a quote from the former president Askar Akaev

> *You can visit the lake of Issyk Kul […] and the snowy peaks of the majestic Ala Too mountains, which attract mountain climbers and rock climbers from all over the world. A number of ski bases are also now welcoming visitors. Adventure tourism, such as trekking, hunting and rafting, are also on offer* (Stewart and Weldon, 2004: 1).

The potential that nature holds for developing tourism in Kyrgyzstan, has been clearly emphasized among researchers and policy makers. A recent report on trends and challenges in the tourism sector in Kyrgyzstan, published by the Institute of Public Policy

and Administration at the University of Central Asia, introduces Kyrgyzstan in the following way:

> *Nestled between the magnificent Tien-Shan and Pamir-Alay Mountains, Kyrgyzstan is blessed with a stunning variety of landscapes and ecosystems including lofty mountain peaks and glaciers, alpine pastures and lakes, flower-covered valleys and rivers, arid canyons and semi-deserts. Moreover, Kyrgyzstan boasts a rich historical and cultural heritage encompassing Asian nomadic traditions and many ancient civilizations along the Silk Road (Jenish, 2017:7).*

The report argues that despite this rich natural endowment, tourism has a much higher growth potential. The report moreover points to a difference in demands among tourists. While tourist from CIS countries mostly prefer vacations along the Issyk Kul Lake, famously known for beach resorts, adventure products such as trekking, climbing, horse riding and skiing, are the most popular products among tourists from Europe, the USA and Japan.

Tourism flows from other Soviet republics to Kyrgyzstan, were important also during Soviet times, with about 1 million tourists annually in the 1980s, (Export.gov, 2019) mostly concentrated around the Issyk Kul Lake.

Figure 2: An Issyk Kul beach resort near Karakol. (Photo by author)

The north shore of the lake was developed for tourism purposes since the 1950s and was considered a popular recreational area with more than one hundred sanatoriums,[7] holiday resorts and children's holiday camps (Supataev, 2005). Tourists from outside the Soviet Union, however, were a rare sight, as the country was more or less closed to visitors from other countries until its independence in 1991 (Schofield, 2004). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the tourist arrivals declined by nearly 90 per cent by the end of the 1990s. Almost thirty years later, the number has rebounded and the recorded number of visitors to Kyrgyzstan for the year 2017 was 1,3 million and tourism

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[7] Among the sanatoria was the famous Jety Ögus sanatorium, known throughout the Soviet Union for offering radon water and hydrogen sulphide treatments, and also the sanatoria in Tamga in the south shore of Issyk Kul lake, known to host famous cosmonauts, such as Juri Gagarin, upon return back from space.

accounted for 4,8 per cent of the GDP in 2017, compared to 3,5 per cent in 2006 (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2018).
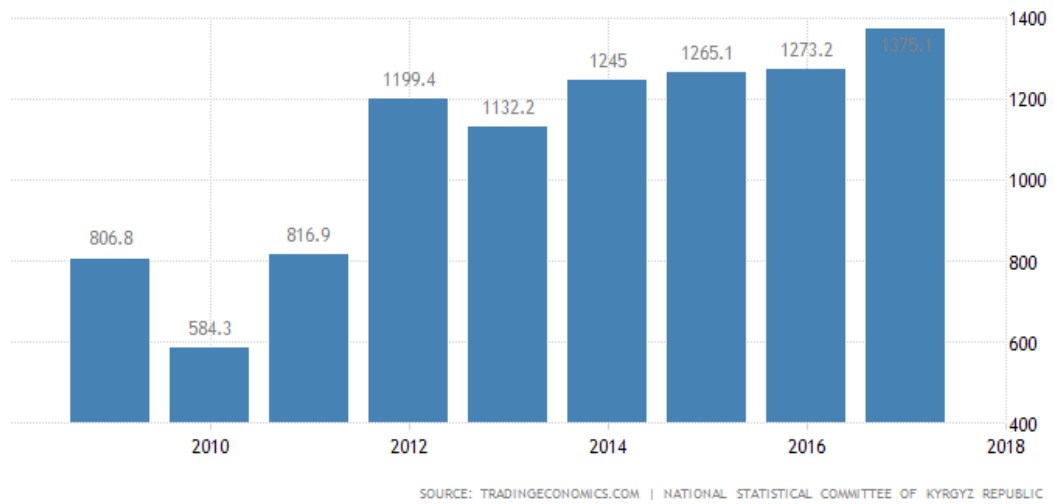

Figure 4: Number of tourist arrivals in Kyrgyzstan (source: National Statistical Committee of Kyrgyz Republic)

3 The study of nature

A study of changed perceptions and practices related to nature soon brings ontological and epistemological questions to the table. Substantially it brings up questions such as: What is nature and how can we study it? Is it possible to study nature as a separate realm? What is it actually possible to know about nature or the world in general?

How these questions are answered is closely connected to the research discipline and research traditions from which nature is studied.

Although ideas of nature are as old as humanity, the scientific view of nature as we know it dates from the Enlightenment and up until today. Since then and until today, many scientists have tried to describe and explain nature, with an underlying assumption that there is an independent reality, which can be studied through a value-free and objective scientific method, and where the scientist is detached from what she is researching. This way of understanding the world, which Descola (2013) categorizes as naturalism, presupposes a singular reality independent of human perceptions where human behaviour is seen as contextually bound in a real world of concrete and tangible social relationships (Morgan, 1983).

Social constructivists have challenged this understanding of the world, pointing to how power relations and cultural codes construct our understanding of nature (Castree and Braun, 1998). The underlying epistemological assumption here is that nature is intrinsically social and that it is not possible to study the reality in a neutral manner, separated from the social. Through this understanding our acting in the world will always be contingent and perceived through our cultural lenses (Nustad, 2015). Social constructivists deny that it is possible to talk about truth and objectivity in a universal sense and rather claim that our knowledge of the world is contingent upon our understandings, ideas, presuppositions and experience. This again raises the question whether there exists a reality *beyond* our understanding.

A critique against the constructivist argument has been that it fails to acknowledge the physical reality of nature (Demeritt, 2002). While radical social constructivists would claim that it does not and therefore deny the idea of scientific realism, a more moderate form of social constructivism does not deny that the material world does indeed exist and is what we base our understandings, meanings, values etc. on (Godfrey-Smith, 2003).

While acknowledging that nature consists of physical and concrete features, creatures and objects, my research approach draws on an ontology and epistemology that sees human relations to nature as strongly connected to cultural, socioeconomic and political factors (Escobar, 1999:1). However, and although it might seem like a contradiction, my research also draws upon research that *questions* the way nature has been socially constructed as separate from the social and cultural realm. With this approach, I draw upon critical studies that claim that a particular binary construction of nature and culture occurred and developed along with industrialization in Europe and North America throughout the last few centuries (Cronon, 1996; Latour, 1993; Nustad, 2015). This is what many social scientists see as a transcendence to modernization, thereby claiming that the nature/culture dichotomy is a modern Western phenomenon.

In the next section, I will go more into depth in this thinking, and also relate this discussion to the geographical and political context of my study.

3.1 The binary construction of nature/culture

That physical nature represents an objective reality that can be explained and thus represents a reality located outside of humanity and which may be understood scientifically, has become embedded in Western philosophical thought. Geographer Neil Smith traces the modern conception of nature back to the British philosopher Francis Bacon and "his enthusiastic advocacy of the mastery of nature". Smith (2008:13) writes:

[With] Bacon onward it is commonplace that science treats nature as external in the sense that scientific method and procedure dictates an absolute abstraction both from the social context of the events and objects under scrutiny and from the social context of the scientific activity itself.

Through this worldview, nature was seen as a passive object, without agency, to be used and worked by humans (Williams, 1972). From an ontological point of view, the natural science approach to nature has traditionally been a positivistic one, assuming that nature can be understood as objective entities and in separation from our epistemological perspectives. Although challenged, this ontological understanding of nature is still dominant in natural sciences today. Acompora (2008:3) claims that "many if not most environmentalists are naïve naturalists in the sense that they believe in the 'objective outdoors' – an external world existing beyond human edifice and mentality". Milton (1999) has moreover found that, this version of environmentalism is most widespread in Western industrial societies, while Eder (1996), argues that this understanding of nature is typically fostered by non-governmental environmentalist organizations.

While nature is seen as something objective, culture has come to be considered as something other than nature. Whereas nature has come to be understood as something which can exist separately from humans, culture is implicitly understood as something "made up" by humans, something which is contingent on humans. Many scholars have questioned the binary construction of culture and nature, and especially that the separation of the two often is taken for granted, in Western society. Habermas' (1987:2) critique of what he terms "scientific knowledge" has been influential in this critique. Habermas believed that "modern science has divorced itself from the means of understanding its social context" (Unwin, 1992:41). In this lies the understanding that our knowledge of nature and the environment are socially constructed, and that the nature/culture divide has become part of what Gramsci would call cultural hegemony (Stoddart, 2007) of Western modernism through discursive practices.

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The French philosopher Bruno Latour has come to be known as one of the greatest critics of the distinction modernity makes between society and nature. Rather than seeing nature and culture as separate categories, Latour (1993) attempts to reconnect the two. He argues that social scientists fail to understand the world if we only manage to explain the world with the very same pre-determined categories as the ones we are trying to explain. In other words, it does not make sense to explain culture with reference to culture. Latour (1993:104) writes:

> [T]he very notion of culture is an artifact created by bracketing Nature off. Cultures – different or universal – do not exist, any more than Nature does. There are only natures-cultures, and these offer the only possible basis for comparison

Latour calls for a relational ontology where we need to break away from the modern separation of culture and nature, but where we rather understand reality as hybrid relations. Through such an understanding the categories nature and culture are divisions which we have imposed upon the world (Braun, 2008). However, while the divide between nature and culture might be the product of a modern, discursive dichotomy, it is nevertheless mirrored in actual policies and nature-management practices such as protected areas and nature conservation. Using Australian conservation policies as an example, Mulligan (2001) show how such policy instruments can contribute to a sharper dichotomy between nature and culture since nature when declared for protection, often is physically marked off. Mulligan argues that this leads to a "frontier mentality" (Mulligan, 2001: 25) and rather calls for conservation that is able to affectively bond humans and the land, inspired by the Aboriginals ability to "listen to the land" (Mulligan, 2001: 31).

In the next section I will discuss nature construction in a socialist/post-socialist context and why I argue that eco-tourism and nature-based tourism can be understood as a political instrument in Kyrgyzstan.

3.2   Western vs socialist/post-socialist nature constructions?

The dualism of nature/culture described above has often been explained by critical social theorists as a product of Western capitalism. However, there are studies showing that this binary construction also was dominant in Soviet and socialist ideology. Snajdr for example (2011:22) notes that the "communist environmentality, which, through the configuration of nature as passive, appeared to place a decisive boundary between the realms of nature and culture". The Soviet citizens were indoctrinated through education and media to view industrial complexes as "monuments of progress of socialism" (Snajdr, 2011:25). Natural resources were primarily something that should be used for the purposes of the human being.

Bolotova (2004:105) has moreover shown in her research on environmental discourses in the Soviet Union, that the popular socialist discourse characterized nature as wild and hostile, and as opposed to man, where "Romanticizing exploration and exploitation of the nature was characteristic of the Soviet epoch". Groys (2011:122) draws it even further and claims that "Soviet power demonstrated […] a deep, almost instinctive aversion to everything natural". This hostility towards nature has been further exemplified by a quote from Maxim Gorky, the founder of socialist realism, stating that: "nature is acting as our enemy and we must unanimously wage war against it as an enemy" (Gorky cited in Dobrenko, 2007:80).

Bruno (2011) notes that there has been done less research on the environmental history of communism as opposed to capitalism. He compares Soviet environmental history with that of Western environmental thought and argues that the process of "attempting to make nature modern" had been a continual and unified process from the late imperial era throughout Soviet socialism and until today (Bruno, 2011:26). He argues that the human–nature relation in post-Soviet thought is not necessarily a product of socialism. Rather, Bruno argues, the human-nature relation has been part of a longer, ongoing process where nature has become imagined as a set of resources that simply needed productive labour to realise their value and allow for regional modernization. Bruno

(2011) suggests that it was not the type of economic system (capitalism or communism) that mattered in terms of altering the human–environment relationship, but that both systems were driven by a common process of economic modernization, where nature played more or less the same role in the process. This adds to Short's (1991: 19–20) argument that "conquering of the wilderness" has been present in the nation-building process in many states throughout the world. Nature becomes part of a civic form of nationalism where certain values and relations to nature have been used in order to build national identity.

Despite similarities between the Western and socialist versions of the binary construction of nature/culture, it does not necessarily mean that they are articulated in the same way in Western and socialists contexts or identical "outcomes" or practises. Prozorov (2014) claims that scholars, such as Foucault, have subsumed Soviet socialism as part of Western rationalization and by that missed important distinctions. Prozorov argues that the socialist revolution, and the aim of transcendence to a socialist society, make the governing practice of the Soviet, and in particular Stalin, unique as it aimed to change nature and humans *into something else,* not just govern and control them. Hoenig's (2014) study of nature in socialist Poland, underlines this, showing how socialism constructed an identity around the transformation of man, society and environment, where large-scale industrial projects, factories, coal mines and gigantic dams became of symbolic and economic importance. Hence, in the Soviet case, it makes sense to talk about a constructed nature, both from a constructivist social science perspective and in a more direct sense as socialism as ideology aimed at *transcending* nature, including the human being.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, there was a wave of Western literature and reports on the disastrous environmental damages of the Soviet Union (see for example: Bowers, 1993; DiLorenzo, 1992; Pryde, 1991). The focus on environmental disasters such as the Chernobyl accident, the shrinking of the Aral Sea and other "dirty secrets" of communism (Peterson, 1993:2) in Western environmental discourse, has been highlighted as "proof" of the failed socialist system and the neglect of nature in Soviet

Union. While the socialist relation to nature is often portrayed as man against nature, it should be noted that some Western scholars, such as Farrington (2005) have pointed out the socialist system made schemes to protect nature, such as the establishment of protected areas (*zapovedniki*). Others, such as Sievers (1998) have claimed that the Soviets were much devoted to environmental protection. Weiner (1999) has moreover claimed that environmental issues were one of the few zones of relatively free speech in the Soviet Union.

Although there is no doubt that nature-management practices during the Soviet period caused many disastrous effects, it is important to keep in mind that much of the literature referred to above has been coloured by an ideological divide (neoliberalism versus socialism). Rather than reproducing claims of the bad Soviet nature management, I find it more interesting to point to how the failure and break-up of the Soviet Union granted Western environmental scientists and experts a "right" to intervene in issues regarding nature management and environmental issues in the region. Nature conservation, biodiversity and climate change were not only issues of general concern but became a powerful instrument to gain political control and renewed legitimacy for being involved in Russia's backyard.

In line with this, nature-based tourism and eco-tourism have become important policy instruments which could unite nature protection as well as a transition to market economy. Nature-based tourism and eco-tourism as a development strategy can be understood as a form of governance, where Western idealization of nature as something separate from humans is paired with market-oriented nature politics (Lacey and Ilcan, 2014; West and Carrier, 2004). Moreover, and as noted by Wooden and Stefes (2009), many Western and local researchers conducting studies in Central Asia, have been dependent on donor financing where the research has been mostly policy driven.

In the following section, I will elaborate further on how I understand and relate the above with reference to the analytical approaches that I use in my articles.

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3.3   Analytical approach and concepts

The above discussion indicates that there are several binary constructions that could be explored in relation to the research question: that of nature/culture, modern/pre-modern, communism and capitalism. A critical question that arise is this: If these binary constructions are constructed, how can we study the world without referring to the very same categories as we have constructed? To venture this, I find it necessary with an analytical approach, which allows for a critical perspective on nature construction. At the same time, I have turned to concepts that are able to challenge the normative and structural explanatory factors that commonly have been used in critical tourism studies (as discussed in Chapter 1.3), and rather look at actual ongoing processes of change. In other words: I wanted to relate local and global tourism development, and questions of power/knowledge, to that of concrete, material objects "on the ground".

For this, I have found it useful to draw upon two analytical approaches: political ecology (PE) and actor-network theory (ANT) which I now will describe separately:

3.3.1 Political ecology

The research field political ecology is explained as developing in opposition to the positivistic stance on nature in natural sciences, during the 1970s and 80s (Robbins, 2004). It moreover came about as an effort to bring the natural and social sciences into conversation (Chagani, 2014). Despite the diversity, political ecology research is united in an effort to show how nature is politically constructed (Hvalkof and Escobar, 1998) as well as to understand how the relationship between humans and the environment is produced, reproduced, and altered through discursive and material articulations of nature and society (Mostafanezhad, Norum, Shelton & Thompson-Carr, 2016). In other words; how our understanding and ways of relating to the nature is shaped by politics and subsequent power structures. Bridge, McCarthy and Perreault (2015) argue that political ecology should not be characterized by its research topics but rather its common commitments. These commitments are divided into first, the "*theoretical commitment* to critical social theory and a post-positivistic understanding of nature and

the production of knowledge about it, which views these as inseparable from social relations of power". Second, "methodological commitments, to in-depth, direct observation involving qualitative research of some sort, often in combination with quantitative methods and/or document analysis". And third, political ecology is characterized by a normative political commitment to social justice and structural political change (Bridge et al., 2015:7, italics original).

Roderick P. Neumann's (1998) study of African wilderness has become an important reference within political ecology studies. In his seminal book *Imposing Wilderness*, Neumann looks at the way our knowledge and understanding of nature also affects the way nature is being managed. In this book he shows how the idea of wilderness, or the idea of how "Africa *should* look" (Neumann, 1998:1), is culturally constructed by "educated Westerners" who "recognize certain landscapes as natural in part because we have been trained to expect a particular vision through centuries of painting, poetry, literature and landscape design". Neumann (2005) moreover argues that biodiversity has been constructed as an object of global concern in the 1980s in a top-down manner, through a Northern narrative that stresses biodiversity as a common heritage of humankind. Along the same line Escobar (1998:53) argues that "although biodiversity has concrete biophysical referents, it must be seen as a discursive inversion of recent origin" and that biodiversity therefore must be studied in the interface between nature and culture, originating from a vast network of sites and actors. This view of discursive sites and actors is quite similar to what Maarten Hajer has termed *discourse coalitions*, which he defines as the "ensemble of a set of story lines, the actors that utter these story lines, and the practices that conform to these storylines, all organized around a discourse" (Hajer, 1993:47).

Neumann (2005) is concerned with the *power dimension* of narrative constructions and how this affects nature management. Power is a central issue of concern among political ecologists (Svarstad, Benjaminsen and Overå, 2018) and many political ecology studies draw upon the French philosopher Michel Foucault and his understanding of the relationship between power and knowledge. Foucault argues that our knowledge is

contingent on cultural codes in a given time, which feed into an underlying truth regime, or an episteme (Foucault, 1966/1970). Political ecologies especially relate this way of thinking to the way we understand and relate to nature, and how hegemonic power/knowledge systems rule the way nature is being managed. Especially Foucault's (1991) concept of "governmentality", and the related concepts "eco-governmentality" (Valdivia, 2015) and environmentality (Agrawal, 2005; Luke 1995; 1999), have been used to explore how the environment has become the rationality of rule. In this way, political ecologists have been eager to unveil the connections between discursive constructions of nature and their implications. How the way we think, talk about and understand nature, has implications for on-the-ground practices. The construction of nature is seen as a result of human decision-making, political strategies, preferences and choices, which lead to cognitive mapping of the social and the natural (Hvalkof and Escobar, 1998: 426). Political ecologists are moreover attentive to how the discursive and material articulations spread both from and between different geographical levels and how structures of power, such as blueprint narratives of rural development created on a global scale, affect people on a local scale (Roe, 1991).

