

Final report

The equine sector in Norway and Sweden - Impact on land use, economy, and the community

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Part 1: Detailed summary

Målsättningen med detta projekt har varit att förstå hästnäringens betydelse för de nya landsbygderna i Norge och Sverige, som idag inte enbart präglas av traditionella näringar som t.ex. jord- och skogsbruk. Hästnäringen utgör ett utmärkt exempel på detta. I t.ex. Sverige har antalet hästar kommit att överstiga antalet kor på landsbygden totalt sett, och i vissa samhällen dominerar hästen stort. Hästnäringen beskrivs därför ibland i termer av ”serious leisure”, dvs. en fritidsverksamhet av särskilt stor betydelse för utövare där det görs stora ekonomiska och materiella investeringar i icke-produktiv verksamhet (i traditionell mening) och som därmed också får stor betydelse för lokalsamhällena. Detta skiljer sig från traditionella turism-frågor genom att det främst berör mer permanenta verksamheter och bofasta medborgare. Landsbygdsforskningen har dock inte hittills fokuserat på denna typ av verksamheter i önskvärd grad, utan mer fokuserat på traditionella aspekter av landsbygdsproblematiken så som regionalpolitik, sysselsättning, areella näringar, migration från land till stad etc.

Vår hypotes har varit att en bättre förståelse av dagens landsbygdsproblematik och stad-land interaktioner, exemplifierat genom hästnäringen (serious leisure), skulle kunna bidra med central kunskap kring hur vi kan bidra till en mer hållbar utveckling av våra landsbygder. Frågor som har varit viktiga att undersöka har t.ex. handlat om hur stor betydelse hästnäringen har (ekonomiskt, socialt och ekologiskt), vad som driver intressenterna, verksamheternas beständighet inför olika störningar och hur olika åtgärder från samhällets sida bättre kan understödja en positiv framtida utveckling.

En preliminär slutsats är att hästnäringen (liksom andra verksamheter inom ”serious leisure”), definitivt har en mycket stor betydelse för de nutida landsbygderna. Forskningen, liksom politik och planering, måste därför i betydligt högre grad än hittills studera och ta med dessa

verksamheter i sina studier och beräkningar, eftersom alternativet annars är att en central påverkansfaktor gällande hållbar landsbygdsutveckling riskerar att negligeras och utvecklingen därmed bli mycket slumpartad.

Problembilden gällande yttre påverkansfaktorer, verksamheternas permanens, beroende av kringverksamheter (även areella näringar), ekonomi mm. har dock komplicerats i mycket hög grad under projektets gång, då vi fått revidera stora delar av arbetet efter att i tur och ordning ha drabbats av svår torka, Covid-pandemi och nu senast även ett fullskaligt krig inom Europa. Den mer stabila utveckling vi tidigare haft som bakgrundsbild har nu ersatts av en betydligt mer komplicerad bild där i princip alla de faktorer vi behandlat gällande ekonomisk, social och ekologisk hållbarhet successivt har fått revideras och omförhandlas efter varje ny händelse av dessa slag. Ännu så länge uppvisar hästnäringen en överraskande stor uthållighet, men det är ett ”rörligt mål” och vi kan ännu inte säga vad som kommer att bli det nya normala. Samtidigt har projektet påverkats mycket negativt i praktiken av att t.ex. inte kunna resa, träffa externa aktörer och mötas inom projektgruppen som planerat under Covid-pandemin. Sammantaget har allt detta lett till kraftiga förseningar av projektets resultat, liksom att slutsatserna med stor sannolikhet kommer att beröra en bredare problembild gällande landsbygdsutveckling och stad-landproblematiken, där hästnäringen förvisso fortfarande utgör en central pusselbit. Förseningarna till trots, så tror vi samtidigt att projektet i längden tjänar på att vi fått vara med om denna ordentliga ”reality-check” innan resultat och artiklar färdigställts, eftersom ett färdigställande innan denna period med stor sannolikhet hade gjort resultaten mindre användbara utifrån den nya verkligheten.

Part 2: Main report (max. 10 pages)

Introduction

The equine sector exemplifies the shift from production towards consumption in agriculture by being a leisurely activity with a significant impact on land use, economy, and social structures in the peri-urban and rural landscape.

Horses no longer play a direct role in agricultural production. Still, the number of horses per capita in Sweden and Norway reflects horses' popularity as a recreational activity and sport. Riding schools and equine centres create employment opportunities and an arena for young people, especially girls, to form identity, self-esteem, and mastery. The equine sector is closely connected to the local community and the agricultural industry through exchanging goods and services and overlapping land use. This is a source of value creation in both economic and social terms, as well as potential conflict over land use and use of other resources. For this sector to develop its full potential for rural development and positive impact on semi-urban environments, the project "The equine sector in Norway and Sweden; impact on land use, economy and the community" has looked into the ways forward for all actors involved.

