

Hands-on in Kosterhavet National Park

The EUROPARC Federation and their Nordic-Baltic Section recently arranged for Simon Goss from the LIFE department of the European Union to spend a week at Kosterhavet National Park, Sweden. Here Simon reports on his time away from his desk in Brussels and out and about enjoying and learning more about our natural heritage...

How it all started

“Emotional intelligence, mind-mapping, creative functioneering ... ma che, what is this **** !”. I was with Angelo Salsi, my head of unit, having my yearly “career assessment and development” interview. Angelo was looking through my training programme that I had (with some difficulty) put together for next year. “Simon, you are supposed to be managing LIFE nature conservation projects, not new-age neurotics!”. Angelo may be impulsive at times but he knows his job inside-out. “Siente, if I arrange a week of hands-on training for you on-site, would you be interested?”....and here I am.

Saturday, October 1st - Arrival

18:48 - Oof! I finally arrived by car, plane, bus, train, bus, foot and ferry at Sydkoster Island at Kosterhavet National Park

<http://projektwebbar.lansstyrelsen.se/kosterhavet/Sv/english/Pages/index.aspx>, Sweden’s youngest national park founded in 2009, and its first marine park. Three people and a dog get off the ferry and walk off into the evening mist. I find my way to the hotel (the only one on the island). “Welcome, we’re closed”! Not to worry, Ima has given me a key and there is a shop on the other side of the island so I won’t have to fish for my supper.

Monday, October 2nd – Ups and downs!

07:07 - I wait on the harbour and join Anita and Stefan, my hosts for the week, on the ferry to Nord-Koster, the next island where their office is situated. Anders, Anita and Stefan manage the whole Park: 39,000 ha (98% marine), 6000 marine species (including the only coral reef in Swedish waters), 6000 terrestrial species, two Natura 2000 sites and six reserves just outside the Park. I wonder how they do it.



Stefan and Anita – my hosts for the week

10:00 – Meeting with Sandra and Helena, two young islanders who are setting themselves up as independent farmers. For a year now, Anders, Anita and Stefan have been encouraging them to manage the grazing on half of the Park’s reserves, on five different islands. There are no other farmers active in the National Park anymore. Old-style extensive subsistence farming is no longer profitable enough, so large areas of open land have become overgrown in the last 30 years and the Park badly needs new farmers to graze the areas they are busy re-opening. It’s a big chunk of money,

but also a big responsibility, so Sandra and Helena are apprehensive. Anders gets out a pen and signs; Helena signs; Sandra hesitates and then signs. Smiles all round.

12:00 - Anders takes me to a new stable under construction. He was a merchant marine engineer before joining the county administration, and helped set up the Park before becoming its first Director. Surprisingly, the builders are ahead of schedule. “The Park doesn’t own any animals, but we are providing those that do with grazing infrastructure, otherwise they couldn’t afford to expand their flocks”, he explains.

On the way back to the office he describes the new visitor centre which should be built next year on Syd-Koster. “We were all ready to build it here along the sound between North and South Koster islands, but three neighbours complained all the way to central government, and the permits were cancelled, we still can’t understand why – that’s years’ work down the drain”.

Afternoon - Anita takes me around the reserve at the North of the island. “We cleared this area a couple of years ago, and put the sheep on to graze it”. A bit further on, Sandra and Helena are repairing the visitor trail. They work part-time for the local entrepreneur who manages the trails for the park. We talk about their various contracts: restoration, trails, grazing, marine site monitoring, socio-economic monitoring etc. etc. “When the new visitor centre is built we should at last get some extra staff, that way we can do a lot more guided visits and other events” Anita hopes.



Sheep grazing contentedly

Near the beach there are long lines of large, round boulders. “10,000 years ago this area was covered by 2km of ice! When it melted it left these characteristic stones.” We try to imagine it then. Along the beach there are large patches of rotting seaweed that came in with a storm a few weeks ago. There is talk with [Kosters Trädgårdar](#) about composting it: “We are trying to make the Park good for the local economy”. Do they contract mostly locals? “Well, we have to do a call for tenders, and the last one for some big restoration work wasn’t won by the local entrepreneur but by an outside company using Polish workers. The islanders were not pleased!” Tricky!

Tuesday, October 2nd – No regrets!

07:07 - I find Stefan who is looking at the weather forecast on his smartphone: wind speed 19 m/s later this afternoon. Their boat is small, so instead of going to a small islet on the south-west side as planned, he takes me to the more sheltered Saltholmen Island, to the leeward of Nord-Koster.



Saltholmen Island

“The clearing work here is mostly finished, before you couldn’t get through it was so overgrown with Juniper and trees”. He shows me his management plan map that divides the island like a jig-saw puzzle into nine different zones, each corresponding to a different habitat. We sit down for a coffee. “You have to stop from time to time to look around and appreciate where you are”. Stefan changed career some years ago from being a Saab assembler to nature conservation manager. “There were 98 applications for this job and I was very pleased to get it”. No regrets there!