In the past decades there has been an upsurge in critical tourism studies drawing upon political ecology (see for example: Cole, 2012; Douglas, 2014; Duffy, 2002; Gössling, 2003; Stonich, 1998, as well as two recent edited volumes: Mostafanezhad et al. 2016 and Nepal and Saarinen 2016). This research approach contributes with important insights in the tourism field. An example is Jamal and Stronza's (2009) research on eco-tourism in Peru. They discuss the impacts of the macro-level international conservation policies and how they are negotiated in the realm of material and cultural practices at the local level. They conclude that the locals change their cultural practices related to nature, due to the conservation knowledge brought to the communities through the development of eco-tourism.

Political ecology studies thus bring questions of knowledge production, cultural values and power to the table. Who gets to define how nature ought to look and be used? What are the underlying power structures and mechanisms behind such definitions? Who gets

to benefit from nature? Whose values are valued the most? Who are the "winners"? Who are the "losers"? And where does it leave nature itself?

However, while it is important to uncover power structures which might lead to injustice and marginalization of certain stakeholders, the world is often more complex than defining "winners or losers". Political ecology studies have therefore been criticised for treating stakeholder groups as monolithic essentials, with little attention to the variations among them (Bury, 2008, Kronenberg, 2013). The tendency of political ecology to the latter, is perhaps primarily driven by a normative and conflict-oriented perspective, where "marginalization" often becomes a causal effect with few nuances. Marginalization is rarely something that effects a group of stakeholders in the same way, and there will often be individuals within a so-called marginalized group who are able to benefit from particular situations and certain power structures. Bianchi (2009: 490) warns that where the *"exploration of discursive power falls somewhat short is in the lack of any sustained analysis of how and why particular discourses become more powerful than others or how they become institutionalized within specific historical-geographical settings"*. Bianchi rather calls for an approach that is able to include actors, as they themselves contribute to create the discourses and institutions that they themselves are entrapped by. By such, Bianchi calls for a more systematic analysis of the actions and interactions between agency and discourses.

3.3.2 Actor-Network Theory

As explained above, a political ecology approach provides the tourism researchers with both the lens and concepts for asking critical questions from a normative standpoint. However, I realized throughout my research and particularly after conducting the first field research in June 2016, that I needed a conceptual framework that was able to help me analyse and explain more on-the-ground processes of change. I needed an approach, which would allow me to study actual changes in *how* perceptions and relations to nature came to change, not just *why* they changed with references to discourses and global power structures. Moreover, I needed an analytical approach that enabled me to

study the actual human beings and objects in the field, i.e. humans, but more particularly the *non-human actors*,[8] which are included (but also excluded) in tourism development. Or, to put it differently: I needed concepts which would help me study the messy relations of tourism, which I myself had observed on the ground.

For this, I turned to and found much help from the concepts and studies of actor-network theory (ANT). This is an analytical approach which originated within Science and Technology Studies (STS) in the 1980s and is usually associated with philosophers such as Bruno Latour, John Law and Michel Callon. A fundamental principle of this post-humanist approach, sometimes traced back to the "antihumanism" of Louis Althusser (Chagani, 2014), is its radical ontological position that rejects the usual binary between human and non-human, culture and nature, modern and non-modern. In this lies the assumption that such categories are not something given, or universally defined and accepted, and thus cannot be used alone to explain the world. The approach moves away from pre-conditioned structural explanations and transcends a priori analytical structures. This means that ANT does not presume an a priori existence of "social" categories such as power, the state and the market that exists beyond human beings, but rather understands reality through a relational approach, i.e. a world where "entities take their form and acquire their attributes as a result of their relationships with other entities" (Law, 1999:3). To come out of the realm of nature/culture binary, actor-network theory suggests drawing attention away from static categories. In other words, to study the world less as a product of certain values, ideologies etc. and more as a process in which meaning is constructed.

By this ANT highlights the complex and intertwined relationship between humans and non-humans and sees the capacity to act not as something that can be possessed by one single actor, but rather as a relational capacity created through an actor-network.

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[8] An actor, also defined as an actant by Latour (1996:373) is in this sense "something that acts, or to which activity is granted by another".

However, the perspective of non-humans as actors with agency brings out some controversial questions. Critics would argue that it makes little sense to talk about agency of others than humans and questions the ability of non-human actors to have intentional will (see for example Gregory, 2014). While the perspective of non-human agency also varies within ANT, I have found support in the understanding of non-human agency with as an actor's ability to connect to, create an effect and engage with other actors, not from simply being a human or as a consequence of intentionality (Ren, 2011, Ren, Jóhannesson and van der Duim, 2012). Through this perspective agency can be understood as something which can be ascribed to humans and non-humans alike.

During the last decades, an increasing number of tourism scholars have made use of ANT in their research. Researchers such as van der Duim (2005; 2007), Ren (2009; 2011), and Jóhannesson, Ren & Van der Duim (2015) and Rodger, Moore & Newsome (2009) have studied tourism using the ANT framework. With an ANT/post-humanism perspective, tourism is seen as a mode of ordering reality which (re)arranges people, things, technologies, discourses and values in certain, rather than other ways (Franklin, 2004, Jóhannesson et al., 2015). Van der Duim (2005, 2007) explains this as complex processes of translation where people and things become entangled with one another in relational networks, or what he labels *tourismscapes.* Rather than focusing on the *outcome* of the tourismscapes, the focus here is on the *process and* the methods used to attract and convince others that they have an interest in connecting and relating (Barnes 2005; Murdoch 1998).

Rather than being a theory on its own, and with Latour (1998) himself being reluctant even to term ANT a theory, ANT has proved to be analytical approach that can be linked to other approaches and theories. Van der Duim, Ren and Jóhannesson (2017: 147), conclude that: "ANT is […] prone to carve out relations between different disciplines, both within current tourism networks and beyond, connecting theories, concepts and actors, which can further yield insights into complex and messy more-than-tourism dynamics as well as encouraging knowledge co-construction."

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This being said, and even though the number of political ecology researcher inspired by ANT and vice versa, has increased (see for example Goldman, Nadasdy and Turner, 2011; Jönsson, 2016, Ren, Bjørst and Dredge, 2016), political ecology and ANT have been categorized as belonging to different and conflicting research approaches. Some researchers have questioned whether it is possible to combine political ecology with ANT, where proponents of the first claim there is an incompatibility between ANT and the core commitments of political ecology. Lave (2015) for instance, warns that efforts to synthesize the two approaches might lead to "watering political ecology and ANT down to compatible forms" and that ANT leads to "abandoning […] focus on justice" (Lave, 2015: 221). In this lies the critique that ANT is apolitical as it fails to raise critical accounts and is thereby incapable of other than to describe (Whittle and Spicer, 2008). This is partly connected to another critique of ANT, raised by political ecologists amongst other, that ANT it is too focused on contemporary processes and actors. By such ANT miss out on the wider context, historical events, texts and actions leading up to contemporary events, texts and actions. Following this critique Asdal (2012:380) points to how Actor Network Theory, which mostly have been concerned with "following the actors in real action", could gain from bringing history and texts from the past into their analysis. . She argues that ANT can be used as a tool for tracing contexts, for example past texts and events, which has been involved in producing contemporary issues.

I agree with this. I moreover believe that political ecology, with its focus on historical and political context, can gain from being challenged by an approach that does not necessarily "lock" contemporary events to that of past structures, but rather studies ongoing actions as something *new* which is *added* to an existing context or reality. My purpose of using both political ecology and ANT in my analysis, is not to force them together. I rather seek to bring the approaches and their related concepts in touch with one another, in order to open up to new understandings of a complex phenomenon. I find that the two approaches offer insights that, rather than watering each other down, are able to raise questions and attention to processes, and more importantly follow the actors of the processes, which might otherwise have been neglected. Thereby I agree with Chagani (2014:424) who argues that "critical political ecology would best be served

with preserving a tension between humanist and post-humanist methods". By that, I find that a combination of analytical concepts from these two approaches (rather than a synthesizing of the two) is fruitful. The political ecology approach with its attention to power structures between and across actors on different geographical scales, and the ANT-approach with a concern for materiality and non-human actants as well as a methodological approach which allows us to "follow the actors" in a given network (Latour, 2005:12).

I would moreover argue that lacking a normative dimension, which ANT is claimed to do (Chagani, 2014) is not the same as being apolitical. I rather hold that not taking a clear normative standpoint in relation to the research purpose, one can bring more sensitivity to the research field as one would be more open minded to what one as researcher might find. If the normative starting point of a researcher is to look for marginalized groups, she would always manage to find them. If the aim of the study is to find conflicts, she would always be able to. This could potentially render the researcher insensitive to nuances, multiple stories and the messiness that our world after all is comprised of.

In Chapter 4 I will describe how I have approached my research field ethnographically in order to capture some the messiness and complexity of my research field. However, before I do that, I will now continue by introducing some analytical concepts which are useful for analysing political and historical contexts, as well as challenge an universal understanding of nature.

3.4   Political ontology and the exploration of the pluriverse

If the way we perceive and enact with nature is constructed, we can moreover assume that the way we perceive and enact with nature can change and be constructed differently. As mentioned in section 4.3.1, Foucault's (1966/1970) notion on episteme assumes that there is an established truth regime underlying all discourses at a particular period, which needs to be revealed in order to discover underlying power structures. Recent debates on de-colonial thinking questions the domination of Western

epistemology by engaging with the notion of the "pluriverse" (Escobar, 2018; Mignolo and Escobar, 2010, Reiter, 2018). The idea of the pluriverse challenges a universal understanding of reality and opens up to thinking about the co-existence of *many* parallel worlds, acknowledging the entanglement of diverse cosmologies, where Western universalism is but one. Theorists such as Edward Said (1988: 9–10) have argued that Foucault himself had a very Eurocentric perspective "as if history itself only took place among French and German thinkers". Escobar and other scholars who belong to the so-called "ontological turn", call for a more pluriversal understanding of the world and as argued by Sandra Harding "we need realistic reassessments of both Western and non-Western knowledge systems" (2008:6).

When it comes to the study of nature, Descola (2013) argues that the division between nature and culture is not universal but Eurocentric, deriving from a particular historical and geographical period. Escobar (1998:61) argues that many cultural models of nature do not rely on a nature–culture binary construction and that we are in need of an anti-essentialist theory of nature that still acknowledges that there is a biophysical basis of reality.

The notion of political ontology, used by Annemarie Mol (1999) and Mario Blaser (2009) among others, is a concept that brings questions of power and knowledge into the debate of de-colonial thinking. This concept opens up for understanding that reality is something that is done, enacted and manipulated by various policies. By that reality is understood not just as something that is observed "by a diversity of watching eyes while itself remaining untouched in the center" (Mol, 1999:77), but rather as something which is done and enacted. Blaser launches political ontology as an analytical approach which is able to raise attention to both the politics involved in the practices that shape a particular world or ontology as well as the conflicts that ensue, as different worlds or ontologies strive to sustain their own existence as they interact and mingle with each other (Blaser, 2009:877).

Political ontology thus implies a radical, pluriversal understanding of the world. It is not simply multiple perspectives on one world, but a notion that implies multiple worlds to be known. This understanding goes beyond an understanding that the world is "knowable on a global scale within single modes of thought, and thus manageable and governable in those terms" (Conway and Singh, 2011: 701). This way of understanding the world thus goes further than simply tolerating differences according to a set of rules in one world, but where many worlds are interconnected and coexist (Querejazu, 2016).

The idea of pluriversal worlds opens up for some interesting discussions. Towards the end of my PhD-period, I got the opportunity to attend the American Association of Geographers annual conference in Washington DC, where "the pluriverse" was the topic in several of the sessions. In one of these sessions, Geographies of the Pluriverse III[9] a presentation by Mo Hume, a professor at the University of Glasgow, caught my attention. Hume talked about how the River Atrato had been given legal recognition as a "subject of rights" by the Colombian constitutional ruling. The presentation sparked off an interesting discussion whether the inclusion and acknowledgment of a river's rights in the judicial framework actually contributes to the pluriverse or if it simply contributes to reducing the pluriverse, by subsuming other ways of understanding and acting in the world, into a modern juridical framework.

The discussion is interesting for my research question since it brings attention to the danger that an acknowledgment of other perceptions and relations to nature, by including it in modern framework, might just be another way of colonizing. Within nature-based tourism development, it is a relevant question to ask in terms of which relations and practises towards nature that "fit" into modern, "sellable" frameworks, and which does not. The point is to keep an eye open for the multiple stories, seen from a non-Eurocentric perspective and from the perspective of actors, both human and non-humans. The discussion of the pluriverse has opened up a whole range of new questions

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[9] https://aag.secure-abstracts.com/AAG%20Annual%20Meeting%202019/sessions-gallery/23891

and insights which I found highly relevant for my own research, and is at the heart of the three articles which I will present in Chapter 5.

In this chapter, I have outlined some of the questions and challenges related to the study of nature. I have discussed the binary construction of nature and culture/society as a modern Western phenomenon, but also as central in Soviet socialism. I have presented the analytical approaches that I use to discuss my research question, that of political ecology and that of Actor Network Theory. I have argued howthey both provide analytical concepts that give insight to my research question. Finally, I have presented the concept of political ontology and the notion of pluriverse, and how these concepts are able to bring together analysis of political and historical contexts, as well as to challenge an universal understanding of nature.

In the next chapter, I will continue by presenting the methodology of my study.

4 Methodology

"If much of the world is vague, diffuse or unspecific, slippery, emotional, ephemeral, elusive or indistinct, changes like a kaleidoscope, or doesn't really have much of a pattern at all, then where does this leave social science?" (Law, 2004:2)

Apart from a recent contribution by Timur Dadabaev (2017) relatively little has been written about doing research in the Central Asian region. I therefore hope that this chapter where I reflect on my own research process, can contribute to methodological reflections on important issues concerning research practices in this part of the world.

In the chapter *Recollecting the Soviet Past: Challenges of Data Collection on Everyday Life Experiences and Public Memory in Post-Soviet Central Asia*, Dadabaev (2017) writes about numerous challenges met by a researcher conducting fieldwork in Central Asia. This book was not published prior to my field research, and I was therefore not able to use it for preparation. Reading Dadabaev's reflections after my own field research, however, has reassured me and also confirmed, that the challenges I have encountered are similar to the ones experienced by others. In the following chapter, I use Dadabaev's research as a reference point to my own experiences. In general terms, my research process resembles that of an ethnographic research approach. I partly, particularly in article 1, attempted to record the life of a particular group of people through participation and observation of their milieu, community and social world (Charmaz, 2006).

My PhD period officially started in January 2016. Prior to this, however, I had visited Kyrgyzstan on several occasions, not only as a tourist (as mentioned in the preface) but also while conducting research for my master's thesis, which was completed May 2006. I had moreover been engaged in the country through a project cooperation, which the University of South-Eastern Norway has had with several Kyrgyz universities since 2007. From 2016 I became head of this project, named *"Sustainable Tourism: rural entrepreneurship and heritage"* which involved travelling to Kyrgyzstan on several occasions which could be combined with research. Apart from several shorter visits to

Kyrgyzstan in the period of 2015–2018, I consider the main fieldwork periods for the thesis to be a two-week long stay in June 2016 and a 3-month fieldwork period from April–July 2017. Below is a separate presentation and discussion of these fieldwork periods and its role for the research process I have dedicated a section describing these two main field stays:

4.1 Fieldwork in June 2016:

The first field stay was carried out from 13th of June until 27th of June 2016. It was conducted unaccompanied and was located mostly in the Issyk Kul region. Prior to this period offield work I had asked a good colleague working at Issyk Kul State University, if she could recommend *"one village which is exposed to tourism (i.e. where there are a lot of tourists visiting) and also a village where there is no/or less tourists, to compare the difference in people's opinion about tourism"* (from e-mail correspondence, dated 24.05.2016).

My colleague advised me to visit three villages: "*Dzhety-Oguz, where there are many tourists in summer, Zhergalan,[10] which is a quite new area for tourists and Enchilesh – which is the village just for internal tourists where [they offer] only horse milk therapy"* (from e-mail correspondence, dated 24.05.2016).

Based on this advice, and after a few days in Bishkek and Karakol, I went to Zhergalan/Shakhta Jyrgalan. This is former coal mining village, located at an altitude of 2.400 meters above sea level, in the north-eastern part of Kyrgyzstan [11] . My accommodation had been pre-booked through my colleague in what turned out to be (at that point) the only guesthouse in the village. The entrepreneurial couple, who became very important for my research, in particular for article 1, welcomed me and I

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[10] Shakhta Jyrgalan has various transliterations. I refer to the village as Shakhta Jyrgalan unless it is transliterated differently in written material.

[11] More detailed information about this village is provided in article 1 "From coal to cool. Reordering nature in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan" which I present in Chapter 5.

was given a private room in their newly renovated guesthouse. There were two other families with small children staying in the guesthouse, one from Kazakhstan and one from Bishkek. During my first visit to Shakhta Jyrgalan, I got a total of 9 interviews (see appendix) as well as many informal conversations with the other tourists staying in the guest house as well as with other people living in the village. The many informal conversations, tea visits, walks around in the village and chats over the fences have been crucial for my understanding of my research field. As I will explain in section 4.3, I kept a field diary where I carefully noted down all observations, thoughts and reflections during the stay. This work was done immediately and as soon as there was time.

My first stay in Shakhta Jyrgalan lasted less than a week. It nevertheless gave me a solid starting point and an initial understanding of some of the complexities of the situation in the village and of some of the issues related to nature-based tourism development at stake here, but also in Kyrgyzstan in general. Apart from the interviews and informal conversations, I also attended a hike with the tourist entrepreneur and some of the other guests to a nearby waterfall. The hike was a good way of observing how the entrepreneur talked about the nature and surroundings with his guest, explaining the different benefits of various plants, which mushrooms were edible and so on. I also attended parts of the horse milk therapy program, accompanying the guest and villagers when they had their daily doses of fresh horse milk. This gave useful insight and information which I used in Article 2; for example a discussion on whether or not this tradition really is a Kyrgyz tradition, or if it has become so after Kyrgyzstan's independence and as part of the nation-building process where the Kyrgyz horse has had an important role.

In Article 1, I reflect on how my stay at the guesthouse have affected my position as a researcher. The possible problem is that the choice of staying at the guesthouse might have made other people in the village think that I was "teamed" up with the tourism entrepreneur. This was based on reflections which I also noted down in my field diary, where I wrote:

I find my role in Jyrgalan a bit difficult. I have been living with NN (the entrepreneur), something most of the people I have spoken to, seem to know. Perhaps they will not say exactly what they mean, if they have something negative to say about him. At the same time, I get the feeling that NN is wondering what I am being told, that he is a bit afraid of what people say maybe, and therefore talks a lot about involvement of the local community. But I know that he has organized workshops for the local community. There are many questions here to start working from. I feel I have gathered a lot of information already.

