

Creating New Fairytales

Statoil, Snøhvit, and Petroleum Exploration in the Arctic

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the valorization of the process of oil extraction in the High North as exemplified in corporate films and marketing materials produced by Statoil, a global energy company based in Norway. In focus is the subsea instillation of Snøhvit [Snow White] in the Barents Sea, an innovation on the frontier of the energy industry in the Arctic. In dialogue with Stephanie Le Menager's "feeling ecological" theory and work with petromodernity, this article analyzes Statoil's discourse in landscape, oil capitalism, and ecology to offer an interpretation of the evolution of the subsea extraction narratives in the Arctic waters as a new chapter in *oljeeventyret* [the oil fairytale] that began in Norway over forty years ago.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article étudie la valorisation du processus d'extraction pétrolière dans le Grand Nord, tel qu'illustré dans des films corporatifs et des outils de marketing produits par Statoil, une société d'énergie mondiale basée en Norvège. L'accent est mis sur l'instillation sous-marine de Snøhvit [Blanche-Neige] dans la mer de Barents, une innovation à la frontière de l'industrie énergétique en Arctique. En dialogue avec la théorie de Stephanie Le Menager « se sentir écologique » et son travail sur la pétro-modernité, cet article analyse le discours de Statoil dans le domaine paysager, en capitalisme du pétrole et en écologie, afin de proposer une interprétation de l'évolution des récits d'extraction sous-marine dans les eaux de l'Arctique comme nouveau chapitre à *l'oljeeventyret* [le conte de fées du pétrole] qui a commencé en Norvège il y a plus de quarante ans.

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lways exploring. Never satisfied.” This Statoil¹ tagline encapsulates the drive behind Norway’s largest energy corporation that has been functioning on the Norwegian Continental Shelf since 1972. The first well was spudded in the summer of 1966, and Phillips announced the Norwegians’ fabled best Christmas present ever when oil was found at the Ekofisk field in December 1969. The story of Norway’s petroleum era, appropriately labeled as *oljeeventyret* [the oil fairytale] in the vernacular, reads like an adventure novel of the twentieth century. An embedded tale in that larger narrative, the history of Statoil itself in the forty plus years since it originated is also a gripping account of exploration and endeavors.

This article extracts one particular Statoil story told about a groundbreaking installation north of the sixty-second parallel: Snøhvit [Snow White].² This name graces the first exclusively subsea offshore development in the Barents Sea operated by Statoil. Marketing this cutting-edge technology and northernmost processing plant for the extracted natural gas brought another set of firsts, and the evolution of their subsea technology narrative to the public is the trajectory in focus here. This study is not based on a thorough review of all corporate marketing from Statoil, but rather it analyzes select cornerstone pieces made available to the general public via Statoil’s extensive website: *Resources in the North*, *Melkøya: Soundslide*, *Snøhvit LNG Project*, *Longer, Deeper, Colder*, and *Treasure Hunter*.³ This article investigates how a global energy company headquartered on the borders of the High North tells its Arctic story and which tropes Statoil employs to shape constituents’ impressions of their work.

This discourse enters the entangled space between ecology and modernity that Stephanie Le Menager calls “feeling ecological,” which in her words is “a competition between emotional investments in modernity as we know it, through its fossil fuel infrastructure, and in ecology, as the network of human-nonhuman relations that we theorize as a given habitat” (Le Menager 2011, 27). Navigating this zone is the task of Statoil oil marketing and communications, in order to handle emotionally charged connections between nature, science, and technology for a general public that encompasses local and international stakeholders.

It is possible to track how Statoil has continually tailored its story about the Snøhvit installation to counter environmental criticisms and public skepticism about exploration in the Barents Sea by sculpting a counter narrative of corporate adventure, skill, and precision. By honing its verbal and visual literacy, Statoil has inverted the tone of its initial audiovisual narrative to re-write this Arctic fairytale of Snøhvit. What began as a cautionary plea to protect a fragile space from unknown threats has matured into a self-confident assurance that Statoil’s acclimatized experts understand the conquered zone and are equipped to go farther. The corporate marketing materials propose that taming the Arctic frontier

in this Oil Age is a heroic tale where elite skill, sensitivity to surroundings, and nimble adaptation justifies Statoil's presence and activity in the region.

