



REGERINGSKANSLIET

”Governance of peatlands and wetlands in Sweden”

**Tal av Statssekreterare Anders Flanking vid 14:
internationella torvkonferensen i Stockholm 7 juni 2012**

***Speech by State Secretary Anders Flanking at the 14th International
Peat Congress in Stockholm, June 7, 2012***

Distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

Admire the mires

When walking on a mire one has to admire these extraordinary creations of nature. Plant species forming its own landscape! Raised bogs forms wide domes of peat and vegetation and peat together can develop sophisticated pattern of strings and hummocks and other features! Every structure has its own miniature ecosystem with species adapted to very specific hydrological conditions.

In these peatlands remnants of vegetation are stored year after year, century after century and even millennia after each other. In these organic layers that we call peat, we can find well preserved residues of both plant and animal species and traces of human activities, and even human bodies, several thousand years old!

The low oxygen content and acid conditions has preserved them in remarkably good conditions. Plant pollens remaining in peat from different ages gives us important information of the development of the natural landscape since the ice-age. The mires are therefore fascinating historical and biological archives that can help us understand both landscape and human development thousands of years back.

The word mire that often is used synonymic to “natural peatlands” comes from the Scandinavian word “Myr”. Natural peatlands are widespread in the world and are the most common type of wetland. But peatlands here in our temperate climate differs a lot from those in the tropics!

Here Sphagnum-species are the most important peat forming plant-group and vast bogs or fens can be covered by different Sphagnum species together with a rather limited number of vascular plants.

In our part of the world we can find a wide variety of different bog and fen types. There are also different swamps with various peat-thicknesses. There is in total a great number of mire types representing different ecosystem types and species compositions. In some cases, one can find calcareous fens with a high species diversity and rare orchids and molluscs.

Research on mires has a long tradition in Sweden resulting in important works, used worldwide, with for example descriptions on mires and their developments by von Post and Sernander 1910 and Hugo Sjörs –the latter with numerous publications during more than half a century from 1948 and onwards.

Mires –natural peatlands are amongst the most typical wetlands in Sweden, but there are also a number of other wetland types, such as wet heaths and grass-lands, swamps and different alluvial wetlands.

The Swedish wetland survey has identified nearly 50 different types –showing the diversity they represent.

Peatlands are an important component of the Earth’s Carbon cycle interacting with the atmosphere. The huge amount of carbon stored in the peat makes them valuable carbon storages in terms of Climate change.

When it comes to the full life cycle of different greenhouse gases and peatlands, emissions and sequestration seems to vary a lot with climate, with different types of peatlands, in different geographical regions and with the degree of human impact such as drainage. I think we still do not have the full pictures on these issues and more research on the issue should be welcomed.

Peatlands have been drained and converted from wetlands to dry land for several purposes. In our country, the most important being agriculture and forestry. In agriculture large areas of former wetlands are now arable land, important for agriculture. At least 600 000 hectares of peatlands was converted in this way, and a large part of the land is today covered to forests.

In forestry, even a larger area, at least 1 million hectare of productive forest is effectively drained peatlands and has a high economic value.

Except for maintaining existing ditches, new draining of wetlands is now held on a minimum level.

Peat extraction constitutes today a very small part of the use of wetlands and peatlands in Sweden. Only about 12 000 hectares of our more than 6 million hectares of peatlands is used for peat extraction for energy purposes. There is also a small amount of mires extracted for horticultural peat.

The knowledge of the different value of wetlands and peatlands has increased the last decades and we find that a wise use of those remaining today is to keep most of them in a natural stage.

Wetlands are important ecosystems for a wide range of wildlife habitats supporting important biological diversity and species at risk. They help us with ecosystem services such as freshwater quality and hydrological integrity, carbon storage and sequestration, and geochemical and palaeo archives. They are important for outdoor recreation, bird watching and hunting.

Governance -responsible wetland management

In order to preserve the majority of these remaining wetlands and their functions we introduced a system of permissions for drainage in the 1980:s and even a drainage ban in parts of the country in the early 1990:s. Also the regulations for peat extraction in larger scale have been strengthened:

Peat extraction for energy purposes in Sweden requires a permit from the provincial government. The issue is treated under a special law on peat-deposits and partly under the Environmental Code. Permission for peat extraction is only given if appropriate in the public interest. An environmental impact assessment must be included in the application. The extraction of peat may not be carried out in a wetland that is valuable for the natural or cultural environment. The result today is that the interest for peat extraction is more focused to already drained or damaged peatlands where nature- and cultural values are low. Extraction of peat in such sites may also under certain circumstances result in a low-net effect on the climate.

A prerequisite for wise use of wetlands and peatlands and also for the authorities to handle different applications for drainage or peat extraction is to have a solid inventory as a base. In this country a national wetland survey have been carried out during a 25-years period from 1981. In total about 35,000 wetlands were surveyed, corresponding to a total wetland area of 4.3 million ha.

The main aims of the survey were: to identify valuable wetlands which should be conserved for future generations, to investigate the impact of human activities on the wetlands, and to increase general knowledge about wetlands in Sweden. This database is now the most used planning tool for wetland management in Sweden.

On top of this the data have been used to produce a mire protection plan covering more than 600 sites. Protection has been carried out, mostly by creating nature reserves since this plan was released 1994 and today about 350 sites are remains to protect.

Protection of mires, restoration of wetlands and other work for the preservation of wetlands is included in the Swedish environmental quality objectives.

The environmental quality objectives

The overall goal of the Government's environmental policy is to hand on to the next generation a society in which the major environmental problems facing Sweden have been solved.

One of the important tools for the government and the parliament in Sweden to reach environmental goals has been to systemize them, quantify them, create a broad consensus within the society and to implement them on all levels with an overall goal to reach the targets within one generation.

The Swedish system of environmental objectives, was adopted by the Swedish Parliament in 1999, now consisting of 16 environmental quality objectives, one of them is "Thriving wetlands".

The Government later intends to adopt strategies for priority areas containing milestone targets, representing clear steps towards achieving the generational goal and the environmental quality objectives.

The all Party Committee on Environmental Objectives is preparing proposals for those strategies, the first, covering protection and forest management is planned to be released in juni 2013.

When it comes to thriving wetlands, the overall goal is that the ecological and water-conserving function of wetlands in the landscape must be maintained and valuable wetlands preserved for the future. Meaning for example that:

- Wetlands of all types are represented throughout the country within their natural range,
- Important ecosystem services of wetlands such as biological production, carbon storage, water management, water treatment and the balancing of water flows are retained,
- Wetlands are restored, especially where activities such as drainage and peat harvesting has resulted in loss and fragmentation of wetlands
- Wetland-species are able to spread to new areas within their natural range;

The government supports the development of holistic regional landscape strategies with the aim to build solid regional knowledgebase and have a high degree of participation of stakeholders in ecological landscape planning. We also have a process to develop green infrastructures in the landscape, enabling species migration, healthy ecosystems and strengthen possibilities to tackle climate change. In these matters wetlands plays a vital role, they support and produce several ecosystem services of importance for landscape functioning and sustainable use.

Admire the mires!

Thank you for your attention!