



Research Guide

Many activities on Svalbard require a permit. Regulations governing this are found in the Svalbard Environmental Protection Act and in regulations issued pursuant to the Act. The regulatory framework covers areas such as flora, fauna, cultural heritage sites, land-use planning, and activities that may affect the environment—including travel, terrain disturbance, and pollution.

Not all research on Svalbard requires a permit application. Whether you need to apply for a permit depends on factors such as the scope of the activity, whether it affects cultural heritage sites, and its potential impact on the natural environment. Examples of activities that generally do not require a permit include small-scale temporary installations that do not disturb the terrain, the collection of water samples, and the collection of small rock samples.

Temporary installations that do not require a permit must nevertheless be marked with the name of the person responsible, the RiS-ID, and the dates of deployment and planned retrieval.

Before commencing research activities on Svalbard, it is important to familiarize yourself with the provisions of the Svalbard Environmental Protection Act and other relevant environmental regulations.

Registration and reporting

All research projects in Svalbard must be registered in the Research in Svalbard (RiS) database, regardless of whether the project requires a formal application. All requested information must be entered into the database. The project leader is also responsible for checking whether there are other projects in RiS with which collaboration might be relevant.

If the project requires a permit from the Governor of Svalbard (Sysselimesteren), the application must be submitted via RiS. The application must cover the research activity, travel/movement, and any camping associated with the fieldwork.

Once fieldwork is concluded, the project must be reported in RiS. All material and data collected during the project must be reported. Data must be findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable in accordance with the international FAIR principles.

Fieldwork participants

For reasons including safety, the Governor of Svalbard needs to know who is participating in fieldwork in Svalbard. All participants must therefore be registered in the RiS project and listed in any application regarding the expedition plan submitted under the field safety regulations.



Where and when will the fieldwork take place?

For reasons of safety, emergency preparedness, and environmental protection, the Governor of Svalbard needs to know where and when the fieldwork will be conducted.

All planned fieldwork must be registered in RiS. You must register one fieldwork entry per location. If the project involves multiple locations, all locations must be registered.

Specify the field areas as precisely as possible in RiS. Remember that the fieldwork period is not necessarily the same as the project period. The project period is the total duration of the project, whereas the field period is the time during which you will actually conduct fieldwork.

Before planning the fieldwork, you must check whether the area lies within a protected area or another area subject to restrictions. Also, consider whether the work could be carried out at an alternative location or at a different time. As a general rule, research projects that can be conducted outside protected areas should be located outside them.

If the fieldwork is to take place in a national park or nature reserve, you must comply with the regulations applicable to that specific protected area. Each protected area has its own protection regulations.

Access and fieldwork in protected areas often require a permit from the Governor of Svalbard. You must apply for an exemption from the relevant provisions and provide a justification for why the work needs to be carried out within the protected area. Please note that some protected areas have restrictions on access during all or part of the year.

Flora

As a general rule, picking or damaging plants on Svalbard is prohibited.

You may collect plants for research or educational purposes without a permit, provided the collection does not significantly impact the local plant population. If the collection is likely to have a significant impact on the population, you must obtain a permit from the Governor of Svalbard.

Importing plants to Svalbard and moving plants within Svalbard requires a permit from the Norwegian Environment Agency.

No specific permit is required to export naturally occurring plants from Svalbard to mainland Norway. If you intend to export other types of plants, you must contact the Governor of Svalbard.

If the plant material is to be forwarded to another country, you must check the requirements of the customs and import authorities in that country.



Fauna

Regulations protecting wildlife on Svalbard are strict. This also applies to the collection and handling of animals. It is prohibited to move or collect animals that have been killed (e.g., by vehicles), animals that have died of natural causes, or parts thereof. Naturally shed reindeer antlers are an exception. If you make interesting finds, please report them to the Governor of Svalbard.

Any disturbance of wildlife requires a permit from the Governor of Svalbard pursuant to Section 30 of the Svalbard Environmental Protection Act. Avoid all unnecessary disturbance of animals.