History

The history of this northern sector belies the current confidence, for its development had a tumultuous start. Norwegian lawmakers amended the border law in 1980, and the first drilling in the Barents Sea uncovered the gas fields of Askeladd [Ash Lad] and Albatross in 1981 and Snøhvit in 1984.⁴ Opinions at the time were likely split, for no one knew then which namesake the Arctic adventure would follow. Would it end well, like the respective fairytales of the Ash Lad and Snow White, where the naïvely intelligent, good-hearted Norwegian protagonists would against all odds succeed and win the prince or princess and half the kingdom, or would this story resemble a meeting with the ill-fated bird famed to be a sailor's bad luck symbol that would curse the unlucky industry for moving to the High North?⁵ While we await the ultimate verdict as the master narrative continues to be spun, some might claim it had been cursed by the latter or perhaps thwarted by an evil step-parent, for high risks and poor feasibility studies shelved all development projects in the Barents Sea until the late 1990s. During this time, Statoil developed prototype subsea well technology at the Gullfaks field that began production in December 1986. Eventually the Norwegian parliament approved a revised plan for Snøhvit in March 2002 and construction began in June of that year. The tables had turned and the fairytale was resumed.

The temptation to contrast the folktale *Snow White* to its namesake in the Norwegian oil fairytale is too great. The symbol of youth and beauty, this ideal woman was first a desired child later shunned by her parents. She survives a treacherous journey into the wilderness and lives thereafter in secluded isolation. Her only friends in exile are dwarves, the hardworking, clever men who leave home every day to extract precious metals from deep mines. Her mere existence provokes either deep love or hate in those she meets, and she eventually overcomes all the deceptive ploys to kill her and resumes her birthright as a queen. While scholars of *Snow White* have argued for its literary power as narrative, figure, and myth, another angle of interpretation may be to consider the Snøhvit of Norwegian petroculture as an allegory. Assigning equivalents to the characters, plot, setting, objects, and patterns of Statoil's Arctic story may be a productive line of argumentation and an alternate lens with which to view Le Menager's notion of "feeling ecological" in the High North.

Revolutionary technology has engineered Snøhvit, a highly desired offspring of the offshore energy development, to become an innovation of near mythic proportions in the Barents Sea. The underwater installations counter the challenges of Arctic waters and harsh climate, accommodate the fishing industry, and preserve the vulnerable ecological systems. Gas from surrounding fields is

extracted via subsea wells at a depth of 250-300 meters and transported 143 kilometers to shore.⁶ Coming onshore at Melkøya, an island just outside of Hammerfest, the gas is processed and cooled to a chilly -160°C to reach its liquid state (called LNG henceforth) in preparation for global transport via specially manufactured tanker ships. The entire system functions on an astounding scale with no visual surface trace of the offshore activity, yet its mere existence angers some powerful people. Its presence is revealed not by a speaking mirror, but by moving pictures that confirm and narrate Snøhvit's existence via visual representation.

For nearly forty years the Statoil marketing team has built its offshore visual reputation on another masterpiece of modern engineering and technology—the oil platform of the North Sea. The resilient and enormous platforms cut a striking image from positions on land, sea, and air, and scores of images are situated to show the platforms' enormous girth as if size alone empowers them with the stubborn tenacity to withstand the extraction of hydrocarbons from below the seabed. The challenge for subsea installations such as Snøhvit that have no such monumental visual marker at sea, forces marketing representations to be animations or imaginative visual descriptions of the underwater technology.⁷ Without this visual shorthand of the platform as a symbol of innovation, new imagery must be employed to convey the equally powerful impact and energy expertise in the High North in a new pictorial discourse. A selection of Statoil's corporate videos offers an arc highlighting developments in that representational narrative.

Take One

The first film, a two-minute video entitled *Resources in the North* embedded in the Statoil's Going North campaign webpages, is rhetorically ineffective because it pairs mutually exclusive groupings of words and images.⁸ Conflicting messages in verbal and visual modalities negate each other regarding the environment, the mission, and the outcome. While the verbal message conveys a positive, persuasive tone, the resounding visual message is less that of a homegrown vigilant explorer promising to care for his backyard and more that of an intrusive transnational corporation resolved to disturb the natural balance of the Barents Sea.

