

Governance innovation cases in coastal tourism

Outdoor tourism facilities in forests

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Mountainbike tracks are a luxury and a challenge

Photo: Hvidkilde Gods

Outdoor tourism facilities in forests

Of the total space in Denmark, 14.3% is covered by forests. In a small country such as Denmark, forests are considered to be a scarce resource. As much as possible, forests of all kinds should be protected from transfer to other utilizations, such as agriculture, infrastructure, and urban development. Over the past decades, shifting governments have launched measures to guard the existing forests from overexploitation or changes to other land use purposes. Incentives are also provided to expand the land coverage of forests. Reasons for such measures are several. Environmental objectives are critical, as forests better than arable land can protect fresh water resources. Forests in general and some types of forests in particular are found to contribute to a region's biodiversity. Recreational and aesthetic benefits for citizens and visitors are increasingly in focus, and the variety of landscapes and trees can accommodate for many types of leisure experiences and relaxation.

The Forest Act

The Forest Act governs the use and development of forests. It is a fairly restrictive act. The transformation of forests to other purposes can, as a general rule, not take place. The owners - public as well as private - are obliged to undertake a considerate and professional forestry practice to ensure both diversity and resilience. These protective measures are critical, as are the needs of the forest business to make a profit out of traditional forest products and productions.

The forestry and timber businesses are the main subjects of regulation in the Forest Act. However, in recent years, recreational activities have become more commonplace as part of the forest business portfolio, and tourism and leisure contribute to the forest business alongside the core activities related to traditional forestry. Recreational hunting is commonplace, but owners of forests also want

to develop leisure business concepts in, for example, biking, riding, climbing, foraging, orienteering, etc.

The growth of recreational business within and in connection to forests has had the effect of increasing domestic and touristic demand. Analyses of tourists' preferences show that walking and biking are among their favorite activities during holidays (Danmarks Naturfredningsforening, 2016; VisitDenmark, 2016). For Danish citizens, forests are often the target for day trips with friends and family, and forests accommodate for organized activities in special interest groups (Friluftsrådet, 2014).

A forest owner will need to obtain permission from the environmental authorities to establish recreational facilities. Such facilities could include playgrounds, shelters and huts, lookout towers, climbing towers, bird watching towers, picnic and campfire sites, artistic installations, bathing jetties, and shooting ranges. The establishment of tracks and trails for mountain biking or skiing also require permission, particularly if they imply future changes in terrain in connection with the construction or use. The assessment of the applications for permission will assess the specific place in detail.

The administration of the act is particularly focused on the fact that new facilities should be modest in size and design, and should allow the major appearance and intrinsic sense of the forest environment to rule. For the same reason, environmental authorities are not likely to permit an agglomeration of facilities, and they will undertake investigations of whether the proposed facilities could feasibly be established in the vicinity of the forest rather than inside the forest.

The obtaining of permission requires not only a good and well-adapted project, but also a significant patience. All aspects of the project can be expected to come under discussion and testing, not the least the design of any physical installations, however small. This has led to some criticism from the owners, but it is most often welcomed by nature organizations.

Mountain biking as a touristic niche in coastal areas

Mountain biking is an increasingly popular sport both for individual tours and as a group and sports competitive activity in more organized formats. In Denmark, mountain biking opportunities attract both domestic and international tourists, based on the fact that Danish forests are more openly accessible than those in many other countries. Bikers are allowed to use already established mudroads and tracks. They are not permitted to go outside tracks or into animal tracks, and they cannot establish their own tracks. However, in many parts of the country, special areas and tracks have been dedicated to mountain bikers, not the least in publicly owned forests. Hence, an attractive infrastructure for mountain bikers is emerging using both tracks and trails, as well as supporting and service facilities such as accommodations, training tracks, renting of bikes, etc. Several regions in Denmark are competing to become mountain bike destinations.