During my stay I was well aware of the possible bias of living with the entrepreneur. It could potentially mean that the other residents would be hesitant to talk to me about things they would not want the entrepreneur to hear. Hence, I would be very careful to explain to everyone I met who I was, what I was doing there, the purpose of my stay and so on. I would also underline several times before each interview, that I would not share the information they gave to anyone and that I would not use their names in my articles. It is impossible to know exactly what effect my accommodation with the tourism entrepreneur had on my informants, and if they were reassured by my explanations. I did feel, however, that the informants in general seemed to speak their minds, and I was even surprised at times by how openly they would make critically comments about the tourism entrepreneurs. This at least reassured me, that after all, I was able to bring out some, if not all, sincere thoughts and opinions about the tourism development.

My roles and positions in Shakhta Jyrgalan multiplied even further during my second stay in Shakhta Jyrgalan, which I elaborate on in section 4.3.1

Figure 1: Picture from Shakhta Jyrgalan (photo by author).

After the days in Shakhta Jyrgalan, I travelled on to Jety Ögus, as recommended by my colleague. Jety Ögus is a village located along the southern bank of the Issyk Kul Lake, famous for its red mountain formations. This is also the location for one of the famous sanatoria, previously mentioned, which were very popular spots for recreation and rehabilitation during the Soviet period. My reason for going here during my first field research was that I had an initial idea to bring in a second and more developed tourist destination for comparative analytical purposes. Here I carried out 4 interviews, including two interviews with vendors of horse milk which I have used in Article 2 (appendix). When I eventually decided not to focus on Jety Ögus as a site for a main fieldwork period, it was because the material from Shakhta Jyrgalan provided much complexity and richness. I also discovered that the mining village of Shakhta Jyrgalan provided a context and possibilities to discuss what I assessed as very interesting issues when it came to changed perceptions and relations to nature. Bringing in empirical

material from another village would certainly be valuable and if supplemented, this empirical material might potentially be used for a comparative study at a later stage. The stay in Jety Ögus was in any case interesting as it truly allowed me to see how this village had developed and become a much more established tourist destination. Even though it was still early summer, the tourist season had already started. Apart from the interviews that were recorded I had several informal conversations with people involved in tourism. Coming from Shakhta Jyrgalan, where tourism was in its infancy, it was obvious how both people and the physical surroundings in Jety Ögus were much more oriented towards and used to tourism, than in Shakhta Jyrgalan. The people I met here came across as much more service-minded but also a bit more distanced and not so curious about the visitors. There were many people selling horse milk along the road, there were young boys whom you could pay to get your picture taken with their falcon on your arm (but who themselves did not want to pose on the photo), there were several yurt camps set up in the area where one could buy food, and there were signs and posters pointing to the various attractions in the area.

I did not go to *Enchilesh*, which my colleague also had recommended, as I was running out of time. But on my way back to Bishkek I stopped for one night in the village of Barskoon, which also later turned out to be important for my papers. Here I stayed at a horse trek company, and while I did not carry out any horse riding treks or formal interviews with the entrepreneurs at this field stay, I returned to Barskoon on two occasions the following year for horse riding treks and interviews, which I was able to use for both Articles 2 and 3.

On my two last days of the first fieldwork period, I also participated on two hiking trips with the Trekking Union of Kyrgyzstan as part of the research for Article 3. The treks became good arenas to talk informally to people about nature and practices related to nature, as well as to make interesting observations that I was able to integrate in my articles. An example was the incident which I describe in the preface and which I later came to call "the incident with the fire" which I will return to in section 4.4.2. This

became an important observation in the work with Article 3, although I ended up not referring to it directly.

4.2 Fieldwork in April–June 2017:

The main fieldwork period lasted for three months in the period 1st of April to 1st of July 2017. This time I brought my husband and two daughters, aged five and seven, with me to Kyrgyzstan. We spent the two first weeks in Bishkek, where we rented an apartment through Airbnb. Apart from work carried out related to the joint cooperation with University of South-Eastern Norway (as mentioned in section 1.2), I also attended several hiking treks with the Trekking Union of Kyrgyzstan, similar to the ones I carried out during the field work in 2016.

Figure 2: Hiking tour with Trekking Union of Kyrgyzstan (photo by author)

After Bishkek, we were another two weeks in the regional capital of the Issyk Kul Region, Karakol. Here we rented an apartment through colleagues at Issyk Kul State University.

The weeks were spent with some more work on the joint project, preparing logistics for the stay in Shakhta Jyrgalan, as well as getting to know the town and area better. I was also able to get a very good interview with a horse tourism entrepreneur (see appendix) for Article 2.

The decision to stay in Karakol for two weeks was also based on our wish to gradually adapt to higher altitudes, and prevent the risk of altitude sickness, especially for the sake of our daughters. While Karakol is located at an altitude of 1,700 metres above sea level, Shakhta Jyrgalan is at almost 2, 500. My husband and Iwere not sure how the children or we would react to living at such heights, which is why Karakol seemed like a good place to stop to be acclimatized. Apart from a mild headache for the first couple of days, and the occasional feeling of shortness of breath when hiking, none of us not experienced any major symptoms of altitude sickness during our stay.

With the experience from my first stay in Shakhta Jyrgalan, staying with the tourism entrepreneur, I was determined to find a house of our own to live in this time. I had hoped to be able to sort this out before actual going there, but this turned out to be a challenge, as noted in my field diary in April 2017 (translated from Norwegian):

> *I have for a long time (since before Christmas) tried to find a house for us to live in, through NN, but he has always replied that "we will fix it once you get here". I actually find it a bit problematic to go through NN for the housing issue, since he is so actively involved in tourism in Jyrgalan. XX (colleague at IKSU) gave me the name of a person who works for the local government. I tried to call him Friday but was asked to call back. I tried again yesterday but he talked very fast about something in the mines which I did not fully understand. I later sent him a message, but he did not reply. Later in the night I saw that NN had written on Facebook that there had been an accident in the mines, with two young boys being trapped inside.*

The accident that I mention in the field notes above, which I later came to hear all about when arriving in Shakhta Jyrgalan, became an interesting incident in itself and in many ways set the scene for my field research. Although the two young miners were

eventually rescued after almost two days trapped underground, it left the village not only shaken but also determined that the bad conditions of the mines had to be changed. The mines had collapsed due to the melting of the snow which was a recurring problem.

For me as a field researcher, walking around in the village interviewing people, the incident became a central topic for discussion. Through talks about the accident it I learned different perspectives on the mines; their future prospects; needs of investment; the consequences for the people working in the mines who were jobless when the mines were closed; the conditions now compared to the Soviet times, etc.

The house we eventually ended up renting belonged to a young family who themselves moved out for the duration of our stay to live with the husband's family. The house was located in another area of the village than the guesthouse, and therefore gave me at least a physical distance from the tourism entrepreneurs. The house turned out to be next door to the home of one of the young miners from the accident. He was also one of very few people in the village who spoke English, and therefore became a contact who my husband (who did not speak Russian) could communicate and with whom we would frequently socialize. We were on several occasions invited into their home and we invited them to our house, celebrated 9th of May (Liberty day) together and had several informal talks over the garden fence. These informal meetings were of course very nice and a great way for both me and my family to learn more about Kyrgyz culture. Moreover, they became important arenas for information which gave me a greater understanding of and contexts for my empirical material. During the dinners spent with our neighbours, I learnt a lot and got a deeper understanding of the mining industry, the hard working conditions, their hopes and future plans, financial issues, etc., across three generations.

Throughout the fieldwork, I worked very hard to get a broad understanding of the complex issues at play in the village. Apart from participating in informal social gathering, I would attend different types of local events, such as the previously

mentioned celebration of the Liberty Day, the "ringing of the last bell" which was the last day of school, the celebration of Children's Day, a wedding celebration and a funeral gathering, to mention some. Taking part in these events, which were not directly relevant for the topic of my research, was based on a strategic choice to show the local community that I took a genuine interest in their village, not just the tourism-related activities.

That being said, I also took part in many tourism-related activities. One of these activities was a guide course offered through the USAID Business Growth Initiative Program. This was a three-day event with young (mostly) men from the village, together with participants from the village of Bokonbaeva (located on the south shore of the Issyk Kul Lake) where USAID also has been engaged in tourism development. The course, which was held in the school building in Shakhta Jyrgalan, was a mix of theory (i.e. about altitude sickness and how to read maps) as well as practical training (how to guide tourists across a river, first-aid training, service management, etc.). Although I did not attend the whole course, it was an interesting arena for me to participate in, and also became a place to meet young, inspiring guides from the village.

I also attended a one-day horse riding trek with the tourism entrepreneur, a volunteer from New Zealand working at the guest house and two Dutch tourists. This trek gave me further insight which I was able to use in Article 2, concerning horse-human relationships and differences between Kyrgyz and Western relations to the horse. For example, I learnt during this trip that the horse I was riding did not have a name, and the tourism entrepreneur asked me to suggest one. This and similar observations were information that I used in my articles. I will elaborate more on the method participant observation later in this chapter.

Figure 3: Horse riding trek in Shakhta Jyrgalan (photo: Ashlyn Piwari).

During our stay in the village, we had friends from Norway visiting. Apart from this being nice on a personal level, it also became an opportunity to discuss and "see" the village through their " Norwegian gaze" as newly arrived tourists and first comers to Kyrgyzstan.

In addition to the events mentioned above, and apart from the interviews and ongoing observations, we also got to experience the challenges and facts of "everyday" life in the village: the harsh climate and the shifting weather; the challenges of food as there were no supermarkets in the village, just a few kiosk-like shops with very limited goods; the low standard of the house with no indoor toilets or hot water as well as the

remoteness of the village, with a minibus (marchrutka) leaving for Karakol only twice a day.

4.3   Reflexivity

During both stays I kept field diaries where each day I would write down all my thoughts and doings. The diaries became important in particular to keep a record of all the informal conversations, information and reflections which I collected during my stay. As noted by Cook (1997: 141), the field diary becomes a way of keeping a record of how "your research has progressed in terms of what you have participated in and what you have observed, day by day, and what you have come to (mis)understand as a result". My field diary very much became such a medium to reflect on both the observations and information I gained as well as my own position and methods. It also became a way of reflecting upon my own role and position as well as for example circumstances during interviews that might have affected the interview.

In the field diary from my first field trip, for example, I wrote (translated from Norwegian) after having conducted my very first interview in Shakhta Jyrgalan:

> *I got a very nice interview with an older man, who by the way looked much older than 69 which was the age he told me. He was on his way home with his calf, but agreed to talk with me and came back after a little while. We were sitting outside on a rock in the sun. I had been a bit nervous to pull out the recorder, as I thought it might feel like "surveillance" for someone who had lived in a former Soviet republic, but he told me it was no problem. The interview lasted for about 40 minutes. I tried to be as conscious as possible about not asking too many questions, not being afraid of the pauses, and rather wait for him to talk.*

As noted by Fangen (2004:30) reflection and self-examination is an important part of doing field research. A steadily growing number of scholars have contributed to questioning the role of the researcher and how the researcher itself co-create

information. Berger (2015:220) argues that these debates have led researchers to focus on "self-knowledge and sensitivity; better understand the role of the self in the creation of knowledge; carefully self-monitor the impact of their biases, beliefs and personal experiences on their research; and maintain the balance between the personal and the universal" (Berger, 2015). There is thus an increasing acknowledgement that "Questions of reflexivity are part of a broader debate about ontological, epistemological and axiological components of the self, intersubjectivity and the colonization of knowledge" (Berger, 2015:220). Donna Haraway (1991: 191) has contributed a great deal to the questioning of claims of objectivity and value-free research, arguing that as researchers we always approach our research with "maps of consciousness" influenced by our own gender, class, nationality and so forth.

As my research was drawn into the direction of actor-network theory, I was also inspired by the methodological approach of ANT, which entails a great deal of self-reflexivity. Being conscious of where I as a researcher come from and of all the binary oppositions that structure my own way of thinking and how it that "orders" *my* world, became a central element in my writing. While reading ANT-inspired studies, I found myself increasingly aware of with my own position in the field, my own cultural background and how it also affected the material. Although I found that my material stirred up many interesting questions, and raised attention to aspects of tourism and how it changes perceptions and relations to nature, I constantly questioned the processes or the changes which I observed. Nor was I able to find a "universal conclusion" or some morally better argument about what tourism does or should be doing. Hence, I found myself agreeing more and more with Law (2004:9), who argues that:

I want to subvert method by helping to remake methods: that are not moralist; that imagine and participate in politics and other forms of the good in novel and creative ways; and that start to do this by escaping the postulate of singular, and responding creatively to a world that is taken to be composed of an excess of generative forces and relations. To do this we need to unmake many of our methodological habits,

including: the desire for certainty; expectation that we can usually arrive at more or less stable conclusions about the way things really are; the belief that as social scientist we have special insights that allow us to see further than others into certain parts of social reality; and the expectations of generality that are wrapped up in what is of the called "universalism". But, first of all we need to unmake our desire and expectation for security.

The role of the researcher in tourist studies is raised by scholars such as Zhang (2013:196). In her article on tourism development in China, she points out that many tourism researchers try to elaborate on the impacts that tourism practices induce, but that they are "clouded […] by the dualistic binaries such as authentic/fake, traditional/modern, developed/developing and north/south". She moreover holds that tourism researchers are "the same as everybody else who is involved in tourism activities; […] we are not only embedded within a dominant dualistic vision of the world, but remain also (at least mostly) unconscious of this dualism, due to the naturalization/normalization of this vision".

While this might be true, I would argue that this partly can be overcome if the researcher is able to reflect and problematize his/her role in the research field. In the next section, I reflect more on the various roles, I as a researcher inhabited during the field stay, and also the blurriness of the roles.

4.3.1 The researcher, the mother and the spy

Following the multiple understanding of ontology forwarded within ANT, I have come to think of myself as a researcher who was not only able to produce *one* set of knowledge analysed through my own understanding. I moreover see how who I am also can generate multiple sets of material, depending on how I consciously or unconsciously enact myself in the field. This was something which I sensed during all research stays, but particularly felt during my second research stay (April–June 2017). I constantly experienced a conflict and blurring of roles, a common problem while doing social

science research and defined as a felt competition between several statuses of a person in a given situation (Aase and Fossåskaret, 2014). To choose which "hat to wear" or what role to enact can be extremely difficult. Mullings (1999) points to how this choice can be particular challenging in a cross-cultural setting.

Looking back at it now, I am able to at least trace three different roles or "versions" of myself as a researcher, that I claim in different ways affected the information and access to the empirical material in the field: I have chosen to call these versions, the researcher, the mother and the spy.

The first and most "official" version of me during my fieldwork was that of a researcher. When I introduced myself to people, I would explain that I came from Norway, that I was a PhD researcher and that geography was my research field. The introduction would of course vary depending on whom I met and for what purpose. In formal interviews, this presentation was a natural part of the introduction, while in informal settings, this information would often come more gradually depending on the setting, context and interest of the other. Being a geographer was a title that gave me high status, given that geography was and still is a much honoured subject both in the Soviet Union and present-day Kyrgyzstan. I therefore knew that if I told someone that I was a geographer, they would often be "impressed".

The question of insider/outsider in this role posed some different aspects: As I was a researcher, European and geographer, asking questions about the nature and landscape, I could perhaps give the impression that I knew a lot about nature, tourism, etc. already. As a foreigner and "outsider" of Kyrgyzstan, however, I could use this position to get more basic information. For example, I could start an interview saying that "I arrived here not so long ago, and therefore know very little about the place, can you please tell me about the village". This opening line was a strategy to make the respondent more confident and to make them understand that I am not "the expert", i.e. that they possessed knowledge that would be of interest to me.

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The feeling of being taken as an "expert" was not always easy to overcome, however. While conducting my fieldwork, I was invited to hold lectures at three different universities on the topic of rural, sustainable tourism. Although most of my informants were not affiliated with these universities, I did interview a lecturer in tourism as well as a representative from an environmental NGO who worked closely with the university. For Article 3 I also interviewed seven Kyrgyz students, at the time resident in Norway through the previous mentioned joint educational project between USN and Kyrgyzstan. Especially in the case with the students, I sensed the notion of me being "an expert": when I asked for the appointment and told them about the topic of my research, some of the students expressed a concern that they would not be able to answer my questions correctly or worried that they would not know "enough". I tried to overcome this expert/student gap by explaining, and also repeating prior to the interviews, that I was interested in their personal accounts with mountains, not general facts. I also tried to overcome this by asking open questions, that the students could interpret as they liked and then follow up on topics of interest, trying to make them feel confident that the information they gave was of interest. This approach made the students relax more in the interviews, although some of the students also expressed a concern after the interview was finished, as to whether the information had been interesting for me or not.

However, being a researcher and lecturer also became something that others could use to their advantage. During my first visit the tourism entrepreneurs wanted to have their photo taken with me. Later he posted this to his Facebook page with the following text in Russian:

Anne Gry Gudmunsdotter Sturød, researcher from Norway. She works on her dissertation related to questions on how to attract tourists and increase tourist attractiveness to Jyrgalan Valley and other new places in the Issyk Kul region. Great work! We are thankful to her!

The above shows how I as a researcher became a marketing tool for the tourism entrepreneur. Although I had carefully explained my research question, this was interpreted and disseminated in a way that could be used for promotion of the tourism destination. Moreover, and as explained in Section 4.1, this could give the impression that I was "teamed up" with the tourism entrepreneur, and it became necessary to clarify to my informants that this was not the case.

As mentioned, I brought my husband and two daughters (aged 5 and 8 at the time) along to the second fieldwork project. Being accompanied by family while doing fieldwork is not unusual for researchers, especially when this research is conducted in another country. Korpela, Hirvi and Tawah (2016) argue however, that this is usually briefly, if at all, mentioned by the researcher. Korpela, Hirvi and Tawah, who share their experience in bringing spouse and/or children on field research, claim that it is important to consider how those accompanying the research affect the data-collection process and also the data itself (Korpela et al., 2016: 4).

It was my experience that doing field research with children posed both challenges and opportunities. On one occasion I brought my children with me for an appointment. I had been invited on a walk by the local "medicine woman" who wanted to show me some healing plants growing around in the area. It turned out not to be a very good combination as I explain in my field diary:

> *The experience of bringing children along to "walk and talk" was not so successful. I had made an agreement with NN, the wife of XX. NN had told me she would show me mushrooms, healing plants and so on that grow in the area. She asked if the children wanted to come along, "so they would not be bored". I thought it could be nice, but I should have known that it probably would not be a good idea. They started to complain once we came to a steep hill, I got annoyed, told them off, they sobbed, I felt bad and had to apologize. It was my fault, really. Then they walked*

back, and I continued after NN, but then I got worried that [the girls] would get lost, knowing that [my husband] was not in the house, so I walked after them. I had also lost my pen in the confusion, and I told NN we could do the rest of the walk another day, and then walked home.