Produced for the 2007 Statoil Sustainability report the year Snøhvit came online, the film juxtaposes the fragile Arctic ecosystem visually coded and identified as endangered animals, pristine waters, and melting ice formations to the aurally described potential of the energy reserves locked below the seabed. The film opens with a satellite view of the rotating earth, the glowing blue marble, and the camera zooms down to the frontier of the Barents Sea. A mystical space exploration soundtrack cultivates the sense of awaiting unknown discoveries

locked in the subsea floor of the unexplored region. Images of pack ice and open sea, underwater glowing jellyfish, fish in a feeding frenzy, and a breaching white whale are closely followed by ambling polar bears and calving glaciers. These symbolic images, which resonate as some of the archetypal Arctic icons frequently employed to advance Polar environmental justice issues, reinforce an understanding of nature as wild, uncivilized, and pristine as is common in traditional landscape photography. Their powerful visual display outweighs the impact of the spoken word, which undermines Statoil's promised integrity of purpose.

The deep-voiced male voice over insists in his spoken narration that energy and environmental concerns are not mutually exclusive in the Arctic, but that this vulnerable natural habitat—"one of Europe's last big intact ecosystems ... the food bowl for future generations"—is a treasured piece in an intricate puzzle that Statoil is both well-prepared and best situated to solve. Citing a nearly forty-year track record of responsible oil and gas exploration and extraction in the North Sea, the narrator underscores that "the Norwegian petroleum industry has become a laboratory for environmentally friendly technology" in recent history. Downplaying the fact that existing oil and gas reserves are on the decline, thus requiring exploration in previously untapped fields such as the Barents Sea, the narration attempts to establish the necessity of the quest by relying on value-laden environmental imagery to persuade viewers. As the sun sets on the panorama of the traditional oil platform at sea after a storm, viewers are led to believe that Statoil is entitled to drill in this new region because of its unique offshore history and technological expertise.

This sense of entitlement resonates with a study conducted by political scientist Leif Christian Jensen, who has analyzed public discourse in Norwegian print media over a six-year period and tracked the growth of what he calls the "Drilling for the Environment" debate—an argument for an evolving High North policy in the early 2000s that persuaded Norwegians of the benefits of opening up the Barents Sea for oil and gas recovery before the Russians (Jensen 35). In his study Jensen identified discourse co-optation at work, meaning one side inverted the other's argument to gain rhetorical advantage. "Discourse co-optation describes how one discourse burrows into the heart of a counter-discourse, turns its logic upside down and puts it to work to re-establish hegemony and re-gain political support. One discourse is strengthened by the addition of a new, powerful argument; the other is weakened almost to the same degree" (Jensen 36-7). As northern foreign policy concerns became increasingly oriented toward the environment, Norway strategically positioned itself as the most advanced and environmentally conscious player in the High North. The evolving message, which Jensen chronicles in four Norwegian newspapers, persuades Norwegians of the notion that exploiting energy in the Arctic would be a boon for the environment, foreign policy, and the economy. "By going ahead in the Barents Sea, Norway is

giving the Russians a helping hand, benefitting the environment and earning good money to boot” (Jensen 35).

Statoil does not directly enter into Jensen’s analysis of the security questions of national energy policy or discursive co-optation, for he chooses not to focus on or identify individual stakeholders; however, I detect the same discursive overtones audible in some of the early corporate Going North marketing materials produced by Statoil. Returning again to an example in the film, the narrator echoes the optimistic mantra that energy recovery in the Barents Sea will “boost both industrial activity and value creation” in the local environment of the far north. But rather than underscore that message with representative place-based images of extraction points in Northern Norway, the visual message that accompanies this voice recording shows the dotted lines that trace the export path of eventual recovered resources from the Norwegian seabed of the Barents Sea to central Europe and to the East Coast of the United States, New York in particular.

Read this way, Statoil’s self-representation in this video becomes that of a greedy emissary devoid of agency who serves only external capitalist forces outside of Norway. The primary motor is not to preserve the immediate region of impact, the communities nearest the unnamed LNG plant at Melkøya where Snøhvit gas is piped onshore and processed, but the international consumers who thirst for refined oil and gas. Statoil here appears unintentionally to be playing into the hands of environmentalists opposed to drilling in the High North, playing Jensen’s notion of discourse co-optation in inadvertent reverse, by serving up the most threatened elements of the region to the greediest global buyers at the highest price.

