

# On the integration of nature conservation and outdoor recreation in the rural landscape

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## Challenges for the development of recreational features within landscape management and planning

Nature protection and outdoor recreation are factors affecting land use in many rural areas in contemporary Europe. This implies new perspectives on “landscape” and reveals a need to broaden the horizons when it comes to understanding problem complexes and seeking managerial solutions. Outdoor recreation and nature protection have been intertwined since the birth of nature conservation during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though some conflicting interests can be identified, these two aspects of land (and water) use have a lot in common in the fields of the history of ideas, spatial areas of interest, shared policy agendas and landscape quality demands (Mels, 1999). Over the past three decades, biodiversity has become a central objective within nature conservation. What implications do the strong commitment to enhancing biodiversity have for the contemporary relation between nature protection and outdoor recreation, and what challenges do they present for the development of recreational features within landscape management and planning? Sweden stands out as a country very active in the biodiversity preservation discourse. More recently, ambitions as regards outdoor recreation have been expressed in national policy strategies. This paper discusses the interface nature conservation – outdoor recreation and explores how outdoor recreation is considered and contextualized in contemporary nature conservation policies and strategies in Sweden. A content analysis of statutory documents has been conducted, and complemented by case studies of two developing nature conservation projects, the Kosterhavet national park and Kinnekulle, a Natura 2000 area and a biosphere reserve (Stenseke in press). The scientific approach is deconstructive, with the primary aim to expose preconceived perceptions and reveal underlying premises that need to be reflected (Castree & Brown 2001).

## More rhetoric than practice

Outdoor recreation is stated to be a cornerstone in nature conservation in Sweden, however, the results from this study indicate that it has not been established as a fully developed and integrated element of nature conservation policies. The phenomenon is vague and not adequately contextualised in policy documents. Furthermore, the case of Kosterhavet shows that scientific knowledge of human dimensions, such as activity patterns and preferences, is not necessarily utilised in major nature conservation projects in Sweden. While recreation is generally referred to as a central aspect of nature conservation policies and management in the nature conservation bill, it mainly exists in the rhetoric ambitions in the environmental quality documents, but is not considered in detail nor elaborated in strategies and managerial

discussions. The text analysis reveals inconsistencies, signalling that the understanding of outdoor recreation varies between sectors as well as between the people formulating the texts. Furthermore, it is to a large degree described as a problem. When outdoor recreation is mentioned in a more favourable light it is generally activities that adapt to the physical conditions in the landscape and make minor impacts upon the terrain. A similar pattern is recognisable in the Kosterhavet national park process: though notwithstanding the intention to enhance nature experiences, outdoor recreation is discussed more in terms of restrictions than possibilities, and there is an evident lack of knowledge and competence as for outdoor recreation.

## A more informed and reflected understanding is needed

The past two decades may justifiably be characterised as an era of biodiversity in Swedish nature conservation. The results of this study indicate that awareness and knowledge about recreational aspects have not progressed to the same degree. The reasons behind can be discussed in terms of (i) *attitudes among officials* – it seems still to be a well-established understanding among people working in the nature conservation sector, that nature conservation is about “nature”, thus keeping an ontological division between nature and culture. Nature’s intrinsic qualities and ecosystem functions serve as the point of departure in nature conservation management, and are keys in defining what is important knowledge, and what competence is needed. Consequently outdoor recreation is not recognised as an interest in itself with its own logic, but as an aspect of nature preservation; (ii) *the institutional structure* – the preconditions given in the administrative structure in nature conservation do not sufficiently support the integration of outdoor recreation. This integration must not be dependent on individual officials and managers, but rather enforced by formal and institutional settings. In the government bill 2010 on outdoor recreation, one aim is to increase knowledge on outdoor recreation. This study indicates that increased knowledge is not enough. For knowledge to be utilised there is a need for an institutional structure that guarantees that the insights are recognised and might be influential; (iii) *the dominant paradigm in nature conservation* – the results from this study promote a challenge to the present ecosystem approach. When introduced in nature conservation management, where there is an influential preconceived notion of nature as something beyond society, the ecosystem approach can be interpreted as postulating business as usual, just demanding a slight change in the sort of objectives that are formulated. Defining outdoor recreation as an ecosystem service might help us to consider the (economic) values of nature, but it is of little use for recognising the variety

of recreational demands, conflicts between various forms of outdoor recreation and between recreation and other societal interests. In order to improve the management of outdoor recreation aspects, they need to be considered in formal structures and better related to scientific knowledge. The results promote a challenge to the present paradigm of ecosystem approach, as it illustrates how the contextualisation of a social phenomenon as outdoor recreation is problematic in that perspective.

A conclusion from the study is that the development of a more informed understanding of outdoor recreation is necessary if appropriate strategies for meeting contemporary challenges of integrating recreation and nature protection are to be developed. This implies, though, not just a reflective understanding of outdoor recreation, but of the entire concept “nature conservation”, acknowledging the act of reinvention as Mels suggested (1999). A consideration of nature conservation as something that is about performing, rather than about preserving, will stimulate discussions on *what* should be performed, *why* and *for whom?*

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