

Research Article

Why municipalities plan for outdoor recreation: a case study from the Swedish west coast

Oscar Jacobsson 

Department of Economy and Society, University of Gothenburg, Box 625, 405 30, Göteborg, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Spatial planning plays a crucial role in preserving both ecological values and areas for outdoor recreation. Historically, outdoor recreation has been central to Swedish public health planning, but research shows that its integration into spatial planning has weakened, particularly in Sweden's decentralized system. Instead, outdoor recreation is often framed as an economic asset, providing attractiveness and supporting development rather than public health.

As Swedish municipalities hold a planning monopoly, they play a key role in preserving recreational areas. This study examines how 11 municipalities on the Swedish west coast—a region facing great development, conservation, and recreation pressures—integrate outdoor recreation into their plans. A qualitative analysis of comprehensive plans, combined with a case study of a nature reserve planning process in Marstrand, reveals that the primary motivation for outdoor recreation is economic growth. Coastal municipalities aim to attract both tourists and year-round residents, whereas urban and commuting areas focus on providing attractive living environments to preserve the residential population under regional/national competition.

A key conclusion is that without formal incentives, the incorporation of outdoor recreation in spatial planning is primarily motivated by an economic rationale rather than as a public health strategy. This suggests that in decentralized systems where health planning is not mandated, outdoor recreation remains secondary to economic priorities.

1. Introduction

The objectives of outdoor recreation are complex and context dependent (Emmelin et al., 2010, 71ff). On an individual level, outdoor activities foster mental health and a deepened connection to nature, offering both physical exercise and a sense of adventure (Pietilä et al., 2015; Pomfret & Bramwell, 2016). Societally, outdoor recreation contributes to public health, enhances environmental awareness, and supports sectors such as tourism and hospitality (Beery, 2013; Colley et al., 2023; Highfill & Franks, 2019). In many regions, it is a valuable economic resource (Börger et al., 2021; Juutinen et al., 2022).

However, balancing outdoor recreation against competing interests poses challenges, especially when tourism pressure threatens nature values (e.g. Marion et al., 2016; Sumanapala & Wolf, 2019) or when outdoor recreation must compete with residential, infrastructure, and industrial development (Petersson-Forsberg, 2014, p. 43). Spatial planning is crucial for managing these trade-offs (Bjärstig et al., 2018; Grip & Blomqvist, 2021; Lester et al., 2013), which raises a key question: What weight is given to outdoor recreation in spatial planning?

Spatial planning approaches differ significantly by country. In Sweden, municipalities largely control land-use planning, unlike in many countries where national or regional entities exert more influence (Nadin et al., 2024). This decentralized context positions municipalities as important actors in shaping and prioritizing outdoor recreational areas within broader development agendas. Given the broader trend toward decentralization of spatial planning across Europe (Zonneveld & Stead, 2024), analyzing how Swedish municipalities integrate outdoor recreation into spatial planning is highly relevant to the wider European context.

This paper explores how Swedish municipalities incorporate outdoor recreation within spatial planning and analyses this incorporation in light of the logic underlying municipal decision-making, with a primary focus on achieving local growth under regional competition (Algotson, 2022; Andersén, 2020). An analysis of comprehensive plans (long-term land use strategies) from 11 coastal municipalities on the Swedish west coast is conducted through qualitative content analysis. While not juridically bound for implementation, comprehensive plans provide insight into how municipalities perceive their overall land-use goals and

E-mail address: oscar.jacobsson@geography.gu.se.

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the balance between different overarching land use interests. The Swedish west coast is a coastal region with high recreational value combined with high exploitation pressure and is characterized by both large urban and smaller rural municipalities with varying economic characteristics. This region was chosen as the study area since it illustrates the complex balance of land-use priorities in spatial planning.

To illustrate how long-term land use strategies are implemented in a decentralized context and how outdoor recreation may be considered in practical local land use decision-making by municipalities, a short case study of a reserve process aimed at preserving access to peri-urban nature on the Marstrand archipelago is also provided. This area was selected on the basis of recommendations from a conservation foundation as an example of a site where a conflict had occurred between municipal development plans and the establishment of a nature reserve for outdoor recreation. The archipelago is a popular tourism and outdoor recreation destination in the region, and the reserve process reveals the different tensions arising from handling intersecting land-use interests in such an area.

The three main questions addressed are as follows:

- In what contexts do municipal comprehensive plans from the Swedish West Coast include outdoor recreation?
- How is outdoor recreation considered in municipal planning practice, and why is it considered?
- What economic incentives most often motivate municipalities to include outdoor recreation in spatial planning, and how do these incentives vary on the basis of municipal characteristics?

2. Background

2.1. Previous research

The present paper contributes primarily to two strands of research. First, the paper connects to an ongoing discussion about the role of public health considerations in spatial planning by analyzing how outdoor recreation, to varying degrees, mediates this role in municipal Swedish contexts. Historically, both spatial planning and recreational planning have had strong ties to the promotion of public health (Grant et al., 2022; Hall & Page, 2014, pp. 315–18), but the integration of the two diminished in the 20th century, when planning focused more on aesthetic and technical aspects (Corburn, 2012). Today, there is extensive research on how public health can be supported by green space and green infrastructure (GI), both in itself and as a medium for recreation (Reyes-Riveros et al., 2021; Tzoulas et al., 2007). A recent paper (Sunding et al., 2024) analyzed the integration of public health and GI in Nordic comprehensive plans, revealing that this connection is often vaguely formulated and largely implicit, typically framed in general terms related to recreation.

This lack of specificity tends to result in the prioritization of economically driven land uses over health-promoting green spaces. Furthermore, unlike in Finland and Norway, in Sweden, municipalities lack formal obligations to address public health beyond social welfare and eldercare, relying instead on national-level regulations and instruments to guide public health considerations in spatial planning (Aguilar Borges et al., 2024). The present paper addresses this problem by analyzing how outdoor recreation spaces are planned and used in a decentralized context that lacks direct juridical incentives for considering public health in planning.

The second research problem pertains primarily to the Swedish context, with a focus on the treatment of outdoor recreation within municipal planning. Existing studies have examined how outdoor recreation is represented in municipal comprehensive plans and planning practices, indicating that while municipalities often express the importance of outdoor recreation, other interests, such as development, tend to take precedence (Ankre, 2019; Ankre et al., 2023; Petersson Forsberg, 2012; Petersson-Forsberg, 2014). Outdoor recreation is often taken for

granted, and municipal approaches to managing it vary widely. It is frequently seen as a resource for attractiveness and tourism rather than as an essential element of public health.

