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***WORKSHOP 4 - Citizenship and social participation in management water landscapes***

**SWEDEN: Cultural heritage of a small river in Örebro County**

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**Cultural heritage of a small river in Örebro County**

This is the story about a dam at a place called Järle, used and inhabited for at least 600 years in connection with iron production. Järle is one of many small sites in a complex landscape – the Noraskog bergslag, directly translated as Norawood mountain fellowship, characterised by iron production since the 12th century. The different components together tell a story about water, wood, iron and people. The treatment of this landscape these last few years is a vivid example of the almost always immanent conflicts of interest and how these conflicts should **not** be treated. There is light in the tunnel, but this it is anyhow a sad story.

**The “Noraskog bergslag” - an iron producing area since the 12th century**

In the centre of this landscape is the small wooden town of Nora. The radius around Nora is some 15-20 km. Nora received town privileges 1643, to help forward the iron production business. The year 1993 Nora wooden town, Pershyttan iron producing village and the rail-road (Sweden's first normal gauge railroad) received the Europa Nostra prize. Nora municipality has 10,700 inhabitants (about 6,000 of them live in the small town) and 17.3 inhabitants per square kilometre.

This particular landscape is situated in a hilly zone in the northern and western parts of the plains of Närke. According to the biological definition this is where “Norrland” (the northern-most part of Sweden) begins. The water starts as small streams and lakes – the highest around 200 m above sea level (the highest peaks are around 250 meters above sea level). The bigger lakes are situated around 120-80m above sea level.

From the 12th century onwards there were blast furnaces in basically all of these small streams. Mining statutes, were promulgated by the King for the Western Mountain in Närke 1340, the oldest preserved statutes in Sweden today. “Noraskog bergslag” is probably the northern part of this Western Mountain. 1539 the King Gustav Vasa counted on 47 taxpaying ”hyttor” in Noraskog.

These furnaces were built and used by “bergsmän” (mountain man/miner) who built farms and lived in the vicinity of the furnaces. Before these miners, this was forest without farmers. These people extracted iron ore locally, made charcoal and finally pig iron in blast furnaces. The whole family was involved in the different activities spread across the year. They were free farmers and skilled craftsmen who payed taxes to the King, as he was considered the owner of Sweden’s natural resources. Pershyttan, outside Nora, is one good example, today protected as a culture reserve. The surroundings are peppered with iron ore mines and slag heaps. Big, beautiful farmhouses belonging to the “bergsmän” are scattered in between. Today this is a very inviting and green area but it was once bare and black.

Some of these “bergsmän” became quite wealthy, building big homes and furnishing them more in the style of a priest or nobleman. “Siggebohyttans bergsmansgård”, today owned by the museum, is from 1790. Built in wood, it is a two storey building, 40 meters long and with characteristic chimneys of cast iron. The Swedish economy relied on these “bergsmän” and their production for 800 to 900 years.

Järle is the last out-post of “Noraskog bergslag” as all the streams and lakes are now dewatered through Järle. In 1976 this place was protected as a nature reserve, taking into consideration both the historical culture and natural values. Järle received town privileges in 1642 but the state could not enforce the idea of building a new town and moving people already established in Nora and Lindesberg. Further downstream is Järle station from 1854, the first and oldest station building in Sweden. The importance of this area for Swedish history cannot be overestimated.

Following the water from Nora via Järle, through Lake Mälaren, the Baltic Sea and to the North Atlantic, the iron was exported to markets throughout Europe, from the Middle Ages onwards.

