

# Outdoor recreation – an important public interest that current municipal spatial planning in Sweden cannot protect?

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## Outdoor recreation – an important public interest

Many people rate outdoor recreation opportunities very high – many so high that it affects their choice of city or city district to live. A national Swedish questionnaire-based opinion poll, *Friluftsliv 07*, and a supplement survey of *Blekinge archipelago and coastal zone* in the south east corner of Sweden, show that the general public express high expectations of the opportunities to enjoy outdoor recreation close to where they live (Fredman et al., 2008a). In many policies from national authorities it is also expressed that outdoor recreation is very important for public health, environmental concern, and as nature tourism also from a local and regional economic perspective. It is also stressed by public authorities at the national level that municipal spatial planning ought to be able to function as a tool to protect outdoor recreation in land use issues (see for instance Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (2005)). However, to what extent the municipal spatial planning can protect outdoor recreation is unclear. This issue has been investigated in the research project “Spatial planning for outdoor recreation” as a part of the national research programme “Outdoor recreation in change” (Petersson Forsberg, 2012).

## Strong protection for outdoor recreation at first glance – but actually weak

At first glance it might seem that outdoor recreation enjoys strong protection in the planning legislation. Outdoor recreation is considered in the *Planning and Building Act* as a matter of public interest, and is included in the *Environmental Code* as a matter of national interest and as one of the two stated reasons for shoreline protection. However, several public interests along with private interests should be considered in planning and the planning laws are in the nature of framework laws. Thus the legislation is open to interpretation on a number of issues. This means that the outcome of planning decisions is far from a foregone conclusion and each actor with any influence in the matter can leave their mark on the end result. The ambiguity of the term *public interest* is another complicating factor in outdoor recreation planning. Furthermore a large number of national regulations important for the municipal spatial planning for outdoor recreation have been recently changed, for instance the shoreline protection legislation and the new *Planning and Building Act*. Many people fear that these recent changes entail a stronger emphasis on private interests, and of that an increased number of planning decisions will accept exploitation and building on public green areas. But it is still too early to tell the outcomes of those changes (Petersson Forsberg, 2012).

Many Swedish population centres have sufficient amounts and quality of green areas accessible to the public. But there are also many cities that have insufficient public green space close to where people live (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2010). According to municipal planning officials that were interviewed in 2010/2011 it is often stated by politicians and planning officials that “well, there’s lots of green places around”. This mean that they think it is possible and appropriate for outdoor recreation to move somewhere else for the benefit of exploitation. The rather extended *Right of public access* in Sweden might be a foundation for this argument. Also the current planning doctrine of “compact cities”, which often is marketed with the arguments of sustainability, puts urban green areas under pressure for exploitation. To a high extent (70 %) people expect municipalities and the state to protect recreational areas, but their knowledge of public participation in the municipal planning process is limited. Almost 40 % answer “don’t know” to this question (Fredman et al, 2008b). This could mean; i) municipalities have a poor planning concerning outdoor recreation, ii) municipalities have a poor communication with the citizens concerning planning for outdoor recreation, iii) people do not care about planning for outdoor recreation as long as they are fairly content with the outcomes of the planning decisions (Petersson Forsberg, 2012:167). As discussed above there are several factors that might lead to increased lack of green space in urban areas and the planning legislation cannot be expected to protect outdoor recreation more than any other interest. So what can be done?

## Possible interventions

Changes in the wordings of the planning legislation might be the first issue that comes to mind in order to enhance the status of outdoor recreation in planning decisions. But some aspects tell against that. For instance the fact that current planning legislation bears signs of compromises between political stances as a battle between public and private interests, of which the wordings bear witness. There are also signs in society as a whole that the status of private interests is getting higher. For instance the private interest is enhanced in a revision of the Swedish constitution and in the law of the European Union. Probably, changed wordings in the legislation would show the same signs. Education can improve the understanding of the values of outdoor recreation and thereby, at least to some extent, enhance its status. But education might not solve the issue completely because many “wrong decisions” do not emanate from ignorance but from different value assessment (Emmelin et al, 2010). Education, however, might lead to a more objective notion

on the sustainability of compact cities, where the balance between compactness and liveability is discussed and also to an improved knowledge of the climate change and its consequences for outdoor recreation. However, as many people do care about their recreation opportunities, the most effective way of enhancing the status of outdoor recreation in planning decisions might be to increasingly engage people in the municipal spatial planning process. This could mean a planning process that is more transparent and more easily accessible to the public.

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