Take Two

Statoil’s next strategy for marketing Snøhvit and Melkøya and underscoring the perseverance of its growing presence in the High North was to distance itself from the emotional images of environmental protest in the short film *Going North* and instead situate energy infrastructure as the given. Images of vulnerable animals and fragile landscapes were jettisoned in favor of the stark precision of the sleek fusion of nature and technology in petroculture.

Michael Truscello uses the term “petroculture” when analyzing Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky’s collection entitled “Oil: Extraction & Refinement” in light of the political inheritance from the photography movement known as The New Topographics.⁹ Truscello reads recent landscape photography that rejects conventional standards of the genre and now sees “traces of an empire in ruins and a sociality to come” in Burtynsky’s work, where images of petroleum extraction and transport meld wilderness and civilization in a new understanding of society that captures the tensions of the twenty-first century (Truscello 188).

Burtynsky presents his aesthetics as “nature transformed through industry” in his own expression of Le Menager’s notion of feeling ecological. For Truscello, Burtynsky “complicates the observer’s relationship to agency in the Age of Oil by foregrounding the scale, technological complexity, and almost mythical ubiquity of petroculture. Absent is the bilateralism of earnest environmental portraiture, the simplistic agential dualism that pits ‘people’ against Big Oil” (190).

While Burtynsky’s photographs evoke discomfort, they capture a beauty that is difficult to articulate. This positive spin on the splendor of science permeates Statoil’s second Snøhvit marketing image. The ninety-second film, a photography montage entitled *Melkøya: Soundslide* attributed to Gjertrud Lindberg, is a visual slideshow with no spoken text. The dualism of the multimodal effort in *Resources in the North* is eliminated for this montage, which is instead set to a soundtrack of electronica house music that could have been composed by Norwegian band Röyksopp. The hip sounds fuse stark images of outstanding gray tone contrasts with bursts of vibrant colour. Off-shore orange, subsea yellow, radio tower red, and brilliant blue splash colour amid the blinding snow whiteouts, charcoal seas, asphalt skies, cold concrete tanks, steely aluminum pipes, and slate ship hulls responsible for transforming the hydrocarbons from Snøhvit into a landscape of international power. The orange backs of the Statoil employees suggest that these faceless innovators are responsible for preserving the bright colours that co-exist with the pristine environment. Clearly foreign, these colourful markers appear not to have scarred the virgin landscape but to have created an equally odd and resilient cultural setting built to weather and complement the harsh climate of the north. The fusion of Statoil’s vision and the riches of the north has become a new petroculture in its own right.

The absolute focus in this clip on the local environment with no external impact (apart from the waiting ship as transport vessel docked at port) downplays the risk for the local viewers by concentrating solely on the seamless functionality of the LNG plant site. Production is underway and the new shine has not yet worn off, but the project remains swathed in an aura of mystique. Neither apocalyptic nor pastoral, these images convey a cutting-edge synthesis. With no verbal text to accompany the visual feast of the image itself, viewers are left to deduce their own interpretations. As Burtynsky articulates in the vision for his photography, his desire is for the images to speak “as metaphors to the dilemma of our modern existence; they search for a dialogue between attraction and repulsion, seduction and fear.”¹⁰ Lindberg’s *Melkøya: Soundslide* montage balances on this same edge, retaining the inhospitable landscape yet evoking the savvy control of technology.

My reading of the local environment in this vein is inspired in part by Ursula Heise, who argues for a revision of environmentalism that reassesses the global scale of human impact on local natural and cultural landscapes. Heise advocates in her 2008 book *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* that a challenge to “environmentalist conceptions of place” is to “imagine local environments [...]

as habitats that are ceaselessly being reshaped by the encroachments of the global as well as by their own inherent dynamism” (114). While this is hardly a call for a pro-industry stance, this film conveys the tone of local partnership and acclimatization that Statoil needed to strike. In a move perhaps reminiscent of Jensen’s discourse co-optation, I suggest that Statoil’s message in this visual slideshow seems to have struck a balance between environmental protection, economic development, and resource exploitation in order to create a visual narrative that demands a reconsideration of its corporate agency in the Arctic.

