

Eight go to Sweden



In July 2022, eight colleagues from UK National Parks headed off to Stockholm, Sweden, to learn a little bit about access and recreation in Swedish protected areas. We spent the week living, working and learning together. The following report represents some of our learning outcomes.

Swedish National Parks

In 1880, 8 years after the world's first National Park was designated at Yellowstone in the USA Rockies, the Swedish polar explorer Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld suggested that the equivalent form of protection should be introduced to the Swedish wilderness.

National Park is the highest level of land protection status in Sweden. Sweden's national parks comprise a magnificent mosaic of different landscape types – beech forests of Söderåsen, Sarek's high mountains, coral reefs at Kosterhavet, sand dunes at Gotska Sandön and Tyresta's pristine pine forests.

In 1909, Sweden established its first nine National parks, which also were the first in Europe. Now, just over 100 years later, there are 30 of them and four or five more are in the planning stage. Many of the national parks have visitor centres, managed walking trails and camping/overnight stay facilities. There are substantial web-based resources to help visitors enjoy and understand them.


The purpose of a national park is to preserve “a large contiguous area of a certain landscape type in its natural state or essentially unchanged” (Swedish Environmental Code).

The protected landscape types include:

- Mountains
- Wetlands
- Coast and Sea

- Coniferous forests
- Deciduous forests
- Lakes and rivers

Sweden encourages its citizens and tourists to visit their national parks with year-round free entry to all the parks and a network of Naturum visitor centres. The parks are very popular. In 2014 they were visited by 2.4 million people. Kosterhavet and Stenshuvud had 500,000 visitors each. Other parks that have high numbers of visitors are Tyresta, Söderåsen, Tiveden, Dalby Söderskog, Abisko, and Store Mosse.

The gold star  is the symbol for Sweden's national parks. It helps to provide a strong national brand. Sweden's Environmental Protection Agency takes the leading role in their national parks management. The land in national parks is owned by the state and the focus is on wildlife and nature protection alongside responsible public enjoyment.

Previously, national parks were created, in part, on the basis of romantic ideals about nature. Now, selection is based on international, scientific criteria for what nature merits protection and interesting attractions. One difference from before is size. New national parks are to be large, untouched areas that showcase a typical Swedish landscape. In most national parks, nature is allowed to take care of itself. In some grazing animals keep the land from becoming overgrown, and meadows are mowed to preserve the old cultural landscape. The government and Parliament make decisions about establishing new national parks. The selection and preparations are handled by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency together with county administrative boards and other local parties



More than 81 per cent of the total area of national parks in Sweden, is situated within the alpine region in Norrbotten County or sub-alpine region in the same county. 15 per cent of Sweden's area (including inland waters) are permanently protected as nature conservation areas and 13 per cent of this area consists of national parks.

Collectively they provide a superbly managed asset for Sweden and the world.

Swedish nature reserves and other protected landscapes

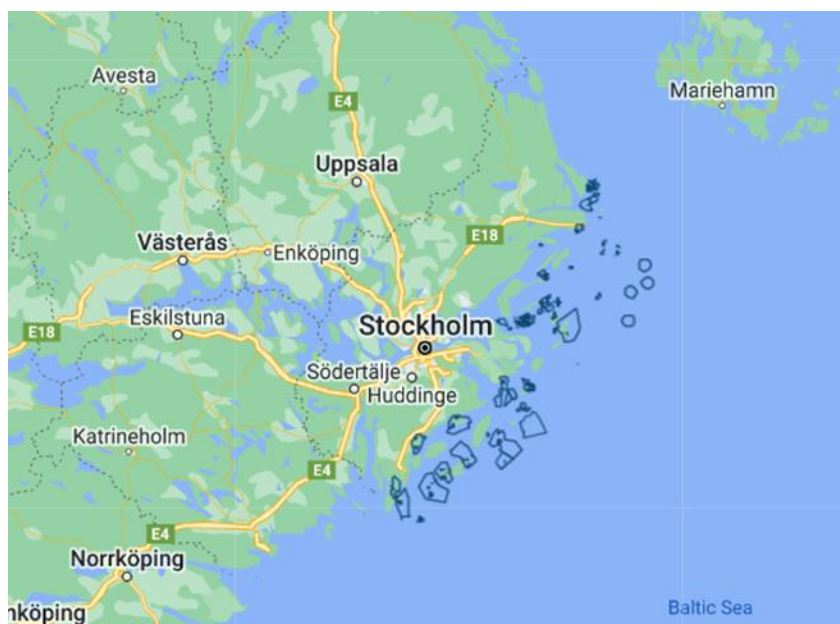
The most common form of protection in Sweden is nature reserves, approximately 15% of the land is protected for environmental benefit and nature experience and supported by the Environmental Code. This applies to both private and publicly owned land.