Figure 4: Children in "the field" with their mother, the researcher and the spy. Photo by author.

Prior to the field research, I reflected quite a bit on how it would be to bring my family along to Kyrgyzstan. I hoped that bringing the children and my spouse would make it easier for me to get to know people, as the children could perhaps "break the ice" with the community. I was hoping this would make my appearance less formalized, when the community saw that I was not "just" a researcher, but also a mother and a wife. This turned out to be partly true, and as mentioned, we were invited as a family into people's houses, or to various social events. People in the village got to know us as a family and I

would always get questions about where my children and husband were, when I was out and about during the day. The children were also invited to come to the local school one day and present themselves in front of the class and therefore gave me an opportunity to attend a school class. By such the children became door openers to new arenas where I got first hand observation of how the teacher taught the national epic of Manas, information that I later used in article 2.

Nevertheless, the language was a big barrier for the other family members who did not speak Russian nor Kyrgyz, and although both the children and my husband picked up a few words, this hurdle was bigger than I had anticipated. My family became very dependent on me, even for the basics as buying groceries and other practical duties. I also felt a constant worry and responsibility that "something could happen" to us as a family and especially the children. Although Kyrgyzstan is a relatively safe country to travel in, my felt risk of catching a disease, being involved in a car accident, or the children getting lost, was greater there than back home. This constant stress factor, either consciously or subconsciously did affect and restrict my field research compared to what it would have if I acted alone, which is why I believe it is worth mentioning

As mentioned previously I felt a bit wary of whether to use a recorder or not, afraid that this would make some of my informants feel like they were interrogated or surveilled. This was not a feeling that persisted however, which is why I was caught by surprise when I on one occasion was asked directly if I was a spy, working for the CIA. The question was asked by a civil servant, working in the local administration, several weeks after I had started my field research. At this stage, I had started to think of myself as "accepted" by the local community and had not experienced any feelings of discomfort among my informants prior to the question. Having read about other researchers with similar experiences afterwards, makes me realize that it perhaps was unusual that I had not been asked this question before. Philliph Lottholz and Joshua Meyer (2016) two PhD-scholars who have carried out research in Kyrgyzstan. Meyer, who has done research both in southern and northern Kyrgyzstan, notes however, that people he spoke to in the north generally seemed more relaxed about speaking to Westerners,

while people in the south seemed to be more afraid that the government would give them trouble after they had spoken to foreigners.

After this incident, I asked a few trusted people in the village if this was a general perception about my presence in the village, which they denied. The question nevertheless made me reflect on my own position as a foreign researcher, and the experience reminded me of the challenges of doing research in this part of the world and how such perceptions potentially may have impacted the information I received.

4.4   Methods and empirical data:

The methods I used were qualitative methods, primarily open-ended, semi-structured interviews, participant observation and to some extent document/media analysis. The rationale behind the choice of a qualitative approach for exploring the research question, is that it allows the researcher to gain more in-depth knowledge of the question and leads to talking about meanings, values and perceptions. Moreover, a qualitative approach allows the informants to describe and talk about nature and landscape using their own words and categories, and not previously fixed categories defined by the researcher.

4.4.1 Interviews

Apart from the interviews carried out during field research in Kyrgyzstan, I also conducted interviews with Kyrgyz exchange students who were in Norway through the above-mentioned project (appendix).

Oral interviews were chosen as the main method for several reasons. First, I considered this an appropriate method in order to capture informal versions and stories. Second, and as noted by Dadabaev (2017:22), the Kyrgyz people have stronger oral traditions than written traditions, which is why many of the stories, legends etc. are best accessed through oral conversation. The internationally renowned Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov has noted: "If other peoples/nations displayed their past culture and history in written

literature, sculpture, architecture, theatre and art, the Kyrgyz people expressed their worldview, pride and dignity, battles and their hope for the future in epic genre" (Aimatov, cited in Köēümkulkļz, 2005).

This was also noted by one of my informants, who explained: *"[Kyrgyz people] are great story tellers. Like Manas, the greatest epic, people can tell it for weeks, but we are not writers […] It was a Russian who wrote down the Manas [epic]. […] We can talk for two hours about Tulpar Tash[12], but if you search online [for information] you do not find anything"* (interview with man in Shakhta Jyrgalan).

The language of the interviews was both Russian and English. After Russian language studies at the University of Oslo and St. Petersburg, many years of using Russian as a working language both in Russia and Norway, as well as several longer work and study stays in Russian-speaking countries, I consider myself to be more or less fluent in the Russian language. Hence, I was able to carry out the interviews in Russian myself. As Wooden and Stefes (2009: 57) note, the Russian language remains an important tool for research in the region but knowledge of local languages other than Russian can be a pre-requisite. Although I personally did not meet any non-Russian speakers during my field research and was therefore able to carry out interviews in Russian, I would occasionally feel that I missed out in social settings, where the colloquial language tended to be Kyrgyz.

All interviews, except one,[13] were audio recorded, and lasted from around 30 to 90 minutes. The interviews were later transcribed using an external transcription service. The decision not to transcribe the interviews myself was done to save time, although it can be argued that transcription is a good way of reading research material in a careful way which can be helpful in the analysis . However, although I consider my oral Russian

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[12] Big rock where, according to a legend, the great horse of Manas has left his hoof marks.

[13] The interview was organized spontaneously, and I had no more memory on my memory card.

language to be fluent, my writing skills are less so, and I knew I would have needed a lot of time to check correct spelling, etc. Based on this I decided to outsource this part of my research process.

I usedsomewhat different interview strategies for the three articles: for the first article, I had a quite open-ended interview structure, basically structuring the interviews by three main topics: (1) tell me about the past history of the village, (2) tell me about life in the village today, (3) tell me about your future dream for the village. Although this open-ended structure sometimes meant that the interviewees got caught up in topics outside the core interest of my research, I nevertheless found this approach useful for a number of reasons. First, the approach made the informants more at ease, as they would not feel interrogated by defined and rigorous questions. This is in line with Dadabaev's (2017:27) experience; who writes that "Using structured interviews in Central Asia, often results in short, noninclusive, incomprehensive answers because of the lack of rapport between the interviewee and the interviewer". Second, the structure of the interview is organized in a narrative manner, with a focus on meaning-making organized on the past, the present and future. This can be helpful when seeing interviews as a tool also for not only representing experience, but also for making and constructing meaning in a coherent way for informants in the midst of changing circumstances, like the one in Shakhta Jyrgalan. While the interview strategy for the first article was more open, the interviews for the second and third article was more thematically ordered, with more specific questions regarding horses and horse-human relationship, and perceptions and practices related to mountains, respectively.

I would recruit the interviewees both randomly, based on what is often described as a the snowball method, and strategic. A random recruitment for article 1 would often be based on a walk around in the village. When approaching someone, this would quite often be outside the house and garden of the person and quite often I was invited in for tea, jam and bread. Taking time to sit down, have some tea and share an informal conversation with the interviewee was not only a nice and polite approach, but also a way of building confidence and trust to the people interviewed. Dadabaev (2017:28)

notes that "long introduction has deep cultural meaning in Central Asia, where people are used to having long introductory conversations before proceeding to the heart of the issue that they are interested to talk about"

Even though my research can be said to be polyphone-driven (Alvesson and Skölberg, 2009) where I tried to capture various perspectives and stories from people with a variance in age, I found that I often gained more insight from elderly people. What made these interviews most interesting was that I could also ask questions about Soviet times which was also of interest for my research question. In line with Dadabaev (2017:23), I found that interviewing elderly people was a way of capturing stories about the past, which "if not collected and recorded now, can be lost due to rapid decrease of those who remember the social environment of the Soviet time". Another reason for why elderly people and women were represented more among my informants, was that they were the ones available in the daytime. Younger and middle-aged men would either live away or be at work during the daytime and would therefore not be as easy to "find".

However, as I wanted to explore my question from various perspectives, it became important to me to strive to get interviews with informants of different ages, genders, ethnicities and occupations. As shown in the appendix, most of the interviews were carried out in the village of Shakhta Jyrgalan. During my first field trip in June 2016, I also carried out interviews in the villages of Jety Ögus and Barskoon with an initial idea of comparing data from different villages. Having returned home and starting the analysis, I decided to concentrate on one village for Article 1. This decision was based on constraints on time and resources, as well as the fact that Shakhta Jyrgalan was particularly interesting since tourism had only just started to develop, which made this village a particularly interesting setting in which to explore my research question. The analytical approach can best be described as an abductive approach, where I moved from empirical data to theoretical concepts, which I believe helped me structure the empirical data, and back to empirical data.

4.4.2 Participant observation

Apart from, and in combination with qualitative interviews, my fieldwork included various forms of participant observation. As mentioned in section 5.2 I was living in the village Shakhta Jyrgalan in the period April-June 2017 where I took part in various activities, some related to tourism, some not. Being involved in the daily life of my informants helped me get a wider understanding of my research field, both consciously and probably, in many ways, more unconsciously.

Figure 5: Participation at "the last bell", the last day of school celebration in Shakhta Jyrgalan. The man in the front is wearing the traditional Kyrgyz hat kalpak. Photo by author

One of the interesting observations that I made during my own participation in various social events, was that the tourism entrepreneurs did not take part in them. This was despite the fact that the events without doubt were important social arenas for the community as a whole. It is difficult to conclude in specific ways regarding this observation. t nevertheless strengthened my impression of a gap between the tourism entrepreneurs and the local community. This was an impression I also encountered in some interviews.

As mentioned in section 4.1 and 4.2, I also participated in several hikes with Trekking Union of Kyrgyzstan. On one of these hikes I experienced an incident, which I later came to call "the incident with the fire". Not fully able to understand what it meant at the time, I nevertheless wrote it down in my field notes:

We were a group of fifteen + guide who left by minibus from Bishkek early morning. The group was a mix of ethnic Kyrgyz, European expats working for various donor organizations in Bishkek as well as three ethnic Russians, all residents of Kyrgyzstan.

[…]

After a couple of hours of hiking we stopped to have a meal. The Russians sat by themselves. A Kyrgyz professor, and two other Kyrgyz participants sat together. The guide sat down with one of the Kyrgyz, a girl. The rest of the tour group, which was a mix of Kyrgyz students and European, mostly young, expatriates, were sitting together in one group, which was also the group where I placed myself.

When we were about to leave the site, one of the Russians, a man in his mid-fifties, set fire to a small pile of garbage, obviously intending to get rid of it. I overheard one of the Kyrgyz students say "a bonfire, how cosy" before she went over to the fire where she threw some small branches of wood onto it, to make it bigger. Many of the expatriates in the group where I was sitting, had strong negative reactions to this. They looked worriedly towards the fire and started to talk amongst themselves about the danger of fire,[14] since the ground seemed very dry, saying that someone should warn them about the risk.

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[14] The risk of wildfire in Kyrgyzstan is classified as high for the whole country, according to a risk measurement carried out by GFDRR (available at: http://thinkhazard.org/en/report/138-kyrgyzstan/WF)

My own reaction was the same as my lunch companions, and my initial instinct was to interfere. However, I was able to remind myself that I was there as participant observer and I decided to keep calm and not do anything to see what would happen.

Eventually one of the expatriates, a Swiss man in his mid-30s went over and talked with the Kyrgyz girl who had joined the Russians next to the fire, to tell her it could be dangerous. I asked the Swiss man afterwards what their response had been, and apparently, he had been told there was no need to worry as they would just trample on the fire to extinguish it. I overheard the Kyrgyz girl tell the Russian man that one from the other group was worried about fire, but the Russian was smiling and shrugging his shoulder, as if it was nothing to worry about. Before we left, the Kyrgyz girl poured some of her water on the fire to put it out. The Swiss man also went over to the fire and trampled on it to make sure the fire was properly out.

For some reason this episode has stayed with me throughout the work with my thesis. I am still not able to "place" it, which is why I have not included it in any of my articles. I still believe it means something, and that the trek partly can illustrate the multiple realities of nature in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, and also how various versions of nature can be in conflict. As a researcher doing fieldwork, one experience many incidents, episodes and observations similar to the one above and which Fujii (2014:525) refers to as "accidental ethnographic data". The importance of such observations, Fujii argues, lies not in what they tell us in the particular, but rather what they suggest about the larger political and social world in which they (and the researchers) are embedded". Referring and reflecting upon this and other incidents throughout my fieldwork has shaped the research and given insights to my fieldwork on a conscious and sub-conscious level.

4.4.3 Internet sources

During my research period, I would actively search for news articles and blog post as well as follow social media. This became a way to to keep me up to date on the ways the village and the region were represented and discussed in social media amongst travellers and promoters of the region. Apart from providing useful background

information about my area of study, it also gave me useful insight to the tourism development and how it progressed.

This was particularly useful for the work with Article 1. Prior to my first fieldwork period there was very little information in English to be found about Shakhta Jyrgalan on the internet. There was only one blog post (Stephen, 2015) as well as a Wikipedia page (Jyrgalan, n.d.). In Russian, there were some news articles, mostly about the situation of the coalmines. I also found two very interesting YouTube clips, released almost in the same period November 2015–June 2016, which I long considered bringing into my analysis. The first one, named simply "Shakhta Jyrgalan" shows a documentary series called "Silnye sydbie" (which translates "strong destinies" in Russian) produced by the TV-channel MIR (MIR, 2015[15]). The documentary described how Shakhta Jyrgalan once used to be a prosperous mining town but has experienced decline; the owner of the private mine in the village has been investing his life into keeping the mine operating. The second one is called "Jyrgalan. A tourist zone instead of mines" and was made by a TV-team from Capital KG (Capital KG, 2016). This video portrays the tourism entrepreneurs who explain their ideas and plans, and includes an interview with a tourist (from Russia). I find it interesting to mention the videos, as they acquainted me with the village from two profoundly different perspectives, and probably also made me aware of how the multiple stories of the village and how these were communicated.

What made internet search particularly interesting to use as a method for Article 1, was seeing the rapid growth in "hits". As mentioned, there was very limited information about the village available prior to my first stay in 2016, while two years later there are now more than 100 different video clips on YouTube of Jyrgalan, while a Google search shows close to 50 000 search results, mostly blog post. This search method illustrates the dramatic transformation and exposure this village has gone through during the last

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[15] The YouTube clip that I first was acquainted with was published by a private person resident in Shakhta Jyrgalan. For the reference here, I refer to the direct link of the documentary available online on the web page of the TV channel.

few years and contributes to emphasizing my findings It moreover shows how new place narratives are created by the use social media, and how nature is perceived and used in these narratives.

4.5   Research ethics:

Prior to my fieldwork periods, I did not plan to gather any personal data ([16] as this would require me to notify the NSD (Norsk Senter for Forskningsdata/Norwegian Centre for Research Data) about my project.

However, and although the informants were anonymous, it became clear to me during my fieldwork that it would be impossible to prevent some of the interviewees being recognizable. This was particular the case with the tourism entrepreneurs from Shakhta Jyrgalan. It therefore became necessary for me to contact the NSD to notify them of the situation and get their approval. I received this in February 2018. As the tourism entrepreneurs would be recognizable I contacted them and asked for their permission to use the direct quote in article 1, which they accepted.

For both my first and second fieldwork periods in Shakhta Jyrgalan I went to the local village administration to present myself and my project. The first time, the head of the administration was not present, and I informed his assistants. The second time I had several meetings and encounters with the head of the administration which was useful both in terms of the information they provided me with, but also in terms of getting an approval of my research.

Prior to my interviews, I would ask my respondents for their informed consent to the interview and state the purpose of my research. This was done orally. I would then ask them if I could record the interview and made clear that I would not use their names and that the information that they shared was only to be used for the purpose of my

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[16] Personal data that consists of "any data relating to and identified or identifiable person. Collected data that can be linked to individual persons are considered personal data" (NSD, n.d)

research. I also stressed the fact that they could ask me to stop the recorder at any point or ask me to delete the conversation.

On one particular occasion I did an interview which I later felt raised some ethical questions regarding both the use of recorder and the use of the information provided to me. The interview (Interview 4) was done in Shakhta Jyrgalan during my first research stay. I was walking around in the village when I met two men who jumped out of a car nearby. They immediately approached me and cheerfully started talking with me, asking who I was, what I was doing and so on. One of the men lived close by and he invited me home to his family. His wife and one of his children were home and his wife invited me to sit down for tea and some bread. Once more I explained why I was there and asked if I could do an interview with them, using the recorder. They accepted and I started the recorder. During the meal I was offered vodka, which is commonly consumed in Kyrgyzstan in social settings, but I politely declined. Both the men were drinking, however, and during the meal it became clear that they had also been drinking before I met them, and now were about to get quite drunk. One of the men started to speak quite incoherently, had a lot of strong opinions and also started to ask me some inappropriate questions. I eventually stopped the recorder and wrapped up the conversation in a polite manner. Before I left, I reassured them about the purpose of my research and that I would only use the information they gave me for my own use as a researcher. They invited me to come back next time I was visiting.

After the interview, I asked myself if I should use the interview or not. I listened to the audio file and as there was no information that revealed their identities and no names were mentioned, I decided to keep the tape and use the information which they provided selectively. I used only one direct quote from this interview in Article 1, which referred to the quality of the coal, as well as general information about the life in the village.

Loubere (2014) describes a similar encounter while doing research in China. As in Kyrgyzstan, drinking alcohol in China during social gatherings is frequent, and also

somewhat expected in order to show friendship and respect. If you do not join in with the drinking, this can be taken as an offence. While this is particular true for men, being a female researcher has the advantage that the pressure of drinking is less. Throughout many visits and stays in Russia and other former Soviet countries, I have learned that if you politely decline to drink alcohol at the beginning of a meal it is usually accepted. However, I did experience on one occasion during my field research in Kyrgyzstan that a man whom I wanted to interview said he "did not trust me", if I did not want to toast with him in vodka.

Whether to use the information provided during such interview settings, still remains an ethical question. However, as Loubere (2014) concludes, although drinking during group meals is a seemingly mundane and necessary social interaction, it should not underscore the importance that we as researchers reflect on how we deal with such situations. Loubere moreover argues that there is no fixed answer or blueprint to follow with such cases but that the researcher needs to navigate such ethical issues on a case-by-case basis as an ongoing reflexive practice.

5 Summary of the three articles

As described in Chapter 2, my overall research question is *how nature-based tourism contributes to changed perceptions and relation to nature in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan*. I have explored this question through research based on empirical material which has resulted in three articles which I will present in the following chapter. I will not present the empirical material from the articles in a detailed manner, as this can be found in the separate articles.

5.1 Article 1: From coal to cool. Reordering nature in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan

Status: The article is published:

Sturød, A.G. (2019). From coal to cool. Reordering nature in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. *Tourist Studies, Vol 19* (2)

In Article 1, I ask the question: How does nature-based tourism development contribute to a reordering of nature in certain ways rather than others? How does this ordering of nature take place?

The central focus in the article is the mountain village Shakhta Jyrgalan in north-eastern Kyrgyzstan. The village, which used to be a prosperous coal-mining town, experienced a heavy decline and out-migration after the collapse of the Soviet Union. A few years ago, the village started to develop into a tourism destination, with the help of tourism entrepreneurs, financed through an USAID-initiated project. The village is currently experiencing an increased interest from foreign tourists who come to the village for free-ride skiing in winter and hiking in summer. In the article I study how the tourism

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development has changed the way the local inhabitants relate to the surrounding nature, more specifically the snow and the coal.