There are 20 sheep on the island (20 ha) but we haven’t seen any yet. We discuss island farming economics, environmental payments, socio-economic changes, the attitudes of the islanders towards the Park and its restoration work, tendering procedures and finish the tour of the island. Back at the jetty, the sheep are munching away quietly. The wind is noticeably stronger

Afternoon - We cross the sound on the little electric ferry and go to Långegärdeholme, 20 ha of peninsula on the north-east of Sydkoster. This side of the island is heavily overgrown, and in parts impenetrable. “This will be restored next year”. Stefan shows me the management plans and maps, including a long fence, coast to coast, to mark the edge of the Park and keep in the grazing stock. “I’m negotiating with the private landowners in the reserve about where the fence should go.”, “How is it going?” “Slowly!”



Långegärdeholme overgrown (Juniper, Scotch Pine, ...)

We walk around the shore-line, hopping from stone to stone, and talking about administration and contact management. “My friends think I spend all my time looking at birds through binoculars, but half my time is spent in the office planning, and the other half I spend inspecting the work being done.” Back at the harbour Stefan tries to summon the electric cable ferry, but it won’t come. A red light reads “High Winds”, so we sit down to wait for the main ferry. Tomorrow I am to go with Anita and a group of school children to the southernmost island, Ursholmen, the westernmost point in Sweden (with a building).

During the night - “Did I wake you?” - Stefan is on the phone - “Yes”, “Oh sorry! The boat trip tomorrow is off – there are three meter waves, so the captain prefers not to sail. Take the 7 o’clock ferry to Strömstad instead.”

Wednesday, October 3rd – Fishing for clues

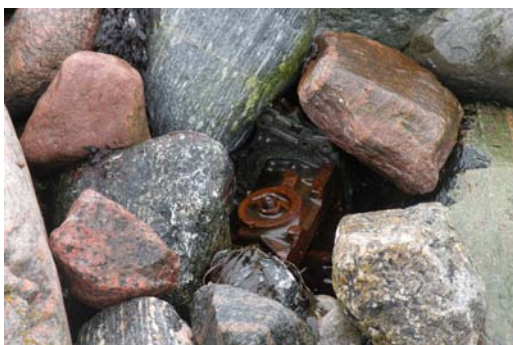
07:07 - Off to Strömstad. Stefan drives me to Rossö island, just off the mainland. They are just finishing the work removing all the *Rosa rugosa*. 1.50m high bushes of the plant had invaded the whole beach making it inaccessible. Six people were digging out roots by hand. This is the second clean-up phase, taking out regrowth and patches missed on the first pass. The first phase was a lot harder because the beach was inaccessible to heavy machinery, and the overall budget is +/- 40.000€ for one ha. “It’s expensive” says Stefan, “but if we don’t start tackling it now it’ll be even harder later. This is the worst area and a priority”.



Hand-clearing *Rosa rugosa*

Magnus shows Stefan a sea poppy they had marked off, and which has survived under the *Rosa rugosa*. “We also found some sea holly” Stefan says, “so hopefully the beach vegetation will recover bit by bit.” He shakes hands with Magnus and says we’re off to meet the environmental police. “I didn’t know we had any” wonders Magnus.

10:00 - We meet the two environment police officers and go to the scene of the crime. A fishing boat had gone ashore at the peninsula of Kockholmen. The owner has chosen the cheap disposal option and is being accused of chopping up the boat, burning the wood on the beach, emptying the oil and fuel on the gravel, and hiding the engine parts under rocks in the water. Kent and Stefan had witnessed this and taken photos.



Engine parts hidden beneath the rocks

“I’m really pleased the environmental police are taking this seriously”, Stefan says. Their department is quite new. Seven people are responsible for the whole Västra-Götalands county. Caroline, one of the officers, tells me that there was only one a few years ago. We talk about their work. “This will be

our first such prosecution around here. It's very well documented, thanks to the Park, and we hope it will have quite an impact" she says.

Kent is retired but still working. He's been a ranger since 1979. "Best job in the world" he says. Kent (a keen bird-watcher) tells Stefan about a sea eagle he thinks is nesting nearby. "It'll be the first one nesting here since 1904". We talk about bird crime and nest robbing. "That's another department", says Caroline, "Don't ask me why."

Just off the parking area behind one of the beaches Kent shows Caroline and I a traditional Swedish country building. "In 1948 the owners dismantled it in a village, 150 km away and shipped it here by rail. Now it's on sale for 3.5 million euro". We try and imagine being able to pay so much. "It's the same on the other islands" says Stefan, "young people can't afford to buy a house on their own island, so they move to the mainland. It's a problem". Nice house, pity about the price

12:00 - Anita shows me the new Park visitor centre nearby. "We'll have one at each of the 5 main "entrances" to the Park." It's very well made with local wood and a distinctive design that features in the Park's entire visitor infrastructure. She tells me of their Interreg project with the neighbouring Ytre Hvaler National Park <http://www.ytre-hvaler.no/>, also a marine Park, just over the frontier in Norway.

