

102 Impact from Covid-19 on outdoor recreation in Sweden

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Introduction

The Covid-19 outbreak has brought about radical changes for societies, individuals as well as the environment. Concerns about the infection and strategies to deal with it, including restrictions on travel and social interaction, have dramatically altered many peoples' lives. This includes also recreation in the outdoors as well as environmental impacts, following from crowding, pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. Considering the unique situation following the Covid-19 outbreak, it is of interest to study how outdoor recreation has changed and reflect upon possible environmental effects these changes may bring. We do this by asking the following questions;

1. Has participation in outdoor sports changed during the pandemic and why?
2. How has participation changed with respect to; transport and mobility, use of land and water, use of material and equipment, involvement in events, social values, motivation and meaning?
3. What are the potential environmental consequences, and opportunities, following the pandemic?

The study focuses on outdoor recreation participation in Sweden during the first months of the pandemic.

Data collection

Collection of data followed a two-step procedure: An online survey and follow-up semi-structured interviews with a sample of survey respondents. The survey had eight questions focusing on participation in outdoor activities before and during the pandemic. Data collection used a snowball approach, where links to the questionnaire were distributed through websites, social media and a network of outdoor recreations administrators working at Swedish counties. The target group was people of the age of 15 years and above. Of the 530 valid answers, 86 respondents left their e-mail addresses and declared themselves willing to take part in a subsequent interview.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted from August to October 2020 with the primary aim to identify changes how people engage in outdoor recreation during the Covid-19 pandemic. The 22 interviews were conducted by telephone and each interview was recorded, transcribed and analysed with a thematic approach. Subsequent validity checks show that the survey data has an over-representation of female respondents compared with the national distribution. We also observe that a higher proportion of the respondents report they are member of an outdoor organization compared with the equivalent figures from previous national surveys. The age distribution, however, reflect the Swedish national distribution quite well.

Results

Our results clearly indicate that recreation in the outdoors did increase during the covid-19 pandemic. Interestingly, we observe that people who reported they recreate in nature "seldom" before the pandemic were those who increased participation the most (Table 1). This applies particularly to weekdays, but also weekends and periods of vacation.

Table 1. How recreation in the outdoors has changed due to the Covid-19 pandemic among people that report different recreation frequencies before Covid-19

	Decreased (%)	Unchanged (%)	Increased (%)	Sig.
WEEKDAYS				
Never	0.0	33.3	66.7	$\chi^2=50.6;$ $p=0.000$
Seldom	0.0	23.3	76.7	
Rather often	4.1	46.9	49.0	
Very often	4.5	71.6	23.9	
WEEKENDS, HOLIDAYS				
Never	0.0	50.0	50.0	$\chi^2=41.9;$ $p=0.000$
Seldom	7.4	11.1	81.5	
Rather often	2.7	37.4	59.9	
Very often	3.0	64.2	32.7	

Transport and travel

Several of the interviewees indicated a large reduction in long-haul international travel during the pandemic. Instead, visits to nature areas in the proximity of the residence increased, making recreation in the outdoors a "local affair". This also

implies an increased use of cars and bikes as the mean of transport to get to nature areas, rather than public transport – especially in larger cities. Different forms of co-transport outside the close family also decreased. People belonging to certain risk-groups, as well as those without access to a private car, felt more isolated than other groups.

Use of land and water

Many of the study participants report they tried out new activities during the pandemic. This also implies visiting and experiencing new places. We do get indications that popular areas, with facilities and easy access, has become more crowded. Less experienced people gather in popular areas, while people with more experience from being in the outdoors displace to more remote areas. The consequence is an increased impact on land and water, both in proximate and remote areas. Some respondents also report that areas previously popular among international tourists become more empty following the pandemic.

Consumption of equipment and organized recreation

Several of the informants have observed crowded stores and outfitters, while their own consumption of equipment has not changed very much following the pandemic. However, this may reflect that more experienced persons participating in the survey already have the equipment needed, and consumption takes place among the beginners.

Participation in organized activities has decreased of obvious reasons since many organizations reduced their programs due to national or local restrictions.

Social values

Yet an interesting observation is the social role that activities in the outdoors has taken during the Covid-19. Restrictions against social gatherings in many parts of society, as well as spending more work hours at home, has made the outdoors as a place to socialize. People visit the outdoors in small groups, or may go there alone to see others. One informant expressed a strong feeling of cohesion by simply being in the outdoors observing other people.

Concluding remarks

Looking at the changes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic from an environmental perspective, we notice both pros and cons. Fewer long-haul trips produce less carbon-dioxide, while increased use of cars do the opposite. Increased use of recreational areas imply more impact on land and water. Digital alternatives to physical meetings certainly reduces travel, while other forms of environmental impact may follow. More important, however, is the evidence of change in society at large observed during the Covid-19, which opens up for new ways forward regarding environmental friendly outdoor recreation in the future.

References

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