

113 A just access to urban green commons? The case of people using wheelchairs in Stockholm

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Introduction

Urban green space and urban green infrastructure as contributors to city qualities have received growing scholarly and practical attention. Of the many forms of urban green space, we focus on urban green commons (UGC), arguing that issues of environmental justice are highlighted and strengthened in the perspective of commons. The UGC concept has been used with slightly different meanings, where e.g. Németh (2012) defines urban commons (not only green spaces) as being collectively owned, held in joint use, and to which everyone has access. Colding's and Barthel's (2013:157) definition of UGC includes urban green space of varied ownership and which "depend on collective organization and management", as e.g. community gardens and allotment gardens, which are not open to all. In this study, we define UGC as green spaces that legally are accessible to anyone, which in a Swedish context is where the Right of Public Access applies (SEPA 2020). However, just because you have the legal right of access does not mean that you have realized access.

We focus on access in a broad sense explored from an environmental justice perspective. The degree of access is often defined quantitatively such as proximity to green spaces, or by how many from a certain social group use these spaces (Kabisch & Haase 2014). However, access is a complex concept, and inspired by Rigolon (2016) we include mental (e.g. fear), social (e.g. company), physical (e.g. roots, ice), and structural (e.g. transport, information) aspects of access. There are different ways of theorizing and analyzing environmental justice (e.g. Anguelovski 2020), and in this study, we follow Svarstad and Benjaminsen (2020), who defines environmental justice as distributive, recognition, procedural, and capabilities, and Rutt and Gulsrud (2016) who apply this lens on access to UGC. We find that within these 'categories' all aspects of environmental justice can be explored.

UGC are intended to be accessible for all people – but is that really the case? Loftus (2020) raises the question about what really is included in the expression "all the people" that often is used in policy and planning declarations, also concerning urban green spaces. But are they in practice UGC from an environmental justice perspective? The use of UGC is increasingly studied, but people with impaired mobility, e.g. using a wheelchair, is one example of a group whose access to urban green spaces has been largely neglected. Most studies about this group include all disabilities (Burns 2013) or are not focused solely on the urban context (Burns 2013, Stigsdotter 2018). However, Corazon et al. (2019) present a qualitative study with people with mobility impairment in cities.

Aim and methods

Based on a case study in the Stockholm region, Sweden, the aim of this study was to increase the qualitative understanding of accessibility to UGC through the experiences of people dependent on a wheelchair. Our goal was to allow the voices of the respondents to steer our analysis. The main method applied was in-depth interviews with 17 people who use a wheelchair on an everyday basis and/or represent organizations working for their increased accessibility to UGC. This was complemented with an online survey to which 58 wheelchair users responded. The main themes investigated included the perceived value of nature interactions and access to UGC understood in a broad sense, including both opportunities and barriers.

Results

Not surprisingly, we found that people are similar in the sense that nature values appreciated are similar independent of mobility. However, for people with severe mobility impairment, it is crucial that these values are accessible nearby, which allows viewing from home, short trips, less preparation, less stress,

no need for transport, and less need for assistance. With the increasing densification of cities, these neighbourhood UGC are decreasing, which will therefore negatively influence people using wheelchair as compared to others. Our results also clarify many important aspects of barriers beyond proximity and more seldom studied. We identified a temporal sequence of barriers, from thinking and planning a visit at home, getting to the UGC, managing there, getting home, and reflecting afterward. At different stages, our respondents encountered mental, social, physical, and structural barriers, which could discourage from, or even prevent future outings. If these barriers were reduced, e.g. better equipment provided, information and transport improved, and unnecessary physical barriers removed, much would change for this group. It was clear that in any accessibility endeavor their range of capabilities was as broad as in overall society, and that this variation must become much better considered. Respondents highlighted the challenging trade-offs in all people having equal access to all UGC, where they argued for a balance between improving accessibility to “untouched” nature and maintaining the values of the same areas.

Discussion

All people value access to multiple nature qualities in their everyday life (see Stigsdotter 2018, Corazon 2019), but often more so by people in wheelchairs due to their limited mobility. Thus, it is important to preserve both nearby and more remote UGC providing a variety of such qualities. However, earlier studies (e.g. Stigsdotter) show that people with mobility impairments less often venture out to UGC, as also shown in our study. Therefore, barriers to access UGC must be removed as much as possible, especially since nearby UGC still are decreasing. Efforts to this effect are made, but often as relatively short-term projects and single improvements without a holistic, just, and inclusive recognition of different needs. The examples illustrated in this study clearly show the urgency of including the four aspects of environmental justice (Rutt and Gulsrud 2016, Svarstad and Benjaminsen 2020) in UGC policy, planning, and management, i.e. distribution, recognition, procedure, and capabilities.

References

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