Handling, tagging, or attaching instruments to animals requires approval from the Norwegian Food Safety Authority before fieldwork begins. Processing times at the Norwegian Food Safety Authority can be long, so you should submit your application well in advance.

Moving animals within Svalbard and importing animals to Svalbard requires a permit from the Norwegian Environment Agency.

Different rules apply to the export of zoological material depending on the species and the material involved. Certain types of export require approval from the Norwegian Food Safety Authority. For species listed under CITES, the Norwegian Environment Agency processes export applications.

Cultural Heritage Sites

All fixed and movable cultural heritage sites dating from before 1946 are automatically protected. This includes, among other things, buildings, structures, ruins, site foundations, graves, and other traces of human activity, as well as objects made or left behind by humans.

Human graves are protected regardless of age. The same applies to whale and walrus skeletal remains at butchery sites, and polar bear skeletal remains at automatic trap sites.

A 100-metre buffer zone applies around all fixed cultural heritage sites in all directions. The buffer zone enjoys the same protection as the cultural heritage site itself. Cultural heritage sites and buffer zones are marked on the map in the RiS database; remember to zoom in closely to view them.

Camping or lighting fires within the buffer zone is prohibited. It is also prohibited to move automatically protected cultural heritage sites, even if they are found on beaches or in other exposed locations. If you are in doubt as to whether an object is protected, you should assume that it is.



If fieldwork might affect protected cultural heritage sites or the buffer zones surrounding them, you must apply for a dispensation under the Svalbard Environmental Protection Act. The application must include a detailed description of all planned interventions in the area, including:

- the type of samples to be taken
- the number and volume of samples
- the location of sampling points
- the size and depth of sampling plots
- whether samples are to be taken from protected cultural heritage sites, such as buildings, installations, or other structures
- whether the samples are to be removed from Svalbard for analysis

The application is submitted to the Governor of Svalbard, who evaluates the matter and provides a recommendation before forwarding it to the Directorate for Cultural Heritage. The Directorate for Cultural Heritage makes the final decision in such cases. You must therefore allow ample time for the processing of the application.

Geology, terrain disturbance, and seismic activity

As a general rule, no permit is required to collect loose stones. However, if samples are to be taken within a protected area, you must check the specific regulations for that area. Rules vary between the different protected areas.

Collection activities must not be so extensive as to impact the natural environment of the area. Consequently, large-scale collection requires a permit from the Governor of Svalbard.

Collecting fossils is permitted outside protected areas. Within protected areas, such collection requires a permit from the Governor of Svalbard.

Geological work involving terrain disturbance exceeding 20 × 20 cm requires a permit from the Governor of Svalbard. This applies to activities such as digging, sampling, and other physical interventions in the terrain.

If the activity affects a protected cultural heritage site or the buffer zone surrounding such a site, you must also apply for an exemption in accordance with cultural heritage protection regulations. See the section on cultural heritage sites for further details.

Soil, ice, snow, water, and sediment samples

As a general rule, the collection of small soil and rock samples does not require a permit. This applies to samples of less than 1 litre and fewer than 10 sampling points.



Collecting ice cores from glaciers, ice and snow samples, and water samples from both fresh and salt water does not normally require a permit either.

More extensive sampling requires a permit from the Governor of Svalbard. A permit is also required if the collection of ice cores involves the use of mechanical or motorized equipment.

If the sampling affects protected cultural heritage sites or the buffer zones surrounding them, the activity always requires an application. See the section on cultural heritage sites for further details.

Collecting sediment samples from the seabed or lakebed may require an application if the sampling involves disturbing the terrain or could otherwise affect the natural environment. In cases of doubt, we recommend contacting the Governor of Svalbard before fieldwork begins.

Pollution

No one may undertake, carry out, or implement measures that could pose a risk of polluting the natural environment. It is also prohibited to release environmental toxins into the environment. In practice, this means it is not permitted to release substances or products that could harm, or pose a risk of harm to, the natural environment.

If fieldwork involves the use or release of substances or products that could have environmental consequences, you must apply for permission from the Governor of Svalbard.

