



Swedish spatial planning: A blunt instrument for the protection of outdoor recreation



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ABSTRACT

Outdoor recreation opportunities are in great demand across Europe—so much so that for many citizens it affects their choice of where to live. National authorities, for example the [Swedish Environmental Protection Agency \(2005\)](#), have stressed that municipal spatial planning (i.e. local land use planning) should be used to protect outdoor recreation. However, the circumstances under which outdoor recreation is integrated into spatial planning remain unclear. The study draws on a survey of Swedish citizens, and another survey of planning officials representing all 290 Swedish municipalities, qualitative interviews with ten municipal planning officials, and analyses of comprehensive planning documents in eleven municipalities. Based on a discussion of the supply of and demand for urban and peri-urban nature, the results show that in Sweden spatial planning is an important, but somewhat blunt instrument for the protection of nature areas suitable for outdoor recreation. It is argued that, a combination of the following planning measures would make it more effective: (i) increased public participation in the planning process; (ii) greater use of research-based knowledge of outdoor recreation; (iii) umbrella legislation for outdoor recreation; (iv) changes to the wording of the legislation; and (v) research on providing clearer definitions and their implementation to planning.

MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

This case study about the position of outdoor recreation in Swedish planning processes bears relevance for an international audience of practitioners and researchers. In Sweden, outdoor recreation as public interest carries very high rhetorical value, but both the spatial planning practice and the planning legislation carry notable weaknesses in defense of these interests. The following strategies are proposed to alleviate this situation:

- Knowledge about public recreation and suitable natural areas in and around urban areas needs to be communicated at all levels of spatial planning, to support the required trade-offs between competing interests.
- The high demand for recreational opportunities close to people's homes is one particularly strong argument for defending the public interest.
- In order to strengthen public participation, the planning process should be made more transparent, public meetings should be made more inviting, and be held at suitable times. Participation and knowledge transfer can also be enhanced by new methods such as geographic information systems (Soft GIS) that allow residents to share their knowledge of their living environment with urban planners and researchers.

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1. Introduction

Outdoor recreation is generally regarded as a healthy activity and governments therefore encourage participation ([Bell, Tyrväinen, Sievänen, Pröbstl, & Simpson, 2007](#); [Sievänen et al. 2008](#)). The Government of Sweden has a long history of promoting these health

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benefits, as is evident in many official policy documents. Frequently these documents depict outdoor recreation as an important means of promoting public health and environmental protection goals concomitantly, and when tied to nature-based tourism, outdoor recreation activities may also become an important component of local and regional economies (e.g. [Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, 2005](#); [Swedish Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications, 1999](#); [Swedish Ministry of the Environment, 2009](#)). Recent academic research has started to affirm these health benefits as a more active lifestyle reduces levels of obesity, levels of stress, and mental illness in the population, and that the proximity to public green-spaces and the quality of the nature available increase the frequency of use ([Grahm & Stigsdotter, 2010](#); [Lottrup, Grahm, & Stigsdotter, 2013](#); [Schantz, 2008](#); [Verheij, Maas, & Groenewegen, 2008](#)). The ideas of a connection between outdoor recreation and public health are not new. Ever since the 1930s, outdoor recreation has featured on the Swedish political agenda to varying extents, and has always been strongly connected to a political interest in public health ([Sandell, 1997](#); [Segrell & Lundqvist, 1993](#)). In the 1930s, healthy outdoors activities were thought to be an essential counterbalance to the stresses and strains of modern, urban working life. At that time, political action was also prompted by concerns about unhealthy living conditions, and the fear that increasing amounts of leisure time would be spent in an unhealthy manner when two weeks annual holiday became mandatory for all employees under the Compulsory Holiday Act of 1938 ([Sandell, 1997](#); [Segrell & Lundqvist, 1993](#)). Outdoor recreation, especially outdoor swimming, was emphasized as a healthy activity. Other leisure related phenomena such as the expansion of vacation homes close to water, competed with the public outdoor activities, and both Sweden's modern right of public access and its shoreline protection legislation have their ideological roots in the political discussions of the pre-war period. The shoreline protection legislation was introduced in the 1950s, probably inspired by the examples of Denmark and Germany ([Sandell, 1997](#); [Segrell & Lundqvist, 1993](#)). By the end of the 20th century, the cost of obesity and sedentary lifestyles became acknowledged as a serious liability of the public health system, and thus outdoor recreation activities once again appeared on the political agenda (e.g., [Schantz, 2008](#); [Swedish Government, 2002a, 2002b](#)). Between 1991 and 2002 no national authority had the responsibility for managing outdoor recreation, but in 2002 the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency reassumed responsibility, and in 2012 the 'Objectives for Outdoor Recreation Policy' were formulated by the government ([Swedish Government, 2012](#)). Currently, outdoor recreation appears to hold a prominent position in government rhetoric. The national government also argues that municipal spatial planning should be used more pro-actively to protect urban green spaces suitable for outdoor recreation during land use decision making (e.g. [Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, 2005](#); [Swedish Ministry of the Environment, 2009](#); [Swedish National Institute of Public Health, 2009](#)).

