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Anna Peterson

Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU), Department of Landscape Architecture

Mats Gyllin

SLU, Department of Work Science, Business Economics and Environmental Psychology

Christine Haaland

SLU, Department of Landscape Management, Construction and Design

Anders Larsson

Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU), Department of Landscape Architecture

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Recreation in Swedish agricultural areas – public attitudes to multifunctional greenway designs

Dr. Anna Peterson¹, Dr. Mats Gyllin², Dr. Christine Haaland³, Dr. Anders Larsson¹
¹Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU), Department of Landscape Architecture, ²SLU, Department of Work Science, Business Economics and Environmental Psychology, ³SLU, Department of Landscape Management, Construction and Design

Introduction

Recreation in the agricultural landscape of SW Sweden is limited in several ways. There is little else than agricultural fields and urbanised areas, and outdoor recreation is limited to a few, small areas. Although the Swedish Right of Public Access allows for accessing the agricultural fields by foot, this is not allowed during periods when there is standing crop. Apart from this, the fields are not particularly inviting, since the winds are continuous and often harsh, and walking on the muddy fields is not comfortable. It should be stressed that this is the everyday landscape for a growing peri-urban population. Furthermore, the homogenisation process that this landscape has undergone for the last five or six decades has also resulted in reduced biodiversity, which further reduces the attraction of the landscape. To make the agricultural landscape more accessible for recreation, some landowners and municipalities have established narrow (3–6 meters wide) greenways along field margins. Since these greenways are primarily aimed at recreation, they are not particularly well suited for plant and animal wildlife, and they are generally too narrow to allow for different types of recreation, such as riding at the same time as walking with dogs or prams. A further drawback with the existing greenways is their lack of protection against the continuous winds in the open landscape. Since these aspects were not considered when the greenways were established, it is probable that simple modifications of the design could satisfy more needs. It is, however, unclear whether such a development would be acceptable and desirable to the involved users and landowners, and whether it could gain support from the authorities.

Background

‘Greenways’ are often defined rather broadly, at least compared to the kind of greenways investigated in the present study, i.e. narrow, soft-surfaced (grassy), open strips of agricultural field margins, in Swedish called ‘beträdor’ (figs 1 and 2). This is a pun, meaning ‘fallow accessible by foot’ (Regnéll 1994). Because of the simple structure, they can also be considered ephemeral, or almost ‘moveable’, since they can easily be ploughed down and (re-)established somewhere else, at a temporarily more suitable location. In Hellmund & Smith (2006), there is a list of different types of greenways with examples (pp. 2-3), but ‘beträdor’ are not mentioned, of course, since they are not widely known, but they could be considered a sub-category of ‘recreational corridors’ or ‘green infrastructure’. Possibly they could be regarded as ‘green veins’, at least if their multifunctional potential is considered (Rossing et al 2003).

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Figure 1. Greenway outside the town of Staffanstorp. It is used for walking and horseback riding. It is even possible to drive on it.

Since the awareness of the complex pressure on the South Swedish agricultural landscape from various stakeholders is growing, the need for multifunctional strategies will also increase (Antrop, 2006; Brandt and Vejre, 2004). An example of a greenway strategy involving design instructions for several types of use is the Hillsborough Greenways Master Plan (1995), in which one of the goals for the Greenways System is to “[...] guide the design of greenways in a way that will minimize user conflicts, provide needed facilities, ensure safety and privacy, and protect resources.” User surveys to study the use of greenways have, for instance, been made by Gobster & Westphal (2004), but in this case the greenways were very large and running along a river. Ryan & Hansel Walker (2004) reported on a survey among landowners in Connecticut regarding their concerns about letting the public access their land. This is interesting in principle, but in practice the Swedish Right of Public Access does not allow landowners to deny access to their land, within certain limits.



Figure 2. Greenway outside of Lund. This type has shrubs planted along the edges, making it somewhat more permanent.