The article asks if this transformation of the town from coal-mining town to tourist destination has also changed how local inhabitants relate to nature. In particular, the article discusses how global discourses of sustainability and conservation become powerful in a local context and how understandings and knowledge of nature are negotiated by various actors/actants at local level. The article also discuss how human and non-human actors are seen as becoming what they are as a result of their relationships with other entities. Through this approach it is possible to see how tourism orders reality in certain, rather than other, ways; in other words: how non-humans and humans relate to one another in novel ways and by such creating new realities.

I draw upon analytical approaches and concepts from both political ecology and actor network theory. I use the political ecology approach to show that connections between discursive constructions of nature on a global level have implications to on-the-ground practices. I moreover point to how nature-based tourism and eco-tourism have been used as a form of governance and policy instrument with reference to Foucault's understanding of power and knowledge. With the critical lens of political ecology I am able to point to the bodies, objects and spaces that risk being marginalized in tourismscapes (how the coal miners and their proud past/identity are being "swept under the carpet") because coal mining is not seen as an environmentally benign development path.

Drawing upon concepts of ANT, I show how nature elements such as clean air, snow etc. are related together in the tourismscapes and thus become part of an actor-network through the process of translation (Callon, 1986), a central concept within ANT. The article shows how the transition is enacted through a *problematization* phase, to an *obligatory passage point*, and to an *interessement* phase, an *enrolment* phase and finally a *mobilization* phase. The article argues that there is an ongoing translation process where coal, untouched nature, fresh air, white snow and other non-human actors of

Shakhta Jyrgalan are reordered in new emergent tourismscapes in Jyrgalan. In this way, the agency of non-human actors changes as they are enrolled into (or excluded from) changeable and mutable realities.

Finally, the article concludes by discussing the process of translation from black coal to white nature in terms of a more multiple and heterotopian understanding of nature, which has been part of the ambition of the project as described in the introduction. I argue that elements are included and ordered in (local) tourismscapes because they are valued and supported by global structures/discourses (such as that of sustainable development and ecological modernization) which again are embedded in the binary construction of nature as separate from culture. Supported by my empirical material I suggest that this reordering of nature makes certain realities emerge, while others submerge. However, while some orderings of nature appear to represent the reality, it does not necessarily rule out multiple understandings of how nature "ought to look" or be used.

5.2   Article 2: The Kyrgyz horse: Enactments and agencies in and beyond a tourism context

Status: The article is co-authored together with Prof. Gudrun Helgadottir and Assoc. Prof. Ingeborg Nordbø. The article is published.

Sturød, A.G; Helgadottir, G. & Nordbø, I. (2019). The Kyrgyz horse. Enactments and agencies in and beyond tourism. *Current Issues in Tourism*. DOI: 10.1080/13683500.2019.1626813

In article 2 the research question is: How is the horse enacted in various discourses and practices related to tourism in Kyrgyzstan?

The article starts by presenting why the horse has such an important position in Kyrgyzstan due to its nomadic heritage and subsequently how horse trekking has become a popular form of tourism in the country.

In the article we look at how the horse is shaped by discourses and practices, but also itself contributes to shaping the very same discourses and practices. The latter indicates a form of non-human agency, which we here understand as an actor's ability to connect to, affect and engage with other actors (Ren, 2011). The article draws upon recent tourism research within political ecology, holding that nature is socially and politically constructed (Mostafanezhad et al. 2016; Nepal and Saarinen, 2016) as well as ANT/post-humanism approaches to tourism studies, that bring attention to non-human actors and agency (Jóhannesson, 2005; Ren, 2011; van der Duim, Ren and Jóhannesson, 2017).

What we find through our empirical material is that the Kyrgyz horse is enacted and enacts itself through multiple versions which we have chosen to name *the brand, the battle horse, the breed, the beshbarmak, and the best friend.* We discuss how these various versions are closely linked but also partly in conflict. For example, we find that the brand, the breed and to some extent the battle horse (through the event World Nomadic Games) are enactments that are used in promoting Kyrgyzstan as a country of nomadic culture and horse trekking. The battle horse is somewhat also in conflict with tourism, since the horse games can be perceived as barbaric by foreigners. We also find that the horse as a food resource, the beshbarmak, is mostly hidden to tourists since horsemeat is seen as controversial by many (but not all) Western countries. Finally, we find that tourism itself has created a version, the best friend, through tourists' demand for well-kept horses with names.

Our empirical material indicates that tourism does not only draw upon (or downplay) existing horse-human relations, but also creates new ones. Tourism leads to what Haraway (2003) has called a co-evolutioned relationship, where humans and animals are being intertwined in new relations. Following this, we argue that the Kyrgyz horse is

enacted in various discourses and practices related to tourism, some of which converge, while others are in conflict.

The main argument/conclusion of the article is that while the Kyrgyz horse and culture of horsemanship plays a significant role in the tourism development of Kyrgyzstan, tourism also partly affects the way that horses are perceived among Kyrgyz people, based on demand and expectations of the tourists. This indicates that tourism is both shaped by and contributes to shaping a non-human agent, in this case the horse, but that the horse through its various abilities to engage with tourism actors, also shapes tourism. However, the branding of the Kyrgyz horse as a "unique" selling point in tourism development fails to acknowledge the complex human–animal relation by downplaying horse husbandry practices that are in conflict with tourism.

5.3 Article 3: The political ontology of Kyrgyz mountains.

Status: The article is co-authored with Prof. Inger Birkeland. The article is not published but will be submitted to *Journal of Cultural Geography.*

In article 3, we ask the question: What versions of the Kyrgyz mountains are performed, what are the politics shaping these performances and what implications does this have at a local level, for both humans and non-humans? Given the present situation of an increased focus on Kyrgyzstan as a tourist destination and the development of institutions and policy tools for tourism, our particular interest is to provide some reflections on how these multiple realities also reflect back at Kyrgyz resource management and tourism policies.

Taking Kyrgyz mountains as a point of departure, we argue that Kyrgyz mountains should be studied through an analytical framework that allows for pluriversal worlds and realities to come forward. The paper is inspired by Annemarie Mol who asks questions on how "the real" is implicated in the "political" and vice versa, as well as Mario Blaser's (2009; 2013) work on political ontology, which encourages social science to take radically different ontologies seriously. Both are part of what has been named the

"ontological turn" in the social sciences, which during the last decade led to a growing body of research (see for example: Burman, 2016; Descola, 2013; Escobar, 2017). In line with Mol, we believe that mountains, or anything else in the world, must be understood through the practices that we enact with them, and that the world is shaped by these practices into *multiple realities* (Mol, 1999, 2002). A central starting point for our paper is that reality in which human lives are performed in a variety of practices and where the radical consequence is this: Reality itself is multiple while there also might be "various versions of an object" (Mol, 1999: 74).

Based on our empirical material we find three versions – or worldings – of Kyrgyz mountains which we call "mountains as sacred", "mountains as a resource" and "mountains as vulnerable". We stress, however, that these versions must not be understood as chronologically organized in the sense that one version replaces another or as mutually exclusive. Rather we argue that the worldings simply co-exist and evolve and, as argued by Mol (1999:85), that alternative realities might be found inside one another. Mountains come into being through various practices relating to different ontologies.

Whereas the first version, the mountains as sacred, places the mountains in reciprocal or even superior relation to humans, the second version enacts mountains through an anthropocentric ontology, where the mountains is subdued by humans through practices of resource extraction, scientific knowledge production, mapping and exploring. The third version extends this anthropocentric ontology, but also manages to include and co-opt some of the practices related to the first version, often through heritage tourism. From being scientific objects to study, explore or conquer, the sustainable development approach to mountains called for a much more holistic view. Ancient, nomadic life and beliefs has become commodified through tourism which makes them possible to be "understood" from an modern ontology and where tourism gives them modern value. Sacred sites are included as protected areas, and granted status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site etc. This shows how the first version, which then stands in conflict to the second and third version - through its non-dualist understanding

of relationships between human beings and nature - is particularly important and vulnerable in a tourism context.

A central concept in the article is the notion of the pluriverse, particular in the discussion of the sacred sites, known as *mazars*, in Kyrgyzstan. We discuss the fact that although practises related to these sites are based on an ontology and human–nature relations which differ from the modern construction of culture and nature, they are in the process of being subsumed into modern discourses of world heritage and Western juridical framework. The question is whether such efforts acknowledge the pluriverse or contribute to reducing the pluriverse.

In the next part, I will return to the findings of the three articles and discuss how they have all contributed to exploring my research question. I will also mention how I find they contribute to discussion beyond that of nature-based tourism in Kyrgyzstan as well as some ideas for further research.

6 Discussion and conclusion

Nature-based tourism has become a much-used strategy to foster economic growth in rural areas of the world with few other opportunities for employment. What is more, nature-based tourism is promoted by major environmental organizations and development agencies as a solution to ensure conservation. However, tourism can be a powerful tool of political and cultural influence between geographies of different scales. Moreover, it is as a phenomenon that influences people, objects and places both in a material sense and in a non-material sense, through changes in perceptions and practices.

My research, presented in the three articles in Chapter 5, has shown that this has also been the case for the Central Asian country Kyrgyzstan, where nature-based tourism has become an important policy instrument for development and a way of promoting Kyrgyzstan externally. Since independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan has become a new tourist destination also for travellers from other countries than the previous Soviet Union. Located outside the beaten track of most Western travellers it has received status as a destination for nature-based tourism and eco-tourism. Similar to other countries with rapid growth in tourism flows, it is a country that is experiencing changes, not only physically but also socio-culturally.

As presented in Chapter 1, the research question has been "*How does nature-based tourism contribute to changed perceptions and relations to nature in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan?*". To explore this question I have looked at the practices related to nature by humans, but also how nature and non-human agency of nature affect and relate to humans, that is; how the materiality of nature is able to change human practices. Knowledge about how these changes occur and what consequences they have, for human and non-humans, is important not only in understanding tourism as a phenomenon but also in order to better plan and develop for tourism in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere.

In this concluding chapter, I will discuss how the results from my research presented in the previous chapter answer my overall research question. I will discuss the results with reference to some of the concepts presented in Chapter 3, as well as to some of the broader discussions and questions which the empirical material has elicited. In that way I am trying show how the findings can give insight to nature-based tourism in Kyrgyzstan specifically, and what we can learn from these findings regarding the study of nature more generally. Moreover, I will discuss how the relational theoretical framework that I have used may provide us with a deeper understanding about how human perceive and relate to nature in the context of tourism.

6.1   Constructions of nature

A central premise for the research behind this thesis is the understanding and construction of nature. My research has brought into question how nature-based tourism draws upon the modern binary construction of nature and society/culture. While I in **Article 1** and **Article 2** refer to the binary construction of nature and *society*, I refer to the binary construction of nature and *culture* in **Article 3**. The inconsistency of terms can be questioned and problematized. However, one of the main discussions of my research is how the study of nature from a modern, Western epistemological perspective often has been grounded in the idea of a separation between nature as something *other* than and often in *contrast* to humanity, regardless of if we call it society or culture.

As discussed in Chapter 3, this binary construction is claimed to have developed within modern capitalist societies, developing in Europe and North America throughout the last few centuries (Nustad, 2015; Latour, 1993). As discussed in Chapter 3, this construction was also present in the Soviet Union where nature became an important component in the socialist project in as far as it could be transcended and changed into something else that could serve socialism (Prozorov, 2016). During the 1950s and onwards, the Central Asian region became an arena to demonstrate the power of Soviet economic development and modernization. In **Article 2** for example, the focus is a discussion on

how the small Kyrgyz breed was mixed with bigger Russian and Arabian breeds to fit better with "Soviet notions of improvement" (Cassidy, 2009:12). Similar to this, and as discussed in **Article 3**, nomads and nomadic culture were regarded as something that had to be modernized (Beyer, 2016) and the Kyrgyz nomads were settled in collective farms during the 1930s and onwards (Petric, 2015). This was part of "the Great Break" where the attempt was to overcome the traditional forms of life (Prozorov, 2016). The aim was to transform man, society and environment (Hoenig, 2014), where industrial projects became symbolic and economic important. This is also something which I refer to in **Article 1** where I discuss the Stakhanovite movement and how a good miner was seen as a good socialist.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist idea, Kyrgyzstan was left in an ideological vacuum. Finding the true national identity became an important part of the transition to an independent state but also a way of distancing itself from the failed Soviet management practices (Petric, 2015:159). The nation-building process was greatly supported by Western countries and international organizations, eager to assist in reforming the country towards democracy and market economy.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the socialist ideology aimed at transcending nature into something better. The focus on nature conservation and sustainable development, which was dominant among the Western organizations engaged in post-independent Kyrgyzstan, challenged this relation to nature. With nature as a selling point for tourists, the conservation perspective moreover became a policy tool which supported market economy. Nature-based tourism in Kyrgyzstan thus became a policy instrument for encouraging entrepreneurship and market-oriented businesses as well as a conservation instrument as opposed to the failed socialist nature-management practices. Nature-based tourism can therefore be understood as a processes of *governmentality* (Foucault, 1991) and *environmentality* (Agrawal, 2005) utilized to create certain forms of behaviour. New knowledge, politics, institutions and subjectivities become linked together where new knowledge of nature shapes practices and human subjectivities in relation to the environment. Nature-based tourism can in

this sense be said to create new perceptions and relations to nature, as nature comes to represent more than physical representations but also gains meaning as part of political discourses.

Throughout the research process, I have looked at how the binary construction of nature and culture comes into play in relation to the development of nature-based tourism in Kyrgyzstan. As much as seeking the "authentic" and "real" Kyrgyz traditions was a part of the nation building process and economic development strategy, it has also become a mirror to the outside world and a way to attract foreign tourists. As I point to in all three articles, nature is the most important resource for tourism, especially to attract foreigners from countries outside the former Soviet Union. Romanticized and idealized images such as "Untouched mountains", "snow banked silence" (**Article 1**, p. 2) "nomadic culture", "wilderness and beauty" (**Article 2**, p. 11) or "great mountains" (**Article 3**, pp. 1 and 19) are actively being used to attract Western tourists. Kyrgyz nature as something pure, wild and untouched is promoted by Kyrgyz tourism operators, as well as expected by tourists, and therefore contributes to upholding and reinforcing the binary construction of nature and culture. At the same time, and as discussed in Chapter 3, a binary construction of nature and culture, does not necessarily lead to the same outcome. An understanding of nature as something that had to be transcended and changed, is not the same as an understanding of nature as something that has to be protected and conserved, even though nature as something "other than" is present in both understandings.

All the three articles show how objects of nature have been part of discourses and new knowledge productions and new understandings of the relation between nature and culture. In **Article 1,** the coal miners, who used to be a symbol of "great socialists" (p. 15), are being replaced by more non-extractive nature-management practices, where nature-based tourism is connected with the discourse of ecological modernization. In **Article 2**, the horse becomes part of the discourse on nation-building through the revival of the "true Kyrgyz breed" as well as through World Nomad Games. While **Article 3**

shows how the mountains become co-opted to global discourses on conservation and biodiversity, where tourism is thought to be an instrument that can ensure sustainable use. The research thus points to how nature-based tourism brings along new knowledge and understandings about nature. In **Article 1**, this can be seen when the local villagers talk about how they have been taught by a "specialist" (p. 22) about the importance of protecting nature, and to the recognition of "how important ecology is for all citizens" (p. 24). In **Article 3,** the same acknowledgement of ecological protection is seen for example through the quote (p. 19) "People have started to understand, especially educated people (…), that nature is our bread".

However, it can be argued that in some cases the binary construction between nature and culture is being blurred, which is the case in **Article 2.** With tourism and the expectations of the tourists of animal welfare, that the horses are being treated nicely and given names as individuals, the horse is in a way brought closer to the humans, making the boundaries between the animal and the human less distinct. It is also interesting to reflect on this in **Article 3**. Here the findings show that there is a blur between nature and human both when it comes to agency that nature and mountains are thought to hold within Tengrism, but maybe most interestingly with reference to the version of the mountain as vulnerable. In the latter version one can almost get the impression that the mountain has become a child that needs to be cared. This personalization of the mountains as something that needs our protection and care, makes the mountains become something more than a resource or something that has to be changed or utilized for the good of humans. At the same time it places humans above nature and portrays the mountains as subordinate and dependent on the help of humans, which therefore upholds the boundary between the mountains and their "protectors". The acknowledgment of human's dependence on mountain as well as an acknowledgement of mountains need for human protection illustrates the complex flux of boundaries between nature and humans. Perhaps even a challenge to the binary construction of nature and culture?

6.2 Relational understandings of nature

As explained in the introduction, power struggles and marginalization have been a central concern of critical tourism studies. This has also been of great interest in my own research, which in many ways, and for several years, has been influenced by a normative perspective. In other words, my research has evolved around political aspects of tourism with regards to the "winners and losers". This understanding came from my position within political ecology, which is focused on how power/knowledge leads to "winners" and "losers". However, through my research on nature-based tourism in Kyrgyzstan and the empirical material that I produced, I have come to see tourism development as a process which is more complex than determining "winners and losers", "privileged or marginalized" and with reference to grand narratives of power struggles. Throughout the research I have come to that the acknowledgment that while it is important to uncover power structures which might lead to injustice and marginalization of certain stakeholders at a certain time, it is also important to acknowledge the nuances, and that positions of "winners and losers" are in flux and may change depending on time and context.

There is no doubt that nature-based tourism in Kyrgyzstan is connected to discourses and processes at both a global and a national level. Still, I do not see these discourses or processes as something that can be discovered or as being part of a "true world of realities lying behind a veil of appearances" (Latour, 2010: 475). Tourism development is not a phenomenon which can be held up and studied in a static perspective or where the materiality of tourism (the bodies, the objects, the places) can be easily separated in a way that makes the relation between them clear. Quite to the contrary, the materiality of tourism is in constant change and the relation between bodies, objects and places is constantly in flux. Exploring the phenomenon in a relational manner affords an opportunity to challenge common explanatory factors or common categories normally used to explain and describe tourism. My empirical material has left me understanding that the world takes its forms in many shapes, realities and practices, all of which are instable and mutable. A place that no one has heard about a few years ago,

might be an up and coming tourism destination today (**Article 1**). A landscape or natural feature valued for its resource exploitation by some, might be valued for being left untouched by others (**Article 3**). A marginalized group of people in one period of time, might benefit due to their ancient traditions and values in another time (**Article 2**).

To understand such changes, instability and mutations, I have used an approach that allows the researcher to "follow the actors" (Latour, 2005:12) and how they relate to one another. Through the three articles, I have looked at various non-human objects: the snow/coal (**Article 1**), the horse (**Article 2**) and the mountain (**Article 3**). I have looked at how perceptions and relations to these have changed as they have become important actants in the tourism discourses and networks in post-independent Kyrgyzstan.