A growing sector

Over the last 30 years, the number of horses for sports and leisure has multiplied. In Sweden, for example, the equine population of approximately 360 000 horses is equivalent to the number of dairy cows. In many places, the equine sector takes over land previously used for traditional agricultural production. It thereby has a different impact on land use, economy, and social structures in the peri-urban and rural landscape. Still, the equine sector depends on traditional agriculture for fodder production and other utilities, resulting in a mutual exchange.

The equine land use is not accounted for in any statistics, but this leisure activity with a large number of small units (the average number of horses/horse farms in Sweden is less than 5) has a far-reaching impact on the landscape. One evidence of the effect of numerous small horse farms is illustrated by the Swedish environmental monitoring performed by SLU, which found that the humus content in Swedish soils has increased instead of decreased as was expected (Poeplau et al., 2015). This result is explained by the increase in lay and grassland for producing fodder for the increasing number of horses. The development illustrates how lifestyle factors may lead to large-scale changes in land use on a local, regional, and national level (Poeplau et al., 2015).

In Norway, the total number of horses is estimated to be around 125 000 (Vik & Farstad, 2012), a much higher estimate than earlier (Econ, 2009; Haukås et al., 2009). More than half of the horse owners in Norway are not directly connected to a farm, and almost 80 per cent of horse owners keep their horses in their own stable (Vik & Farstad, 2012), which means that a lot of horse keeping is not on traditional farms.

Cope with crisis

More than 60 per cent of horse owners buy fodder for their horses, and most buy directly from the producer. Weather events like the drought in most of Scandinavia in the summer of 2018 also affect the equine sector. The lack of fodder and consequent rise in fodder prices gravely affected many horse owners. Cooperation and support both within the equine sector and with other sectors will be needed to better cope with crises likely to happen in the future.

But not only the drought in 2018 had affected horse owners during the period when this project was carried through. Shortly after, also the Covid-pandemic and now recently also the Russian invasion of Ukraine has shed new light on the situation illustrated above, and this has also affected the outcome of this project, not only by preventing physical exchange, joint field studies between Norway and Sweden and conference presentations as planned.

The project has been financed by:

Many of the early findings and pre-conclusions drawn will have to be reconsidered due to the changing realities of the world and the difficulties in jumping to hasty conclusions and recommendations for the horse sector in the middle of these times of change. The apparent differences between Norway and Sweden discussed in the early stages of the project have diminished against the backdrop of drought, pandemic, and war. Small or big, private or commercial, have all suffered when it comes to economy and possibilities for planning for the future. The agricultural sector has likewise suffered, and while sometimes differences between the equine and farming sector have disappeared, sometimes also differences have been more obvious.

Both horse owners and farmers suffer during drought if they do not have access to their own water ponds and increased diesel prices, etc., during pandemics and periods of military conflict. But while farmers can also gain from increased prices regarding their harvest, some products such as rape seeds have skyrocketed, and there are no such corresponding gains for the equine sector. Rising prices will affect the latter negatively, even if some might gain a little from tourism, temporarily at least, changing focus from international to domestic. All these factors, and many more, have definitely affected both practice and theory.

Material and methods

Three case study areas, two in southern Norway and one in southern Sweden, were chosen and studied. The method was based on “Grounded theory” and a qualitative approach that involved continuous dialogue with informants and representatives from the horse sector, local people and representatives from the municipal administration. More than 30 in-depth interviews have been conducted in Norway and about 20 in Sweden, in addition to some more or less sporadic conversations with people we met while doing fieldwork.

Mapping and field visits to horse owners in the municipality of Skurup in southern Sweden as well as in Nittedal in southern Norway have been undertaken. For the other Norwegian case area, such mapping was already done.

The interviews have been analysed by following the classic Grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1992), classifying and categorising the data to understand better the equine sector and the people involved.

Throughout the project, there have been several interactions with the reference group members. Due to the pandemic, we had to cancel several of the planned face-to-face meetings and substitute them with shorter digital sessions. Still, the reference group has been a valuable resource for the project throughout the whole project period.

Results and discussion

As horses occupy more space in the peri-urban landscape, both the social and physical landscape undergo restructuring. This “horseification” often involves a kind of lifestyle migration, whereby new inhabitants and commuters (horse owners) of the peri-urban countryside transform the environment.

