Ecoparks – nature conservation with a landscape approach

Photo: Malin Weiland, Sveaskog's image bank

◄ Missutjärn in Skatan Ecopark, a geological kettle typical of this ecopark.

Ecoparks are large continous landscapes with high conservation values and high ecological ambitions. The parks have an average size of approximately 5,000 hectares (50 square kilometres) and each has a unique ecological character. In these ecoparks, where ecology takes precedence over commercial interests, many threatened species can live and flourish.

Background

Sveaskog is Sweden's largest forest company and owns about 14% of the forestland in Sweden. The company is unique in that it is wholly owned by the Swedish state and all profits from its forestry operations are invested in Sweden's welfare state. Sveaskog owns forestlands throughout most of Sweden and has around 800 employees, working with everything from cultivating new seedlings to the final logging of fully grown forest.

In 2002, the Board of Directors of Sveaskog adopted a new environmental policy which, among other things, ensures that 20 percent of the productive forestland in each forest region is earmarked for nature conservation and protection. One quarter of this 20 percent was to be transformed into so-called ecoparks, larger continous landscapes of extensive ecological importance. A total of 36 landscapes were selected and the work to establish the ecoparks took more than a decade, by the end of which there were in fact 37 ecoparks.

Sveaskog's ecoparks – to benefit nature and people

Many researchers claim that there has been a shortage of more extensive landscapes with a high share of biologically valuable forest. Expansive natural environments with a large share of forestland are important if woodpeckers, birds of prey and many other species are to thrive. This is why Sveaskog created its ecoparks, to complement other types of protected forests and land areas, such as nature reserves and national parks.

An ecopark is a larger continous landscape of extensive ecological importance. According to Sveaskog's definition, an ecopark should cover at least 10 square kilometres, although they vary in size from 10 to 140 square kilometres. Sveaskog has high environmental ambitions for these parks. At least half of the productive forestland is used for nature conservation.

A limited amount of forestry is conducted in most ecoparks, but is always adapted to the particular natural and cultural values of the ecopark. Moreo-

ver, this most often entails a greater degree of nature conservation compared to logging conducted outside the ecoparks. The final balance between nature conservation and production is determined by the current natural and cultural values found in each ecopark, as well as by the opportunities to restore high conservation values.

The work to create an ecopark begins with inventorying the proposed area, visiting all forest stocks and conducting a so-called nature conservation assessment. This entails inventorying natural values, such as the presence of old trees, deadwood, aquatic environments, history and so on. A proposal is made for how to manage the forest stocks, that is, whether each is to be used for forest production or conservation purposes.

Once the inventory is complete, the results are compiled in a landscape analysis and a management plan is drawn up for the ecopark in consultation with the Swedish Forest Agency and the concerned county administrative board. A 50-year nature conservation agreement is entered into with the Swedish Forest Agency and, following a festive inauguration, the adopted management plan is implemented to create a functional forest landscape with ecological values outweighing economic values.

Nature conservation measures

Ecopark status offers not only protection, but also the restoration of natural values and the large-scale transformation of the landscape. Nature conservation measures are implemented in some of the forests earmarked for nature conservation. This entails, for example, the controlled burning and flooding of forests, logging coniferous forests to favour new deciduous forest growth and, in some cases, reintroducing animals on old grazing grounds.

For example, work is under way to increase the share of deciduous trees in the ecoparks. Old deciduous forest has become a scarcity in Sweden and many of the species currently under threat are dependent on such woodlands. The clearing of coniferous trees helps create large areas of deciduous forest every year. In the space of just one year, a dense mixed forest dominated by young spruce trees can become a bright and open birch forest, which is attractive to animals, plants and people.

Another method to actively restore old natural values is to fill old ditches. This helps restore old wetlands, to which countless fauna, from waders to salamanders and dragonflies, soon return.

The ecoparks are also subjected to controlled burning, which is used to preserve fire-dependent species such as the black fire beetle and the hardy geranium. Forest fires have been part of the coniferous forest ecosystem for so long that many forest species have adapted to them. Since humans learned to stop forest fires at the end of the 1700s, these animals and plants have had difficulty surviving. They are, however, experts at finding the few fires that still burn, and a wide variety of insects make their way to the burned area while the embers are still smouldering.