Central for the discussion in all three articles is the notion of non-human agency, which I understand as an actor's ability to connect to, affect and engage with other actors (Ren, 2011). In all three articles I have looked at practices related to nature by humans, but also how nature and the non-human agency of nature affect and relate to humans; that is, how the materiality of nature is able to change human practices. In **Article 1,** I discuss agency in relation to the coal, and how coal actually was the non-human actor which, due to the infrastructure development during Soviet times, made it possible to develop nature-based tourism the way it has been done in this area (p.16). Later the snow has become the non-human actor which has made this place attractive and which was the reason for the tourism entrepreneur's initiative to start nature-based tourism in the area. In **Article 2**, my co-authors and I argue that the horse likewise has non-human agency. Was it not for the horse, there would not have been a nomadic tradition, horsemanship or horse games to use in nation-building discourses or outward branding of the country (p. 12). **In Article 3**, the non-human agency of the mountains is discussed with reference to how tengrism as an ancient nomadic belief, renders nature with "the ability to bless and punish". While the discussion of non-human agency in **Article 1** and **Article 2** understands non-humans as becoming what they are as a result of their relationship with human and non-human others, the latter opens up for a much more

radical understanding of non-human agency. This brings me into the ontological turn and a more pluriversal understanding of nature.

6.3   A pluriversal understanding of nature

Based on my empirical material and interpretations of this, I have found that yes, perceptions and relations to nature *do* partly change when tourism starts to develop. However, throughout the research process, I have come to understand that perhaps more than *changing* perceptions and relations to the nature, nature-based tourism contributes to *adding* new perceptions and relations to nature, through new ways of enactment in the world (Mol, 1999). Nature-based tourism thus becomes a way for human and non-human actors to come into the world or "being in the world" both through new practices and new knowledge (Burman, 2017). These new ontologies do not necessarily replace each other, or exist separately from one another, but they may actually co-exist and evolve within one another.

In **Article 2**, for example, one of the findings is how Western horse-human relations, such as expectations of animal welfare, affect the Kyrgyz horse-human relationship. However, rather than changing horse-human relations completely (which would be rather unlikely given the long traditions of horsemanship in Kyrgyzstan), this finding show how tourism adds new "versions" of the horse (the horse as a best friend). Hence, the new versions do not necessarily replace old versions, but might partly alter them to make them compatible with tourism branding. The other "non-compatible" versions, such as the horse as food resource, still continue to exist, but are less visible for the tourist.

While the notion of the pluriverse is present in all three articles, it is obvious that this is a notion that has developed along with the empirical material throughout the work with the articles. My initial understanding of the process of tourism development was perhaps more of a linear and exclusive development, where one way of understanding nature becomes replaced by another. This understanding is evident in the title of **Article**

1, "From coal to cool", which in itself indicates a move *from* something *to* something else. However, rather than thinking about our world as moving from some dominant understandings and practices towards other dominant understandings and practices, the notion of the pluriverse opens up for an understanding of the world as more non-essential, non-universal and non-linear. In **Article 1**, I start to open up for an understanding of nature as multiple, where various versions (the tourismscape and minescape) coexist. In retrospect it would therefore perhaps be better to call the article "Coal and cool" without indicating this linear move, but rather acknowledging this co-existence.

I refer to Jamal and Stronza (2009) who call for a perspective on eco-tourism development that is not determined solely by academics, capitalist markets, conservationists or NGOs, but also by locally defined and culturally embedded relations and meanings. Through my empirical material I furthermore point out how the binary construction of nature and culture/society might lead to ignoring other ways of understanding nature or ignoring the possibility "that there are "multiple natures", constructed variously by different societies" (Cater, 2006:32). In **Article 2**, the idea of multiple realities is explored further through the non-human agency of the horse and how it is enacted in various versions. While the argument here is that tourism has contributed to adding a version of the horse, that of "the best friend", we also point to how the branding of the Kyrgyz horse as a "unique" selling point in tourism, fails to acknowledge the complex human-animal relation by down-playing horse husbandry practices that are in conflict with tourism. In this sense tourism can also contribute to reducing the pluriverse or at least hide the pluriverse. In **Article 3** the idea of multiple realities from **Article 1** and **Article 2** continues to be explored, through the notion of political ontology and the very concept of pluriverse. The discussion here is on how various versions or ontologies of the Kyrgyz mountains exist side by side. While the findings show how new version of the mountains have been added through global discourses and policies on tourism, heritage and protected sites, the question of what versions are being lost is also raised. As the mountains are being re-constructed into the

modern political ontology, and colonized as "ours" to save, the consequence might be that the non-modern is being left out from the "real" following the modern ontology or translated into a modern framework in order to "make sense".

Since the notion of the pluriverse was something which I got engaged in towards the end of my PhD, this has limited the scope to which I was able to explore this notion. I believe the concept has a lot to offer the research field of tourism, and would be intrigued to explore this further, both in a Kyrgyz context and beyond. While exploring my research question in a concrete geographical context (Kyrgyzstan), looking at physical objects, I have raised questions and discussed nature from an ontological and epistemological level, which might be relevant beyond the region and objects of my study.

6.4   Reflections and insights on own understanding of nature

I have found political ecology and ANT-inspired studies to be fruitful for my analysis. The political ecology approach that I have drawn upon has provided me with perspectives and concepts which bring attention to power/knowledge structures between and across actors on different geographical scales. Political ecology, in combination with actor-network theory have contributed greatly in developing a critical questioning of nature as a social construct. These perspectives have helped me link the on-the ground practices to global discourses. The ANT-approach with a concern for materiality, both human and non-human actors, and how they relate, gains meaning, value and agency in networks and relations.

The three articles show some progress in terms of how to understand and study nature. **Article 1** is perhaps the most political ecology oriented. The reason for this was that political ecology was the initial analytical framework with which I set out to explore my research question. However, and as I explained in Chapter 4.3, I felt that my analytical perspective was lacking concepts which allowed me to follow more on the ground

processes, and also which were able to include the materiality of tourism, i.e. human and non-human actors. **Article 1** shows how I reflect upon my own position as a researcher and shows how I have moved from a normative and critical understanding of tourism development, towards a more nuanced and relational understanding. The historical and political context is described to show how the present situation and transformation of the village, and the people and objects are connected to a bigger picture and how the reordering of nature locally is related to global processes, hence adhering to explanatory factors of political ecology. However, acknowledging that this historical and political context makes a difference leaves out the most interesting question: how does it make a difference? By looking more closely at actual objects (and places) through the ANT approach, I am able to show at a concrete level, how the structures work: *how* the coal is being devalued in the new reality, *how* the snow is becoming valued (**Article 1**). And, perhaps most importantly: what results does this produce? What are the consequences? From the position of a researcher, **Article 2** shows how I have moved further into the ANT conceptual thinking and how it has opened up my understanding of what Annemarie Mol (2002) has called multiple realities. This radical ontological thinking allows us to think of the world as being multiple through the way actors enact in it. While the horse–human relationship might be understood as a cultural construction, the concept of non-human agency allows for a more relational perspective, where actors are rendered agency through their ability to connect with others and that these relations are in constant flux. In the last article, **Article 3**, I find that the concept of political ontology might be a link between political ecology and ANT, where notions of power, knowledge and politics are coupled with a relational approach to understanding the world. While the concept of political ontology challenges pre-given categories, typically developed by Western scholars, the concept relates well with ANT, which has been criticized for being too focused on contemporary processes and actors, to wider context, historical events, texts and actions.

Hence, by drawing upon these two approaches, I have been able to explore my research question from both a structural *and* relational approach. By that I acknowledge that "Networks are structural, in that the composition and interrelation of various networks

constitute structural power relations, and they are relational because they are constituted by the interactions of variously powerful social actors" (Dicken, Kelly, Olds and Yeung, 2001: 94). By drawing upon the concept of the pluriverse, I have contributed to opening the door, at least a little bit, to new ways of understanding the complex phenomenon of nature-based tourism in Kyrgyzstan as well as new ways of understanding nature more in general.

Tourism is a complex phenomenon that influences people, objects and places not only in a material sense, but also in a non-material sense, through changes in perceptions and practices. Through my empirical material and analysis, I have shown how national and local tourism development is strongly connected to processes and discourses on a global level. Tourism should therefore be understood as a powerful tool of influence between geographies of different scales. My material has moreover shown that the places, objects and people affected by tourism are not passively being changed by some external force, but that both human *and* non-human actors have agency, with the capacity to impact tourism. Tourism should therefore be studied through a relational approach where the human and non-human actors are understood as becoming what they are as a result of their relationship with others (Law, 1999). My research can altogether be read as attempts to question the binary construction of nature and culture, both in relation to nature-based tourism, and as a general modern phenomenon which rules the way we understand and manage nature. I believe that the results of the research can moreover contribute to challenge researchers to revisit some of the very categories on which we base our analysis and our own understanding of the study of nature.

There is no doubt that tourism has become a major global driver of change. Whether this change is for the better or worse, is a question I have continuously asked myself throughout the last three and a half years. And although this is the end of the conclusion, I still have no clear answer to present. It remains an open question depending on who is asked, where it is asked and when it is asked. However, rather than being frustrated

by the lack of clear answers after all these years, I feel certain that my research has given new insights to the *processes* of change.

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Appendix: List of interviews

Interviews conducted for article 1:

No.	When	Who/Occupation[17]	Place	Comment
1.	June 2016	Man, late 60s , farmer/retired miner	Shakhta Jyrgalan Outside his house	
2.	June 2016	1.Mother, 70s 2. Son, 30s, miner	Shakhta Jyrgalan, in their kitchen	
3.	June 2016	Man, early 60s*	Outside village admistration building	A second man, in his 60s joined the interview towards the end. Same informant as #4, article 3
4.	June 2016	1.Man, mid 50s, miner 2.Man, mid 50s, miner 3.Woman mid 50s, retired	Shakhta Jyrgalan In the kitchen of one of the men's house	This was the interview mentioned in section 4.5 which involved alcohol
5.	June 2016	Woman, early 30s*	Shakhta Jyrgalan, in her work place	
6.	June 2016	Man, early 50s*	Shakhta Jyrgalan, in his work place	
7.	June 2016	Woman, early 30s*	Shakhta Jyrgalan, In her kitchen	The battery of the recorder went flat after 10 minutes. The rest was written by hand
8.	June 2016	Man, early 50s, Tourism entrepreneur	Shakhta Jyrgalan In the kitchen of the guest house	

[17] Where marked with * the occupation is left out due to anonymity.

9.	June 2016	Man, late 70s, retired miner	Shakhta Jyrgalan. In his kitchen	We were also accompanied by his daughter in law. Same informant as #3, article 3
10.	May 2017	Man, mid 40s, miner and *	Shakhta Jyrgalan In his work place	The interview was interrupted at three occasions by other people
11.	May 2017	Woman, early 40s*	Shakhta Jyrgalan In her work place	The interview was interrupted by other people on several occasions
12.	May 2017	Man, late 60s, retired miner	Shakhta Jyrgalan	His neighbour joined in towards the end of the interview
13.	May 2017	Woman, mid 30s*	Shakhta Jyrgalan In her kitchen	Her neighbour joined in towards the end of the interview
14.	May 2017	Man, early 40s*	Shakhta Jyrgalan In the guest house office	Non-resident, affiliated with the USAID project
15.	May 2017	Man 40s*	Shakhta Jyrgalan In his work place	
16.	May 2017	Woman 60s*	Shakhta Jyrgalan In her house	Same informant as #2, article 3
17.	May 2017	Woman 60s*	Shakhta Jyrgalan In her house	
18.	May 2017	Man, late 50s, retired miner and *	Shakhta Jyrgalan In his house	
19.	May 2017	Woman, early 30s*	Shakhta Jyrgalan In her kitchen	Same informant as # 12, article 2
20.	May 2017	Woman, early 50s Tourism entrepreneur	Shakhta Jyrgalan In the guest house	

21.	May 2017	Woman, early 50s, occupation unknown	Shakhta Jyrgalan Outside in their garden	Her teen-aged daughter attended the first part but left. A neighbour joined in towards the end
22.	May 2017	1.Woman, 40s* 2.Woman, 40s, occupation unknown	Shakhta Jyrgalan, outside in the garden	
23.	May 2017	1.Man, 30s, Dutch tourist 2. Woman, 20s, Dutch tourist	Shakhta Jyrgalan In the guest-house	Number 2 is the same informant as #10, article 2
24.	June 2017	Man, 50s, tourism entrepreneur	Shakhta Jyrgalan	Same informant as interview #8, this was a follow-up interview from 2016
25.	June 2017	Man, early 70s, retired miner	Shakhta Jyrgalan In his kitchen	
26.	June 2017	Woman, early 60s, Kyrgyz tourist	Shakhta Jyrgalan In the guest house	Same informant as #13, article 2
27.	June 2017	Woman, late 60s, occupation unknown	Shakhta Jyrgalan In her house	Her neighbour attended the first part but left
28.	June 2017	Woman, late 20s*	Shakhta Jyrgalan, In the guest house	Non-resident, affiliated with the USAID project
29.	June 2017	Man, early 30s, tourism consultant	Shakhta Jyrgalan, In the guest house	Non-resident, affiliated with the USAID project The interview was not recorded as the memory card was full Same informant as #6, article 3

Interviews conducted for article 2:

No.	When	Who/Occupation	Place	Comment
1.	August 2015[18]	Horse tourism entrepreneur	Issyk Kul Region	Interview carried out by Ingeborg Nordbø and Gudrun Helgadottir
2.	August 2015	Horse tourism entrepreneur	Issyk Kul Region	Interview carried out by Ingeborg Nordbø and Gudrun Helgadottir
3.	August 2015	Horse tourism entrepreneur	Issyk Kul Region	Interview carried out by Ingeborg Nordbø and Gudrun Helgadottir
4.	August 2015	Horse tourism entrepreneur	Naryn Region	Interview carried out by Ingeborg Nordbø and Gudrun Helgadottir
5.	August 2015	Horse tourism entrepreneur	Naryn Region	Interview carried out by Ingeborg Nordbø and Gudrun Helgadottir
6.	August 2015	Horse tourism entrepreneur	Chui Region	
7.	June 2016	Horse milk vender	Issyk Kul Region	
8.	April 2017	Horse tourism entrepreneur	Issyk Kul Region	
9.	June 2017	Horse tourism entrepreneur	Issyk Kul Region	Interview carried out together with Gudrun Helgadottir

Same informant as #5, article 3 |

[18] All interviews carried out in August 2015 were conducted by Ingeborg Nordbø and Gudrun Helgadottir as part of a pilot study, as explained in section 1.3.

10.	June 2017	Tourist from The Netherland	Shaktha Jyrgalan Issyk Kul Region	Same informant as #23, article 1
11.	January 2016	Tour operator	Oslo	The tour operator was interviewed while visiting Norway for promotion of Kyrgyzstan to Norwegian customers
12.	May 2017	Woman, early 30s	Shaktha Jyrgalan, Issyk Kul Region	Same informant as #19, article 1
13.	June 2017	Woman, early 60s, Kyrgyz tourist	Shaktha Jyrgalan, Issyk Kul Region	Same informant as #26, article 1
14.	March 2016	Advisor Environmental NGO	Bishkek	Same informant as #1 in article 3

Interviews conducted for article 3:

No.	When	Who/Occupation	Place	Comment
1.	March 2016	Advisor Environmental NGO	Bishkek	Same informant as #14 in article 2
2.	May 2017	Woman 60s	Shaktha Jyrgalan, Issyk Kul Region	Same informant as #16 in article 1
3.	June 2016	Man, early 70s, retired miner	Shaktha Jyrgalan, Issyk Kul Region	Same informant as #25 in article 1
4.	June 2016	Man, early 60s	Shaktha Jyrgalan, Issyk Kul Region	Same informant as #3, article 1
5	June 2017	Horse tourism entrepreneur	Issyk Kul Region	Same informant as #9, article 2
6.	June 2017	Tourism consultant	Issyk Kul Region	Same informant as #29, article 1
7.	January 2018	Female student	Bø, Norway	
8.	October 2018	Male student	Bø, Norway	

Article 1

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Article

From coal to cool: Reordering nature in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract

The article studies the transformation of a Kyrgyz coal-mining village into a tourism destination. By combining political ecology research approaches with concepts borrowed from Actor Network Theory (ANT), I attempt to show how nature-based tourism development contributes to a reordering of nature in certain ways rather than others. Supported by my empirical material, I suggest that this reordering of nature makes certain realities emerge, while others submerge. However, while some orderings of natures appear to be representing the reality, it does not necessarily rule out multiple understandings of how nature "ought to look" or be used.

Upon returning to the Kyrgyz mountain village in April 2017, I was met by the two signs seen in Figure 1. The sign to the left, which reads "OAO Shakhta Jyrgalan" in Cyrillic letter or "OAO[1] Mine Jyrgalan" in English, had also been there during my field research the previous year. The sign to the right, however, that reads "Welcome to Jyrgalan" in Kyrgyz language at the top, followed by the English version below, was new.

The old and new signs illustrate well the ongoing transformation of this mountain village, located at an altitude of 2400 m above sea level in the northeastern part of Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia. Once a prosperous, Soviet coal-mining town, with shops, a bakery, cinema, and culture center, the town experienced a fast decline after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The subsidies from Moscow stopped, the mines could no longer produce the coal quotas it once did, the shops closed, many people moved away. The

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Figure 1. Signs at the village entrance (photo by author).

village appeared to be almost forgotten by people from outside the village and prone to suffer the same fate as many similar de-industrialized places around the world: a marginalized region characterized by job loss and outmigration of the younger generation, problematic, and "not pretty" (Birkeland, 2015: 164).

A few years ago, however, something happened. Groups of foreign skiers, in search for "untouched" areas for freeride skiing, started to arrive. The landscape, nature, and snow conditions soon proved to be very attractive to ski-enthusiast and nature lovers. Initiated by a Kyrgyz entrepreneurial couple and heavily supported by an USAID-driven tourism development project, the village has today apparently transformed into the cool and up-coming tourist destination *Jyrgalan Valley*. The village, with a once bleak future, is now described as "The best place in Kyrgyzstan" (The Crowded Planet, 2017) by international bloggers, praising the surrounding nature.

A true success story of rural nature-based tourism development? Possibly so. But has this transformation also changed how the local inhabitants relate with nature? Would the local inhabitants also describe the village like an "oasis" (NOMADasaurus, 2017) "a mountain paradise" (Goats on the Road, 2017), an "eco-village" (Lioy, 2016) like the international bloggers do? Have they too come to see "the snow banked silence" (Monk bought Lunch, 2015) and the "untouched mountains" (TripAdvisor, 2018) as a "prime destination for outdoor adventure"? (The Sandy Feet, 2017). And where does it leave the mines and the coal, which the village life once used to center around?

While acknowledging that nature consist of physical and concrete features, creatures, and objects, my research approach draws on a social constructivist epistemology that sees human relations to nature as strongly connected to cultural, socioeconomic, and political factors (Escobar, 1999: 1). Moreover, it draws upon research that questions the way nature is understood as separate from the realm of society, a binary often claimed to have occurred with modern, industrial life, developing in Europe and North America throughout the last few centuries. For a lengthy discussion of this understanding, see Escobar (1999), Fletcher (2014), Neumann (1998), and West and Carrier (2004).