Cultural conflicts

Not unexpectedly, such a restructuring of the peri-urban landscape creates some conflicts between its “new” inhabitants (lifestyle migrants, horse owners) and its long-standing residents (farmers and landowners). This can be understood as a collision between groups with different ideologies and values, whereby rural practices are challenged by an urban norm (Flø 2021). A central aspect of these kinds of “culture clashes” is that an urban norm about the landscape as an area for

consumption and recreation tends to stand in direct opposition to rural values and practices where the landscape is, to a greater extent, a source of livelihood.

Still, the cultural clash between “new” and “old” inhabitants was not always connected to horse and horse keeping. The horse keepers felt they were somehow representing the urban norm. By that, they were blamed for the cultural changes some of the old inhabitants experienced and disliked, such as fewer public services being available in the countryside. At the same time, all positive development focuses on urban areas.

The equine sector needs to work on how the inhabitants perceive the sector in the community where they live. The notion of “us and them” seems to influence the relationship between horse-owners and non-horse-owners in the communities. This reduces the room for developing informal institutions and smooth rules for how to live together.

Informal organisation and loose network

The Norwegian equestrian sector has overarching bodies such as the Norwegian Equestrian Federation, the Norwegian Equestrian Center, and many riding clubs that often serve as a gathering point. In addition, there are many associations for the different breeds that also have their member activities and events. The equestrian centers and riding schools are also important meeting points in their local communities. But an important feature of the equine sector, particularly in Norway, is still the degree of informal networks and informal organization, and the many small private actors who operate independently. Like in the stables for instance where the horse owners themselves buy feed and emergency equipment, and share tasks such as feeding, import and discharge. In such environments, it is the informal organization of the work tasks in the stable that is most important for the horse and the horse owner's well-being. These informal structures work very well in many places, but where they do not work, horse owners can quickly find that they are left alone with problems that a more formal network might have helped them with. At the same time, the equine sector may appear to be a bit unstructured from the outside, with no fixed points of reference for players who want to influence the sector.

Experience from Sweden shows that it is when the equine sector gathers across the branch, level, race or other directions within horse, that it will be possible to influence the authorities. Large companies and other players outside the equine sector, such as suppliers of feed, potential sponsors and other interest groups in society, will also be easier to influence by more jointly organized horse owners, than individuals or small horse enterprises.

A stronger and more jointly organized equine-sector will help with the communication and negotiation with the local authorities as well as with other interest groups, suppliers and players outside the equine-sector.

Environment

Horse keeping was found to be primarily associated with cultural ecosystem services, by its contribution to the equine sport sector and the preservation of the rural cultural and natural landscape with high recreational values. By preserving farmland and grazing pastures for horses, horse keeping can also be linked to supporting, regulating and provisioning ecosystem services. In addition, horse keeping in peri-urban areas was found to end in the periphery of the local physical planning. However, there is a need to integrate a long-term strategy and holistic perspective to achieve the full potential of horse keeping, considering the contribution to the ecosystem services. There is a need for more creative planning if horses should reach the potential as a resource and a planning tool for a sustainable development in the dynamic peri-urban landscape.

Economy

Horse owners are completely dependent on a number of goods and services. Many people rent stable space, and depending on the conditions, the horse owner buys feed and spreads himself. In

addition, the equine sector needs specialized equipment and services such as farriers and trainers. Many of these services, especially teaching, are created by the equine sector itself. This means that as the equine sector grows, there will be room for the development of more such services. But when the horse sector is reduced, for example as a result of economic downturns that make it cost too much for many to have a horse, more of those who offer goods and services to horse owners will also notice this and there will not be room for as many players. Everyone who drives a horse thus benefits from a large and vibrant horse sector because it gives them, not only better but a greater diversity of goods and services.

The relatively high density of horses in the case study communities was the main reason why several of the farriers and others delivering services to the sector had settled with their business in the area. The same was reported from several of the retailers of different equipment for horse riding etc. Some local farmers also reported that they have specialized their grass production to serve the market for fodder for horses. None of them saw any alternative profitable agricultural production on their properties.

Several of the people we spoke with, were people who grew up in the communities and who have learned to handle horses and appreciate life in the stables at an early age. To them, the possibility of starting their own horse business in their home community was the main reason why they didn't move away.

Planning

Some of the tensions between the equine sector and the other users of the peri-urban landscape can be reduced by thorough planning. The project has shown us that the concept "serious leisure" can be useful to see how complex it is to understand and respond in a constructive way for the municipal planners today. The equine sector is a good indicator for the transformation the peri-urban areas are facing today. They admit that they are lacking knowledge about the extent of the equine sector, and the sector is not part of the theme they are set to plan for, and they ask for clearer policy and more sensitive concepts for the change in peri-urban areas. Serious leisure is an important factor to take into rural- and peri-urban planning and development, especial in the affluent peri-urban communities in Scandinavia.