However, little research has focused on how the planning of outdoor recreation aligns with the municipal political economy, general municipal responsibilities, and the economic incentives that enable municipalities to fulfill their formal obligations. Although extensive literature on planning and regional competitiveness explores attractiveness, place marketing, and other municipal practices in both Swedish and international contexts (Andersén, 2020; Lucarelli & Heldt Cassel, 2020; Westholm, 2021; Öjehag-Pettersson, 2022), this literature has yet to focus on outdoor recreation planning, which has typically been viewed as an issue in itself or in relation to other land use interests. Addressing this gap could provide insights into how outdoor recreation planning fits within broader municipal strategies, including those related to economic and political incentives.

2.2. Outdoor recreation and spatial planning in Sweden

In Sweden, there is a history of providing and conserving recreational space tied to the development of the welfare state. The 'freedom to roam', formalized during the 1930s and 1940s as part of welfare state reforms, grants unrestricted access to nature (Sandell, 2011, pp. 25–26). The 1950 shoreline protection legislation, which limits exploitation within 100 m from a shoreline, aimed to secure public access to shorelines for recreational and public health purposes, particularly in peri-urban areas (Segrell, 1995, pp. 55–56). In the 1960s, spatial planning for everyday recreational space was prioritized, and universal access to diverse recreational environments for public health benefits was emphasized (Pries & Qviström, 2021).

In the 1980s and 1990s, Sweden shifted from a sport-for-all approach to urban green area provision to a state focus on green space and green structure as part of a landscape ecological mode of thinking (Qviström, 2022). During this period, the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency's (SEPA) responsibility for outdoor recreation ceased and resumed only in 2002, making recreational planning mainly a municipal activity (Petersson-Forsberg, 2014; Qviström, 2022).

In 2012, the Swedish government established a national policy for outdoor recreation with ten goals (Regeringskansliet, 2012). Some goals concerning public health and accessibility align with historical state interests, whereas others tied to peri-urban attractiveness, and regional growth more strongly reflect contemporary municipal growth strategies. While a recent evaluation reported limited progress toward these goals, the report stated that municipal spatial planning plays a crucial role and that increased incentives for protecting peri-urban nature, holistic planning in protected areas, and further integration of outdoor recreation in planning documents are needed (Naturvårdsverket, 2023).

Contemporary municipal spatial planning emphasizes the rhetorical importance of outdoor recreation, yet governing frameworks are often vague and overshadowed by competing interests such as exploitation. While legislation such as the 'freedom to roam' and shoreline protection seem effective, their interpretative nature leads to variable outcomes (Petersson-Forsberg, 2014). Studies reveal that despite municipalities acknowledging the importance of outdoor recreation, it is frequently taken for granted, particularly when recreation areas are exploited (Petersson Forsberg, 2012). In regions such as the Jämtland Mountains, planners often lack specific knowledge or experience with outdoor recreation planning, responsibility is unclear, and environmental effects are minimally considered in planning documents (Ankre et al., 2023). Despite this, outdoor recreation is frequently cited for its attractiveness and as a resource for tourism and residential development. Research thus often calls for the strengthening of outdoor recreation in spatial planning through changed legislation, increased actor collaboration, and further integration into municipal planning practices (Ankre, 2019; Ankre et al., 2023; Petersson-Forsberg, 2014; Stenseke et al., 2023; Stenseke & Hansen, 2014).

2.3. The Swedish municipality and striving for attractiveness

Swedish administration is divided into national, regional, and local levels. The national level is represented by the government and different government agencies, while regional county administrative boards (CABs) coordinate regional development with national laws and a regional council overseeing issues such as health care and public health. At the local level, municipalities are governed by elected councils and are legally required to provide welfare services such as education and social care, accounting for 79 % of municipal expenses on average, with other services such as business development and recreation being optional (SKR, 2021, pp. 2, 2023). Municipal income largely comes from local taxes (avg. 69 %) and government grants (avg. 21 %) (SKR, 2023), with economic growth – through rising incomes, population, or employment – expanding a municipality's capacity to deliver services (Fjertorp et al., 2012).

Swedish municipalities have exclusive control over spatial planning (SFS, 2010: 900), which is conducted through comprehensive and detailed plans. Comprehensive plans guide long-term land use but are not legally binding, whereas detailed plans provide binding land use regulations for specific areas. Spatial planning is overseen by government authorities to ensure alignment with national policies (Bjärstig et al., 2018), including designating areas for specific uses, such as national interest (e.g., for outdoor recreation, mining, wind farming, or military purposes), nature reserve, and cultural sites (Petersson-Forsberg, 2014). Citizen participation in Swedish comprehensive planning involves public consultations, where municipalities present draft plans; gather feedback through meetings, surveys, and digital platforms; and integrate public input before finalizing the plan. However, although municipalities generally comply with the legal requirements for public consultation, actual engagement from residents and local stakeholders tends to be limited (Bjärstig et al., 2018).

In recent years, municipal planning has increasingly focused on growth and competitiveness, with strategies to attract investment and residents by creating appealing environments (Andersén, 2020; Cars & Thune Hedström, 2006; Öjehag-Pettersson, 2022). This includes prioritizing economic growth and sustainability and sometimes reframing preservation efforts to support local growth goals (Andersén, 2020). Techniques such as place branding and marketing are common, as municipalities strive to increase their attractiveness to residents, businesses, and visitors (Lucarelli & Heldt Cassel, 2020; Niedomysl, 2004).

3. Method

This study uses two types of material to explore municipal planning and its relationship with outdoor recreation, thus capturing different dimensions of this process. The first material used is comprehensive plans, which provide insight into broader municipal planning tendencies and how outdoor recreation is prioritized relative to other municipal interests. These plans, while central to strategic spatial planning, are nonbinding documents that primarily serve as vision statements. They reflect how municipalities wish to frame their long-term spatial planning goals rather than the practical realities of implementation. Consequently, they offer a top-down perspective on municipal ideals rather than outcomes in practice.

A valid critique of such analyses is their susceptibility to biases, as comprehensive plans may emphasize aspirations that diverge from actual practice. Some studies attempt to address this limitation by supplementing plan analysis with interviews of planners (Ankre, 2019; Ankre et al., 2023; Petersson-Forsberg, 2014) or surveys directed at municipal officials (Bjärstig et al., 2018). However, interviews and surveys may also be biased; planners' perspectives are shaped by their roles and responsibilities within their organizations and may align with the formal guidelines governing their positions. Such limitations can obscure the broader institutional and contextual factors influencing planning outcomes.

To counteract these challenges, this study incorporates a second type of material: official written correspondence related to a specific planning process. This approach captures the more formal arguments, positions, and negotiations expressed over time, offering a clearer view of how planning goals are operationalized in practice. For this purpose, the study includes a case analysis of the Marstrand nature reserve formation process with the aim of preserving peri-urban recreational areas (2002–2017). This case exemplifies how planning goals and incentives articulated in comprehensive plans manifest in concrete planning practices. The Marstrand process involved protracted negotiations between stakeholders, including the municipality, the County Administrative Board (CAB), local organizations, and landowners, over competing priorities such as conservation, outdoor recreation and housing development.