Goals and objectives

The main objectives of the present study have been to investigate how different user groups actually experience the existing greenways and the landscape in general. Furthermore, it involves attitudes of different stakeholders regarding recreation in this landscape type, and to enquire how users can be tempted to make more frequent visits. From this we intend to make a number of design proposals on how greenways could be designed. Although some general design models exist (e.g. Hellmund and Smith, 2006), it is the belief of the research group that the operational stage needs to be localized to meet local needs. In the case of southern Sweden, for instance, it can be hypothesised that establishing greenways at least partly as bridle ways could benefit other interests as well, since horseback riding is one of the most demanding of possible greenway activities, and horses in the region are numerous and increasing in numbers.

Methods

Results are based on material from three projects dealing with greenways in highly productive agricultural areas. One of the projects focused on accessibility and participatory planning (Larsson et al, 2010), while another used a broader approach to accessibility and multifunctionality (Haaland et al, 2010b) and a third project was

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based on farm planning and landscape values (Haaland et al, 2010a). The parts from these projects that deal with stakeholders' views and attitudes on greenways are included in this paper. They have been made in four different municipalities in the region. The results are collected from a mix of observations, short spontaneous interviews and focus group meetings made during a period of 4 years. Furthermore, qualitative interviews have been made with planners, riders, boarding stable owners, and landowners. A questionnaire was made during one of the user meetings, including all kinds of stakeholders. Visitors were asked questions on how they used greenways (to what purpose and how often), other visitors they had noticed, the construction and design and their preferences. Landowners were asked about their views on letting the public access their land. Planners from municipalities and the County Administrative Board were asked about strategic aspects, the administrative processes involved, and on the available operational options.

Observations and spontaneous interviews with visitors were made by visiting existing greenways during a total of 20 hours in different seasons, time of the day and weather conditions.

Results

Common to all the interviewed groups was that they all saw the other groups as more or less of a problem.

Visitors were very positive to greenways and in favour of establishing more greenways for recreation, particularly to make complete loops, to be able to choose different paths and a possibility to reach them directly from their home or their horses' stable. They had no spontaneous thoughts regarding biological or cultural qualities, but when asked specifically they were always positive. Concerning how the greenways should be administrated, it was thought of as a responsibility for the authorities, as a part of the Right of Public Access. Only equestrians were willing to pay accessibility fees. Nearly all walking visitors were more or less negative to horses, since they thought they were dangerous and that the hoofs destroyed the pavement. Equestrians, on the other hand, preferred routes with less people and argued that they were indeed concerned about the surface quality, as they did not ride when it was wet.

Landowners expressed very different views. Those with a negative attitude usually had had bad experiences of people damaging their crops. There were examples of people letting their dogs run loose in parsley fields or equestrians galloping on newly sown fields, which is not only damaging but also illegal. Landowners were also worried about safety. Since there are a number of places in farms that could be potentially dangerous, landowners felt that they could not guarantee the safety for all possible events. Some farmers were, however, positive. They liked the idea of people coming to the farm and experiencing farming at a close range, to watch farmers doing a good job and in the extension to be more positive to buying local products. Some farmers had mixed feelings about accessing their land, and asked

what was in it for them. This ‘middle’ category seemed skeptical, but not hostile. Farmers taking an active part in the participatory planning project and the collaborative process did, however, in the end come to the conclusion that it was better to guide the public actively to the most suitable places and ways of conduct than to do nothing, or to be disapproving, in which case people would access places in a more random, and thus potentially more harmful way. All landowners agreed that economic compensation is mandatory for them to give up arable land for recreation. In that case, they were interested in both establishing and managing greenways. Over all, landowners were very negative to the principle of taking agricultural land out of crop production, because they had already lost too much to new roads, shopping malls, housing areas etc. Their chief motive for this was that it is bad sustainability policy regarding the securing of future food production.

Officials from public authorities were rather ambivalent, as they were positive to the idea of greenways, but doubtful as to whether it would be possible to implement. In the small municipalities planners felt that they were the only ones that tried to take a holistic perspective. It was particularly difficult to engage others in the biodiversity issues. An important aspect in the regional perspective was that communication between municipalities was limited, which was seen as a difficult obstacle. They were doubtful regarding multifunctionality and did not believe that for instance horses and dogs could share the same track. The acquisition of land was also regarded as a major obstacle. They acknowledged the benefits of multifunctionality, and that the awareness of it is growing, but good examples, tools and funds are lacking.