Information regarding whether a substance or product may be harmful to the environment can be found in the safety data sheet, among other sources. Pay particular attention to the product's classification and labeling regarding environmental hazards.

Fuel storage

If you plan to establish a fuel depot on Svalbard, you must obtain a permit from the Governor of Svalbard. The same applies to the placement of fuel containers (jerrycans).

You can apply to establish a fuel depot electronically via the Governor's website. The proposed setup must also be described in the application submitted to the Governor through the RiS database.

The fuel depot must be located so as not to pose a risk of pollution. It may not be established near protected cultural heritage sites or within the protection zone surrounding such sites. Please refer to the section on cultural heritage sites for further details.



Installations – deployment and retrieval

Major installations outside the designated planning areas require a permit from the Governor of Svalbard. All installations must be registered in the RiS database. The registration must include the precise location on a map and a plan for both deployment and retrieval.

Within the planning areas, projects and installations must comply with the applicable land-use plan. In many cases, it is also necessary to submit a notification or application to the planning authority. The largest planning areas on Svalbard are Longyearbyen, Ny-Ålesund, and Barentsburg, along with their surrounding areas.

Therefore, before planning an installation, you should verify whether the project aligns with the applicable land-use plan. If in doubt, you can contact the Longyearbyen Community Council for projects in Longyearbyen, Kings Bay AS for projects in Ny-Ålesund, or the Governor of Svalbard for projects in Barentsburg.

The Governor of Svalbard acts as the planning authority for all planning areas on Svalbard except Longyearbyen, where the Longyearbyen Community Council serves as the planning authority. The planning authority can also provide guidance on practical matters related to the project.

Installations and other projects also require the consent of the landowner. It is the applicant's responsibility to obtain the necessary landowner permissions.

All installations must be marked with the owner's details, the deployment period, and the RiS ID (project and installation number).

If the installation is to be placed in an area containing protected cultural heritage sites or within the buffer zone surrounding them, a special permit is required. Please refer to the section on cultural heritage sites for further details. The establishment of moorings involving the dumping of anchors on the seabed is prohibited under pollution regulations and requires specific authorization under environmental regulations before the measure can be implemented.

Transport and motorized traffic

Depending on the mode of transport and transport requirements, multiple permits may be necessary. For instance, permits are required for all helicopter landings and cargo drops, including those onto sea ice or vessels.

It is important to plan transport thoroughly so that all necessary permits are in place before fieldwork begins. For research and educational activities, travel outside designated travel zones requires a permit.

There are also specific restrictions on motorized traffic in certain areas on land and sea ice. Motorized traffic is prohibited in these areas from 1 March. Research activities



should, as far as possible, be scheduled to avoid areas where motorized traffic is banned. If motorized traffic in such areas is necessary to carry out the project, an application must be submitted via RiS.

The use of motorboats on fresh water requires a permit from the Governor of Svalbard.

Ensure that transport requirements, vehicles, vessels, aircraft, landing sites, cargo drops, and any alternative solutions are described in the application. This facilitates more efficient processing.

Drones, UAVs, and other remotely operated devices

The use of drones and other remotely operated or autonomous unmanned devices is regulated by both the Svalbard Environmental Protection Act and the regulations for protected areas. These rules apply to devices operating in the air, on the ground, on the water, and underwater.

Specific restrictions apply to drone use to protect wildlife. From 1 April to 31 August, flying a drone within 500 meters of bird cliffs is prohibited. As a general rule, the use of drones is prohibited within protected areas. In addition, the general ban on disturbing wildlife in Svalbard applies.

If you intend to use a drone, you must familiarize yourself with and comply with the regulations governing drone operations. The Civil Aviation Authority of Norway administers the rules regarding drones and model aircraft: Drone (luftfartstilsynet.no).

It is also important to be aware of the rules concerning photography, filming, and the use of sensors. The Norwegian National Security Authority (NSM) and the Norwegian Data Protection Authority provide information on the regulations applicable to the collection of aerial imagery and data. Further information can be found here: Airborne sensor systems – Norwegian National Security Authority (nsm.no) and here: Drones – what is permitted? | Norwegian Data Protection Authority.

