

ON THE INTEGRATION OF OUTDOOR RECREATION IN NATURE CONSERVATION POLICIES

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Nature conservation and 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 horizon when it comes to understanding and analyzing rural land. During the last decades, biodiversity has become a central objective in landscape management and planning. Meanwhile, the possibilities for outdoor recreation have become increasingly important, due to urbanization, coupled with greater leisure time and escalating economic welfare. This article 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. An examination of statutory documents has been conducted, and complemented with a case study of a developing nature conservation project. The result shows that outdoor recreation is acknowledged in the documents as an important factor, but this is not followed up rigorously. The focus is on the impact of recreation on nature while conflicts between various recreational interests as well as other societal aspects tend to remain unnoticed. The reasons behind are discussed in terms of (i) attitudes among officials; (ii) the institutional structure; (iii) the dominant paradigm in nature conservation.

Introduction

Nature conservation and 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 preservation have been intertwined since the birth of nature conservation during the 19th 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 (Jongman, 1995; Mels, 1999). Over the past three decades, biodiversity has become a central objective within nature conservation. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), established in 1992, has been a powerful force and Natura 2000, the network of conservation areas in Europe, is the major contribution by the European Union towards the fulfilment of the CBD programme (European Union, 2008). What implications do

these strong commitments 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, both in the international arena and with respect to national policy making (Sandström, 2008). Meanwhile, the issue of outdoor recreation has been much less in focus. Since the beginning of the 21st century, however, renewed ambitions in this regard are seen in the national policy strategies and outdoor recreation is once again explicitly considered to be an integral part of nature conservation (Swedish Government, 2002). Furthermore, since 2002, the national responsibility for outdoor recreation has come under the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA), which has been responsible for nature preservation since 1967. In the context of the emphasis on biodiversity, the ambitions as regards the interface between nature conservation and outdoor recreation in contemporary policy strategies imply challenges regarding how to preserve “nature” while encouraging the recreational use of land and water resources. This article 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. The scientific approach is deconstructive, with the primary aim to expose preconceived perceptions and reveal underlying premises that need to be reflected.

Outdoor recreation and nature conservation

One fundamental issue, with implications for how outdoor recreation is considered and contextualised, is the way that relations between human beings and nature are

conceived. From a nature protection point of view, a common preconception is that recreational activities are harmful for the environment. Much natural science research on the interaction between outdoor recreation and nature conservation has primarily focused upon the negative consequences of recreation for biodiversity (Arnberger and Mann, 2008). Recreation and hunting have been identified among the factors most responsible for the conflicts between human activity and biodiversity conservation in Europe (Young *et al.*, 2005). Issues such as waste, pollution, and loss of vegetation cover exemplify this discourse of “disturbance”. Different recreational activities have, however, different environmental impact. The impact is not homogeneous or strictly dependent upon the number of visitors, but varies depending on activity patterns and general behaviour. Furthermore, the consequences for biodiversity can be positive or negative, direct or indirect, temporary or lasting and can vary in scale from global to local (Pröbstl, 2003; Pickering, 2010). Besides the very concrete physical impacts of recreation on “nature”, there are also implicit aspects to the relation between nature protection and outdoor recreation. Tourism and outdoor recreation have been highlighted as means for enhancing local development based on nature protection, thereby providing a win-win situation for the nature conservation authorities and the local community (Burger, 2000).

In the wake of ambitious conservation objectives and the expansion of protected areas, there is, however, a growing body of research showing that ‘nature’ is inescapably social as it is defined, delineated and often even physically reconstructed by humans (Macnaghten and Urry, 1998; Castree and Braun, 2001; Hajer and Versteeg, 2005). This approach challenges the modern ontological division between nature and culture, by revealing the cultural construction of central concepts such as wilderness and biodiversity, and reinforc-

ing the need to identify and analyse implicit perspectives in nature conservation. Having their departure in a critical perspective, a number of scholars have revealed biases and preconceived notions in nature conservation and landscape management that shape ways of perceiving outdoor recreation and its integration. In his research on national park planning in Sweden in the 1990s, Mels showed that nature was essentially defined as beyond society, though the very existence of national parks could be understood as a confirmation of the fact that nature and humanity are one (Mels, 1999). In his critique Mels stressed the need for a more reflexive understanding of nature conservation and launched *reinvention* as a key concept in understanding contemporary nature conservation.

