Nordenskiöld, an Early Pioneer of Nordic Conservation

Seija A. Niemi

Summary

In 1880, after the successfully completing his expedition to sail the Northeast Passage, the Finnish-Swedish explorer and scientist Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld (1832–1901) published his essay *Förslag till inrättandet af Riksparker i de nordiska länderna* (A Proposal for Establishing National Parks in the Nordic Countries). In his essay, Nordenskiöld called for the creation of protected areas in which the original nature of the Nordic countries could be preserved for later generations. His *Proposal* eventually led to the passing of Sweden's Conservation Act of 1909, which established nine national parks - the first ever in Europe.

In the history of explorations, Nordenskiöld is best remembered as the explorer who first sailed the Northeast Passage during a 1878-1879 expedition. A lesser known fact is that he was also an influential pioneer in Nordic conservation history. His 1880 essay *Förslag till inrättandet af Riksparker i de nordiska länderna* (A Proposal for Establishing National Parks in the Nordic Countries) is a seminal text, comparable with George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature* (1864) or Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949).

Nordenskiöld wrote *Proposal* in order to help people realize the damaging effects of technological innovations on the environment. He wrote:

> "The accumulated influence of the great inventions of the last century on the nature around us is becoming increasingly evident day by day. The farthermost countryside will soon be crisscrossed by railways and telegraph lines. Sawmills and other kinds of mills are located deep in the wilderness .... The transition brings happiness and welfare for millions and demonstrates the true measure of a country's development ... But, at the same time, there is a melancholy feeling that future generations will barely be able to imagine what the land of their fathers was like." — Nordenskiöld *Förslag* (Proposal), 1880



Portrait of Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld (1902)

Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld by Axel Jungstedt (1902)

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In his writings, he warned of the downside of the cultural progress: the destruction of nature. However, at the same time he understood and accepted progress, because it often brought improved welfare to people.

Furthermore, to him, nature was a source for human inspiration and innovation. He himself got some of his most innovative ideas from his observations of nature, such as his development of ice breakers, floating breakwaters, and artesian wells. For example, his observation of how an ice drift calmed turbulent water, making it safe to sail behind or beside the ice, prompted him to design the floating breakwater.

Animal protection and the survival of species were also important to Nordenskiöld. In his diary from his first expedition to Spitsbergen in 1858, he described how greedy eider hunters collected all the eggs and killed most of the birds for their feathers. He considered it a miracle that the bird colonies were not completely exterminated. In his reports from subsequent expeditions, he spoke about the over-harvesting of whales, walruses, and seals committed by Norwegian and other northern European fishers in the Arctic Ocean.

Nordenskiöld's concern for the environment was new to Europe at that time. His diverse writings about the damages and changes caused by humans played an important role in the awakening of environmental consciousness in Europe and his *Proposal* eventually led to the passing of Sweden's Conservation Act of 1909 , which established nine national parks - the first ever in Europe.



Stora Sjöfallet National Park in Northern Sweden. Established in 1909 under Sweden's first major conservation legislature.

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Further readings:

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Related links:

- Biography of Nordenskiöld
  http://www.kansallisbiografia.fi/english/

Websites linked in this text:

- https://www.environmentandsociety.org/arcadia/nordenskioeld-explorer-and-scientist-north
- https://www.environmentandsociety.org/tools/keywords/marshs-man-and-nature
- https://www.environmentandsociety.org/tools/keywords/leopolds-sand-county-almanac
- https://www.environmentandsociety.org/tools/keywords/first-national-parks-sweden
- https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/3891

Websites linked in image captions:

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Adolf_Erik_Nordenski%C3%B6ld_by_Axel_Jungstedt_1902.jpg
- http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Suorvajaure_in_stora_sjofallet_park-2008-22-07.jpg

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Seija A. Niemi is an environmental historian with a wide range of interests. At the University of Turku she completed her MA in Cultural History with a thesis on the Finnish Tango King Olavi Virta in 2003 and earned her PhL in Finnish History with an environmental thesis on the history of birch tree in the Finnish forests in 2005. She is currently working on her doctoral thesis which discusses the Finnish-Swedish explorer and scientist Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld (1832 – 1901) and his place in the history of Finnish conservation.
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