The analysis of comprehensive plans was based on both inductive and deductive coding in NVivo 14 and covered current comprehensive plans from 11 coastal municipalities on the Swedish west coast with varying economic characteristics (Fig. 1, Table 1). Comprehensive plans were imported, and text masses (mostly paragraphs) mentioning 'outdoor recreation' (sw. *friluftsliv*) were extracted and coded in NVivo 14. An inductive coding approach was first applied, where all occurrences of outdoor recreation were identified on the basis of their contextual usage. This analysis informed the development of two thematic coding categories, which were subsequently applied deductively. The first category was structured around municipal responsibilities as defined by legal frameworks (see Table 2). The second encompassed broader themes related to outdoor recreation and spatial planning, drawing inspiration from the national goals for outdoor recreation, which, as previously

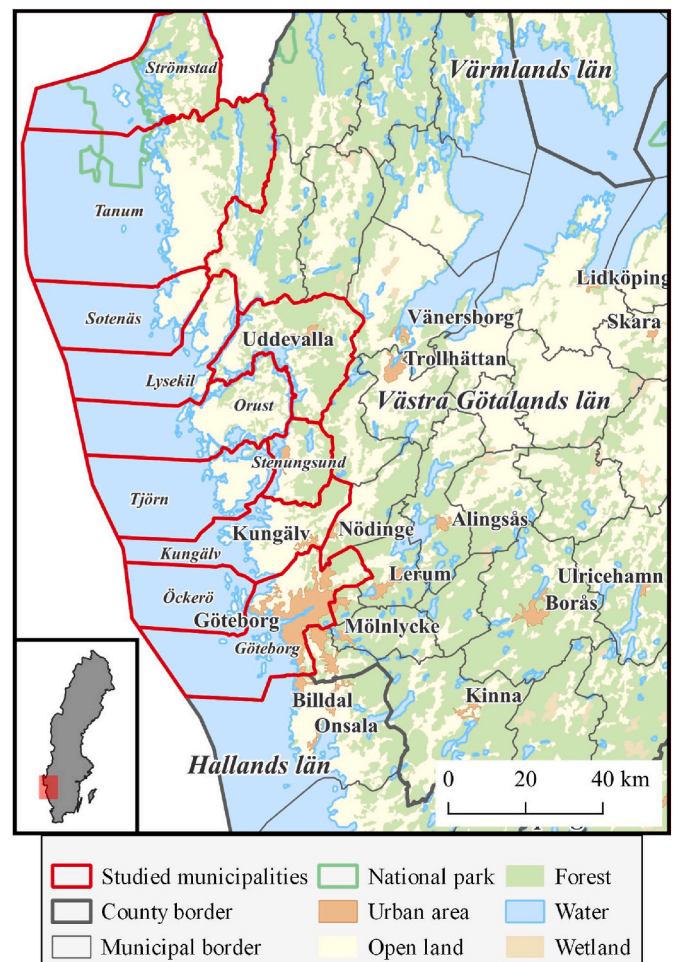


Fig. 1. Overview map of the studied municipalities.

Table 1

Basic information on the studied municipalities, based on data from SKR and SCB. The municipality type is based on a statistical typology from SKR, 2023. Of special interest in this paper are the ‘rural municipalities with tourism industries’, which are defined as rural (the largest urban area has fewer than 15000 inhabitants) and exceed threshold values for the number of guest nights, retail revenues, hotel revenues and restaurant revenues per capita.

Name	Type	Population 2023	Population/km ² 2023	Share of second homes per capita
Göteborg	Major city	6,04,616	1350.1	1.01 %
Kungälv	Commute municipality near a major city	49,785	137.3	4.99 %
Lysekil	Rural municipality	13,969	67	31.04 %
Öckerö	Commute municipality near a major city	12,819	497.8	5.93 %
Orust	Commute municipality near a smaller urban area	15,333	39.7	40.05 %
Sotenäs	Rural municipality with tourism industry	9052	65.5	46.77 %
Stenungsund	Commute municipality near a major city	27,862	110.6	3.68 %
Strömstad	Rural municipality with tourism industry	13,476	28.8	29.98 %
Tanum	Rural municipality with tourism industry	12,865	14	52.49 %
Tjörn	Commute municipality near a smaller urban area	16,146	96.5	26.62 %
Uddevalla	Low-commute municipality near a larger city	57,045	89.5	6.46 %

stated, have high relevance for spatial planning. The codes were assigned on the basis of the principles outlined in Tables 2 and 3.

The analysis of the Marstrand case is based on an archival study of public acts. The public acts analyzed, which were collected from the CAB archive, included official correspondence between the CAB, Kungälv municipality, other public authorities, local organizations, and private landowners. Optical Character Recognition (OCR) scanning followed by NVivo 14 analysis of outdoor recreation terms in these documents facilitated the study of the reserve process, revealing how outdoor recreation was addressed in various contexts and discussions over time involving different actors.

These analyses offer insights into municipal utilization of outdoor recreation from two perspectives. Comprehensive plans highlight outdoor recreation via a top-down planning approach driven by vision and long-term goals, although implementation remains unclear. In this context, the municipality takes the lead in land use planning. The Marstrand reserve formation process illustrates how the municipality responded to actions initiated by the government and the CAB, potentially conflicting with local development plans. This case study provides a tangible example for examining local municipal practices.

4. Results: spatial planning as a vision

4.1. Service themes in comprehensive plans

Five notable common themes related to municipal services are revealed in the comprehensive plans, the coding coverage of which is

Table 2

Municipal services as listed by SKR, 2021, where each service was coded as a separate theme in Nvivo 14. ‘Types of content coded’ refers to the content in the studied comprehensive plans coded to these services. OR = outdoor recreation.

Name	Types of content coded
Business development	Direct mentions, OR values important in tourism contexts, service sector in relation to OR, development of the hospitality industry
Civil defense	No codes
Education	OR in relation to schools, mentions of recreation for increasing public environmental knowledge
Employment	OR creating employment possibilities through connected services
Energy	Energy infrastructure development limiting impact on OR values
Environmental and health protection	Different types of area protections, mentions of preservation, outdoor recreation as a value related to nature values
Housing	Balancing housing with protecting recreational values, developing an attractive near-home living environment, green space in settlements
Library services	No codes
Planning and Construction Issues	All types of spatial planning issues in relation to outdoor recreation
Recreation and culture	All aspects of outdoor recreation mentioned
Rescue Service	No codes
Social well-fare	No codes
Waste Management	Mentions of waste, often in relation to coastal OR
Water and Sewage	OR in the vicinity of water reservoirs, sewage development in areas with high OR values (often tied to secondary homes)

summarized in Table 4. ‘Recreation and culture’ emerges as the most frequent group, since it encompasses various subjects related to outdoor recreation, such as recreation areas, national interests, nature values, municipal development, housing strategies, coastal recreation, and cultural and natural landscape dimensions. Another broad category is ‘planning and construction issues,’ as comprehensive plans exclusively cover municipal spatial planning; thus, almost any mention of outdoor recreation in the material pertains to planning issues, except for general descriptions and definitions. ‘Environmental and health protection’ is another broadly coded category; its focus is on area protection with recreational components, and the unified value of nature and outdoor recreation is often emphasized:

‘Biodiversity also promotes public health, as many natural and cultural environments are important areas for recreation and outdoor activities’ (author’s translation, Tanum municipality 2017: 168).