Take Three

A third film in this same vein further constructs Statoil’s image as a good neighbour in the Barents Sea. This animated video titled simply *Snøhvit LNG Project* oversimplifies the process from extraction to export in relation to the fishing industry. As in the *Resources in the North* opening, the screen opens to a map of Europe and the camera zooms in to Norway and the Barents Sea, identifying from a bird’s-eye view the location of the Snøhvit field and underwater link to Melkøya just outside of Hammerfest. Diffuse ocean noises give way to seagull cries as the birds in question circle an incoming trawler. The animated camera dives below the surface and sinks down past the trawler’s lines to the subsea yellow installations anchored on the ocean floor. A school of fish swims past, chased by the trawler’s nets, both predator and prey unimpeded in their journey by the subsea well. New sound tones begin as a 3-D cross-section of the sea floor falls away to indicate graphically how some wells extract gas while others inject CO₂ deep into the Earth. Colour-coded as blood vessels where oil replaces oxygen, the camera leaves the blue energy-poor CO₂ pipes and follows the red energy-rich gas stream to Melkøya where an oversimplified floor plan of the island traces the transformation of raw gas to LNG. The awaiting tanker departs with its cargo and meets on its outbound journey the trawlers coming home from fishing at sea. After passing as friendly neighbours, the tanker morphs into a red dash on the initial European map, leaving Hammerfest heading south and west in order to indicate the scope of delivery.

This animation downplays the harsh regional conditions by insisting that the Norwegian energy industry can withstand and adapt to this climate as well as the fishing industry has done—all while recognizing the importance of the fishing lifestyle and the industries’ ability to coexist. Indeed it resonates with the partnerships Statoil always has enjoyed with the fishers south of the sixty-second parallel. This reinforces the message that communications scholars Øyvind Ihlen and Michael Nitz identify in their analysis of how the rhetorical framing of the Snøhvit media debate in terms of coexistence presented the argument that “petroleum activity posed no threat to the fishing industry or the environment” (7). Apart from the maps framing the animation, there is little to no evidence of

the Arctic setting in this film. This is offshore business as usual, or at least a projection of the new norm that Statoil is striving to establish in the subsea adventure narrative. The goal is to build a subsea factory on the seabed; the corporate vision, according to Statoil Senior Vice President for Technology Excellence Siri Espedal Kindem, is to go longer, deeper, and colder to acquire global energy resources.¹¹

The film also signifies an acceptance and recognition of the overall state of petromodernity where animated short films join other “aesthetic images and environmental emotions that valorize ... the process of oil extraction” (Le Menager 2012, 62). Le Menager’s research on the aesthetics of petromodernity investigates art within “a modern life based in the cheap energy systems long made possible by petroleum” (Le Menager 2012, 60). Although this study focuses more on the content of the individual films than the process of their creation, it is telling to trace the evolution of environmental emotions of these Statoil short films. To reiterate the core of this artistic investigation, in Truscello’s words, “By expanding our understanding of distributed human and non-human agencies in ‘petromodernity,’ we can better recognize the shifting intensities of petrocultural assemblages” (193). If these Statoil films collectively can be granted status as an assemblage, then parsing the tensions embedded in the multimodal chronicle of this new subsea extraction narrative affords better understanding of Statoil’s official Snøhvit story to a critical public.

The Trailer for the Next Release

It remains to be seen, perhaps, how Snøhvit will actually align to the fairytale *Snow White*. Critics may already perceive the tale as an ecocritical allegory, intended to illuminate the hazards of twenty-first-century petroculture. Statoil arguably has framed this multimodal narrative with the intent and hope that it will deliver the anticipated fairytale ending. The figure of Snow White is the ideal of perfection and beauty, the fairest of them all; in the offshore petroleum industry, the new ideal outgrowth of Snøhvit is described as equally superlative—the underwater factory with seafloor installations that function without surface displacement in increasingly inaccessible locations. Subsea technology is a fusion of meeting environmental concerns and boosting production that mediates conflict between dueling perspectives on energy and ecology. Statoil’s marketing story of Snøhvit models energy exploration in the Barents Sea and chronicles changes in the energy worldview in petromodernity.

