

Fiery landscapes? The layered coastal heathland and the resurgence of heath burning in Norway



Figure 1: heath burning.
Photographer: Øyvind Vatshelle

In recent decades, there has been a resurgence in the agricultural practice of heath burning along the coast of Norway for the purpose of mitigating risks of wildfire and conserving the coastal heathland – treeless landscape dominated by common heather (*Calluna vulgaris*). This poster examines this revival through the interlocking of fire, landscape and heritage

The common story of heath burning is of farmers that for thousands of years formed and shaped the coastal heathlands through regular burnings (between every 15th – 25th year), until industrial agriculture made the practice come to a halt during the twentieth century. The result of this was, as it is commonly argued, a degraded landscape filled to the brim with dried-up combustibles. It is these effects the resurgence seeks to mitigate by restoring and conserving the old fire regime.



Figure 2: sprouting heather in a post-fire area. Photo: Author

When certain meanings and memories deriving from the entanglement between certain layers and humans are given an official status, a heritage landscape is formed. Regarding coastal heathlands, this status came relatively recently.

Almost all landscapes have layers – physical strata as well as objects and artefacts – that in dialogue with humans create different meanings and memories. Through time, these layers can be erased, rendered invisible or preserved. The coastal heathland is no different here.

Thus, the resurgence of heath burning might be regarded, not as an ancient practice brought back to life to counter the devastating effects of its death during the twentieth century, but a modern memory of both fire and landscape formed by a relatively recent dialogue between humans and a certain layer in the landscape, that subsequently also has been given status as heritage. The burning of coastal heathlands, as such, only conserves a particular memory, rather than the fire regime.