Following Mels, assessments of “authenticity”, and the common ambition in nature preservation to restore habitats to a “non-human biophysical authenticity” (Campbell, 2005) can be questioned, as indeed can the notion of historical landscapes being more “authentic” than present ones (Deremitt, 2001). In the numerous social science studies on nature conservation, conflicting interests are often essentialised as discrepancies between purist (ecocentric) and use-oriented (anthropocentric) attitudes to nature (Gobster, 2001). The dominant preservation versus utilitarian dichotomy, developed in a historic era when extractive use was perceived as the greatest threat to nature qualities, is, however, losing its validity (Wilson, 2008). As the relationship between humans and the physical landscape is changing, there is a need to direct more attention to changing societal expectations, including the growing demand for recreational use (Daugstad *et al.*, 2006).

The request for a more sophisticated conception of nature conservation, can be related to the widely acknowledged need to integrate social and natural science if sustainable usages of land and natural resources are to be developed (cf. O’Riordan and Stoll-Kleeman,

2002; MA, 2005). The most prominent approach towards this integration is the ecosystem approach, originating in the CBD and promoted by the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) (IUCN, 2009). Simply put, in this approach, human society and all human activities are considered as parts of ecosystems (CBD, 2009). One of the primary goals in this approach is to maintain ecosystem services V the benefits people obtain from ecosystems (Shepherd, 2004). As ecosystem services have become prominent in environmental rhetoric, outdoor recreation has been categorised as a cultural ecosystem service (MA, 2005). The attempt to absorb human society analytically into ecosystems has, however, attracted criticism, as has the ambitions to create naturalistic models of human behaviour (Macnaghten and Urry, 1998; Head, 2007).

From a recreation management point of view, it is of fundamental importance to recognise what motivates people to be outdoors, what they want to do, and what kind of expectations they have, in order to meet the demands for nature experience and recreational qualities (Manning, 2010). Several studies show that biodiversity preservation qualities are not essential to experiences of “nature” (Emmelin *et al.*, 2010). Animals and plants do not have to be rare to be fascinating (Henningsson, 2008), and pristine areas are not always of recreational interest (Gundersen and Frivold, 2007). All this, of course, in the context of considerable divergence in recreational interests of different individuals and groups (Stankey *et al.*, 1999; Emmelin and Fredman, 2001). In North America, a number of concepts for managing recreation and nature protection in the same areas have developed (Pirgram and Jenkins, 1999). The most well known of them is Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) (Manning, 2010), which also has been occasionally used in national park planning in Sweden (Fulufjället, see Wallsten, 2003).

Outdoor recreation in Swedish nature conservation policies and strategies

In order to examine how recreation aspects are integrated in central policies in nature conservation in Sweden, a quantitative content analysis and a context examination (Krippendorff, 2004) of written policy documents in Swedish nature conservation 2002–2006 were performed, and complemented by results from a case study of the policy in practice. The documents were selected as being the most important strategic texts for nature conservation during that period, and the ambition has been to reveal overarching perspectives and approaches of importance for resource allocation and the perceived need for knowledge and competence, rather than applied guidelines: The government bill on

nature conservation (Swedish Government, 2002), and the National Code for Environmental Quality Objectives, which form the basis of the national environmental policy (Swedish Government, 2005a) (the examination in this study is limited to the text describing the environmental objectives), together with its three complementary national strategies for wetlands, forest conservation and marine environments (SEPA, 2005a; Swedish Government, 2005b; SEPA, 2006). In the content analysis, the frequencies of code words related to outdoor recreation and the understandings of outdoor recreation, explicitly expressed or implicitly indicated by textual devices and analogy, were investigated.

The results show a great variation between the documents in the use of the term “outdoor recreation” and related terms (Table 1).

