

12 Outdoor recreation during the corona pandemic – experiences and trends from western Sweden

Andreas Skriver Hansen¹, Javier Falla Arce², Ida Lindbergh², ¹University of Gothenburg, Sweden. ²Gothenburg Region, Sweden

The presentation reports on a study and published paper from western Sweden with a focus on the development of outdoor recreation in the region during the Covid-19 pandemic.

When the pandemic swept across Sweden and Europe in March 2020, it resulted in major changes in and consequences for outdoor recreation activities across the country. Quite abruptly, conditions for a normal life in Sweden changed in order to reduce the spread of the virus. People were recommended to not travel outside their own region or municipality, and public transportation became problematic to use. Citizens were advised to work from home and not socialize with others beyond their own social circle. In other words, the whole foundation of an active outdoor lifestyle changed. This had consequences for all citizens and, not least, outdoor organizations, many of which had to postpone or completely cancel activities. As a result, the basic conditions for outdoor recreation changed fundamentally.

But something else happened as well. Shortly after the pandemic took off, reports on increasing public interest in nature and outdoor recreation surfaced. Examples and discussions came from all corners of the country and were echoed globally. Preliminary observations, especially among local area managers, saw a sharp increase in visitor numbers. In some areas, so many arrived that it was difficult to receive all guests and at the same time show consideration for everyone and all activities. Life in the city also changed. The use of the city's green areas increased, becoming 'green oases' for people in search for a pandemic detox. Both local and national media began to write about the importance of exercise and moving around in nature. This likely helped to push many both newcomers and more routined outdoor enthusiasts into the outdoors. The reports and observations pointed in the same direction: outdoor recreation was undergoing new and rapid changes.

Against this background, researchers at the University of Gothenburg and Gothenburg Region, a co-operative organization for thirteen municipalities, decided to collaborate on a study with the purpose of documenting recreational changes caused by the pandemic in western Sweden. The study was part of a national research program, Mistra Sport & Outdoors (2020-2028), which aims to generate knowledge and solutions for increased sustainability in sport and outdoor recreation in Sweden. The study was to be a contribution to the increasing knowledge base on outdoor recreation during the pandemic in Sweden and internationally. The study was also to lead to increased knowledge about the regional development and thus create a base for current outdoor recreation planning and management strategies in the region.

The study was done as a so-called Public Participation GIS (PPGIS) study (Brown & Kyttä 2014). PPGIS is a method specializing in acquiring spatial data in a survey-like style, but based on an interactive mapping exercise, where participants plot activities on a map. The activity is usually followed by questions about the mapped activities and a more general survey. As is in the name, PPGIS studies uses a citizen science approach by inviting members of the public to participate and contribute with mapped data. A benefit of this approach is the opportunity to acquire large and often detailed data sets over short time, while it (usually) also is an interactive and interesting activity for participants. The study used a combined convenience and snowball strategy to reach citizens above 16 years of age in the region. The survey ran July to October 2020, four months in total. During that time, 4832 unique people visited the website, of which 1506 provided answers (approximately 32%). Put together, the maps and survey results point to several new outdoor recreation trends during the pandemic. Main results include:

- Nature close to home has become important during the pandemic.
- There is a sharp increase and a high concentration of visitors in popular nature areas, such as national parks and nature reserves, but also in traditionally less popular nature areas, such as smaller green corridors and spaces in urban areas.
- Many respond that their outdoor habits have changed due to the pandemic and several point out that they will continue the habits even after the pandemic.
- People seek the outdoors in order to recover and energize, to be free from worries and to socialize. Indeed, nature has become a social space, a 'sanctuary', during the pandemic.
- Outdoor life in combination with exercise has become popular and can be linked to physical health. Walking, hiking, running and cycling are particular popular activities.
- The new recreational trends has become a lifestyle for many, especially those who did not use the outdoors much before the pandemic.
- Observed conflicts linked to the trends include increased crowding on paths, tracks and trails as well as cabins and parking lots,

lack of consideration, visitors vs. landowners and littering.

From a management perspective, the reported trends have large and long reaching consequences. On the positive side, the development has led to increased interest in the outdoors and nature, which has been an outspoken political goal, both regionally and nationally. On the negative side, the current development and trends have also led to challenges for management, both those of a social nature, such as the abovementioned conflicts, and those of an ecological nature, such as increased pressure on the physical environment due to increased visitor volumes and a larger visitor spread.

The reported study has only scratched the surface when it comes to knowledge about the outdoor recreation trends that currently can be observed in the region. Furthermore, as there is no certainty about what will happen and be seen a year down the road, let alone a couple of months, it creates a precarious situation to be in from a research point of view. But all the more reason there is to closely pay attention to the trends observed now, as the world will not be back to normal after the pandemic. A new normal for the world, including outdoor recreation, is more likely.

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References

Brown, G. & Kyttä, M. 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apgeog.2013.11.004>.