In Longyearbyen and Ny-Ålesund, flying a drone within five kilometres of the airport is not permitted without authorization from the air traffic control tower. It is the pilot's responsibility to obtain the necessary authorization for each individual flight.

Ny-Ålesund is also subject to a radio silence zone with a radius of 20 kilometres. In practice, this means that drone operations are prohibited in Ny-Ålesund and large parts of Kongsfjorden without special permission. If you wish to fly a drone in this area, you must apply for authorization from the Norwegian Communications Authority (Nkom). Before submitting your application, you should contact the Norwegian Mapping Authority (Kartverket) to coordinate with ongoing and planned listening activities.



For further information regarding the radio quiet zone and drone operations in Ny-Ålesund, please contact Kings Bay AS, Nkom, or the Norwegian Mapping Authority. It is recommended that such matters be clarified well in advance of starting fieldwork. Useful information can also be found here: UAV regulations (kingsbay.no) and here: Use of UAS | Ny-Ålesund Research Station (nyalesundresearch.no)

Camping and setting up camp

Requirements regarding camping and setting up camp are regulated by both the Svalbard Environmental Protection Act and the Regulations on Camping in Svalbard (the Camping Regulations).

All camping associated with research and educational activities requires a permit from the Governor of Svalbard. Researchers must apply using the application form in the RiS portal. Camping activities requiring a permit from the Governor must be secured by an alert and organized polar bear watch whenever people are present in the camp.

Remember the requirements regarding minimum distances to protected cultural heritage sites and their buffer zones. These are marked on the map in the RiS database (see the section on cultural heritage sites).

Camping activities must be conducted in a manner that minimizes damage to or wear on vegetation. Tents and other installations should, as far as possible, be placed on ground free of vegetation.

Safety

Anyone traveling outside settlements—with the exception of visitors and residents participating in organized tours—is required to be knowledgeable about protection against polar bear attacks. Necessary measures must be taken to avoid the risk of a polar bear attack and to be able to avert such an attack without harming or killing the animal.

Securing the campsite against polar bears is mandatory, and an alert, organized polar bear watch is required whenever people are present in the camp.

You must familiarize yourself with potential hazards on Svalbard and relevant preventive safety measures. Ensure you are proficient in the use of firearms and flare guns. We recommend that everyone heading into the field takes a safety course. Responsible handling of firearms is essential for your own safety, the safety of others, and the safety of the polar bears.

You must carry an emergency beacon whenever traveling outside the designated travel area, and the Governor of Svalbard must be informed of the beacons' identities. This is specified in the notification form.



Notification and reporting of expeditions/trips

You are required to apply if you intend to conduct fieldwork outside the designated travel area, pursuant to Section 3 of the Field Safety Regulations: <https://lovdata.no/dokument/SF/forskrift/2025-06-06-940>

Specific requirements apply to the content of such applications, and they must be submitted electronically via the Governor of Svalbard's notification form: (Application and notification requirements for trips on Svalbard | The Governor of Svalbard).

A group may submit a joint form.

Fieldwork must not commence until a response to the application has been received from the Governor of Svalbard. Upon completion of fieldwork, field days must be recorded in a separate reporting form. Overview of forms – The Governor of Svalbard.

There is no specific registration requirement for travellers within the designated travel area.

Insurance

As a general rule, visitors should hold insurance or a bank guarantee covering costs associated with potential search and rescue (SAR) operations and medical transport during their stay on Svalbard. However, researchers and students participating in research projects are assumed to be covered by their research institutions' self-insurance schemes. Consequently, researchers conducting fieldwork are generally not required to hold separate SAR insurance.

Visa requirements

If you require a visa to enter the Schengen Area, you must apply well in advance of your departure. Applications should be submitted to the nearest Norwegian embassy or consulate. Traveling to Svalbard involves leaving the Schengen Area; therefore, you generally require a visa that allows for two entries. ...within the Schengen area: one for the journey to Svalbard and one for the return journey.

You can find more information on the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration's website.