### **The European Union Water Framework Directive – a destructive force in the wrong hands**

The European Union Water Framework Directive has been a destructive force in Sweden in recent years – not the directive in itself, but its interpretation and implementation. Court decisions made local people feel they were unjustly treated when the traditional law was overruled. A disturbed power balance gave power to national and regional authorities, but not to the municipal level. It gave power only to environmentalists, and not to heritage managers. Regional heritage management was under-financed and regional environment management over-financed, resulting in the environmentalists having both the initiative and all the resources. At first they took protection behind the directive claiming that it was the European Union which wanted to remove all the dams. Then they claimed the dams had to be torn out to protect a red-listed species, for example the freshwater pearl mussel

(*Margaritifera margaritifera*) that depends on migrating fish for its reproduction. Others claimed that there were un-holy alliances between civil servant activists, anglers and stream-savers behind the many orchestrated efforts to the remove dams. Civil servants being able to count sticks, and appear thrifty, in the monitoring systems of New Public Management.

As a matter of fact no landscape perspective or strategy was presented. Ecosystem grooming was not paired with a historic dimension. The civil servants on the environmental side seem to have been picking easy targets, sites owned by the Swedish state or by small, single owners without the means to object. Information meetings were disguised as open discussions, whereas the true objective was to convince stakeholders that the authorities were doing the *only possible* and also the *only right* thing. In contrast to these beliefs, researchers say both the scientific support and monitoring systems are lacking.

Consultants acted as middlemen between people and the real decision-makers, making the power of the state even more distant and diffuse, and seemingly completely uninterested in local stakeholders. This made owners angry, and sometimes they even threatened in a completely unacceptable way. The civil servants were uncomprehending: we who are the good guys, how can you accuse us of wrongdoing? Sometimes they were scared, and not without reason, although no-one has to date been physically abused. Other stakeholders feel sad as their interests and needs are neglected. If you change a place completely and turn it into a place solely of nature, interesting to anglers first and foremost, then it is not so easy to adjust if you have built a life and a living on the culture of historical values.

### **The actions and the role of Örebro County Museum**

Örebro county museum is the oldest provincial museum in Sweden. The town's original historical society was founded and financed in 1856 by the town's citizens. Today the museum is an independent foundation, financed by regional authorities. The regional history society is one of its founders.

Our interest in the removal of dams started in 2016 with a meeting arranged in Järle. It was supposed to be an open discussion, but it soon became obvious that it was already decided that the dam had to go. It was natural for us to team up with the Regional Historical Society (RHS). The RHS in Örebro has around 16,000 members organised in more than 70 local historical societies. In January 2017 we wrote a critical debate article in the regional newspaper citing Järle as a negative, deterring example. Our plaque of silver, awarded to citizens engaged in taking care of their heritage, was the given to a man for his work with the mill in Järle. Later we organised an open conference together with the RHS and in December that year we had a follow-up conference. In 2018 we published two debate articles, one in a national magazine and the other in a regional newspaper.

We have also attended meetings, written answers to different authorities at different levels, given interviews and had many telephone conversations with owners and stake holders.

In 2018 we started raising finances for a film that is now in production. Owners, stakeholders, researchers, authorities, from different sides, and with different views, have been interviewed to give a full picture of this complex matter and the conflicting interests.

The aim of the museum has been to lend an ear to those feeling unheard, to give a voice to those feeling silenced or muffled and to offer visibility to those feeling unseen and in general to “the other side”. We have been a platform for opinions and common questions. This has helped create a feeling that it is

possible to fight back and to influence politicians. I believe we have not been imperative in directly influencing the politicians. This is all thanks to owners, neighbours and local societies, but the museum engaging people in the issue of the removal of dams, did, I believe give some citizens back their confidence. We also suggested new arguments and showed that some nature conservationist arguments were either wrong or false.

### **Challenges and conflicts**

It is seldom only one side to blame and even this time I believe there have been mistakes on both sides. Heritage managers have focussed on the wrong point of entry. The first step is not the inventory of all single dams and other remains but, instead, a synthesis at landscape level, in this case naturally the water catchment basin, and the history of the chosen landscape. Then inventories of specific places can be made, if necessary. However I am convinced such a place as Järle would have emerged as an essential part of this cultural historical “ecosystem” without inventories.