‘None of the reserves are affected by the proposed development areas or infrastructure measures in the comprehensive plan. Only in Svartedalen does the nature reserve overlap with development proposals, which are considered compatible land uses, as the proposals are focused entirely on outdoor recreation’ (author’s translation, Stenungsund municipality 2020: 27).

Discussions related to national interests for nature conservation and outdoor recreation, as well as green infrastructure and biodiversity development with positive effects for outdoor recreation, are included in this category. Notably, aspects of environmental protection concerning outdoor recreation are more common in northern Bohuslän (Strömstad, Tanum, Sotenäs, and Lysekil) than in the Gothenburg region.

The next two categories, ‘housing’ and ‘business development’, are more specific. ‘Housing’ contexts often involve managing conflicts between housing development and outdoor recreation, particularly in municipalities with archipelagos and secondary home concentrations, such as Sotenäs, Strömstad, Tanum, and Öckerö outside Gothenburg. These municipalities primarily protect unexploited outdoor recreation areas by limiting coastal housing development to existing settled areas. In areas intended for housing exploitation, there is also discussion of different measures to ensure public access to recreational areas and

Table 3

Description of the national goals for outdoor recreation (Regeringskansliet, 2012) translated into thematic codes in Nvivo 14. “Goal nr” and “Name” refer to the number and name of the goal among the national goals, where each was converted into a separate theme and coded in Nvivo 14. A short description of the goal translated from Regeringskansliet (2012) is also included. “Types of content” describes the type of content within the comprehensive plans that was coded to each theme.

Goal nr	Name	Short description	Types of content coded
1	Accessible nature for all	... everyone should have the opportunity to be present in and enjoy the natural and cultural landscape.	Direct mentions, infrastructure for increased accessibility across transport types, inclusive accessibility development, infrastructure for different social groups
2	Strong commitment and collaboration for outdoor recreation	... places the individual's personal choices and involvement at the center.	Collaboration between municipalities, collaboration with and between other actors
3	Freedom to roam	... safeguarding the Right of Public Access and ensuring that the public, landowners, associations, and businesses have a good understanding of the Right of Public Access.	Direct mentions of the freedom to roam
4	Access to nature for outdoor recreation	... the needs of outdoor recreation are ensured through sustainable use, physical planning, and conservation.	Preservation of nature related to outdoor recreation, physical planning for protecting outdoor recreation, descriptions of valuable recreational areas
5	Attractive peri-urban nature	... there should be access to attractive nature in and around urban areas. The public should have access to green spaces and an urban-near landscape with high outdoor, nature, and cultural environmental values.	Direct mentions, physical planning for peri-urban nature with recreational aspects, access to peri-urban nature mentioned in relation to attractiveness, peri-urban green infrastructure
6	Sustainable regional growth and rural development	... outdoor recreation and tourism contribute to strengthening local and regional attractiveness, fostering robust, sustainable development, and promoting regional growth	Growth and recreation mentioned together; tourism, hospitality industry and business development in relation to outdoor recreation, development of outdoor recreation for growth
7	Protected areas as a resource for outdoor recreation	... is about making natural areas attractive for outdoor activities and recreation.	Protected areas mentioned as important for outdoor recreation, protected areas mentioned as areas for future development of outdoor recreation
8	Rich outdoor recreation in schools	... preschools, pre-school classes, primary schools, and equivalent institutions engage in outdoor activities and provide education on a healthy environment and sustainable development as per the governing documents.	Outdoor recreation mentioned in relation to schools, developing nature and recreational areas around schools, placing schools with access to outdoor recreation

Table 3 (continued)

Goal nr	Name	Short description	Types of content coded
9	Outdoor recreation for public health	... aims to create favorable conditions for people to engage in regular physical activity in natural and cultural landscapes.	Outdoor recreation described as valuable for public health, mentioned in relation to well-being, rehabilitation or rest
10	Good knowledge about outdoor recreation	... implies the establishment of research and statistical gathering related to outdoor recreation, considering the breadth and interdisciplinary nature of the field. This should be long-term over time and built upon the needs of outdoor recreation stakeholders.	Knowledge development directly mentioned, e.g. mapping, surveys, knowledge dissemination

shorelines:

‘New development or facilities that could hinder the use of the area for outdoor recreation or harm its value for nature conservation, outdoor activities, and cultural heritage preservation should not be permitted. In certain parts of the area, individual houses may be considered in connection with existing buildings’ (Sotenäs municipality 2022: 24).

‘Area 1 is located adjacent to existing buildings on the hilltop. The shoreline is not accessible from the site due to the topography, but a possible passage on the hill between the new buildings and the water should be ensured’ (Tanum municipality 2017: 136).

Business development contexts involve recreational values linked to the hospitality industry, tourism, or other businesses. It is common in northern municipalities such as Sotenäs, Lysekil, and Tanum, as well as Tjörn and Öckerö, to mention areas with value for both outdoor recreation and the tourism/hospitality industry. Descriptions often emphasize the close interaction between outdoor recreation development and the tourism/hospitality industry, with some arguing for benefits to the residential population through increased recreation and work opportunities:

‘The development of tourism in the area can benefit the year-round resident population by providing opportunities to run businesses linked to the tourism industry. The development of trails and facilities for activities such as hiking, cycling, paddling, and climbing, aimed at promoting tourism and supporting related businesses, also contributes to an increased range of outdoor recreation options for local residents’ (Lysekil municipality 2023: 65).

Certain areas of national interest, such as the northern coast of Bohuslän, are proposed for business development related to outdoor recreation and tourism and are perceived as beneficial rather than threatening to area value. In cases such as Kungälv and central Gothenburg, the tourism and hospitality industries are often described more separately from outdoor recreation, especially in urban contexts.