While several studies have focused on how post-industrial communities have transformed into industrial heritage sites (see, for example, Hospers, 2002; Jonsen-Verbeke, 1999; Xie, 2015), there is less research on post-industrial sites that have transformed into nature-based tourism destinations. This is despite the fact that nature-based tourism is often promoted as an alternative to extractive industries (World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), 2010). The paper follows up on an edited volume by Büscher and Davidov (2013) who call for research that does not treat extraction and ecotourism as two different research areas but rather seek to link the topics.

In this article, I attempt to show how nature-based tourism development, which draws upon the modern binary of society/nature, contributes to a reordering of nature in certain ways rather than others. Supported by my empirical material, I suggest that this reordering of nature makes certain realities emerge, while others are hidden. Through my empirical material, I furthermore point out how the binary of society/nature might lead to ignoring other ways of understanding nature, or ignoring the possibility "that there are 'multiple natures', constructed variously by different societies" (Cater, 2006: 32).

In exploring my research field, I suggest an analytical framework combining a political ecology oriented approach with concepts borrowed from Actor Network Theory (ANT). By this, I follow up on a recent study of Jönsson (2016) who finds that a combination of the above-mentioned approaches brings fruitful insight to tourism studies. While arguing that ANT concepts can be useful for exploring how tourism makes human and non-humans actors intermingle in novel ways, I attempt to show that a "political ecology perspective brings insight to how this intermingling is inseparable from political and political-economical processes" (Jönsson, 2016: 331).

I continue first by introducing Kyrgyzstan and Shakhta Jyrgalan where I place my study. Second, I present the analytical approach and concepts that I have found helpful to understand the reordering of nature in Shakhta Jyrgalan. In this section, I also reflect upon my methodology. Third, I show how society/nature relations, although discursively and materially constructed through local scale processes, connect to global discourses. Finally, I reflect upon how my analytical approach and empirical material both shed light on, but also challenge, the modern binary of society/nature.

Nature-based tourism development in Kyrgyzstan

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 had dramatic consequences for Kyrgyzstan. The GDP fell by 50 percent in the period from 1991 to 1996, and, by the end of the 1990s, 64 percent of the population was living in poverty (World Bank, 2009). Due to the structural dependency between Moscow and the Soviet periphery, the disintegration of the

Soviet Union had great impact on states such as Kyrgyzstan (Spoor, 1999). One of the main priorities of Kyrgyzstan's first president, Askar Akaev, during the 1990s, was to establish an attractive foreign investment climate to promote economic reform. In this period, and as part of a transition toward a market economy, Kyrgyzstan managed to attract the attention of foreign aid organizations, realizing the potential of Kyrgyzstan as a nature-based tourism destination. With its beautiful nature, rich fauna, and mountainous topography, Kyrgyzstan was soon promoted as a tourist destination of adventure, nature, and ecotourism (Allen, 2006; Palmer, 2006). This development strategy reflected global policy papers, such as Agenda 21 (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 1992) and the call from the UN Summit in Johannesburg in 2002, encouraging international donors to provide technical assistance to developing countries and transition economies to support tourism business development (UN, 2002: 26). Although contested, nature-based tourism[2] and ecotourism[3] are often viewed as non-extractive alternatives to industry (WTTC, 2010) and promoted as strategies toward sustainable development.

   Today, more than 20 years after independence, the Kyrgyz government regards tourism development as one of the main steps for the sustainable development of rural areas and job creation in Kyrgyzstan (National Council for Sustainable Development in the Kyrgyz Republic (NCSDK), 2013). Similarly, the UN report *Assessing Development strategies to achieve the MDG[4] in The Kyrgyz Republic* highlights tourism as a driver of economic growth in the country (Mogilevsky and Omorova, 2011). With this global and national context in mind, I now turn to Shakhta Jyrgalan.

Nature-based tourism in Shakhta Jyrgalan/Jyrgalan Valley[5]

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Shakhta Jyrgalan experienced a fast decline, similar to many other rural areas in Kyrgyzstan (Spoor, 1999). Mining specialists who had come to Shakhta Jyrgalan for work from all over the former Union, moved back to their home countries or to other more profitable mining areas. The remaining people were left more or less to themselves, with no governmental support.[6] Due to frequent emergencies, floods, and collapses, the mines have been closed for extended periods in recent years, leaving the families of the village without a steady income (Alimbekova, 2014).

   In 2014, a Kyrgyz entrepreneurial couple, who also runs a guesthouse in the regional capital of Karakol, arrived at the mountain village. They decided to buy an abandoned house and rebuild it as a guesthouse. The following year, the couple won a bid for funding through the USAID driven program Business Growth Initiative in 2015 (USAID, 2015). A requirement for funding was the involvement of more than one partner, upon which the entrepreneurs invited village families as well as the village administration to join the project.[7] The initiative, implemented by the consultancy company Deloitte, resulted in the establishment of the Destination Management Organization (DMO) *Destination Jyrgalan*, with a clear aim to develop the village into the year-round tourist destination *Jyrgalan Valley*.[8] In September 2017, Jyrgalan Valley won several awards during the Kyrgyz Tourism Awards, including prizes for *The best innovative tourism project in Kyrgyzstan* and *Second best Destination in Kyrgyzstan* (Sabirova, 2017). As shown in the introduction, media and the Internet have played a major role in the tourism

development of Jyrgalan Valley. During the last two years, around 20 bloggers have found their way to the village, many personally invited and funded by USAID to write about the village. This has increased the popularization of the village accordingly, or as one of the bloggers revisiting the village in 2017 writes:

> Hidden away in the far-eastern part of the country, close to the border of Kazakhstan and only an hour from Karakol, is the captivating Jyrgalan Valley. Snowmelt rivers carve their way between jagged peaks and alpine lakes sit calmly amongst undulating pastures. […]. From being an obscure village that didn't even feature on Google Maps, to being the next up-and-coming adventure destination in the country, Jyrgalan is a town on the rise. We have seen firsthand the benefits that sustainable tourism can bring to a small village. (NOMADasaurus, 2017)

The above quote illustrates well the new story of the village. More than that, the quote also shows how the natural features of the village connect to the discourse of sustainable tourism as well as global technology networks. Hence, the quote indicates that in order to understand the ongoing process of nature-based tourism development in Shakhta Jyrgalan, it could be useful to draw upon a conceptual framework that is able to describe the process seen from various scales.

Conceptual framework

A recent involvement of tourism scholars in the research field of political ecology has raised questions as to how nature "ought to look like" in order to attract tourists. Much of this research explores the link between ecological concerns and neoliberalism, a link that underpins the rationale of many nature-based tourism initiatives (Cater, 2006; Duffy, 2008; Mostafanezhad et al., 2016; Nepal and Saarinen, 2016; Regmi and Walter, 2016). Inspired by Foucault's (1980, 1983) work on power-knowledge, many of these studies see a connection between discursive constructions of nature and on-the-ground practices. Jamal and Stronza (2009: 317) critically examine how an ecotourism project initiated in the Peruvian Amazonas is tightly connected to the global discourse of *ecological modernization.* This discourse holds that the economy can benefit from environmentalism and that science and technology can solve problems (for a critical discussion of the discourse see (Dryzek, 2013; Hajer, 1996). Jamal and Stronza argue that the impacts of the macro-level international conservation policies are negotiated in the realm of the material and cultural practices at the local level and conclude that the locals change their cultural practices related to nature, as conservation knowledge arrives. This resembles the process of environmentality, a Foucault-inspired term coined by Agrawal (2005) which refers to how knowledge, politics, institutions, and subjectivities become linked together, and where new knowledge of the nature shape practices and human subjectivities in relation to the environment. Yet, and as pointed out by Jamal and Stronza (2009: 316), discourses such as that of ecological modernization "appear as universalized meta-narratives imposed on the local, with little understanding of how reproduction, change and struggle […] occur in relation to these global influences."

Studies showing that global discourses influence local practices and knowledge production demonstrate that knowledge of nature is socially constructed. In this respect, political ecology offers a useful critical lens to deconstruct this knowledge with particular attention to power structures. However, in an attempt to avoid using global discourses and capitalist structures as a priori explanatory factors, I am also interested in studying *how* a particular discourse becomes powerful within certain historical and geographical contexts.

While understanding nature-based tourism initiatives as resting upon on the rationale of the ecological modernization discourse, I attempt to show how understandings and knowledge about nature are also negotiated in a material context by various actors, both human and non-human. I find much inspiration in researchers such as Van der Duim (2005, 2007; Van der Duim et al., 2013), Ren (2009, 2011), Jóhannesson et al. (2015), and Rodger et al. (2009). Many of these researchers follow up on Bruno Latour's ANT by questioning the binary construction of nature and society and an ontological understanding that denies that there is a "true world of realities" that can be discovered (Latour, 2010: 475). They rather study reality through a relational approach where human and non-human actors become what they are *as a result* of their relationships with other entities (Law, 1999). An actor, also defined as an actant by Latour (1996: 373) is in this sense "something that acts, or to which activity is granted by another" while agency refers to the actors' ability to connect to, affect, and engage with other actors (Ren, 2011). Through such a relational approach, tourism becomes a way of ordering reality in certain, rather than other ways (Franklin, 2004; Jóhannesson et al., 2015). The question is then, *how* does this ordering of reality take place?

Van der Duim (2005, 2007) explains this as complex process of *translation* where people and things become entangled to one another into relational networks, or what he labels *tourismscapes.* According to Van der Duim (2007: 964–965), tourismscapes include three main constituents: (1) bodies, (2) objects and spaces, and (3) information and media. The latter, as I see it, can be thought of as *inscription devices*, described by Latour and Woolgar (1986) as an instrument or technology contributing to producing particular realities. In other words, information and media can be understood as devices that contribute to the translation process where people and things are brought together, "converting relations from non-trace-like to trace-like form" (Law, 2004: 29).

The concept of translation is often associated with Callon (1986) and his study of scallops in St. Brieuc Bay in France. In his study, Callon uses the example of a scientific and economic controversy around scallop conservation and the attempts by three marine biologists to impose themselves and their definition of the situation on others. Callon explains the translation process through four phases: the first phase, problematisation, is where problems are identified and the network initiator frames an opportunity and persuades other actors to devote resources to developing a solution to the problem. In this phase, other actors are given new roles that will contribute to solving the problem. The network initiator establishes himself or herself as an obligatory passage point (OPP) in the network of relationships he or she is building and makes all the other actors pass through this point. The second phase, interessement, is where the problematisation is confirmed and other actors become interested in the proposed solution. This creates the conditions for the third phase of actor-network formation, enrollment. This involves the

definition of roles for the actors in the newly created actor network, and involves a set of strategies where the initiators seek to convince other actors to be part of the whole project. This leads us to the last phase, mobilization, where the actor-network becomes durable and the relations between actors become irreversible. If mobilization is achieved, the representatives function as the spokespersons for others, either as elected representatives, or by claiming to represent others. If the translation is successful, a reality where certain things are possible and legitimate, while others are not, have been created (Korsgaard, 2011). This is what Latour (1987) has defined as the "black box."

While drawing upon both political ecology–oriented studies and concepts and methods from ANT, I am aware of the recent debates questioning if it is possible to combine political ecology with ANT, where proponents of the first claim that there is an incompatibility between ANT and the core commitments of political ecology. Lave (2015) for instance, warns that efforts to synthesize the two approaches might lead to "watering political ecology and ANT down to compatible forms." The latter is not the purpose of my article, nor do I believe that ANT leads to an "abandoning […] focus on justice" (Lave, 2015: 221). I find that the two approaches offer insights that, rather than watering each other down, are able to raise questions and attention to processes, and more importantly follow the actors of the processes, which might otherwise have been neglected. I will demonstrate this in my analysis where I will show how certain actors, such as the coal and the snow, are reordered in relation to other actors, as well as how this reordering relates to a broader global process.

Methodological reflections and methods

In line with the relational approach to my research field I acknowledge that I as a researcher, I am part of my own research field and that I "cannot step outside the world to obtain an overall 'view from nowhere'" (Law, 2004: 8). As a European researcher, from a country where the idea of "untouched" nature is highly valued and whose relation to nature arguably can be said to rest upon the modern binary of society/nature, my background necessarily influences the way I experience and interact with my field. The section below is therefore an attempt to highlight my position as a researcher in the field and the methods used to assemble and understand the empirical material that I am using.

My research builds upon two separate field stays in Shakhta Jyrgalan/Jyrgalan Valley. Although my research interest in Kyrgyzstan goes back to 2005, with several shorter and longer stays in the country, I had not been in Shakhta Jyrgalan prior to my first visit in June 2016. My knowledge of the village was therefore limited, as was (at that time) the information available on the Internet. During the first stay, I stayed in the guesthouse of the entrepreneurial couple and was therefore first acquainted with their story. As I was living in the guesthouse, this posed a challenge to me as a researcher in exploring stories, realities, and relations to nature *other* than the story presented from the perspective of the tourism entrepreneurs. Staying at the guesthouse probably also contributed to positioning me as a tourist and might have led other villagers to think of me as "teamed up" with the tourist developers. This feeling was somewhat overcome during my second and longer field research, from April to June 2017. Together with my husband and two children, I then rented a private house located away from the tourism entrepreneurs. During

this period, I frequently socialized with people not directly involved in tourism, many who presently worked or had previously worked in the mines, and took part in various social and everyday events in the village. I was able to communicate with the villagers in Russian, which, together with Kyrgyz language, is the official language.

To understand my research question, *how nature-based tourism development reorders nature*, I also wanted to get insight into the relation between nature and society among local inhabitants that were *not* directly involved in tourism. Asking direct questions about this complex issue did not seem like an option. I therefore chose an open narrative approach where I strived to gain insight into local stories of the village through qualitative interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation. A total of 31 interviews were carried out altogether, with lengths ranging from 20 to 100 minutes.

Conscious of the fact that many of the village people thought of me as being a tourist, or as part of the tourism development initiative, I would rarely initiate questions about tourism. I rather followed an open-ended interview structure, focusing on three main topics: (1) past history of the village, (2) present situation in the village, and (3) thoughts and hopes for the future. I asked open questions in order to allow the informants to develop their own stories, and occasionally followed up with my own questions as suggested by Kvale and Brinkman (2015). Using this narrative approach in tourism studies, I follow up on (Deery et al., 2012) call for a new research agenda on the impacts of tourism where "impacts […] need to be examined in greater depth through methods such as storytelling, narratives, and observation." For the analysis of my material, I have used a narrative coding inspired by Svarstad (2009) and Birkeland (2015). By narrative, I follow Svarstad's definition that sees narratives as stories containing a course of action, involving one or more actors, that provide specific perspectives on issues, and is produced by one or more persons. Birkeland's (2015) writings of place narratives of the past, being constructed in the present, and thereby producing visions and ideas of the future has also guided the analysis. I have used an abductive analytical approach, going back and forth between the empirical material and conceptual framework. In the following section, I present the results and discuss them in the theoretical and analytical framework outlined above. In this, I have chosen to use many direct quotes (most of them translated from Russian to English) in order to stay close to the data (Messner et al., 2017).

The black past: submerging minescapes

I begin my analysis with an object repeatedly occurring in my empirical material: coal.

As in other industrial countries, coal also played an important role in the Soviet Union. In an article published in *The World Today* in 1951, it was noted that "The increase of coal production, [reflects] the progress of industry as a whole in the USSR since 1928" (S, 1951: 518).

Geologist K.I. Argentov, one of the first explorers of coal in Kyrgyzstan (Sidorenko, 1972), is mentioned as the first to describe the coal deposits of Shakhta Jyrgalan in 1911 (Makarov, n.d.). The first extraction started in 1932, led by geologist Sikstel, while the building of the mines started in 1943 (Makarov, n.d.). Prior to the coal extraction, there was no permanent settlement or road access in the area, which until then had been used

as pastureland for nomadic herders.[9] Up until the mid-1990s, the Jyrgalan coal mine was recognized as one of the main coal mines in Kyrgyzstan (Bogdetsky et al., 2001) with an annual production up to 100,000 tons per year and about 300–500 employees. The mine remained state-owned until 2006, when it was registered as an open joint-stock company (Makarov, n.d.).

In interviews and informal conversations with local inhabitants, the coal and the mines were frequently mentioned, as was the past glory of the coal-mining town. Many of the interviewees pointed to the good living standard that they used to have,[10] the supplies from Moscow,[11] the steady jobs and salaries,[12] the multicultural population,[13] and the shops and services[14] that used to operate during the Soviet Union. An older man, a former miner, explained,

> When the mine worked, we had supplies, the shops were open; we had deliveries [from Moscow]. Our village is situated high in the mountains, but because of the mines, we had better supplies than *vnizy*.[15] We had more products, food, and also better assortments. They even came from *vnizy* to buy things here. That was how our position used to be. And now … [laughs loudly] now, they have forgotten about us. That, I guess, is how the story goes. In one moment you can live and in the next … it's nothing.[16]

Many village inhabitants explained that the coal in this area was *"the second best in the Soviet Union."*[17] Through interviews, informal conversation, and observation, I also learnt that the miners were much respected and that they were considered to be brave and "honorable."[18] An example of this is found at the school in the village, also named after a local miner, Temirkasi Asanbaev. According to a large information poster on the school wall, Asanbaev, who started to work in the Jyrgalan mine in 1961, managed to dig out more than 150 percent of his intended coal quota, and "was an example to be followed by many Kyrgyz miners" (Figure 2).[19]

It should be mentioned here that mining was not only seen as a heroic occupation in this part of the Soviet Union. Coal miners were venerated as socialist heroes in the whole USSR, especially through the Stakhanovite Movement (named after the coal miner Aleksei Grigyrivich Stakhanov) a campaign established to encourage miners to work more than their intended quota (Newman, 2015). There was, in other words, a strong association between being a good miner and being a good, socialist citizen. Moreover, coal miners were among the best-paid industrial workers in the Soviet era, adding to the status of this occupation (Bogdetsky, et al., 2001; Heinberg, 2009). Many of the old miners in Shakhta Jyrgalan were very proud of their identity as miners. The village still celebrates *Coal Miners Day* on the last Sunday in August every year,[20] a holiday introduced in USSR in honor of Stakhanov and to demonstrate the prestige of the profession (Heinberg, 2009).

In light of this, it is reasonable to argue that during the Soviet Union a discourse was developed, strongly relating the coal and the mines to political (socialist) beliefs and economic processes. The empirical material moreover indicates that this discourse ordered the way of life and social practices in the coal-mining village of Shakhta Jyrgalan. However, from the above mentioned, I also draw that coal was not only part of a discourse of being a good miner and citizen, but also that coal was a focal non-human actor.

Figure 2. School wall poster (photo by author).

By that, I mean that the coal has a non-human agency that, due to political and economic structures in the given period, allowed it to be entangled to human actors in a relational network. Was it not for the coal, and the Soviet political and economic incentives to support the extractions, the village of Shakhta Jyrgalan would most likely never have existed, people would not have settled there, and the place would have remained a remote mountain area with no housing and access by road. Without this infrastructure, tourism would have been much more difficult, if not impossible, to develop because great investments would have been needed. This is food for thought, similar to Jönsson's (2015: 309) reflections on the missing "hands, hooves and struggles historically shaping this landscape" yet not visible to visitors of the golf club Bro Hof Slott, the site of Jönsson's study.