A dilemma with the mountain bikers for the Hvidkilde Estate on the Funen Island is that it is difficult to cover costs and generate an economic income from mountain biking, as the entry to the forest cannot be priced and controlled effectively. Quite some illegal mountain biking takes place, with negative consequences for land erosion and destruction of traditional forestry opportunities. There might also be inconveniences for other users, such as walkers and riders.



Access to forests is free, but multifunctional use demands mutual understanding

Photo: Anne-Mette Hjalager.

Hvidkilde Estate owns 1,500 hectares of forest in a hilly landscape. A non-profit association called the Mountain Bike Track Association was created with the purpose of establishing a 15 kilometer-long track in the forest. The initiative was undertaken in cooperation between the estate, a recreational development organization, municipalities, and the local community. Members of the association are individual bikers.

The association as a governance innovation

The purpose of the Mountain Bike Track Association is to establish and maintain the trail, and to promote a range of mountain biking activities for locals as well as visitors. Anyone who purchases an annual or 3-day pass to the track automatically becomes a member. The trail association is supplemented by a trail guild, whose members are more involved in volunteer work. So-called trail-builders undertake tasks with the expansion of the trails, and trail-bosses assist with monitoring and management. The guild is, in practice, a Facebook group with 500 members, although not all the group members are active in practical tasks.

When Hvidkilde Estate collaborates in this way with a voluntary association, the control, the cash flow, and the responsibility shift hands from the estate to the association. The contract has a duration of ten years. Governance structures are matters of innovation. In greater detail, the processing of the planning and implementation has taken place with the following ingredients.

“Naturturisme,” which is an outdoor development organization owned by the local municipalities, innovated the partnership model and ensured the process. The partnership model implies that the estate rents the forest to the Mountain Bike Track Association. Formally, the Mountain Bike Track Association applies for external funding for the establishment of the track and sponsorships. In this context, it is important to understand that some of the principal funding sources are available for NGOs only, and the private estate cannot apply. The association has the task and role to ensure that the area is properly kept, maintained, and expanded.

The benefit for Hvidkilde Estate is, as indicated, that a maintenance and control problem is shifted to other hands, and that the land rent creates an income of 150,000 DKK annually for a period of 10 years. The advantage for local mountain bikers and a variety of MB clubs is the increased quality of trail and exclusive access. A community capacity building in the local area has emerged as an important side-effect of the association's responsibility with the management of the trail. In addition, an income is generated for the association through sales of trail passes to locals and tourists.

The touristic element is underway, and expanding. After some discussion in the association, a focus is emerging in terms of welcoming those who purchase 3-day passes, with the hope that people will stay in the region for a longer period of time. During the first year, 500 3-day passes were sold. All incomes to the association are allocated to expansion and maintenance. Funds are also used for social activities for those volunteers who spend much time and effort working for the trail.

This innovation case illustrates that the governance innovation in coastal tourism can prevent and mitigate potential conflict and, at the same time, create value for a number of actors in a collaborative partnership and beyond. Partnership and dialog is becoming more open and concerns are expressed for all to understand (Wilkes-Allemann et al., 2017). This case also demonstrates that partnerships involve actors from different sectors, and recognizes that they have different resources and face different institutional obligations and obstacles. A re-composition in a new institutional setup releases the resources and energies, but it creates also new dependencies.

Controversies emerged initially in the process with the organization "Friluftsrådet," an organization with a strong plea for open and unrestricted access to nature areas. The Hvidkilde estate owner finds the projects like this will only progress well, if it finds compromises and ways to accommodate for several interests because of a very open atmosphere, a continuous dialog, and a great deal of patience. He finds that further developments are likely to happen in terms of the expansion of outdoor facilities, including touristic activities with mountain biking as an opportunity. A major sports event is planned to take place in the region, and it is important in this connection also, and the local actors will contribute in showing the full range of sports facilities and potentials to many new guests.

Further reading and viewing

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<http://skovhuggeren.com/#hjem-section>

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