



Short communication

## Perceived accessibility on golf courses – Perspectives from the golf federation



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### ABSTRACT

This pilot study addresses the effect of golf course establishments on public accessibility to recreational areas. There has been debate over whether golf courses represent a limitation to public access to green spaces and thereby the possibility for outdoor recreation. In Scandinavia, freedom to roam is an important legislation providing public access to the countryside. However, freedom to roam is not without limitations, and common rights does not necessarily lead to frequent use of accessible areas. In this study we assess whether golf course establishment prevent or provide accessibility to recreational areas in practice. Through interviews with green keepers and representatives from the golf federations in four Scandinavian countries we found that the effects of golf course establishment on accessibility vary between golf courses. In areas with limitations to freedom to roam and infrequent recreational use prior to the golf course establishment, the use can actually increase due to introduction of inviting elements such as information signs, paths and public resting areas.

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### 1. Introduction

Landscapes, particularly in near urban areas, are under great pressure from a diversity of interests, and the European Landscape Convention (Council of Europe, 2003) explicitly highlights the need to safeguard everyday landscapes for the benefit of people. Access to recreational landscapes has become an increasing concern in European policy and planning over the last decades. Accessibility to areas for low threshold recreation is understood as one important prerequisite and driver of physical activity in urban populations (Koppen et al., 2014). The view on outdoor recreation has changed from hiking in the forest or mountain to also include walks in the neighbourhood. This is for example mirrored in the Norwegian Environment Agency's campaign on urban outdoor recreation (Norwegian Environment Agency, 2014).

Since pressure on urban green spaces is increasing, there is a need to start looking at all urban green spaces that could be used as recreational spaces. In this article we focus on golf courses, these can contribute to the need for recreation in near urban areas. Golf has become an increasingly popular sport in Scandinavia, and the Norwegian Golf Federation is currently the third largest sports federation in Norway. As a consequence the number of golf courses

has increased dramatically, as in Norway, where the number of golf courses increased from 40 in 1995 to 174 in 2011. A similar development has been seen in Sweden, where golf is now the third largest sport, with 474,000 golfers registered in 2014. Golf courses occupy large areas. A standard 18 hole golf course typically covers between 50 and 100 hectares (Norwegian Golf Federation, 2002). At a typical 18 hole golf course about 50–60% is not used for golf play, hence there is a potential for other kind of recreational uses such as walking which in Norway is the most common outdoor recreation activity (Odden, 2008). As many golf courses have been established near cities, it has been debated whether this can be in conflict with the objective of equal accessibility to green structure for recreation for the urban population. As safeguarding attractive near urban recreational areas is high on the political agenda, understanding and predicting the effects of golf course establishments for public accessibility is of importance both to national and local planning authorities and to the Scandinavian Golf Federations. There is very limited research on public access, or perception of access, to golf courses. But when suggesting establishments of new golf courses the topics is discussed in both media and on the web (e.g. Gundersen, 2001; Reusch, 2013; Mellingsæter, 2014). A large body of literature is dealing with golf tourism (e.g. Markwick, 2000; Priestley, 2006; Woodside, 2009) or ecological or environmental impacts when establishment of new golf courses (e.g. Salgot and Tapias, 2006; Colding and Folke, 2009). Conflicting interests in relation to land use, such as protection of cultural landscapes (Norderhaug, 1990) or nature conservation

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(Jönsson, 2009) or people's opinions about establishment of new golf courses are also found (Briassoulis, 2010).

In Scandinavia the legislation is different in terms of the right to roam the countryside. In this study we focus on Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland. In these countries the public has access to roam on privately owned forest and farm land as long as it is not in conflict with crop production or otherwise a nuisance to the property owner (Ministry of the Environment, 1957; Ministry for the Environment and Natural Resources, 1999; Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, 2013). This means that farm land can be accessed during winter time when the ground is frozen. In Denmark, it is not permitted to trespass on private land except on permanent roads and foot paths (Danish Ministry of the Environment, 2014). Most of the golf courses in Scandinavia are privately owned, however, only few restrictions apply for movement for non-players on the courses. Except for Denmark, it is not allowed to put up "No access" signs, nor to fence off the area. However, warning signs are allowed, in order to make the public aware of possible danger from flying golf balls and to guide them to use safe areas and foot paths. Old accesses and rights of way have to be maintained. Restrictions of access differ from course to course. On many courses, not only in Scandinavia, the clubs have put up illegal signs and fences. Another dilemma is that the public in countries that practice freedom to roam, tend to think they are restricted to use public paths only. The buildings of public paths so to speak restrict their access unintentionally. The Norwegian government suggests that to secure environmental or sustainable goals it can be necessary to divide the area regulated to golf sport into different zones where walking path zone is one example (Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, 2000).

