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Protected area management

Summary

Protected areas make up 15 per cent of Sweden's surface area. Protected areas need to be managed through nature conservation and measures that make the areas accessible for outdoor life. The audit of the Swedish National Audit Office ("the Swedish NAO") shows that management of protected areas is not effective. The risk is that the natural, cultural environmental and outdoor recreational values that are protected in our national parks and nature reserves will not be preserved or could even be lost. In order for the county administrative boards to manage protected areas effectively, the Government needs to clarify its management and the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency needs to develop its support for the county administrative boards. The Riksdag has decided that protected areas shall be managed with a high level of ambition. The Swedish NAO considers that allocated funds do not suffice to attain the goals set by the Riksdag for managing protected areas.

The Government does not follow up on goal fulfilment

In order to improve effectiveness in the management of protected areas, more knowledge is needed on the outcome of such management. The Government has not designed the follow-up in a way that enables assessing whether or not the goals for managing protected areas are achieved. There is therefore no national aggregate of the status of the assets that have been protected. This also affects financial management, as it is not possible to estimate the cost of preserving the protected values.

The objectives for managing protected areas cannot be achieved with allocated funds

There are strong indications that the objectives set by the Riksdag for managing protected areas are not being achieved. The Swedish NAO assesses that there is a discrepancy between what the county administrative boards can achieve within the scope of allocated funds, and the objective for there to be a high level of ambition in the management of protected areas. The county administrative boards do not have sufficient resources to manage the protected areas in a way that preserves or increases natural assets, and that makes the areas freely accessible to visitors.

Outdated management plans prevent effective management

Many of the management plans for the national parks and nature reserves are outdated and need to be revised to enable effective management of the areas. The county administrative boards and the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency have not revised management plans at the required pace.

The Swedish NAO considers that the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency also needs to update its guidance on designing management plans, so that the plans can provide greater scope for adapting management to changes that affect management needs and choice of methods. That way, management plans will be relevant and useful for longer.

The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency does not provide the county administrative boards with adequate support

The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency's guidelines on managing protected areas do not fully meet the county administrative boards' need for support. The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency has not kept the guidelines up to date and adapted to the county administrative boards' needs. This poses a risk of inability of the county administrative boards to manage protected areas effectively.

The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency's IT support for following up on the management of protected areas is not fit for purpose. The registration of implemented measures requires extensive work for the county administrative boards but is of limited benefit for their needs. The shortcomings also mean that the data in the systems does not provide a reliable basis for national follow-up.

Risk of the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency failing to distribute funds effectively

There are shortcomings in how the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency has devised allocating funds to the county administrative boards for managing protected areas. The Swedish NAO assesses that there is a risk that the allocation of funds does

not adequately reflect the counties' different management needs, and how they change over time. These shortcomings present a risk of resources not being used for the measures with highest priority at the national level.

Recommendations

The Swedish NAO makes the following recommendations:

To the Government

- Ensure that follow-up on the management of protected areas is developed so that it can be used to monitor whether the objectives are met, identify management needs and provide a basis for financial governance.
- Review whether the financial governance enables the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency and the county administrative boards to manage the protected areas with the high level of ambition decided by the Riksdag.

To the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency

- Ensure that the guidelines needed by the county administrative boards to manage protected areas meet their needs.
- Update the guidance on how management plans should be designed to make them more fit for purpose and for them to stay relevant for longer than currently.
- Clarify the guidance on delegating the management of protected areas to another party, by specifying the criteria that must be met for such delegation of management and how the county administrative board is to monitor how these areas are being managed.
- Ensure that the management plans for all national parks are kept up to date.
- Review the allocation of funds for the management of protected areas such that funds are allocated between the county administrative boards in a way that enables implementing the measures with highest priority at national level. The allocation of funds should take account of changes in management needs.

To the county administrative boards:

- Ensure that management plans for all nature reserves established by the state are kept up to date.
- Apply principles for prioritising measures to ensure that resources are used for the most prioritised management measures.