

Grazing Animals as Park Managers? using animals in the management of urban green areas

Interest in using grazing animals in the management of parks and other urban green areas has grown in Sweden in recent years. Through grazing and trampling these animals create the conditions for a rich flora and fauna.

This study was undertaken to document the use of grazing animals for management of urban green areas in Swedish municipalities.

A questionnaire with 40 questions concerning the activities, organisation, results, reactions from the public, etc., was sent to the persons responsible for the management of green areas in 49 (of a total of 290) municipalities that used animals in urban areas.

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF MUNICIPALITIES

Most of the municipalities were in areas with a vegetation period of >190 days and they consisted of cities or larger towns. It is probable that in areas where the vegetation period is shorter, people will have less interest in making all the necessary arrangements to keep grazing animals. The same can also be said of rural communities that have small central urban areas and limited park land and that are moreover surrounded by farms with grazing animals. The grazed areas varied to a great degree but most areas were between 0.3 and 5 ha in size. The primary reason for the activities was a desire to keep the land open, but another important motive was to keep or recreate a certain flora including especially valuable trees.

CHOICE OF ANIMAL SPECIES

More than 70% of the municipalities in the study used sheep. Some municipalities used more than one species on the grazed area, e.g. sheep and cattle, which often gives a better grazing

result. The choice of animal species and breed depends on the properties of the land that is going to be grazed and the desired grazing result. Since the grazing land is in an urban area it is also necessary to consider the affected public. Smaller animals are perceived as less dangerous than big animals, but on the other hand there are often fewer problems with vagrant dogs and injured animals if cattle and horses are used.

The most common situation was that the animals were privately owned, but in some cases the animals were owned by the municipality or various associations



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Seeing the animals makes me happy

such as riding schools. Using privately owned animals was in the short term the most economic alternative and experienced people were available and willing to take responsibility for the animals and observe laws and regulations.

PRACTICAL PREPARATIONS ARE NEEDED

Most municipalities had done some preparatory work before letting the animals in for grazing e.g. clearing of shrubs and unwanted trees, sowing of special plants, building of fences around especially valuable trees, removal of



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potentially harmful objects like plastic bags or metal pieces and making an inventory of the vegetation.

The type of fencing used for the areas differed depending on the animal species used and the functional and esthetical demands. The fence should be efficient and not dangerous for animals or children. From an esthetic point of view the fence should not disturb the general view of the landscape and it should be fitting in areas of historical interest.

PLANNING LAND MANAGEMENT

The written management plans generally contained some background description with possible historical aspects, a description of the present character of the area, visions for the future, starting measures, maintenance measures, time plan, and a plan for evaluation and budgeting. The management measures consisted of recommendations for shrub clearing, pasture trimming, species of animals to be used, if the use of fertilisers, herbicides or supplementary feeding were allowed, etc. The visions concerned the number of trees in the area and the look and condition of the sward. The result of the grazing was reported to be satisfactory, even better than had been achieved with mechanical management.

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Grazing result	The animals	Miscellaneous
<p>Positive comments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Beautiful open landscape. -The grove has returned. -Lots of berries now that the area has been opened up. -The landscape is “alive” in a different way. -More flowers. -A pastoral view of the landscape. -Fewer seeds from weeds found their way into the nearby gardens. 	<p>Positive comments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Seeing the animals makes me happy. (A frequent comment!) -The animals give variety. -Seeing animals is relaxing. -To be able to meet, caress and maybe feed the animals is a factor of great satisfaction. <p>Negative comments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Don’t appreciate the animals’ dung, especially by the gate. -The animals smell and bleat. -The animals attract flies. -The animals are too close when people want to have a picnic. -Negative when the animals break through the fence. -The animals may cause allergies. -People scared of animals are afraid to be in the area 	<p>Positive comments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Get people out in the urban green areas. -Nice place for an outing or a picnic. -Children come into contact with living animals. -Children learn to take responsibility for the animals. -Highly appreciated place for visits for school children and nursery schools. -Combine business with pleasure, teach about animals. -Opportunity to learn about the relation between humans and animals. -Neighbours help each other to look after the animals - creates a feeling of solidarity. <p>Negative comments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Not nice with barbed wire. -The fence poles are left during the winter. -Difficult to pass through styles and gates.

POSITIVE PUBLIC RESPONSE

Formal evaluations conducted among the neighbours after the grazing season were all positive. Some of the comments expressed are listed in the table below. The positive comments were mainly from neighbours and parents of small children, while the negative comments were made by tourists and senior citizens.

Some problems recorded were vagrant dogs, destroyed fences and molesting or slaughtering of animals. The municipalities that used only sheep or sheep in combination with another species were over-represented among those who had problems.

The majority of the affected public perceived the animals as something very positive; and aside from their effect on the landscape and the environment, the animals, had an important social function as well. To get continuous positive responses from the public it is important that the animals are not only well looked after, but that it is apparent that the animals are comfortable. Contaminated drinking water or lack of feed or shelter are likely to catch the attention of the neighbours and result in negative reactions.



To maintain the positive attitude of the public it is also important to consider and improve facilities for other activities in the area. Discussions should be held with, for example, the health office (allergies, manure), the leisure office (tracks for riding, skiing and running), and the building and planning office for suitable locations of gates and openings in the fence. Informative and easily read signs about the objective of the grazing and the animals will also help to get the support of neighbours in protecting the animals.

EVALUATING THE METHOD

It was not considered possible to get the same results with more conventional management methods, and subsequently it was not meaningful to put any price tag on the activities. It was concluded that extensive work at considerable costs would have been necessary to achieve at least similar results. The alternative was often no management at all, and even if this method is cheaper than grazing, a value can be put on keeping the area attractive for people.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

It is very clear from the study that the preparations and the way the grazing project is started are crucial for the success of the project. This concerns the land, the animals, the owners of the animals and the affected public as well as the vision for the area and the desired grazing result. Careful planning and preparations for all aspects, e.g documents concerning management plans and contracts with the owner of the animals, and a clear idea about what should be achieved, will have a major influence on the success of the grazing project.

The present study relates to the situation in Sweden, however, the positive effects of grazing as a management tool for the vegetation can be obtained anywhere. Other factors such as availability of animals, ethical opinions on and interest for animals, interest of the community officials etc. will determine whether it is possible to use the method successfully. These factors are site specific and have to be looked into in each case.