Many, or even most, environmentalists seem to lack a sense of history. It is as if nature has no past. I am convinced they are fully aware of the history of nature but somehow they tend to forget this when it is convenient. In this particular case “customary law” was treated as something old and obsolete that exists in other countries with indigenous people and not in a modern country with a homogenous people such as Sweden (and that is not true, by the way). Secondly, in the past “people did not manage the fish” – that is of course rubbish. Those taking care of dams and water knew perfectly well that at times fish had to be let through the dams, or there would be dire consequences. There is even a name for this: the “kungsfåran” (directly translates as the King’s part of a stream).

Dealing with restoration without a proper idea of the concept of restoration is dangerous. Is it even possible to go back to something original? Original – what is the original time? Nature is not constant but it is treated as obvious and simple by civil servants who do not have appropriate training. Tens of millions of Swedish Krone have been spent on transporting gravel and blocks to small streams, operations financed by “Good environmental choice” a label owned by the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation. What consequences might arise after a restoration? This summer local people in Örebro County claimed that restored streams dried out and as a result the pearl mussels died.

It is the city that sets the agenda and the overwhelming majority of the population live in cities today, and thus the rift between countryside and city is widening. The majority of people and politicians are convinced that removing dams is a good and noble thing. They have not heard the other side and besides, they argue, that other side is not worthy of listening to because those who live in rural areas are backwards by definition.

Finally I think *New public management* is to blame. To count removed dams is easy. To count effects of measures against acidification, wood fertilising, deforestation etc. is more difficult. If you are smart and want to get more credit and more money, what would you choose to do?

### **How does this story end?**

In Sweden the European Landscape Convention has not been put to work by the environmentalists. The environmentalists claim they cannot work with the Convention because it is based on people and “experiences”. My firm belief is that if the Convention had gained a proper foothold among the nature

conservationists we would have had a different process including stakeholders of all kinds being treated more equally.

In 2016 the land and environment high court decided that customary law did not apply for dams, and as a consequence the owners had to seek permits. The angling association rejoiced – many hundreds of old watermills scattered around Sweden in one stroke lacked adequate permits. Some county administrative boards now gave owners offers they could not refuse: either pay for a permit that you might not get, and possibly also for restoration costs or give up now and we will pay for the dam removal and restoration of the stream.

This was suddenly a fully legal way of acting, but it caused a lot of bad blood. In my opinion, claiming the end justifies the means is always a dangerous route because it usually means one person is in a power position and the other powerless. This causes strong emotions of injustice with lasting distrust between people and authorities. A strong trend in large parts of the world of today is “the powerless” striking back politically. Protesting against the elite is more important than protecting the usual economic and social interests of the group. Environmentalists and heritage managers belong to the elite in the eye of ordinary people.

This year finally a new law came into function. It gives customary law a legal status comparable to a permission. In January 2019 the same high court ruled in a case that customary law applies. So now local people rejoice. It would have been better if there had not been this conflict at all.

However Järle seems to be doomed. The national authorities, both heritage and environment, seem to be blinded by prestige. Doing the right thing and admitting to bad judgement might be painful for a moment, but in the long run it builds trust in authorities. Järle has been listed and owned by the Swedish state since 1976, and therefore not honouring that decision and promise to save it for all future is a sinister thing. Furthermore, not being able to admit that Järle is a vital place for the important story of the close connection between iron production and the Swedish state is simply incomprehensible.

The moral of this story is that power corrupts no matter how good the cause. Restoring streams is a good cause and environmentalists involved in this are inspired by saving nature. Their main problem seem to be the feeling that they can *only* do good, and that they are the only ones that *can* do good. But good and evil live next door, and we must keep to the narrow road because it is it that leads to life. This of course goes for heritage managers and civil servants in general as well. No one is immune.

I hope this sad story will end in a moment of reflection and learning for the future. I hope the European Landscape Convention will be revitalised and used as inspiration for enhanced social participation by both environmentalist and heritage managers.