Table 1. Frequency of outdoor recreation terms in mandatory documents in Swedish nature conservation

| | Friluft + rekrea (outdoor recrea + recrea) | Fritid (leisure) | Upplevelse (Experience) | Turis (Touris) |
|--|--|------------------|-------------------------|----------------|
| Government bill on Environmental Quality Objectives (214p) | 22 (+ 4 rekrea) | 7 | 11 | 17 |
| National Strategy for Wetlands (32p) | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| National Strategy for Forest Conservation (127p) | 18 (+ 14 rekrea) | 0 | 6 | 0 |
| National Strategy for Marine Environments (91p) | 8 | 19 | 0 | 14 |
| Government bill on Nature Conservation (135p) | 277 (+ 10 rekrea) | 18 | 57 | 190 |

The nature conservation bill (Swedish Government 2002), states that outdoor recreation is a cornerstone in nature conservation and deals significantly with recreational aspects, as indicated by the quantitative content analysis (Fig. 1). Outdoor recreation is partly embraced as an integrated part of nature conservation, implying outdoor recreation as a land use interest. Outdoor recreation is furthermore conceptualised as having intrinsic values, giving people positive life quality values.

“Outdoor recreation implies experiences and enjoyment and is a kind of ‘consumption’ that increases the welfare and wellbeing of the population.” (Swedish Government 2002, p. 9, author’s translation).

One of the explicit aims in the Nature Conservation Bill is to create opportunities for nature experiences and development of outdoor recreation options rather than restrictions. The possibilities for outdoor recreation are briefly related to issues such as accessibility, areas without noise, air pollution, discussions about how many visitors an area can accommodate, and synergies with local development and physical planning. Conflicts between various kinds of recreation activities are to some extent discussed and zoning is brought up in passages concerning how to satisfy people with various interests when designating protected areas.

In the environmental quality code with the 16 national objectives, phrased as catchy slogans, e.g. Sustainable Forests, Thriving Wetlands, A Varied Agricultural Landscape, and the related strategies, which explicitly departs from the ecosystem approach, outdoor recreation is much less of an issue. Recreational issues are, mainly apparent in the rhetorical parts of the bill, as in the chapter on Flourishing Lakes and Streams;

“The importance of lakes, shores and streams for experiences of nature and culture and for swimming and recreation are taken into account and considerably and sustain-

ably developed.” (Swedish Government 2005a, p. 104, author’s translation).

Outdoor recreation is often contextualised as a means for enhancing nature protection, as education and business opportunities for local communities adjacent to protected areas, while it is generally absent in those sections dealing with implementation and management. In the forest strategy, for example, the explicit objective stated in the introduction, is to create a green infrastructure for animals, plants and people, yet the following chapters relate to biological qualities and measures for protection. When recreational aspects are considered, the focus is generally on the impact upon biological qualities, and outdoor recreation and related terms are regularly found in contexts of disturbance.

“In bird-rich areas, visitors should be channelled towards certain zones in order to reduce the risk for disturbance.” (SEPA 2006, p. 15, author’s translation).

The examination of the texts reveals inconsistencies in the use of the terms under investigation that complicate the interpretation of how outdoor recreation is related to nature conservation. Even if the bill on nature conservation states that outdoor recreation is a cornerstone, the 18 passages where the expression “outdoor recreation and nature conservation” can be found, indicate that this idea of outdoor recreation being integrated has not taken hold. Moreover, the consideration of outdoor recreation as a use interest or a preservation interest varies; in the target of the bill, it is stated that hunting and fishing are not considered as outdoor recreation, but as utility interests. This could be understood to mean that only recreational interests that are related to landscape quality preservation are included in the bill; however, this logic is not consistently applied.

As for outdoor recreation in the environmental quality objectives documents, there are notable variations in the frequency and the vocabulary when it comes to different

landscape types, indicating various sectorial habits and a lack of coherence in contextualising the phenomena. Terms related to outdoor recreation are to a large extent found in the chapters dealing with the sea, forests, the alpine areas, urban areas and biodiversity, while just occasionally in others. The terms “social values” and “experience” are used more frequently in the forest context than in others, and it is only in relation to forests that the use of urban-proximate nature for recreational reasons, nature experiences, children’s activities and nature education is discussed. Equally, in the strategy for wetlands, hunting and off-road vehicle driving are mentioned as outdoor recreation activities, while neither of these is discussed in the forest strategy.