The Environmental Code aims to preserve biodiversity, protect natural environments and to protect or restore habitat for endangered species as well as meet the needs for recreational access to the public. There is long term protection in place to help conserve clean water, air and unspoilt nature to provide value to the environment and for people to enjoy.

The lifestyle of the Swedish is healthy and active, and the public are encouraged to enjoy outdoor recreation to improve both physical and mental health to enhance quality of life. Outdoor recreation adds to job creation and support of the tourism industry, particularly in rural areas. Outdoor recreation encourages people to understand the landscape and connect with nature with a view to conserving for future generations. There are many national agencies that are commissioned to work with outdoor recreation in Sweden, in order to promote jobs within the sector and create partnership working.

There are 5111 nature reserves in Sweden and cover around 85% of the landscape. Due to the varying landscapes of the reserves, each one has different regulations and restrictions in place to protect natural and cultural features.

During our Erasmus trip to Sweden, we visited 3 nature reserves – Bjorno, Uto and Alo.



The areas highlighted in Blue show the extent of the Archipelago

All 3 nature reserves we visited were part of the Archipelago and it is an extensive nature reserve owned by the Archipelago foundation, which aims to preserve the area for future generations to have access to the land for recreation. The foundation creates opportunities for tourism, encouraging business within the reserves.

There are other forms of landscape protection in Sweden. Biotope Protection Areas are areas of land or water that are important habitats or places of refuge for certain species. There are 7 categories; lines of Trees, streams with wetland in agricultural areas, stone piles, willow banks, small watercourses, stone fences, tree copses.

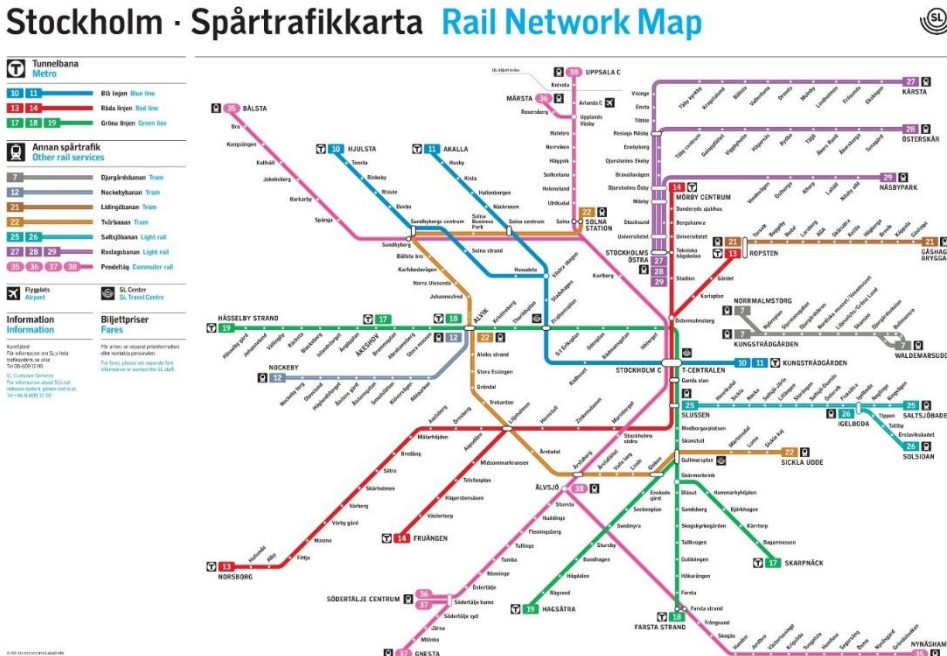
There are 15 World Heritage Sites in Sweden that are protected, 3 of which are rich in natural assets – Laponia Area which encompasses 4 National Parks and Two Nature reserves and is approximately 1 million acres. The Kvarken Archipelago which is made up of 5,600 islands. Southern Oland, which is home to diverse flora species.