In reality, however, the protection of urban and near-urban natural areas, which are also suitable for outdoor recreation, is a challenge across Sweden: in each of the ten largest metropolitan areas the amount of urban green space accessible to the public decreased between 2000 and 2005 ([Statistics Sweden, 2010](#)). The discrepancy between the importance of green spaces for the quality of life and the partly insufficient consideration in city planning can be observed across Europe and is not unique to Sweden.

[Tyrväinen \(2001\)](#) estimated the recreational value of urban forests as recreation areas. The vast majority of residents in two Finnish towns, Joensuu and Salo were willing to pay for the use of recreation areas; good locations and active management increased the average willingness to pay further. In the opinion of respondents, urban forests produced more positive benefits than negative effects. However, natural areas in urban settings can also be perceived as ecosystem 'disservices' when they are associated with

safety issues in dark areas, debris, pests, pollen allergies, or by attracting socially undesirable elements ([Lyytimäki, Petersen, Normander, & Bezak, 2008](#); [Tyrväinen, 2001](#)). Furthermore, in Swedish urban spatial planning, natural areas are sometimes regarded as barriers, as they increase distances between destinations and thereby discourage walking (i.e., the comprehensive plan for Stockholm; [Municipality of Stockholm, 2010](#)).

Data on the spatial and temporal distribution of users and the types of activities they engage in natural areas can be used as a knowledge base for planning decisions and management measures. Based on video-monitoring, [Arnberger \(2006\)](#) concludes that two different urban forests in Vienna, one inner-urban and one peri-urban, differed completely in their recreational use levels, use patterns, and user composition.

Other publications are discussing opportunities to quantify, value and expand urban green spaces for recreation and the provision of cultural ecosystem services ([Bolund & Hunhammar, 1999](#)). In Germany, any community-based land use decision resulting in new land being developed (for residential or industrial use) will be approved only if appropriate compensatory measures are undertaken on site or elsewhere ([Busse, Dirnberger, Pröbstl-Haider, & Schmied, 2013](#); [Pröbstl, Sowa, & Haider, 2010](#)). International research is also increasingly concerned with the supply of urban and near-urban nature and its contribution to ecosystem services, one of which is recreational values ([Fisher, Turner, & Morling, 2009](#)). Against this background the present article will examine the position of outdoor recreation in Swedish municipal spatial planning, and discuss how outdoor recreation is integrated, by pursuing the following research questions:

- 1) What is the public demand for outdoor recreation opportunities?
- 2) How, and to what extent are recreational aspects integrated in municipal spatial planning?
- 3) Do the recreational opportunities provided by the municipalities match public demand?
- 4) If they do not match, explain why, and explore possible solutions?

2. Background

2.1. Spatial planning as an instrument for the protection of outdoor recreation

Under the Swedish planning legislation ([Planning and Building Act, 2010](#)), Swedish municipalities enjoy a 'planning monopoly', as land use decisions are under their jurisdiction. Consequently the provision of recreation areas also rests with the municipalities. However, the national government maintains influence in some nature areas of public interest, such as nature reserves and national parks, which are protected at a national level by the [Environmental Code \(1998\)](#). In certain designated areas across Sweden, the national government also influences spatial planning in the national interest, where outdoor recreation is one of several land uses that must be taken into account. Other land uses of possible national interest are mining, wind farming, reindeer husbandry, cultural-heritage protection, nature conservation, and so on. However, the balance between municipal and national influence in questions of land use is not crystal clear. The national interest has not been defined in detail, and when invoked in municipal spatial planning it is not always clear which authority, national or local, is the ultimate authority for a given decision. Such a situation is highly problematic for the planning practice ([Emmelin & Lerman, 2006](#)), and the framework and formal definitions of the national interest have been under review for several years. National influence on spatial planning for outdoor recreation is also strong along shorelines, as the legislation for shoreline protection is part of the

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