The establishment of Kosterhavet national park

The findings from the strategic documents are related to the outcome in practice through a study of how recreational aspects were considered in the establishment of Kosterhavet National Park, which coincides in time with the documents examined (Stenseke, 2010). In the process of establishing the Kosterhavet National Park, an explicit aim was to promote nature experiences. Kosterhavet is likely to be the most species rich area in Sweden. At the same time the archipelago is a popular spot for recreation and tourism. When the park opened, a number of facilities for visitors had been constructed in various places (signs, waste collection, toilets etc), a visitors’ center was planned and restrictions for use had been erected. The analysis of the process revealed, however, that these measures were mainly taken ad hoc, as no clear strategy or structure for how recreation aspects were to be integrated were at hand. While there was a significant base of scientific knowledge regarding the biological aspects, and scientific expertise was mobilized for the inventories, the knowledge base for outdoor recreation

consisted of the experience of the executives (biologists), supplemented by consultations with local residents. Except for the planning of the visitor centre, no one with professional competence in outdoor recreation, tourism, or human behaviour, participated in the process. Furthermore, the plans for future monitoring of recreational aspects remain unclear, again in contrast with the specific monitoring plans for biological aspects. Although a visitor survey revealed some data of interest for recreational aspects, the results are not referred in the management plan. Thus, a number of vital concerns were not elaborated, e.g. How many visitors are there in the area, and where are they? What different recreational demands are at hand? Do the various demands interfere with each other and/or with nature preservation?

Discussion

Outdoor recreation is stated to be a cornerstone in nature conservation in Sweden, however, the results of 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. 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. The results presented show parallels to the implementation of Natura 2000 in many European countries (Rekola *et al.*, 2000; Alphandéry and Fortier, 2001).

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, which suggests 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. Nature conservation policies and strategies might not necessarily present extensive ontological considerations as regards outdoor recreation, but a common and consistent reading of the phenomenon would support a competent, transparent and integrated management of land and water. 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*?

The vague conceptualisation and inconsistent contextualising of outdoor recreation is a problem, restricting as it does the possibilities of enhancing recreational use of land

and water resources. In order to remedy these deficiencies, the reasons behind them have to be understood. Based on the results of this study, one can speculate on individual as well as administrative and paradigmatic explanations. First, 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. Questions related to recreation are generally handled through making use of one’s own previous experiences and through trial and error. For a professional management of outdoor recreation aspects should be founded on scientific knowledge, similar to the demands posed for biodiversity management, why the qualifications and the knowledge base need to be beyond personal interest. The perceived dichotomy between preservation and use in nature conservation, as discussed by Daugstad *et al.* (2006) and Wilson (2008), serves to confuse the integration of outdoor recreation into nature conservation as recreational aspects can be categorised as both. It could be suggested that the complication arises from contrasting landscape perspectives. In nature protection, landscape is commonly considered as a stage, where something is to be performed; preservation, ecological functions, biodiversity etc., while the recreation approach embraces landscape both as stage and as practice; not only consisting of the physical environment, but also of the activities carried out there — walking, picnicking, biking, socializing etc.

Secondly, the preconditions given in the administrative structure in nature conservation

do not sufficiently support the integration of outdoor recreation. The integration of outdoor recreation in nature conservation must not be dependent on individual officials and managers, but rather enforced by formal and institutional settings. The various styles of writing and the incoherent understandings of outdoor recreation in the investigated documents signal that a thoroughgoing reconsideration of concepts, measures, guidelines and competence is requested. The need for a formal structure that promotes a qualified integration of recreational aspects can be illustrated by the Kosterhavet case, where not even relevant reports on outdoor recreation supported by SEPA were not used (cf. SEPA, 2005b; Kajala *et al.*, 2007). In the recent government bill on outdoor recreation (Swedish government, 2010), 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. One option is to change the institutional structures for outdoor recreation, making it less aligned to nature conservation.

Thirdly, 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 (Shepherd, 2004), 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. Furthermore, when integrating the human sphere in ecosystems, it may be

tempting to overestimate the similarities between the human society and the non-human world. The consequence of this is often an (over)emphasis on local societies. Humans situated in an area have, however, complex connections to other places and to regional, national and global processes. The term “local” is therefore intricate, and the question of who belongs to the local community is certainly delicate: a societal interest such as recreation cannot be understood just from a place based point of view. This calls for the development of new perspectives, in which nature and the human sphere, though integrated, need not be under the hegemony of either one or the other.

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