4.2. Goal themes in comprehensive plans

Among the thematic codes inspired by national goals, the most prevalent theme in the studied comprehensive plans is ‘access to nature for outdoor recreation.’ This code encompasses sustainable use, spatial planning, and conservation for recreation, which are contexts the emphasize preservation, protection, and recognition of recreational nature in municipalities. The spatial planning aspects here primarily involve restrictions on further housing development in valuable

Table 4

Coverage list for the four most common codes related to formal municipal services mentioned in relation to outdoor recreation in the studied plans for each of the studied municipalities. Coverage in this context relates to the percentage of the entire text mass for the comprehensive plans covered by this code. Coding was performed on all paragraphs mentioning outdoor recreation, which means that the percentage shown illustrates the percentage of the text covered by paragraphs related to each code. The four highest scores for each code are marked in bold.

Municipality	Recreation and culture	Plan- and building	Environment and health	Housing	Business development
Tanum	2,06 %	1,75 %	1,41 %	0,86 %	0,80 %
Tjörn	1,82 %	1,48 %	1,10 %	0,51 %	0,70 %
Lysekil	1,78 %	1,68 %	1,63 %	0,62 %	1,03 %
Strömstad	1,73 %	1,85 %	1,35 %	1,14 %	0,52 %
Uddevalla	1,72 %	1,13 %	1,01 %	0,61 %	0,55 %
Sotenäs	1,56 %	2,19 %	1,86 %	1,36 %	1,67 %
Kungälv	1,42 %	1,06 %	0,81 %	0,60 %	0,45 %
Orust	1,29 %	0,76 %	0,92 %	0,50 %	0,41 %
Göteborg	0,64 %	0,18 %	0,57 %	0,13 %	0,12 %
Öckerö	0,47 %	0,92 %	0,74 %	0,79 %	0,66 %
Stenungsund	0,36 %	0,43 %	0,37 %	0,18 %	0,26 %

unexploited areas used for nature, cultural, and recreational purposes, with a coastal focus on boating berth development. Plans generally limit future development to already developed areas:

‘A cautious densification and addition of residential buildings has also been proposed, provided that the new development is adapted to the character of the existing buildings as well as to the surrounding terrain and cultural landscape’ (Strömstad municipality 2013: 38).

In peri-urban and urban contexts, especially in Gothenburg, emphasis is placed on developing a coherent green structure. The preservation of natural areas is motivated by their supporting function as ecosystem services and considerations of national interests, Natura 2000 sites, or shoreline accessibility. References to the coastal landscape or ‘untouched nature’ as a resource for promoting attractiveness also drive preservation efforts:

‘A good balance between measures to increase accessibility and the attractiveness of untouched nature is a prerequisite for preserving all national interests in outdoor recreation’ (Tanum municipality 2017: 173).

Regarding ‘sustainable regional growth and rural development’, which emphasizes the contribution of outdoor recreation to local and regional attractiveness, the coded contexts are concentrated in the northern municipalities and Öckerö. Descriptions outline ways in which tourism or recreational values can be developed to increase attractiveness and often involve initiatives such as the establishment of service facilities in natural areas or infrastructure development motivated by potential growth. In cases such as Lysekil, development of the hospitality industry tied to outdoor recreation is perceived as beneficial for ‘the residential population through enabling the establishment of services tied to the hospitality industry’ (Lysekil municipality, 2022: 64). Other instances highlight development motivated by recreationists’ interest in increased facilities tied to national interests. Attracting both residents and visitors is mentioned for local growth and business development, with arguments that developing outdoor recreation and tourism will lead to local economic benefits and economic sustainability:

‘The challenge in the coming years will be to improve conditions and attract more people to settle in these communities year-round while simultaneously preserving and strengthening opportunities for sustainable tourism and the visitor economy. The need for a vibrant municipality throughout the year was highlighted in the early dialog with citizens. Achieving this requires the development of diverse, thriving communities with proximity to sustainable transportation, services, workplaces, and outdoor recreation/local leisure’ (Orust municipality 2023: 52).

The theme ‘attractive peri-urban nature’ focuses on public access to green spaces in and around urban areas; this theme involves direct

mentions and spatial planning for green areas with recreational components as a resource for increasing attractiveness. This theme is more prevalent in municipalities with larger urban areas such as Gothenburg, Uddevalla and Kungälv, with Lysekil serving as an outlier with the highest coverage. The benefits mentioned include green infrastructure as a basis for a sustainable urban lifestyle, making it attractive for the residential population to remain in the municipality:

‘It is important to create an attractive living environment in all aspects so that, for example, families with children can and want to stay, and so that the city’s residents can seek recreation and relaxation in the local area’ (Gothenburg municipality 2021: 21).

The proximity of certain urban areas to coastlines is considered attractive. In this context, references to public health as a motivation for recreational urban green space are more frequent and are linked to relaxation and physical activity:

‘The need for nearby recreational areas is based on the fact that greenery promotes well-being and that nature has intrinsic value for our health. The forest has high recreational value, and contact with nature has positive effects, for example, on children’s development, adult and elderly health, relaxation after stress, and rehabilitation after illness’ (Kungälv municipality 2010: 27).

The code ‘accessible nature for all’ focuses on equal access to nature across the population. In municipal comprehensive plans, these terms most commonly appear in urban or commuting municipalities, especially in contexts tied to infrastructure development, with the aim of increasing accessibility across transport types and catering to diverse social and demographic groups.

‘An increased access to mobility at sea is sought for commuting, tourism, recreation, and outdoor activities throughout the year. Efforts should be made to ensure that the sea and archipelago are accessible even to those without their own boats. Therefore, development is desirable at hubs that have the conditions for coordination between maritime and land transport’ (Lysekil municipality 2023: 53).

Importance is placed on including children and young adults in developing accessibility, frequently in contexts tied to public health. Strategies involve increasing public transport access to valuable natural areas, providing more accessible information, and developing infrastructure for disabled persons. Creating connecting nodes for different transport types or recreational infrastructures is also important in this context. In some cases, the emphasis is on inclusivity for the entire population on the basis of their needs.

‘Nature and outdoor recreation areas shall safeguard the municipality’s biological diversity and strengthen our ecosystems while also

providing access to safe, inclusive, and accessible green spaces for all target groups' (Uddevalla municipality 2022: 54).

The spatial planning strategies of the studied municipalities focus primarily on attractiveness, accessibility, and preservation of nature, as detailed in the comprehensive plans. Some aspects, such as accessibility, attractive peri-urban nature and preservation in relation to national interests, are clearly communicated against national agendas. Others are more closely related to regional or national competition, such as recreation as a driver of local growth or attracting residents and visitors. In the end, the pursuit of equal accessibility and green space for public health *also* aligns with the creation of attractive living environments, while competing interests are most often discussed in the context of preservation.

5. Results: spatial planning in practice—a case of nature reserve formation

The Marstrand Islands, located in western Sweden near Kungälv, include the islands of Marstrandsön, Koön, Klåverön, and Instön (see Fig. 2). Marstrand is a popular tourist and outdoor recreation destination, where the historical cultural heritage town on Marstrandsön attracts over 500 000 passengers annually, mainly during the summer months (Marstrands färja, 2023). The residential population has increased on both Koön and Instön, whereas the population on Marstrandsön has decreased slightly over the last 7 years. In 2022, the total number of residents on Marstrandsön, Koön, and Instön was approximately 1600 (SCB). Koön retains a coastal pasture landscape with a long history of agricultural use (see Fig. 3).