To summarise results connected to the design of multifunctional greenways, we conclude that visitors and planners are sceptical towards the possibility of different types of recreation at the same space. Planners find the idea of greenways for recreation and biodiversity protection appealing because they cover less space than entire fields, thus making it cheaper. Landowners/farmers also prefer this to setting entire fields aside for production purposes. Considering aspects of nature and culture values, the visitors saw this as secondary, since accessibility was considered a more urgent need. If this were solved, other landscape values would be a nice bonus. Planners saw the multifunctional potential – to solve several issues at the same place, accessibility/human health, increased biodiversity and public awareness and willingness to pay for landscape values.

Concerning the shape of greenways, there were two major opinions from visitors: There should be no dead ends, since it was considered tedious to go back and forth the same route, and it should be possible to choose greenways of different lengths, to be able to adapt to your preferences for the moment. Visitors also saw variation as a desirable quality, e.g. to be able to walk beside a pasture or along a brook.

Landowners had a more practical view on how and where greenways could be placed. Fields should not be divided, if it could be avoided, but it could be acceptable if they were divided to fit the width of ploughs, harvesters and other equipment. Landowners with pastureland were reluctant to encourage visitors, since

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they had bad experiences with people behaving badly, e.g. by disposing rubbish that could be consumed by the animals, or frightening them in various ways. They were also reluctant to allow people close to their farm buildings for privacy and safety reasons.

Discussion

The direction for the research group in creating a design proposal, or a set of proposals, can be summarized like this: The main purpose is accessibility in the peri-urban agricultural areas. There should be sections that are wide enough for relatively undisturbed vegetation to develop, which would also favour animal wildlife, and allow for different types of simultaneous recreation. Some sections may be permanent, and would thus allow for shrubs and trees, while others may be more flexible, and only permit herbaceous vegetation.

Farmers need to be economically compensated, and should be encouraged to adopt the thought of *producing recreation*.

Some principles are thought to enhance the quality and experience of greenways: Interesting cultural or biological objects along the way may enhance the experience. The biological quality may be enhanced in different ways, through topology, width, etc. and greenways may thus function as habitats and/or corridors for plant and animal life. In some cases, greenways may even work as an aid for the farmer's access to his fields.

It seems obvious that every additional greenway is beneficial for biodiversity and recreation in highly productive agricultural land. Multifunctionality in narrow strips may be the best solution in a sustainability perspective, since they leave the fields practically intact, while still covering large areas, possibly linking to other green space in a green infrastructure and providing a backbone for agricultural biodiversity. The major part of Sweden consists of forest, but the southernmost region is as densely populated as other countries in northern Europe at the same time as it provides some the best agricultural fields of the country. Non-permanent greenways without trees or shrubs are very easy just to plough when and if the land is needed for food production.

Most visitors to greenways have emphasized accessibility and the need for additional greenways. Indirectly, this expresses a need to promote public health. Since people spend less time on everyday outdoor activities, peri-urban planning should aim at sustainable, everyday recreation close to residential areas.

Landowners produce what people and society want and greenways should be seen as producing recreation, public health, biodiversity, and landscape accessibility, including elements of cultural heritage and should be economically compensated for this, just as they are paid for producing food and other agricultural products.

The design of greenways should be adapted to local conditions, population densities, soil, and common recreation activities. They should be established as loops of different lengths to provide coherence and variety and thus appeal to more people. It would probably be necessary to create separate trails for equestrians and walkers, e.g. by a strip of vegetation that should remain mostly untouched by visitors and thus could improve conditions for the wildlife flora and fauna. Furthermore, bridleways may be established at a level below the trails for walking people to make a psychological difference.

We are aware that our results concerning users so far are based on informants that are already inclined to use greenways. We don't have information based on people that do not use them, which is a disadvantage. It would, of course, be very interesting to know what factors that could persuade these people to enter greenway networks.

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