The freedom to roam is seen as an important public right and a key prerequisite for people's possibility to enjoy nature and outdoor recreation. Compared to the situation prior to golf course establishment, where freedom to roam has applied in the majority of cases, golf course establishment is seen as an impediment to public accessibility in the area. However, the accessibility in terms of freedom to roam does not necessarily result in high frequency in actual use of an area. Even if outdoor recreation is very common in Scandinavia and deeply rooted in the population (Gelther, 2000) it is not so that all people want wild nature. Instead many people appreciate managed routes and signs of accessibility and care to feel safe (Nassauer, 1995; Kaplan et al., 1998). Many golf courses have introduced elements to enhance internal accessibility in the area, such as roads and paths, as well as signs, benches and other recreational elements. Provided that the public perceives the courses as open to them, the accessibility in terms of facility of movement, as well as the actual recreational use, may therefore have increased.

One can assume that one of the reasons to involve in the golf sport is likely the experience of the outdoor. However, does the recreational value only benefit the golfers? The aim of this study is to assess the public access and accessibility on golf courses and the impact on access to recreational areas for people from golf course establishment. The study is a pilot study focusing only on green keepers' and professionals' experiences with construction of golf

courses. In the paper we will study physical accessibility rather than cultural or social accessibility (Koppen et al., 2014). This means our focus is on different attributes and elements introduced on golf courses, and how they could contribute to perceived accessibility. We will discuss accessibility in the summer and winter season, as these differ distinctly in Scandinavia, leading to different possibilities for recreation throughout the year.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Choice of golf courses

The Scandinavian Turfgrass and Environment Research Foundation, STERF, was contacted to find relevant golf courses to be part of the study. The criteria for choice of golf courses were: a variety in urban and rural settings and diversity in landscape types. STERF suggested 3–4 golf courses from each of the Scandinavian membership countries (except for Finland). From these we chose two from each country, which gave us a sample of eight golf courses. The courses are typical for Scandinavia when it comes to size, landscape setting and design. They were all surrounded by natural or agricultural land and five of them also by housing estates. For a list and facts of the golf courses see Table 1.

### 2.2. Interviews

To assess how design of a golf course can influence perceived accessibility and people's use of an area, we completed interviews with people with local golf knowledge. At each course (except Ledereborg) interviews were made with two interviewees: a local green keeper and a head of course facilities in the golf unions in each of the countries. In total 15 persons were interviewed. It was important that the interviewee knew the history of the site and the development from before the golf course establishment. The first part of the interview was performed as a walking interview with the green keeper. This means that the interviewee walked together with the researcher on the golf course while talking about signs of accessibility. Walking on the golf course created an important context for the interview and made it possible to point at important features in the landscape while talking about them. Based on literature on both external and internal accessibility (Koppen et al., 2014) four signs of accessibility were registered:

- *access points* – the number of public access points.
- *information signs/boards* – signs/boards that give information about accessibility on the golf course.
- *public roads/paths* – presence of public roads/paths on the golf course.
- *public resting areas* – presence of seating on the golf course.

We grouped the number of access criteria into *few*, *moderate* and *many*, see Table 2. The numbers are based on general experience from golf courses in Scandinavia, UK and New Zealand on what is common and can be functional on a golf course with mixed groups

**Table 1**

An overview of the eight golf courses in the study.

Golf course	Location	Country	Type of golf course	Area in hectares
Oppgård golf course	Oslo	Norway	18 holes	70
Vestfold golf course	Tønsberg	Norway	18 holes + 9 holes	85
Delsjö golf course	Göteborg	Sweden	18 holes	80
Ullared-Flädje golf course	Falkenberg	Sweden	18 holes	75
Smørum golf course	København	Denmark	27 holes + 9 holes	190
Ledreborg golf course	Roskilde	Denmark	18 holes + 9 holes	170
Korpa golf course	Reykjavik	Iceland	18 holes	70
Tungudalsvöllur golf course	Isafjordur	Iceland	9 holes	12

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