5.1. The reserve formation process and the role of outdoor recreation

In 2002, the Swedish government addressed challenges in securing peri-urban green spaces for public health amid increasing urbanization and tasked Stockholm, Västra Götaland, and Skåne CABs with developing regional programs for managing and preserving peri-urban green spaces (Regeringens skrivelse 2001/02:173, 2002). The Gothenburg region has proposed 40 new reserves, including the Marstrand

archipelago, which is valued for its natural and cultural landscape (Länsstyrelsen i Västra Götalands län, 2003: p. 95–96). Kungälv's comprehensive plan aligned with this initiative, emphasizing conservation with minimal development (Kungälv municipality, 2001).

By 2012, a new comprehensive plan shifted focus to housing, infrastructure, and tourism development, proposing 4500 new housing units on Marstrand and designating southern Koön as a key development area (Kungälv municipality, 2011). The plan aimed to balance growth with preservation and referenced ongoing discussions with the CAB regarding a proposed nature reserve on southern Koön, leaving a portion for housing inside the reserve (Kungälv municipality, 2011: p. 38–39).

In August 2012, the CAB met with the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SSNC) to discuss the proposed reserve and municipal housing plans, with the SSNC arguing that housing would harm the area's natural and cultural values for both visitors and residents (Länsstyrelsen i Västra Götalands län, dnr 511-7379-2012-6). In a subsequent meeting with the municipality, the CAB did not mention this but reframed the reserve as a branding opportunity, emphasizing recreational investments such as trails, benches, and waste management (Länsstyrelsen i Västra Götalands län, dnr 511-7379-2012-7). The SSNC reiterated their concerns in a letter, emphasizing the area's recreational and tourism potential, its accessibility, and its value as an untouched natural space (Länsstyrelsen i Västra Götalands län, dnr 511-7379-2012-8).

In the first draft of the reserve, the County Administrative Board states that they are revoking an existing landscape protection order for Marstrand and are allowing the municipality to develop the southern part of Koön by building residential housing—an area they assess to have lower natural value—while designating the remaining part of southern Koön as a nature reserve as compensation (Länsstyrelsen i Västra Götalands län, dnr 511-7379-2012-54). The municipality, in response, agreed that the recreational value is important but emphasized the role of housing development in enhancing the accessibility of the infrastructure for the reserve and its value for the hospitality industry (Länsstyrelsen i Västra Götalands län, dnr 511-7379-2012-92):

'The purpose of the nature reserve is to preserve diverse natural landscapes with significant scenic value and high biological

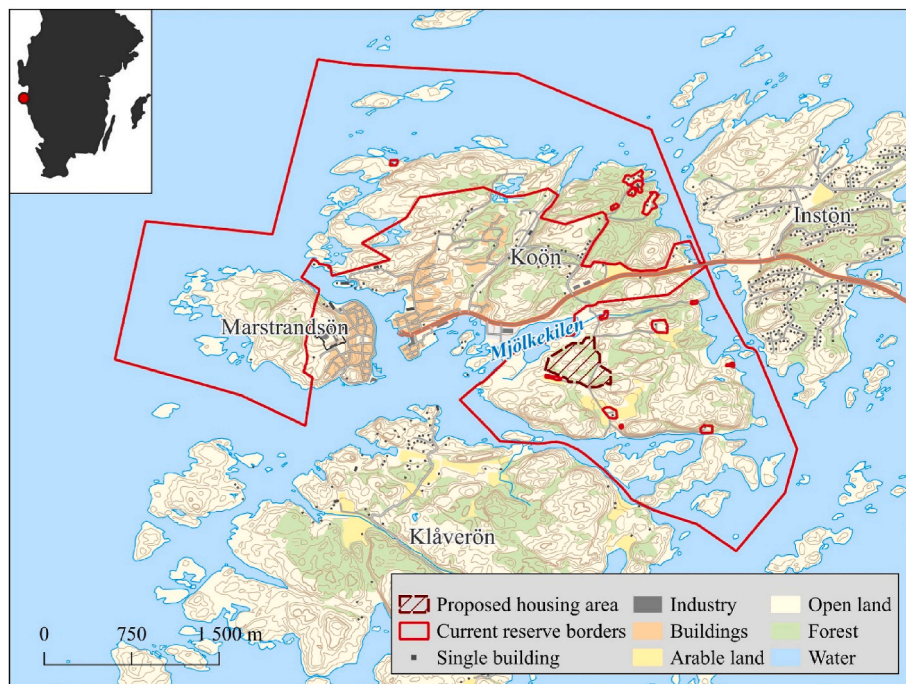


Fig. 2. Overview map of Marstrand.



Fig. 3. The coastal pasture landscape on southern Koön.

diversity, both on land and in the productive shallow waters of the sea. Another objective is to protect areas for outdoor recreation and the hospitality industry. ... An important aspect of the development on southern Koön is also to improve public access to natural areas [which] could strengthen the connection between the community and southern Koön, thereby expanding opportunities for residents and visitors to explore the area's nature values and outdoor activities.' (Länsstyrelsen i Västra Götalands län, dnr 511-7379-2012-92).

The response from the SSNC again highlighted that housing threatened the area's landscape character and recreational potential, noting its unique accessibility as one of few similar areas in the municipality that is not reachable only by boat (Länsstyrelsen i Västra Götalands län, dnr 511-7379-2012-71).

Following the initial draft, discussions largely shifted to conflicts between conservation and housing development, with outdoor recreation receiving little attention. By 2014, the municipality pushed for an even larger housing development area in the reserve, while the SSNC, residents, and leasehold farmers resisted, citing risks to grazing, outdoor recreation, and conservation (Länsstyrelsen i Västra Götalands län, dnr 511-7379-2012-96). Amid these tensions, the CAB noted the challenge of integrating nature, culture, and recreation with housing development on southern Koön. Under these circumstances, the CAB considered postponing the southern Koön reserve and shifting focus to the less controversial northern part (511-7379-2012-98). However, this was not accepted by the municipality, which was eager to continue with their housing plans (Länsstyrelsen i Västra Götalands län, dnr 511-7379-2012-102 and 103).

