

# Bike trails spread throughout a previously roadless Norrland

Photo: Ernst Manker, 1938. The Nordic Museum



◀ One of the aims with the bike trails was to benefit residents and the trails improved the social lives of those who had previously been without roads. When motor vehicles became more common, the bike trails were replaced with forest roads.

The bike trail between Klemmetsnäs and Treskifte in Arvidsjaur Parish, Norrbotten. Cycling we see a girl from the crown lands of Stensund.

The beginning of the 1900s saw the start of the establishment of bike trails in northern Sweden due to the great need for a transport network. These bike trails were intended for pedestrians, motorcycles, pedal bikes, livestock and carts. Domänverket, the former Swedish Forest Service, was responsible for most of the bike trails as they made it easier for civil servants and forest workers to get around the forests. The bike trails were often built as public works projects, a way to help people in areas with high unemployment.

## Background

Before this initiative, there were few roads in northern Sweden, which meant that it was mainly only in the winter when the ground was frozen that heavier loads could be transported, using reindeer or horse-drawn sleds. It was also faster to ski in the winter than to walk forest trails in the summer. The rural population of northern Sweden was isolated and had a great need for access roads from their homes to larger roads. A transport network would improve the standard of living. Domänverket, the former Swedish Forest Service, started building bike trails on state lands at the beginning of the 1900s to enable its employees to more easily access state forestlands. Bike trail construction was accelerated in the 1920s.

The reason for building bike trails rather than proper roads was quite simply economics – they were cheaper to build. Moreover, cars were uncommon at

the beginning of the 1900s. Building a basic road cost about four Swedish crowns per metre, while a narrow bike trail cost only one Swedish crown per metre.

## What does a bike trail look like?

The bike trails were about one metre wide and were intended for pedestrians, motorbikes and pedal bikes. Since cart wheels ruined the narrower trails, there were also wider trails, one-and-a-half metres wide, for carts and livestock. In Arvidsjaur, some bike trails were made less than one metre wide to prevent carts from using them. Today, you can still recognise a bike trail by the ditches found on either side. Furthermore, you will often see depressions along the sides of the trails where material for the causeway was excavated.

## Domänverket built most bike trails

Domänverket was responsible for building most of the bike trails and only a small share were established

Photo: P. Wallerström 1928. Historical forest image archive, SLU



▲ A cart with a roller, designed especially for bike trail construction work. The roller could be attached to the cart wheels and used to compact the bike trail surface.

by community forests, log driving associations and forestry companies. Domänverket had a keen interest in a larger transport network because it would make it easier for civil servants to prevent poaching, visit logging sites and mark timber. Moreover, forest workers could more easily get to and from work and transport any necessary equipment. This meant that forest work could be conducted throughout the year rather than only in the winter.

### Public works projects

To help the unemployed, the Swedish state's Unemployment Commission funded public works projects during the depression following World War I. The construction of bike trails was a form of public works project that could be planned for areas with high unemployment.

### Societal benefits

One of the reasons for building the bike trails was that they would enable more people to participate in the community, which the authorities believed would benefit all of society. Shorter journey times between work and home enabled forest workers to spend more time participating in culture, clubs and societies, local politics and church.

The bike trails were also used by professionals such as midwives, nurses, teachers and veterinarians. Goods were more easily transported by bike than by hand. The trails were also used to travel to areas where berries could be picked, which was important as both a food source and household income.

### Preventing forest fires

The bike trails made it easier to attend to forest fires so that they could be extinguished as quickly as possible.

Additionally, the trails would act as narrow fire roads, which could prevent some ground fires from spreading.

Increased interest in bike trails in the early 1940s was down to the fear of incendiary bombs during World War II.

### Wages

The wages earned by the workers who built the bike trails varied. Since the wages paid by the Unemployment Commission were not permitted to exceed those paid for privately commissioned bike trails, the wages were sometimes so low that they barely covered food costs. In other cases, the work could be well paid, especially if many bridges and culverts needed to be built, which paid extra.

The bike trails were put out to tender and the crew offering to do the work for the lowest wages was given the job. One recommendation was that each crew should have five members and access to a horse. Many young people were involved in this construction work. The workers had to have their own tools to build the bike trails, and these included mattocks, pickaxes, digging bars and shovels.

### Instructions and work descriptions

Following a 1937 government inquiry, detailed instructions and work descriptions were drawn up on how the bike trails were to be built, as this made it easier to check whether the trails were properly constructed. The State Forest Officials and workers began by staking out where the trail was to be laid by measuring and placing stakes every fifty meters.



Sometimes, they'd stake out a kilometre that was as straight as an arrow and you weren't allowed to stray. If there was a large pine or spruce in the middle of the trail, you weren't allowed to go round it, you had to clear it. Large rocks had to be drilled by hand, so as to make holes for explosives so you could blow them into pieces and then clear the debris. So you also needed someone who could make a drill bit.

**Bror-Erik Karlsson**

Bror-Erik Karlsson from Jokkmokk built a bike trail in his youth and in an interview explained that they were not allowed to deviate from the trail staked out by the crown forest keeper.

## Social

The bike trails made it easier to get to and from home, to a local dance or to the cinema. In an interview, Evert Nilsson spoke about how it felt when he got his first bike.

“I was actually more overjoyed when I got my first bike than when I bought my first car. Much, much more. It made life so easy! From home to the nearest cinema in Murjek was 29 km and we could ride there and back. I remember it so well, being so happy about getting a bike.”

The bike trails made life easier for very many people and it was not unusual for people to bike 50–100 km a day.



Photo: Anna-Maria Rautio 2009

▲ Throughout the forests of Norrland, you can still find stretches of serviceable bike trails. They offer a wonderful way of getting around in the forest. The bike trail between Harsprånget and Aspudden at crown park Ananasse in Norrbotten.



Photo: P. Wallerström 1928. Historical forest image archive, SLU

▲ A State Forest Official with his bike beside a newly laid bike trail.

## Forest roads

The bike trails were replaced with forest roads in the 1950s and 60s, as cars became increasingly common. In some cases, the roads were built over the bike trails, but in other cases the trails simply fell into disuse.

Often, only parts of the overgrown bike trails remain today.

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## visa skogen

Project PINUS, a project for innovative experiences in managed forests, aims to gather the tourism industry, the forest industry and forestry academia in efforts to create opportunities for tourism in managed forests. Project PINUS began in August 2016 and runs until November 2019. The Museum of Forestry in Lycksele is the project owner.