12:30 - Anita takes me to the Marine Biological Laboratory at Tjärnö, part of the Universities of Göteborg and Stockholm. She is a marine biologist (*nudibranchs*) and used to work there before becoming Assistant Director at the Park. "The Laboratory does a lot of work for us, such as inventories and monitoring. There's so much about the marine part of the Park we don't know yet."

We go round the aquarium discussing the effects of trawling on the species and habitats. "Here they have a tradition of fishing for three days and stopping for four days to let the fjord rest". Anita tells me about the collective management practices the local fishermen have been developing voluntarily for a number of years, and the awards they have won for sustainability. "We had lots and lots of discussions running up to the establishment of the Park and its marine management plan, but it wasn't confrontational. They can still trawl for shrimp but have accepted a packet of restrictions on the times, depths, places, net sizes and types and so on. It's a balanced agreement that allows them to earn living while protecting our most sensitive areas." She laughs as she remembers. "We gave them some marine biology courses, so they could better understand the ecological issues. Afterwards, they agreed they had learnt quite a bit, but that it was also clear we knew nothing at all about professional fishing. So they then gave us fishing courses!"

One of the scientists is working on a coral restoration project that uses weak electrolysis to encourage growth. They plan to reintroduce the coral on a dead reef in the South off the Park, which would be a conservation breakthrough, but it's still in the experimental stage. We discuss [LIFE funding](#) possibilities.

Anita takes me to another nearby reserve with a small visitor centre. We talk about the socio-economic impact study she has commissioned. "In the year after the Park was inaugurated, visits to the area increased by 30%". On the way back she shows me the house of one of the fishermen and one of his two boats in the small very small harbour opposite. "His family has been fishing here for generations, and he's really keen on preserving both the fishing and the marine life. He's been very helpful in our discussions".



Sustainable fisherman's boat

Thursday, October 4th – Of wind and white gold

07:07 - It's still very windy, and another boat trip is cancelled. "That's life on the islands; you have to be ready to change your plans with the weather".

I sit with Stefan, looking at his GIS / satellite photo programme with which he plans his restoration work. We discuss habitat types, cost estimates and the recent tender. He shows me the photos before the clearing was done on Saltholmen – big changes. We talk about burning, grazing loads and the difference between restoration grazing and maintenance grazing. Stefan would like to have goats there to finish off some of the juniper overgrowth. He's worried that there aren't enough animals in the Park to graze all the land he is clearing, and the Park can't buy any. We discuss ways around this policy.

Coffee break, the phone rings. "The ferry captain has seen half a dozen Northern gannets" says Anita. Apparently they are quite rare here. Stefan fires up his smartphone and shows me a real-time GIS tracking system of all the large boats in the area. "Here's the ferry, here's the coastguard" Two red dots with a registration label inch across the sea.

10:00

Stefan takes me to check on some coppicing that has been done for the Park. "We get 11€ per tree from the environmental payments". We climb to the top of the island where there are two old lighthouses lovingly restored by a volunteer lighthouse preservation society. It's very windy, but you can see practically the whole of the Park area. "Do you still want to go out on the boat?" Stefan asks me as we shelter from a particularly strong gust behind one of the lighthouses. We watch five grey crows chase a sparrow-hawk around the sky.

We meet Pia-Lena, another grazing manager. We discuss grazing economics again, and go down to another area they plan to restore later on. Some birds pass, and Stefan fires up his smartphone, which then emits a series of chirps and tweets. "That's the gold crest song, now wait and see", and within a minute a flock of gold crests and tits comes round. Amazing! On the way back he shows me an area restored a few years ago. "At the time the islanders about all the trees being cut, but now they say how nice it is".

Back at the office, Anita has been struggling with updating the Swedish marine habitat definitions, in line with the EU ones, and how this affects her sites' habitat maps. "The EU marine habitat definitions are too broad, they should be more precise". We discuss the pros and cons of tampering with the Habitats Directive over lunch.

13:30 - I walk across Syd-Koster to Ekenas where I am showed around an oyster hatchery by the owner Benno. We discuss the price of Swedish flat oysters: "5€100 g, 300 Tonnes per year

production target, you work it out”. He’s a marine botanist from the same research laboratory as Anita – he ran out of research money three years ago and joined this venture capital enterprise.

They breed the Oysters full cycle from larva to adult, which takes three years and five species of alga as food. This involves much cleaning, filtering and dividing the batches as they grow to give them room. After 14 weeks or so in the hatchery, they are big enough to be parked in containers in the sea nearby. “We’re the only hatchery around here, so they’re all curious about what we’re doing”. Their first harvest is next year.



Benno and his oyster hatchery

Friday October 5th - Departure

07:07 - Dark and windy. No boat trips today. I take the ferry to the office, and catch up with typing. Stefan has a telephone meeting, and Anita catches up with her administrative work.

Afternoon - I say good bye to Stefan and Anita who leave on different ferries. The sun is out and the sky is blue, the wind has dropped. I sit on a rock and look out over Kosterhavet National Park.



Kosterhavets National Park

My special thanks go to Anders, Anita and Stefan, Kosterhavet National Park, for a great week.

Simon Goss, LIFE

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