Between 2015 and 2017, the municipality revised its stance, accepting a CAB-proposed compromise with a new, less controversial area selected for future development (Länsstyrelsen i Västra Götalands län, dnr 511-7379-2012-106 and 110). This reflected a shift in municipal priorities toward business and hospitality development in Marstrand, with housing development focused closer to Kungälv (Länsstyrelsen i Västra Götalands län, dnr 511-7379-2012-114):

'The question was posed to the municipality about whether a FÖP (detailed comprehensive plan) for Marstrand is being considered in the near future. [Municipal planner 1]: We are in a period of significant growth, with many assignments and projects underway. The FÖP for Ytterby is the first priority. [Municipal planner 2]: Marstrand

is a priority area along with the city center and Ytterby. However, for Marstrand, the primary focus is on tourism and business development.'

After a second round of referrals in 2017, the nature reserve was formed. In these last referrals, outdoor recreation reemerged as part of municipal strategies for Marstrand, with the municipality positioning the reserve as central to their strategy for 'Destination Marstrand'. They highlighted hiking trails as key visitor attractions complementing investments in hotels, spas, culinary experiences, and a sailing center, aiming for 3000 year-round residents by 2030 (Länsstyrelsen i Västra Götalands län, dnr 511-7379-2012-131). The CAB, in discussions with the municipality, again reinforced the reserve's branding potential (Länsstyrelsen i Västra Götalands län, dnr 511-7379-2012-114):

'The area has significant natural value, and its importance for outdoor recreation and tourism can hardly be overstated... This will also support the municipality's stated goal of developing "Destination Marstrand," where the area's natural values and hiking trails are among the key attractions for visitors, serving as important complements to investments in hotels, spas, culinary experiences, and the national sailing center.'

'[CAB official]: Such a large archipelago reserve will become a strong tourist destination and can attract new target groups.'

Throughout the reserve planning process, notable differences emerge in the perspectives on outdoor recreation among the municipality, the CAB, and the SSNC. The municipality primarily emphasizes outdoor recreation's importance for attractiveness and accessibility, with minimal conflict with housing plans. In contrast, the SSNC mobilized arguments for nature conservation, using accessibility and attractiveness *against* housing exploitation. The CAB seeks a balance, engaging with both housing plans and SSNC concerns; however, it is more formally engaged in discussions with the municipality.

The process reveals that the municipality primarily viewed outdoor recreation as a resource for developing the attractiveness of Marstrand for the existing and future residential population as well as for visitors and the surrounding hospitality industry. While the SSNC continually pressed the issue of conserving nature to protect and develop the area as a recreational space, it was not this argumentation that motivated a change in the municipal plans. Instead, it seems to have been a

reprioritization of housing initiatives within the municipality as a whole. Although outdoor recreation is highlighted to some degree by all the actors involved, notably, these aspects are primarily raised at the beginning and end of the reserve process. Instead, the majority of the discussions focused on resolving the conflicting interests between housing development and nature conservation. Although outdoor recreation plays a central role in the motivation for developing the nature reserve, it plays a rather peripheral role during the process. The CAB primarily appears to have predominantly regarded outdoor recreation as an inherent value requiring safeguarding according to government directives. Consequently, the foremost priority is to address and resolve the discussion regarding the protection of the area, taking municipal interests into consideration.

6. Discussion

6.1. Outdoor recreation themes in comprehensive plans

The paper reveals that outdoor recreation, as outlined in the comprehensive plans, is related primarily to municipal services tied to recreation/culture, environmental protection, housing, and business development. The general prevalence of outdoor recreation issues is highest in municipalities with a significant tourism economy and those attractive for secondary homes, where outdoor recreation is notably linked to housing and business development. Previous research has revealed variations in how municipalities organize work related to outdoor recreation, with responsibilities sometimes concentrated within specific departments or divided and unclear across departments (Ankre et al., 2023; Petersson Forsberg, 2012). This variation likely mirrors the diverse role of outdoor recreation within the broader framework of municipal services, which are influenced by local geographic characteristics.

With respect to the goal-inspired themes, the comprehensive plans exhibit notable variation. The theme of local growth through recreation is prominently concentrated in coastal municipalities with a large visitor industry. In contrast, the themes of a peri-urban nature and inclusive accessibility are more commonly found in commuting or urban municipalities. This suggests that the general characteristics of municipalities strongly influence the primary focus of recreational considerations. In visitor-oriented municipalities, the motivations for local growth are vaguely defined, but the results suggest a focus on securing work opportunities and local economic sustainability. Moreover, in urban and commuting municipalities, their peri-urban nature and equal accessibility are distinctly tied to providing attractive living environments for the urban population; public health is also used as an argument.

The suggestion that the geographic characteristics of municipalities affect how outdoor recreation is integrated into municipal planning further suggests that this varies across Sweden and that the results from the Swedish west coast detailed here are not representative of the entire country. Rural municipalities inland with little to no visitor industry may approach outdoor recreation in a different way; thus, further investigations are needed in these areas. However, the results from this paper harmonize with results from previous studies in a wider Swedish context (Ankre et al., 2023; Petersson-Forsberg, 2014), showing that outdoor recreation is primarily viewed as a value that can be used and exploited to serve development interests. This paper provides further nuance into the rationale behind such patterns, which show intraregional differences as well.

6.2. The mobilization of outdoor recreation in municipal practice

The analysis of the reserve planning process on the Marstrand islands revealed a municipal view of outdoor recreation as a resource for municipal growth, echoed in communication from both the municipality and the CAB, especially in terms of using the reserve for branding. This mirrors the growth-oriented development approach in municipal

planning, where questions such as conservation become means toward a specific end (e.g., Andersén, 2020, p. 22). The case study also shows the flexibility of comprehensive plan implementation, since the housing plans detailed in the plan were abandoned due to changing municipal housing priorities and not as a result of conservation interests.

This case illustrates the importance of moving beyond the study of visions and perceptions in the research on outdoor recreation and spatial planning in general and demonstrates a method and materials highly suitable for use in future analyses. Previous research focusing on comprehensive plans, surveys, and interviews (e.g. Ankre, 2019; Ankre et al., 2023; Petersson Forsberg, 2012; Petersson-Forsberg, 2014) tends to analyze how municipalities perceive their work rather than assessing implementation as an ongoing practical process. As illustrated, municipal priorities change over time, and initiatives from the CAB, such as the creation of nature reserves, can challenge municipal jurisdiction and potentially conflict with local development plans. The Marstrand case involved a challenging compromise between conservation and exploitation interests, and studying such processes provides insight into the practical implementation and underlying logics of municipal planning. Future research on outdoor recreation in the practical implementation of municipal spatial planning should analyze the planning process as a whole, for example, by studying the documentation behind comprehensive plans, detailed development plans, or, as in this case, nature reserves.

This paper has not explored the political context of municipal planning, which strongly affects the development strategies employed. As previously observed, overall trends impacting municipal activities are driven by increased regional competition (Algotson, 2022; Cars & Thune Hedström, 2006; Öjehag-Pettersson, 2022). While these trends influence Sweden's general political development, the specific administration in power still influences municipal priorities. For instance, the studied reserve planning process would benefit from a political lens. The impact of political administrations, especially changes over time, on municipal outdoor recreational planning needs to be further studied.