A parting example of the latent power of this new Arctic fairytale returns full circle to Statoil’s role in shaping the narrative of Norway’s *oljeeventyr*. A one-minute Statoil television commercial depicts a bedtime story where a daughter inquires about her daddy’s job. This innocent, realistic scene transforms into a fantastic animated bedtime adventure where the pair travels as “treasure hunters”

to answer the girl's questions and search for the underwater riches that "the world needs in order to function."¹² Because there is much less treasure now than there used to be, the inquisitive girl's daddy tells her, the journey to the treasure is more difficult and dangerous. And once it is found, they still need to figure out how to retrieve it. When the daughter questions if success is even possible, the daddy answers that it *almost* defies the possible. Marketing innovation to a new generation coming of age in this era of petromodernity still relies heavily on the fairytale and adventure narrative, luring impressionable viewers at an early age into the fantastic mysteries of the deep. The commercial's closing printed tagline at the bottom of the screen reads: "The Norwegian oil adventure has never been more exciting." Statoil, the powerful narrator, enchants an ageless audience with daring tales of adaptable, clever heroes on the technological frontier who are navigating new landscapes, ever-curious, and "always exploring—never satisfied."¹³

NOTES

1. <http://www.statiol.com/>.
2. This is the long-held northern border for hydrocarbon exploration in the Norwegian Sea.
3. All videos originally found on <http://www.statoil.com> are listed in the references.
4. The Ash Lad in Norwegian folklore is akin to the heroine of the Cinderella story.
5. The word *albatross* can be used metaphorically to mean a psychological burden that feels like a curse, according to Gary Martin, as in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."
6. See the Statoil Snøhvit homepage: <http://www.statoil.com/en/ouoperations/explorationprod/ncs/snoehvit/pages/default.aspx>.
7. The most successful Statoil video that contextualizes the scope of the subsea developments is the eleven-minute film *Longer, Deeper, Colder*. Because this film focuses on the development of subsea technology as a whole and not just the Snøhvit installation, I chose to exclude it from the primary analysis of this article although it does resurface briefly in the conclusion.
8. I was unable to find any earlier films on the Statoil website, so I assume this to be the first and reference it as "Resources in the North."
9. This 1970s movement "engaged American landscapes as the scarred and decaying byproducts of capitalist exploitation" (Truscello 189). Some of Burtynsky's images are available on his homepage: <http://www.edwardburtynsky.com>.
10. Burtynsky's artist statement "Exploring the Residual Landscape" reads thus: "Nature transformed through industry is a predominant theme in my work. I set course to intersect with a contemporary view of the great ages of man; from stone, to minerals, oil, transportation, silicon, and so on. To make these ideas visible I search for subjects that are rich in detail and scale yet open in their meaning. Recycling yards, mine

tailings, quarries and refineries are all places that are outside of our normal experience, yet we partake of their output on a daily basis.

These images are meant as metaphors to the dilemma of our modern existence; they search for a dialogue between attraction and repulsion, seduction and fear. We are drawn by desire - a chance at good living, yet we are consciously or unconsciously aware that the world is suffering for our success. Our dependence on nature to provide the materials for our consumption and our concern for the health of our planet sets us into an uneasy contradiction. For me, these images function as reflecting pools of our times."

11. See the interview with Espedal Kindem (excerpt from 10:29-11:20) on the *Longer, Deeper, Colder* film.
12. See the Statoil TV Commercial *Skattejeger* [*Treasure Hunter*].
13. This quote was a Statoil marketing phrase when the *Skattejeger* commercial was released. It is visible in older marketing campaign images such as this example, entitled "Determination is our nature." See image at: <http://gullblyanten.no/media/uploads/1868/7050-a73d1-archive.pdf>. The stated webpage <http://neversatisfied.statoil.com> is no longer accessible. The current marketing campaign is "Kraften i det mulige" [The Power of Possible] and that concept was launched on May 5, 2014. See a new animated film on this theme at <http://www.statoil.com/en/NewsAndMedia/Multimedia/Pages/ThePowerOfThePossible.aspx>. See an updated subsea industry film in Norwegian entitled *Nordmenn are gode på bunn* [Norwegians are good to the core] at <http://kraftenidetmulige.no/nb/reservoir> on the Statoil homepage.

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