The Swedish Species protection Ordinance (2007) sets out which species are to be protected within the landscape. These are;

43 Orchid Species, 232 Vascular plants, 12 Mosses, 8 Lichen, 5 Fungi, 1 Algae, 250 Birds, 27 Mammals, 7 Reptiles, 13 Amphibians, 31 Invertebrates

Stockholm and public transport

Stockholm is an incredibly clean city and everyone we came across was very approachable and helpful. Getting about was easy as the public transport was incredibly good. We all got a seven-day pass that allowed us to hop on and hop off buses, trains, and some boats to get across the city as well as out to the different National Parks and Nature reserves, we visited. The rest of the time was spent exploring Stockholm and Sweden in numerous ways including on foot, by bike and some even opted for the electric scooter. All the transport seemed new and well-funded - due to government investment from higher taxes. It all ran smoothly and on time and some was even free such as the inner-city ferry connecting the different patches of land and parts of the city as we explored on an evening in various areas of the city and what it had to offer.



Stockholm ferry connections



This was used whilst visiting the city parks as well as smaller shuttle type boats which we used in the city as well to allow ease of travel.

Tyresta National Park

Tyresta was the first arranged site visit on our study tour, where we were met by Jessica Angstrom who manages the visitor centre naturum, a nature centre which showcases Sweden's National Parks, sells souvenirs and gives information on hiking trails, guided tours and local attractions.

Jessica led us on a 2.5km walk following the Urskogsstigen trail, a hilly walk with information signs, promoted on the website as a 'good introduction to Tyresta's ancient forest'. The forest has been left untouched and as such, the area was filled with dead wood (primarily Norway spruce and Scots pine). Some trees were 300 years old and contributes to a thriving ecosystem. We were given handheld magnifying glasses to look in the nooks and crannies in the trees (see below), as Jessica explained this was a method used to engage with educational groups who come to study the Park.



Tyresta is facing issues with beaver and wild boar numbers; they largely have a non-intervention policy but have recently started allowing boar control (let to local hunting clubs). The Park is also facing an issue with Spruce Bark Beetle, which, despite causing large amounts of the spruce in the Park to die (picture below), is being left with a non-intervention policy.



The Swedish 'Right to Roam' doesn't apply in Tyresta nor the surrounding nature reserve. In Tyresta, activities such as horse-riding and cycling are prohibited, but with minimal signage, I found this unclear 'on-the-ground' in comparison to the way we waymark our Rights of Way network in the UK National Parks.

In 1990, a forest fire destroyed 20% of the National Park's area. With the amount of dead wood around, it was understandable that camping and fires are permitted only at designated places. Park rangers provide tourists with firewood that they may use, and was an interesting approach to minimise fire risk, one that could apply to many places in the UK.



The public transport to the Park was wonderful, with a bus service taking you to the Park entrance. It was therefore very easy to go back and visit the Park on a self-guided walk as recommended by Europarc. Day 2 at Tyresta allowed us to fully immerse ourselves in another trail walk and go for a swim in the lake (below).



On this longer walk, we were able to experience the accessibility of the trails to a larger extent. At the start of the 55km of trails, there was a firm surface suitable for wheelchairs and pushchairs, which we witnessed first-hand. Bridges also had accessibility in mind, with the side facing the view being of a mesh to allow users on a lower level to enjoy the same perspective. It was interesting to note that some of the bridges and walkways were on metal stands to circumnavigate any beaver intervention!

Our longer walk also allowed us to fully appreciate the maintenance challenges the Ranger team must face when repairing boardwalks (below), steps etc. There were sections of challenging terrain, where boardwalks were surrounded by peat bogs and wetlands (although the weather meant the Park was largely dry when we visited!)



We also had a tour around Tyresta Farm (below), a 'showcase' farm that aims to give an insight into crops and animals. There was also a farm shop where you can buy local produce such as sausages and honey. We met with Mattias Sjölander, Farm Manager, who showed us the 20 cows and some of the 120 sheep on the site. It was interesting to hear about the challenges the farm has with wolf predation, for which they use electric fencing to combat.



Both days at Tyresta ended with a coffee and cake at the lovely café. From our discussions with Jessica and Mattias, we recognised similar issues between the UK and Sweden, such as visitor numbers and ample parking. In some areas of the Brecon Beacons National Park, we charge our visitors for parking. With a need for more income, we were interested to note that Tyresta don't charge for parking or camping.

In addition, it was interesting to hear about the seasonal pressures facing the access and recreation of Tyresta. In the Brecon Beacons, our peak season where we face issues (particularly in Waterfall Country) is during the summer school holidays. However, in Tyresta (and Sweden generally) the autumn months are when peak visitor numbers are recorded, as people leave the city to forage for fungi and berries, an old tradition it seems. We even found and ate an edible mushroom for ourselves on our walk with Jessica!

What a *magical* National Park!



Bjorno Nature Reserve

Bjorno was the second arranged site visit to a Nature Reserve where we were lucky enough to have a guided walk by Cecilia Wibjörn from the Archipelago Foundation who manages the site.