6.3. Municipal incentives for outdoor recreation

As noted in the background section, the logic of economic growth characterizes Swedish municipal planning, and the results of this paper clearly show that outdoor recreation plays a part in such logic. Attracting permanent residents with high outdoor recreation values as part of their lifestyle is an instrument for increasing the municipal tax base. Similarly, developing outdoor recreation values can also create opportunities for the hospitality industry, since visitors from other places and regions need accommodation, guides, restaurants, and other facilities. This contributes, in turn, to the overall business environment, which positively affects the income of the population and raises the tax base, and attracts investments into the municipality. The dual logics of attractive business and living environments serve as the core incentives for municipalities to include outdoor recreation in spatial planning.

However, some notable variations have also been revealed between different municipalities, which are influenced by the geographical context. Municipalities such as Strömstad, Tanum, Sotenäs and Lysekil, with a thriving visitor economy and substantial numbers of secondary homes, tend to emphasize outdoor recreation in terms of both housing and hospitality development, which is integral to local growth strategies and attracting new residents. Moreover, urban and commuting municipalities such as Gothenburg, Uddevalla or Stenungsund place a stronger focus on creating attractive living environments and facilitating everyday engagement with outdoor recreation to *retain* residents under regional-national competition.

The case study of Marstrand again provides some nuance to these patterns, since the municipality of Kungälv is a commuting municipality, whereas Marstrand serves as a popular regional destination for tourism and outdoor recreation. On Marstrand, the municipality followed the logics of the visitor economy, while its commuting

characteristics likely affected the overall municipal housing plans. Conservation plans were made to fit within and were highly affected by these logics, and the way that the CAB chose to communicate the reserve plans to the municipality indicates the need to motivate the reserve with values beyond conservation-in-itself.

An important point in understanding how geographic context connects to municipal incentives for outdoor recreation concerns the municipal promotion of public health, which is currently constrained by the legal municipal framework. The results revealed that connections between outdoor recreation and public health were made primarily in urban and commuting municipalities, where the creation of attractive urban living environments serves a municipal economic purpose. Since Swedish municipalities have no formal obligation to consider public health—which is managed by the regions—this study suggests that those municipalities that do engage in public health initiatives adapt them to serve other legally mandated responsibilities. Public health is often used as a justification for green infrastructure and outdoor recreation in urban areas, where the underlying goal is to create attractive living environments that attract residents and businesses. In municipalities with a strong focus on tourism and second homes, however, public health has received little attention, with efforts instead directed toward preserving attractive landscapes and leveraging them for municipal growth.

Under the current economic logic guiding municipal planning, it is highly questionable whether outdoor recreation can fulfill its potential role in promoting public health (c.f. Colley et al., 2023; Hansen, 2018). In Sweden, the promotion of public health across different municipal types would require changes to municipalities' formal obligations, similar to approaches in other Nordic countries such as Norway and Finland (Aguiar Borges et al., 2024). A key challenge is the formal disconnect between spatial planning, which is a municipal monopoly, and public health, which is managed by the regions. If outdoor recreation is to be planned as a means of promoting public health, municipalities must be provided with formal incentives beyond purely economic considerations related to income taxes and business development. This also has wider implications for other countries undergoing decentralization of spatial planning (Zonneveld & Stead, 2024), as a lack of formal obligations regarding public health would likely result in outdoor recreation planning serving primarily economic purposes.

7. Conclusions

This paper highlights the integration of outdoor recreation into Swedish municipal planning, where its role varies depending on the municipal context—coastal municipalities emphasize outdoor recreation as part of tourism-driven growth, whereas urban and commuting municipalities prioritize it as part of creating attractive living environments and promoting public health. However, outdoor recreation is often subordinate to economic priorities, particularly in regions with strong tourism or housing markets, and in urban environments, attractiveness and public health are also part of the economic rationale. The Marstrand case demonstrates how conservation efforts must align with development goals to gain municipal support, reflecting the broader challenge of balancing preservation with economic interests.

A key insight is that outdoor recreation serves both economic growth

and public health interests, yet current legal and economic frameworks prioritize its role as a development tool rather than a public good. Without formal municipal obligations for considering public health, outdoor recreation planning is shaped by economic incentives rather than social well-being goals. Future research should explore the political dimensions of municipal planning and compare governance models for outdoor recreation across Nordic countries, where municipal responsibilities for public health vary. Additionally, further historical research would enable a deeper understanding of how municipalities treated recreational planning before decentralization accelerated in the 1990s.

Management implications

- Sweden has 290 municipalities with varying characteristics. National directives should be sensitive to these variations and how they affect the ways in which municipalities work with outdoor recreation.
- The municipal function of outdoor recreational planning as primarily playing a part of local growth strategies could be further recognized by public authorities. This would enhance the clarity of outdoor recreation as a municipal interest, which can be weighed in relation to other issues.
- In the current system, public health is only indirectly addressed through outdoor recreation planning. If outdoor recreation is to promote the improvement of public health, it should be formally linked to municipal responsibilities. This could be achieved through changed legislation.

Declaration of generative ai in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT to shorten parts of the text in the original draft. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Declaration of competing interest

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APPENDIX. STUDIED COMPREHENSIVE PLANS

Municipality	Year	Title	Status
Gothenburg	2021	Översiktsplan för Göteborg. Granskningshandling mars 2021.	Public review draft
Kungälv	2010	Översiktsplan 2010 för Kungälv's Kommun. Antagen av kommunfullmäktige.	Adoption draft
Lysekil	2023	Översiktsplan för Lysekils kommun. Granskningshandling.	Public review draft
Öckerö	2018	Översiktsplan Öckerö kommun. Antagandehandling.	Adoption draft

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Municipality	Year	Title	Status
Orust	2023	Översiktsplan 2040. Samrådshandling.	Consultation draft
Sotenäs	2022	Översiktsplan för Sotenäs kommun. Antagandehandling.	Adoption draft
Stenungsund	2020	Översiktsplan 2020, Part 1–3. Antagandehandling.	Adoption draft
Strömstad	2013	ÖP Strömstad. Översiktsplan för Strömstads kommun, Part 1–4. Antagen av kommunfullmäktige	Adoption draft
Tanum	2017	Översiktsplan 2030, Part 1–3. Antagandehandling.	Adoption draft
Tjörn	2022	Möjligheternas översiktsplan. Tjörns kommun. Samrådshandling.	Consultation draft
Uddevalla	2022	Uddevalla kommuns översiktsplan 2022. Utdrag ur samtliga texter. Antagandehandling.	Adoption draft

Explanation of status.

Consultation draft First draft shared for input from authorities and the public.**Public review draft** Revised version available for formal public review.**Adoption draft** Final version prepared for political approval.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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