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## **Accessible recreational areas? A pilot study on disabilities, experiences and the outdoors**

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### **Introduction**

Nature experiences and outdoor recreation have numerous positive outcomes with important physical and mental health benefits for the individual. In different international and Swedish legislative proposals and governmental letters this is evident; public health and well-being must be supported, as well as outdoor recreation, and nature experiences for everyone. Some groups in society are nevertheless excluded. Different physical disabilities can be particularly challenging due to physical barriers in nature. It can also be a challenge to get to nature areas because of, for example, incomplete information, long distances, transportation, or individual ability. Lack of accessibility is still a crucial obstacle for people with disabilities to participate in outdoor recreation (Burns et al., 2009).

A better understanding of the participation patterns and perceived constraints by people with disabilities is necessary if nature and outdoor recreation are going to become accessible and inclusive (Corazon et al., 2019). The project aims to understand factors that enable and hinder participation in outdoor activities for people with physical disabilities. In the context of Östersund municipality, Sweden, we discuss how people with physical disabilities perceive accessibility to nature, and analyse available information on websites. What prevents people from getting out into nature? What kind of barriers can be identified? What kind of information is needed and is it available?

### **Method**

This is a pilot study with a mixed-methods approach, using semi-structured interviews as its main data collection, followed by an analysis of websites and field observations. Initially, six interviews were conducted in October 2020-May 2021 with people with physical disabilities. The interviewees were identified through local disability associations and were contacted either by email or telephone. The interviews lasted approximately 1–1,5 hours, and were recorded, transcribed and anonymised. Questions included experiences and activities in the outdoors, their experiences of accessibility, safety and information. Follow-up questions were used, often leading to an unstructured dialogue where issues and anecdotes emerged.

Five websites were analysed: Östersund municipality, Jämtland county administration board, Jämtland Härjedalen Tourism (JHT), the Accessible database, and Naturkartan.se (a digital visit guide to nature areas). The focus was to identify information available in terms of outdoor recreation. In addition, 18 place observations were carried out in Östersund municipality in June-July 2019 and 2020. These areas - nature reserves and non-protected nature areas - were selected based on website information and the researchers' local knowledge. Factors such as terrain, public transportations, facilities and the outdoor opportunities in general were considered. An observation took 1-3 hours and included field notes and photo documentation.

## Results

The interviewed spend a lot of time in the nearby nature; it is safer and takes less energy without disappointments. The need for assistance to get out into nature is in many cases clear; people with disabilities are not always independent or autonomous. Maja, a woman in her 40s and nearly blind, says: *“One limitation is to get to nature areas by car or bus, it becomes a project too big; I rarely go alone, it is with my husband and children. I have the right to a travel service but it is difficult, it is expensive and not obvious to find the way to nature.”* Transport options are important, as well as to actually being able to get from the parking lot to the nature area. There is an obvious lack of understanding of the whole chain of accessibility; to get from A to B. Daniel uses a wheelchair due to an accident and he describes: *“Often it is the last meters that becomes a problem. I never get all the way... we saw the water, but we had to sit in the car and eat. ... I feel that it is the final part that goes wrong.”* However, motorized outdoor activities (e.g. quad bike, moped or snowmobile) make nature more accessible, according to some of the interviewed.

Mainly the interviewed get information about various nature areas for outdoor recreation from other people. Interviewees state that information is very important for daring to visit places, especially locations where you have not been before. It is crucial that detailed information is available on websites with images of the nature area as well. Information they considered of relevance was about the terrain, distances, accessible toilets, and public transports. The lack of adapted toilets is something that all interviewees highlight as a problem when they visit nature. Simple practical adjustments but also information would make nature more accessible. For the interviewees, on-site signs and information boards are appreciated - if the authentic feeling of the area remains.

Our overview of the websites shows that the degree of detailed information differs a lot, and that information is dispersed and not always easy to find. For example, the nature reserve Lillsjön is described to have an adapted footbridge, but the place observation showed that it had been closed for several years for restoration. Also the digital information regarding accessibility of adapted fireplaces and wind shields as well as facilities and equipment on site, need to be developed.

## Conclusions

This study reveals how important local nature is to people with physical disabilities and that basic adjustments are lacking (e.g. toilets) and holistic understandings of the experience. There is information about some accessible nature areas in Östersund municipality, but there is still a lack of basic and detailed information. The place observations show that certain nature areas are accessible, but that there is a gap between the municipality's strategy and reality. Based on this study, the conclusion is that Östersund municipality tries to be inclusive but further information needs to be developed in dialogue with people with disabilities.

Burns, N., Paterson, K., & Watson, N. (2009). An inclusive outdoors? Disabled people's experiences of countryside leisure services. *Leisure Studies*, 28(4), 403-417.

Corazon, S. S., Gramkov, M. C., Poulsen, D. V., Lygum, V. L., Zhang, G., & Stigsdotter, U. K. (2019). I would really like to visit the forest, but it is just too difficult: a qualitative study on mobility disability and green spaces. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 21(1).