Photo: Lars-Göran Ek, Sveaskog's image bank

▲ **Tjadnes-Nimtek Ecopark's virgin forests.**

A few selected ecoparks

Sveaskog's 37 ecoparks are spread throughout Sweden. The southernmost ecopark is also the smallest, Raslången. It straddles the border between Skåne and Blekinge and covers 1,300 hectares. The northernmost ecopark is Naakajärvi, located north of Tärendö in Norrbotten. The most recent addition, Öjesjöbrännan Ecopark, was created from Sveaskog's forests around Sala that burned in the 2014 Västmanland Wildfire.

Tjadnes-Nimtek

Sveaskog's largest ecopark is Tjadnes-Nimtek, which is situated between Arjeplog and Arvidsjaur. This park, which was inaugurated in 2012, covers 22,500 hectares of magnificent wilderness spread over a landscape of low fells. You can wander far without seeing a single stump. However, although the area may seem completely untouched by humans, there are plenty of Sami cultural relics.

> Tjadnes-Nimtek offers an idea of what the forests of Lapland looked like a thousand years ago.

Tjadnes-Nimtek offers an idea of what the forests of Lapland looked like a thousand years ago. The spruce trees grow slowly, with time for long beard lichen to form. When they finally fall, they can lie in the surrounding moss for a long time, providing food and habitats for countless fungi, insects and birds. Here golden eagles can find large old pines able to support their nests, and otters can find pristine waters full of fish.

Photo: Anders Palmén, Sveaskog's image bank

▲ **Skatan Ecopark.**

You need not go far to find traces of bears, such as demolished ant hills, claw-marked dry trees and old dens. Wolverine and lynx are also found in the forests. Tjadnes-Nimtek has been Sami land since time immemorial and remains an important place for grazing reindeer. Here you can see an old restored Sami summer camp, in the midst of the roadless old-growth forest. Those with sharp eyes can find more traces of old Sami activities, such as scars after the old Sami tradition of peeling inner bark, as a food resource, from pine trees.

Skatan

Between Hällnäs and Åmsele is Skatan Ecopark, some 7,300 hectares dominated by pine forest. The ice sheet, which began melting 8,000 years ago, shaped the landscape of Skatan Ecopark. The name Skatan, from the Swedish for headland, is due to the spits of land seen in the park's lakes, formed by the ice sheet.

The hilly landscape offers easy access and interesting geology. The ecopark is crossed by the sixty-kilometre long Isälvsleden, a popular hiking trail. The trail, which you can walk or bike, offers many beautiful places to stop and rest. Ecopark Skatan's sparse pine forests grow in sandy soil enriched by sediment from the proglacial river. The areas of dry ground have seen many wildfires, and visible fire scars are common.

Many rare beetles thrive in the sunlit pine forests. Their presence is one of the reasons why the area was designated an ecopark.

Jovan

In inland Västerbotten, fifty kilometres southeast of Storuman, the steep mountains and deep forests of Jovan Ecopark unfurl. The spruce trees growing on the mountain tops are few and far between, with twisted, windswept crowns. From here you can enjoy panoramic views of a wilderness of old-growth forests and mires, where bears hibernate and black grouse perform their mating. The deciduous-dominated and diverse forests are popular with many of the species that have become rare in Swedish forest landscapes today. They are also popular for rambling, fishing and berry picking.

For those keen to explore, there are traces of log driving, the ice age, wildfires and predator claws. Here you will find pine forests shaped by wildfires, high-altitude, slow-grown spruce, wetland forests full of hanging lichen, mires with stands of old pine, and streams and small lakes lined with deciduous forest.

The varied nature and mature forest provide habitats for many animals and plants. There is no end to the nature waiting to be explored here. Those with sharp eyes can find traces of the ice age, log driving, trapping pits, forest fires and the black grouse who just left their pine trees.

Photo: Leif Öster, Sveaskog's image bank

▲ **The stone bench that was unveiled when Jovan Ecopark was inaugurated is beautifully situated by the waters of Jåvanbäcken.**

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.

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