Conclusions

Even if the project has been delayed due to several reasons, explained in the detailed summary in Swedish, we can for sure conclude by saying that there is a need for a better organized equine sector, particularly in Norway. Several of the challenges the sector as well as the individual horse owners are facing will benefit from a stronger and better connection between the different groups of actors in the sector. A place to start will be to acknowledge that all the different actors and groups of actors are depending on each other. A better organized horse sector will also, potentially, influence the work on strengthening the relationship between horse-owners and non-horse-owners in the communities. It will help with communication and negotiation with the local authorities as well as with other interest groups, suppliers, and players outside the equine sector.

This will also influence the work on planning for horses and the use of horses in peri-urban areas. Better planning will reduce conflict levels between horse-owners and non-horse-owners in the communities as well as potentially have a positive effect on environmental factors.

Relevance for the practical horse sector incl. recommendations

The equine sector needs to work on how the sector is perceived by the inhabitants in the community where they live. The notion of "us and them" seems to influence the relationship between horse-owners and non-horse-owners in the communities, and this reduces the room for developing informal institutions and smooth rules for how to live together. The notion of being

perceived as representatives of an urban “invading” culture, by some local actors, is concerning many of the horse keepers.

A stronger and more jointly organized equine sector will help with the communication and negotiation with the local authorities as well as with other interest groups in the community, as suppliers and players outside the equine sector. In addition, a better organized horse sector might also help to reduce the notion of “us and them”.

There is a need for the equine sector to work on linking horse keeping to supporting, regulating, and provisioning ecosystem services. While the social contribution from the equine sector seems to be well communicated the sector’s deliveries of environmental goods and services on the other hand are under-communicated.

The equine sector in peri-urban areas supports the local economy by demanding goods and services from suppliers. Fodder is purchased from farmers who sometimes specialize their production to serve the equine market. A relative density of horses in an area also creates markets for service providers who are able to establish businesses and settle or even to continue living in the community.

The tensions between the equine sector and the other users can be reduced by thorough planning. Here the concept “serious leisure” is useful to respond in a constructive way for the municipal planners who admit that they are lacking knowledge about the extent and complexity of the equine sector. Riding and horse use need to become part of the theme planners are set to plan for, and we need clearer policy and more sensitive concepts for the change in peri-urban areas.

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Part 3: Result dissemination

So far, we have published one scientific article in addition to some popular articles and public talks. Two manuscripts are in the making, the first to be published this autumn and the second during spring next year. We also hope to be able to do a joint synthesising report/article more as a comparison of the equine sectors in Sweden and Norway.

Scientific publications, published	Flø, B. E. (2021). Bygda som vare. ARR-idehistorisk tidsskrift. Nr 1. 2021, pp. 17 - 31
Scientific publications, submitted	
Scientific publications, manuscript	Flø, B. E. & A. S. Prestvik, (spring 2023). Kva er det med hest? Ei studie av det bynære hestehaldet i møte med serie av kriser post post-moderniteten. Norsk sosiologisk tidsskrift. Elgåker, H. & Larsson, A. (autumn 2022). Why care about horses in landscape planning? Issues such as <i>serious leisure</i> slipping through the cracks of land use planning, exemplified by the horse industry in Sweden in times of climate change, pandemic and economic unrest (journal not decided, possibly Land Use Planning).
Conference publications/presentations	
Other publications, media etc.	Prestvik, A. S. & B. E. Flø, 2021. Om drivkraften og det seriøse hesteholdet. Hestesport nr 6. 2021. Prestvik, A. S. & B. E. Flø, 2021. Hest, landbruk og miljø. Hestesport nr 7. 2021. Prestvik A. S., 2021. Hesten, økonomisk og sosialt. Hestesport nr 8. 2021.
Oral communication, to horse sector, students etc.	Larsson A. Urban sprawl & the urban-rural divide – mind the knowledge gap! (Landscape analysis for people and environment studies, Alnarp, 220128) Larsson A. Jordbruksmark i samhällsplanering. (County of Gävleborg, online, 220316) Flø, B. E. Bygda som vare. (Release event for the Journal ARR special issue on rurality. 210826)
Student theses	
Other	We have ambitions to write up a synthesising article to discuss similarities and differences between the Swedish and Norwegian equine sector. This will eventually happen after each of the specific articles is published