For further analytical comparison, I use the term minescapes to capture the relational network presented above. In the next section, I will show that minescapes now seems to be submerged by another order of nature, that of tourismscapes. I will moreover show how this new ordering relates to another discourse, that of ecological modernization, where ecological concerns are integrated into products and policies, while "straightforward exploitation of nature […] is seen as illegitimate" (Hajer, 1996: 250) leaving no

room for coal mining heroes. This must be seen in relation to a global political acknowledgment that coal accounts for a high percentage of the greenhouse gas emission, which has led to the ratification of the Paris Agreement by 179 Parties, Kyrgyzstan included (UNFCCC, 2016), and to an expected disinvestment in coal power (Bauer et al., 2018).

The white future: emerging tourismscapes

In the following section, I seek to understand *how* the process of reordering nature, that is, how non-humans and humans relate with one another in novel ways, takes place. For this part of my analysis, I find support in Callon's (1986) concept of translation, which I believe is able to shed light on negotiations at the local level through both discursive and material articulations.

The problematisation phase can be a helpful concept when describing the situation in Shakhta Jyrgalan/Jyrgalan Valley. The success of this phase depends on the principal actor defining a problem in such a compelling way that it ensures the acceptance of other actors (Callon, 1986; Woods, 1997). The entrepreneurial couple, here understood as the principal actor, is framing their tourism development initiative as a solution to the problem of unemployment and outmigration in the village. One of the entrepreneurs explains,

> […] two years ago, when we came here and started to build, people of Jyrgalan were moving away. You have seen the foundations of where there used to be houses, right? They were tearing down the material from their houses and took it with them. But since last year, the local people, they stopped moving away. On the contrary, they started to come and bought these empty lots, and started to improve the conditions for tourists. There is progress in tourism as people have started to realize that tourism is a really good thing.[21]

The aforementioned quote illustrates well a story line, where nature-based tourism is clearly presented as "the solution" to a common problem. As part of this story line, the entrepreneurial couple moreover position themselves as an OPP, making themselves indispensable in the development process. All plans related to tourism development pass through the couple and the DMO Destination Jyrgalan, an organization that I will return to later in this section. Their position as an OPP is moreover physically reinforced with their guesthouse being the central meeting place for all tourism related activities in the village, such as workshops and trainings. It is also the place all foreigners automatically are directed to when they arrive at the village, either by the local mini bus or by local taxi drivers.

The problematisation phase, as Callon (1986) describes it, is moreover about identifying actors that can take an active part in solving the problem. In the Jyrgalan Valley, there are several human actors involved: the local population, tourism entrepreneurs, international organizations, bloggers, and of course the tourists. Returning to Van der Duim's (2007) concept of tourismscapes, however, it makes sense not just to look at *the bodies*, but also at objects and spaces, *the non-human actors*, and how they "acquire their attributes as a result of their relationships with other entities"(Law, 1999: 3). The tourism entrepreneur illustrates well the importance of objects and spaces in the tourismscapes, listing up the places of interest around the village:

There are many beautiful places here. It is like a Klondike […]: there is a waterfall, there are mountain lakes, Tamerlane's rock[22] […]. Around here are also many beautiful canyons like Turgen, Tyop, Chemindisan. There is the river Karkara […] and there is a place called Dzarkydyk, which is a very famous place.

What is interesting is that also other local inhabitants, not directly involved in tourism, refer to several of the objects and spaces as places to visit for tourists, illustrated in the quotes below (marked in bold):

Unfortunately, many people are without work here now, since the mines are not working. And because of this, we have decided to try to attract tourists, because **the nature** here is very nice, and there are **a lot of interesting places**, like the **waterfalls**, you have been there, right? […] And further you have the **Jyrgalan Lake**, have you been there? […]. So, there is potential here to develop tourism.[23]

There is a very big potential [for tourism]. Very big! Also for winter tourism. We have **six months of winter** here. We have good **snow**, and much snow. And in summer the **nature** here is beautiful, **fresh air**, **clean water**. […][24]

As shown in the last quote, snow is mentioned as something good. This is interesting since the long and harsh winters were something many of the village residents mentioned as a problem. They explained that frost and snow make growing cereals and vegetables difficult, and it makes it hard to keep livestock, since they have to store enough fodder for the long winter season.[25] Through interviews, I moreover learnt that the difficult living conditions in the mountain village is acknowledged by the government, which has provided the inhabitants higher pensions and the right to earlier retirement than people in villages further down. One middle-aged woman explained,

[Here in the] highland one receive pension earlier. Women starts at 45 if she has high seniority and men at 50. I have been at pension for 12 years already.[26]

The snow and the geographical location, previously assumed disadvantages that needed to be compensated with social benefits, now seem to have been re-ordered as an important non-human actor in the new emerging tourismscapes. The tourism developers were eager to point out the favorable conditions and that "snow can be guaranteed."[27] A man working in the local administration also mentioned that the village has "winter from October to May […] it makes the conditions for developing winter tourism in the Jyrgalan very favorable."[28] Hence, similar to the coal in the minescapes, which was the reason for the settlement of Shakhta Jyrgalan, the snow becomes an actor that brings other actors together. Through interviews, I gained the impression that an increasing number of the villagers saw the potential in the snow for attracting tourists for skiing, although two women in their early 40s pointed out that "skiing was too expensive for them"[29] when asked if they went skiing themselves.

In what Callon (1986) refers to as the interessement phase, the focal actor reinforces the identities and associations identified in the problematisation phase. Here the actor

seeks alliances with other actors and attempts to convince them that their solution is the way forward. Yet, my empirical material from Shakhta Jyrgalan/Jyrgalan Valley shows how new associations of human and non-human actors are facilitated in new social arenas, such as an annual winter festival (the opening of the skiing-season) and various tourism development trainings. One young woman explained about a training seminar she had attended:

> We made a poster for the wall were we drew all the sightseeing of Jyrgalan, the Tulpar Tash, Turnaluu-Kol,[30] the water fall, the Jyrgalan River. We have many interesting places where the tourists can visit. There we made a presentation […]. There were many places where I even have not been myself […]. After the presentation they asked us how we can save these places, improve the services here and also how we can use the nature in alternative ways.[31]

The quote above shows that these arenas are not only contributing to reordering nature and entangling certain human and non-human actors but also to knowledge production about ecology and nature. One of the entrepreneurs explained that this was also the intent of the festival:

> In 2015, we had the first winter festival, which was fully financed by USAID. [USAID] invited international bloggers who came with our journalists from Bishkek and Karakol. And we carried out the first celebration, winter celebration, in the village, so that the local population also could see that this is a good thing, that this tourism, it does not ruin the ecology, that if we develop tourism, people can receive additional income.[32]

In this quote, the role of information and media in the tourismscapes is once again mentioned. The bloggers and journalists invited to the festival, who later would write about the village, the event, and the tourism initiative, can all be seen to have contributed to assert new realities, "pin these down, fix them" (Law, 2004: 28) into the tourismscapes, through inscription devices, the blogs, and photos.

But what has guided this reordering of nature into a new reality? Why do some practices related to nature appear as "a good thing," as suggested in the quote above? To explain this, I will once more return to the discourse of ecological modernization. Similar to the findings of Jamal and Stronza (2009), I would argue that the events and training, financed through the USAID-program,[33] become new social practices where the impacts of the macro-level international conservation policies emerge through a process of environmentality (Agrawal, 2005). The process of environmentality shapes the knowledge and the actors in relations to nature in adherence to the discourse of ecological modernization, where nature is seen as an object of conservation. This becomes very evident in the following quote taken from an interview with an older woman who participated in the winter festival:

> Woman: They talked about our nature, that we need to protect it, that we must preserve it, that we must treat the nature with respect. That we should not kill animals. That we need to protect them […]
>
> Me: Who said that?

Woman: Well, these specialists came; they explained how to pick berries, how to use medicinal herbs. That we should take only what we need ourselves, only to cut this much, but not all […]. These things they explained.[34]

Related to this, and similar to West and Carrier (2004: 485) who in their studies from Jamaica and Papua New Guineas found that eco-tourists tend to spread the modern, dualist view on nature, I found traces of similar tendencies. Invited by a member of the local administration in Shakhta Jyrgalan to talk about tourism development, I was told,

Development of winter tourism would be very profitable. But then […] the tourists themselves suggested to us: Let this place stay in an early stage, in its original form […]. We do not need noise. And this nature we do not want to spoil. Let it stay like that and invite tourists […] Not like Chourchevel, but just like, just clean nature. People who come skiing, look around, go skiing and leave again. And not noise, commotion and music—they do not want that. And we also want this slow development.[35]

According to Callon (1986: 10), "interessement achieves enrolment if it is successful." In the case of Shakhta Jyrgalan/Jyrgalan Valley, the success of interessement can be seen through the enrolment in the DMO, *Destination Jyrgalan*, as explained by this informant:

They made a proposal and NN invited us. If we wanted to, we could join in the organization (Destination Jyrgalan). Then it was created […]. Everyone was told about this, when there was a meeting in our village. […]They made advertisement, I guess one could describe it like that … but people did not understand or like … I do not know. In the end, it was only five of us who signed up.[36]

The quote above is interesting, not only because it explains the process of the creation and enrolment into the organization Destination Jyrgalan but also because it describes an initial reluctance to the idea of tourism. This reluctance was confirmed by one of the participating USAID-workers who explained,

We had a public meeting, you know, we invited them, and, you know, we faced this situation, that really people were afraid: "What is this tourism, why do we need to do this, you know, so all this suspicion, you know, came up, and only five guesthouses … four guest houses raised their hands, and they said we want to help."[37]

What the empirical material indicates here is that in the enrolment phase the focal actors encountered some initial challenges in recruiting members to their network. This, however, seems to be a situation that has later changed, shown through the next quote, from the same USAID worker:

[And] we saw that people are waiting for this involvement. They started realizing, and now they will contribute for themselves, [make] investments, and they will do their houses as guesthouses. Because they are watching the tourists coming. Before there were no tourists. Now in

wintertime they received 300 people, during summer time, there is a movement going on, it is happening, it is real, they start understanding that it is not… let's say a lie.[38]

The mobilization phase is the phase where the focal actor of the network assumes the role of *representing* the others, by talking on behalf of others. Although the tourism development initiative in the Shakhta Jyrgalan is relatively new, this mobilization seems to be an ongoing process in the village, helped by various inscription devices (Law, 2004: 29).

The new sign set up in the village entrance, mentioned in the introduction of this article, can be seen as such an inscription device. The new sign contributes to both a discursive and material construction of a new reality, with a "new" name, distancing the village from the mining history. Another example of such an inscription device is the newly created webpage www.jyrgalan.com, launched in the second half of 2017, with the front page stating that "the residents invite you to immerse in Kyrgyz hospitality and cultural traditions preserved for generations." The various newspaper interviews, blogs and feature articles, add to this outward representation. The following quote is an example from a recent interview published in online magazine, carried out with the entrepreneurial couple, who gives an interview about the tourism development in Jyrgalan:

> I believe that we gradually acknowledge how important ecology is for all citizens. The mines clearly harmed the ecology, because there are still disfigured excavated quarries and dumps with waste rock. I am sure that if tourism will be developed, then the ecology of the village will benefit as well as the villagers who can start to make real money and do not have to risk their health and life in the mines. (Saralaeva, 2017)

By these various means, the focal actors are representing the village on behalf of other local inhabitants, and by that contributing to strengthening the reordering of Jyrgalan from minescapes to tourismscapes, as well as actively spreading this vision to a wider audience.

Based on the empirical material presented above, I argue that there is an ongoing translation process where coal, "untouched" nature, fresh air, white snow, and other non-human actors of Shakhta Jyrgalan are reordered in new emergent tourismscapes in Jyrgalan. Similar to what Ren (2011) showed with the polish goat cheese, the above demonstrate how the agency of the non-human actors of Shakhta Jyrgalan, in other words their ability to connect to, affect and engage with other actors, change as they are enrolled into (or excluded from) changeable and mutable realities.

Tempting as it might be to stop the analysis after having described an ongoing process of translation from a black past to a white future, this would mean ignoring a multiple understanding of nature, which I will turn to in the next section. I will moreover return to reflections on my position as a European researcher and conclude with some thoughts on how my analytical approach has led to new insight into the transformation of this mining town specifically, but also to some aspects of social research more generally.

The gray present: multiple natures, reflections, and conclusions

How the nature-based tourism initiative in Shakhta Jyrgalan has reordered nature in certain ways rather than others (Franklin, 2004) soon appeared to me as "a story to tell" as a researcher. A story where I, from a political ecology point of view, could have chosen explanatory factors, such as neoliberal structures, to explain the ordering and look for resistance toward tourism. And yes, some of the villagers did express a reluctance to tourism, believing it to be "only a fairy tale"[39] and even criticized the tourism entrepreneurs "working only for themselves,"[40] interesting controversies that would be worth looking at in a separate research paper.

What I did *not* get, however, was an impression that the locals who were not involved in tourism, considered that the tourism initiative was in conflict with their stories, their realties or their way of ordering nature. This despite, as I have shown above, that the tourism developers wish to remove themselves and the village of Shakhta Jyrgalan from the mining history.

In other words, whereas co-existence between tourism and mining did not seem to "fit" in a tourism reality, it did not seem to be contradicted by the local inhabitants. Through interviews and informal conversations, I was several times met with comments similar to the one below, taken from an interview with a middle-aged woman:

> Shakhta[41] is a very beautiful place. You have probably seen it yourself. It is clean air, and you can relax from the city bustle […]. I believe that tourists are welcomed with proudness. But, it would not hurt if the mine worked. If the mine worked, life here would be easier. Because that is where our miners work. This is a miner's town.[42]

When I at this point in the interview was tempted to ask a direct, and somewhat leading question, about whether she believed it would be possible for the village to develop *both* coal mining and tourism, she replied,

> Yes, yes, yes, [the mines and tourism] do not interfere with one another. […] the mines do not work all the time, and [the miners] could work partly with tourism.[43]

While my leading question is a reminder of how my own European research approach "habitually distinguishes between the social on the one hand and the natural on the other" (Law, 2004: 132), this question nevertheless brings attention to an important point. The answer to my question indicates an understanding of nature that does not see "touched" nature (the mines) as a contradiction to "untouched" nature. It is therefore a reminder of "multiple natures" (Cater, 2006) and how nature based tourism realities, based on the modern binary of society/nature, where "untouched" nature is the ideal, is merely *one particular* way of ordering nature. Hence, while some orderings of nature appears to be representing the reality, it does not necessarily rule out other understandings of how nature "ought to look" or be used. However, while untouched and wild nature has become the hegemonic ideal and romanticized version of nature in western society (Cronon, 1996), sites where nature is exploited by man, such as the coal mines of Shakhta Jyrgalan,

still continue to have significance, although considered a much less idealized version of nature. Here it could be useful to draw upon Foucault's (1967) concept of heterotopia, as sites of "a different ordering" which come to represent something in "contrast to other sites" (Hetherington, 1997: 8). In this sense, the coalmines of Shakhta Jyrgalan come to represent something in contrast to the "untouched" Jyrgalan Valley and vice versa. The fact that the latter version has become more visible through tourism development does not mean that the former version has ceased to exist. Whether tourism development is just another way of exploiting the nature, is, however, a question for debate beyond the scope of this article.

In this article, I have attempted to show that a political ecology approach has been helpful in supporting my analysis and envisage how nature-based tourism is embedded within global discourses, such as that of ecological modernization. This approach has moreover been useful when showing how the ordering of nature is related to knowledge production, where some practices related to nature are deemed good while others are harmful.

While ANT would disapprove of metanarratives as explanation factors, I have attempted to show, however, that the discourse of ecological modernization also can be viewed as an actor in tourismscapes. Instead of accepting the transformation of Shakhta Jyrgalan as an outcome of global discourses and neoliberal power structures, the ANT-concepts has been helpful in understanding how this discourse has led to certain material and discursive articulations at the local scale. ANT has moreover contributed to questioning the society/nature binary of the discourse and has shed light on how the nature of Shakhta Jyrgalan has been reordered by this binary. Likewise, the concept of translation has contributed to envisage how other ways of ordering that does not fit this view, such as the minescapes, is hidden. Moreover, inspired by ANT I have been able to reveal my own society/nature binary, and by that allowed the multiple natures to come forward in my empirical material.

While acknowledging that a complex process such as the one I have studied in this article exceed my capacity to fully understand it, and that my insight therefore is limited by default, I might at least have contributed with some spots of gray to the "black box" (Latour, 1987).

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Declaration of conflicting interests

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Notes

1. Open joint-stock company Russian: Открытое Акционерное Общество. Now known as Публичное акционерное общество, abbreviated: ПАО
2. Based on a thorough review, Fredman and Tyrväinen (2010: 179) conclude that there is no universally agreed on definition of nature-based tourism. However, in previous research, nature-based tourism has been defined to cover activities that people do while on holiday, which focus on engagement with nature and usually includes an overnight stay (Silvennoinen and Tyrväinen, 2001).
3. I use the term ecotourism in line with the definition developed by The International Ecotourism Society: "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education" (TIES, 2015). I understand ecotourism as a niche within nature-based tourism.
4. Millennium Development Goals.
5. While Shakhta Jyrgalan still remains the official name of the village, the name Jyrgalan Valley is widely used in promoting the village for tourism. There are various Latin transliterations of Jyrgalan, I have chosen the most common form.
6. According to the official records of the local administration in Shakhta Jyrgalan, the population in 2017 is 1016 people (Ail Økmutu Shakta Jyrgalan, 2017). Ail Økmutu=local administration.
7. Interviews 14 and 28.
8. Interview 14.
9. Interviews 3 and 9.
10. Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 10, 16, 17, 21, and 25.
11. Interviews 1, 2, 4, 5, 10, 12, 16, 17, and 25.
12. Interviews 1, 2, 10, 16 25, and 27.
13. Interviews 4, 9, 10, and 21.
14. Interviews 1, 2, 4, 10, 16, and 25.
15. vnizy=down, a much used term by the locals when referring to the villages located at a lower altitude, that is, closer to Karakol.
16. Interview 1.
17. Interview 4.
18. Interview 9.
19. Translated from Russian from the information poster at the local school.
20. Interviews 15 and 22.
21. Interview 8.
22. A rock with a secret river running underneath it, located in the area.
23. Interview 9.
24. Interview 22.
25. Interview 12.

26. Interview 22.
27. Interview 8.
28. Interview 15.
29. Interview 22.
30. Tulpar Tash is a big rock in the outskirts of the village. According to the legend the horse of the Manas, the hero in the National epos of Kyrgyzstan, once climbed the rock and the marks of the hooves are still visible (Turmush, 2016). Tyrnalø-Kul (The Crane lake) is a small mountain lake 2 hours walk from the village.
31. Interview 19.
32. Interview 20.
33. Interview 8.
34. Interview 21.
35. Interview 15.
36. Interview 11.
37. Interview 28.
38. Interview 28.
39. Interview 13.
40. Interview 5.
41. Here referring to the village, not the mine in itself.
42. Interview 22.
43. Interview 22.

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