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EXPERIENCES AND APPLICATIONS OF ECOMUSEUMS IN SCANDINAVIA

Dear colleagues,

First of all I would like to express my gratitude to the conference organizers, who made it possible for me to take part in your conference. I have been working as the managing director of the Ecomuseum Bergslagen in the 90ties and I am now director for the city museum in Norrköping at the east coast of Sweden since four years ago.

I have been asked to give you some examples of our experiences of ecomuseums in Scandinavia during the last twenty years. I will start by trying to define the ecomuseum concept. I will then give you a background to the application of the new museology in Sweden and how its implementations are developing. I will try to characterize the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish ecomuseums pointing out the similarities and differences and finally give you some more basic examples of activities in the Ecomuseum Bergslagen. I hope these examples will point out the delicate balance between the work of the volunteers and the professional workers, the contradictions between using and preserving the physical remains of the heritage and finally how an ecomuseum can play an important role in the development of a sustainable cultural tourism.

Defining an ecomuseum is not an easy task, since there are as many definitions as there are ecomuseums around the world. Anyhow they have some criteria in common. An ecomuseum is consisting of a number of physical places in a region, places that are connected together like a necklace in order to give a visitor in the region a more complete understanding of the history of a local place. The definition can also focus on the close connection between environment, resources and technology and the most important part of every ecomuseum – the local inhabitants.

You can easily distinguish the traditional museum from the ecomuseum. The idea of an ecomuseum is quite different from a traditional museum. The concept “museum” is generally focussing on the house in which you are exposing the collections. The word “museum” could be traced back to the Greek word *Museion* which was the name of the temple where Mnemos – the goodness of Memory – was living with her nine daughters representing the traditional fine arts. An ecomuseum on the other hand can be defined as a part of a landscape. A territorial museum. It has no house, no collections and not even a professionally educated staff. Or very few staff members. The aim of the ecomuseum is to invite the visitors to share the history of the landscape with the local inhabitants and to describe, in the specific region it covers how the inhabitants have used the natural resources over a wide time span. In this sense the ecomuseum deals with both ecology and culture. You may also define the traditional museum as a museum of things and the ecomuseum as a museum of people.

Many museologists in the world refer to the ecomuseums – or as they also may be called the local community museums – as truly democratic institutions, connecting small local museums into a broader network and helping and encouraging local inhabitants to express, take care of and maintain their heritage. The ecomuseum concept was created in France in the early 70ties. In Scandinavia there has been a very strong emphasis on the role of citizens and local inhabitants’ roles. The ecomuseum idea has been accepted among people mostly because of its possibility to strengthen democracy and offer opportunities for local people not only to deal

with the heritage but to define it and to define the values of it. The influence of the local inhabitants in the Scandinavian mode of ecomuseum is strong. Scandinavia has a long tradition in engaging people in local communities to take part in the process of shaping and creating history and heritage. 100 years ago, around the shift between the 19th and the 20th centuries, there were a broad movement growing for preserving local heritage connected to the traditional farming life on the countryside. People were afraid of the sudden social changes, which were happening when industrialising were growing and great amounts of young men and women were forced to move into towns to get jobs. Local heritage associations were created and thousand of people were engaged in the preservation of the agrarian life stile. Our most well-known example of this is Dr Arthur Hazelius, who created the outdoor museum *Skansen* in Stockholm, where he brought examples of buildings from different regions in Sweden and arranged them so visitors could get a good picture of the ordinarily life on a farm in elderly times.

Hazelius was a modern museologist in his own time. He won a lot of prizes on the world trade exhibitions around the world. Most famous was his "living tableaux" consisting of real persons in old fashion clothes, who demonstrated ordinarily farming work for the visitors.

During the same time there where a strong movement in educating adults with none or very low educational level. The Labour movements in the Scandinavian countries supported the working class in their attempt to study. Associations for self-study groups were created all over in Scandivavia and in Denmark the Danish priest Grundtvig (1783-1872) – who was one of the most well-known personalities in the whole history of Danish culture - created the idea of a special Folk High School, a kind of residential college of non-formal adult education, with long-term courses as the core of its work. The percentage of voluntarily work has always been very high in these movements and a broad tradition has been consolidated based on voluntarily work among people from lower and middle classes. In contrarily to the volunteers who are working in the museums in Great Britain for example. The ecomuseum exemplifies another way of handling the daily work in the museum. The traditional museum has a staff of professionals and academic experts who are supported by an association of volunteers in running the museum. The ecomuseum consists of a great numbers of volunteers who have a little group of museological experts to their help.

Today there are more ecomuseums in Norway than in any other country in Scandinavia. Many of these museums are not calling themselves an ecomuseum, but they can be defined as such because they work very closed to the local inhabitants in each region. In the early 80ties a network of local museums started in Norway and their mission was quite different from the traditional museums. Many of the marginalised groups such as the fishers in the far north small villages, the Lapps and also the workers in many of the industries in Norway could not been identified in the traditional cultural heritage in the museums. So they supported this new museological movement. The key-words were; identification and documentation. Many of the Norwegian ecomuseums are a kind of archives with photos and archive material reflecting the 20th century life of people.

In Denmark the movement of ecomuseum started much later. First in the middle of the 90ties there were created some museums, which could be defined as ecomuseums in a truly sense. For a long time there were a resist against the name ecomuseum. Since it was too much associated with ecology and the "green wave" in Europe. Cultural tourism and its economic effects of the museums work has been high lightened in Denmark and today the concept of the ecomuseum is an important part of the strategy of the Danish environmental ministry.

