

The Office of the Auditor General's investigation of the management of Svalbard

Summary

Developments in Svalbard set new challenges for the management of this archipelago. These include challenges concerning the environment, population growth, and the increase in the general use of the area. A new comprehensive plan must be drawn up for Svalbard that reflects both the development and the enhanced complexity of the situation and that provides predictability for both social and environmental goals.

The Office of the Auditor General's investigation of the management of Svalbard, Document no. 3:8 (2006–2007), was submitted to the Storting on 1 June. The objective of the investigation has been to assess whether the goals for the environment and the social development in Svalbard are being achieved. The manner in which the responsible ministries contribute to attaining these goals was also reviewed.

As of 2006 the number of inhabitants in Svalbard is higher than that specified in the intentions of the Storting. The investigation shows that the consequences on the environment in and around Longyearbyen of this growth in population have not been assessed. The monitoring of the environmental status in Longyearbyen is unsatisfactory – for example with regard to the sorting of waste and to the emissions from the power station outside the town. There will be a need to consider measures for changes in population growth and business development that can promote a more acceptable settlement pattern in Longyearbyen in line with environmental considerations.

The investigation shows that the systems for environmental monitoring are inadequate and do not provide a satisfactory basis for assessing the status in relation to the various environmental goals that have been set. For example monitoring data is deficient for several red-listed species (endangered species). There is a need to initiate measures to ensure better surveillance – particularly in the area of flora which represents a key indicator for monitoring both wear and tear from people as well as the impact of global climate change.

Cruise traffic is undergoing strong growth, both in the number of tourists and in the number of locations for disembarking, and few indications have been given as to a suitable definition for sustainable tourism. In addition, the criteria for assessing the wear and tear on cultural monuments and vegetation have not yet been completed.

Due to the Svalbard Treaty, not all Norwegian laws are applicable in the archipelago. However, there is a need for greater statutory regulation as the Svalbard community gradually acquires a more standard profile. The investigation questions whether the current legislation practice is appropriate and whether further laws should be put into force more widely in this group of islands.

The Ministry of Justice and the Police agrees that there is a need to draw up a new comprehensive plan for Svalbard, and is of the view that it is appropriate to consider the preparation of a new white paper. According to the Ministry, a white paper would also make it possible to place the Svalbard policy in the context of the development of the policy for the High North.