Again the public transport to the Nature Reserve was impressive and we were able to connect from the metro within Stockholm to buses which connected us to the Reserve – all worked seamlessly – showing how central Stockholm residents are able to access the coastline easily via public transport.

As such Björnö is a very well-visited reserve. We met with Cecilia in the main car park for the Reserve, where she was able to take us on a tour along a popular accessible walking route

which had additional interpretation along the route teaching young children about the importance of looking after local habitats, using a popular recognised nature-loving character in Sweden – Skogsmulle.



We were shown the accessibility adapted bathing area, with a wheelchair accessible jetty, and the snorkeling trail that has also been adapted for the visually impaired with underwater signs with tactile writing.

Cecilia also explained more about the importance of bladderwrack for supporting small fish species, and which is suffering a decline in some areas, and conservation efforts they are making to protect it.

She then took us on a walk around the nature reserve showing us popular beach areas, where there were areas for BBQs and fires, and then showed us wetland areas they have created with funding from the WWF recently. We were able to enjoy our picnic looking out across the sea to the islands in the archipelago. At the end of the tour we were lucky enough to then go for a swim in a sheltered bay – blissful!



From our discussions we recognised very similar issues during the Covid pandemic in both Sweden and the UK, with increasing visitor numbers, new visitors who are unfamiliar with behaviours in protected landscapes, and issues such as litter, fires and controlling dogs.

In addition it was interesting to hear about the remote communities that live on the islands, and how changing residential/work patterns since Covid, with more people choosing to live for longer periods in what were previously summer homes, is having an impact on the local environment and community resources.

Stockholm Royal National City Park

On our free day we chose to explore the Stockholm Royal National City Park, as recommended by our hosts.

Using the fabulous integrated transport network, we arrived at the visitor centre for the obligatory coffee and cake (or finka) before exploring.

The Park has been Crown land since the Middle Ages and in the 1600's was turned into a royal hunting ground with deer. In the 1700's the Park was opened to the public and is rich in plant and animal life along with ancient oak trees and some impressive buildings.

Our first impression was that the park had more of a UK National Park feel about it with recreation being the key. Waymarked routes littered the park (although we still managed to get lost) with an interesting sculpture trail along the way.



The further we got away from the popular visitor centre, the less obtrusive the interpretation became (very much like the signage policy in the Yorkshire Dales NPA). Small interpretation panels displaying information on the flora and fauna were used to provide more information about the landscape.

We used Swedish style bikes to explore the park. These 2 gear, back-pedal brake bikes were a challenge at first but once we got the hang of them we were off. The advantage of these bikes is that you take everything a bit slower. We encountered people walking, running and generally having fun. Had the weather been less inclement I'm sure we would have witnessed some swimming as there were plenty of opportunities to be had.



This was the first (and only) time we saw any litter within a protected landscape but it was localised in a parking layby. The overall feeling was of how clean the area was – very much like the rest of the Sweden we saw.

Had we had time, we would have visited one of the museums within the park.

Uto Island

This was the only day where public transport from Stockholm didn't work for us. Instead, we shared a taxi for us to get to the coast in good time to catch the ferry to Utö island. The ferry took about 30 minutes before we arrived at Utö Gästhamn. On Utö, the Archipelago Foundation has set up both bathing areas and visitor facilities, constructed paths for walking and cycling and actively manages the forests to encourage nature conservation. There are cafés, shops, hotel accommodation, kayak hire, bike hire and a tourist office. The island has a history of mining for iron ore, which has since gone, but there are the remains of open cast mines which are now partly filled with water and miners' homes dating back to the 18th century. There are several trails to explore the island which we did by hiring bikes.

Bike hire was very straightforward with payment made at the café, before a bike was efficiently allocated to each of us and we set off. The trails were relatively well signposted and marked with a loose type gravel surface rather than tarmac. We found a map was essential to navigate across the island, and as there was good mobile signal, we were able to navigate effectively using Google maps.



One of the bikes developed a fault which resulted in us borrowing some tools from local residents. We managed to limp the bike carefully to our planned lunch stop at Alö. There we phoned the bike hire expecting that they would send someone out, but we were able to simply swap for another bike at the restaurant. We did consider that the type of bikes (sit up

and beg) where probably not quite robust enough for the trail surfaces they were being used on. Bike hire for the day was very reasonable at around £20.00.

During the afternoon we cycled over to Alo stora sand, where we all had a swim in the Baltic Sea (which was freezing). We noted people who were wild camping and that cooking and BBQ facilities were provided here also. We then cycled back to Utö Gästhamn to catch the return ferry and taxi back into Stockholm.