In Sweden the concept was in use in the early 80ties and became an important argument for the new museology. Many museums needed to revitalize their work since they too much had been focussed on their house in spite of the mission to reach all inhabitants in each region or local community. A museological debate started and the first ecomuseum in Sweden was created in the landscape of Bergslagen. There were three important reasons for this museological experiment at that time.

First the democratic aspect of cultural heritage. The gap between the academic defined values and the local citizens' thoughts and perceptions of value was growing wider.

Second the needs to care of the 20th century physical remains of industrial heritage made it necessary to find new ways of handling the documentation and preservation questions. Collection of objects were not longer an easy task, when these object consisted of huge equipments and machineries from the last decades of industrial era. A complete new method was needed. The ecomuseum with the aim to preserve everything at its original place was a

solution on this problem.

Third were the growing interest in cultural tourism and the ambitions in local regions to create a more sustainable tourism based on the natural tourist resources in the landscape. A contributing reason was also a growing general interest in local history.

Bergslagen is situated in the middle part of Sweden. It consists of 24 local communities spread out in seven counties. The region is famous due to its rich ore resources (iron, copper, silver) and the ore has been refined since early medieval time up to the late 1960s and 70s, when the economic crisis hit the region – the same thing happened in many other of the industrial areas in Sweden and Europe. There is still steel production in the region, but today the companies are specialised and they need less manpower than before. And of course many of the former plants and work-shops, mines and power stations were abandoned and left to be ruins. So the situation was in the beginning of the 80s precarious. High unemployment, low educational level, a lack of entrepreneur spirit and a huge amount of empty and left over mines and factory buildings. These were the main obstacles for economic development in Bergslagen 20 years ago.

The Ecomuseum Bergslagen in Sweden was created in the middle of the 80s. It consists of about 50 local sites in seven communities. The Strömsholm's canal connects the north and the south part of the area with each other. The canal was in the past an important way where ore and cast iron was transported by boat in the summer and by horse and sledge on the ice in winter time. The area covers 7500 sq km. The common theme for all chosen sites in the museum is the iron, steel and copper production, including a wide span of local places illustrating low technology iron production in pre-historical time up to modern steel plants, but also including settlements, power stations, railways, cultural halls and modern societies.

Together all these places can give the visitor a glimpse of how mining and metal production has shaped the landscape, the settlements and peoples life over centuries.

The local authorities in the seven communities own and finance the organisation, which aim is to strengthen the local identity and feeling of belonging together by supplying each site with all necessary information about the other places in the ecomuseum. The staff are just a handful of people with professional skills and all their time are spent travelling around to the sites in order to meet and serve the local inhabitants, who are engaged in the presentation and activities on the site. These people are the real museum staff.

In order to keep the whole area united the staff organise different types of collective activities; seminars, excursions, discussions, study groups and even parties and festivals. The main point is to make everybody aware of the relationship between the sites in the museum. You have to make sure that everybody who work as a local guide or volunteer is a representative for the whole area. This is one of the most difficult challenges, since every person likes her own place and is more familiar with her own heritage than with others.

About 1000 up to 1500 persons are partly and from time to time doing voluntary work in the museum. This means that the ecomuseum have to deal with the balance between unpaid people working for fun and employed people working for their living. And it's not an easy task. Volunteers can not be steered up and directed in the same way as you do with your paid staff members. This means there will always been a flexibility and a moment of insecurity in the organisation when it is built upon volunteers. You may find yourselves standing without any fixed opening times on the sites for examples. The fascination and positive effects of the work of the volunteers are their enthusiasm, their great knowledge about the local site and their charm and generosity. If I may quote Kenneth Hudson, "the museums must have chairs and charms to survive". Working with volunteers gives the museum both.

Another way of handling the balance between paid and unpaid staff is to be observant of all possibilities to earn money in a larger scale on the elaborated activities on the sites. There are a lot of events, festivals, and local cultural activities arranged on the sites or in close connection to them especially in summer-time. There are also a lot of coffee-shops and souvenir boutiques rising in the region, as well as small hotels, camping sites, restaurants, bed & breakfast accommodations and handicraft shops. As soon as this kind of private entrepreneurs are showing interest in a cultural heritage site, the museum staffs starts a discussion how to develop the business without being dependent on voluntary work. In some cases this ends up in a co-operation between the association with local volunteers and the entrepreneur. To strengthen this collaboration you need entrepreneurs with a very good and deep knowledge about the local heritage and the industrial remains on the site. And these people need good relations to local people so that co-operation between paid and unpaid

persons can survive and become stronger. This is one reason why special educational programs for entrepreneurs are carried through in the ecomuseum.

Heritage is not only a question of physical remains in the landscape. The intangible heritage in the shape of memories, stories, knowledge and thoughts of the people are as important as the physical concrete pieces of old buildings and constructions. The volunteers are a rich resource for all kind of intangible or immaterial heritage.

Dealing with the industrial heritage, another problem will arise. The traditional preservation methods consisting of conservation of objects can not be applied to huge industrial equipments. It is impossible to take the costs for such a conservation process in this scale. Moreover it is questionable if this is the most efficient way of preserving industrial machineries. These parts of the industrial heritage need to be in use in order to be in good condition. Knowledge of the industrial processes and the handling of these equipment details can not be transmitted to next generations in a theoretical way through books, but need to be demonstrated and practised. The need of using is a new and very important part of the preservation philosophy and methods.

A conflict can arise between the former workers, who also are volunteers in the museum and the academic experts, who are pleading for a more traditional preservation philosophy in order to conserve the objects and the equipments for the benefit of the future generations. The important question to rise is; who has the right to define cultural value?

I am not sure these type of conflicts ever can be solved, but you will always face them and the discussion will be kept alive in the practise of an true ecomuseum.