
RECREATIONAL AND SPORTS FUNCTIONS IN THE MUNICIPAL FOREST IN OLSZTYN – A CASE STUDY

Joanna A. PAWŁOWICZ^{1(A,B,D,F)}, Elżbieta SZAFRANKO^{1(C,E)}, Marta TANAJEWSKA^{2(F)}

1. Faculty of Technical Sciences, UWM in Olsztyn

2. The “Kreska” Club of Young Architects and Urban Designers, UWM in Olsztyn

Key words:

- forest management,
- social function,
- leisure time,
- woodlands

Abstract:

This paper, dedicated to the question of forest management and evaluation of its adaptability to social functions, is a case study performed on the Municipal Forest in Olsztyn. It discussed the factors which have made to forest popular among the town residents as an interesting destination for relaxation and sports. Field inspections were completed, including surveys to collect opinions of forest users. The questions in the survey enabled identification of the needs and expectations with respect to the municipal forest. In addition to this, a search through archives and libraries was done in order to describe the historical background and cultural environment existing when sports functions were first assigned to in the analyzed area.

INTRODUCTION AND BRIEF HISTORY

Indisputably, the nature, topography and functionality of a forest are the driving powers stimulating and sustaining its social functions. People want forests to serve social functions, hence the frequent assignment of recreational and sports functions to suburban woods. The actual management and spatial arrangement of a forest within an urban setting depend on the users' needs and expectations, which are shape specific functions of a given park or forest.

In this context, a function means an area with a uniform type of use or distinguishing way of arrangement. This definition applies to any type of land, regardless of its use and localization [1]. A definition specifically pertaining to woodlands has been suggested by Marszałek [2], who states that a function of a forest is its capability of providing various types of products and services, both material and non-material in character.

The above definition clearly indicates that a forest plays many functions, a concept adopted in the state's forest policy. Generally, woodlands are most often treated as a source of timber, irrespective of the leading function of any given forest. Both globally and across Europe, production is a prevalent function of woods (30%), with multi-functionality of forests in the second place (24%), while the other woodlands are occupied by nature reserves, forest parks and others [3].

Productive functions of woods consist primarily of generating, with the powers of nature and man, timber and other useful and human friendly products, which are the base of many branches of manufacturing industries, occupations, tradition and culture [4].

The actual use of a forest attains a level defined by the natural conditions for production, breeding and conservation requirements and, most importantly, respecting the principle of the sustainability of forests and enlargement of forest resources. In addition to timber, forests provide other products, such as mushrooms, berries and game [5].

Functions of forests are either shaped naturally or by human action. They are identified by experts from different fields of science, as a result of which there is an endless cornucopia of possible functions and a variety of distinguishing criteria. However, the dominant functions comprise the needs and expectations of groups and whole societies [6].

Our intention has been to assess people's needs in respect of their free time, hence, in line with the slogan 'nothing about us without us', field observations were made, including a photographic and cartographic inventory and questionnaires among the visitors to the analyzed urban forest.

Forests with recreational facilities are most often located within the limits of towns or municipalities and are typically owned by a given community. Such woods are called urban forests (municipal or communal woods). In 2009, the highest percentage of municipal forests was found in the Province of Podkarpacie (28.2%), while the Province of Warmia and Mazury had just 3.4% of communal woods and their lowest percentage was recorded in the Świętokrzyskie Province – just 0.8% [7].

Municipal forests are often extremely fragmented and cover relatively small areas. According to Janeczko and Woźnicka [8], about 200 Polish cities and towns had urban forests. Kosmala [9] estimates their number at 550. They are highly different in acreage: from 1.11 in Biskupiec (Province of Warmia and Mazury) to about 2,700 ha in Warsaw. In rare cases municipal forests make up a compact woodland. Most frequently, they are composed of several scattered, disconnected fragments [8,9].

Forests play an important role in people's lives. Devoid of contact with greenery, people suffer and may even experience irreparable damage. Living day by day in an industrial setting, we will intuitively look for some relaxation among trees and green plants [10]. A forest with social functions is our likely choice.

Forests with social functions are designated forest purposes in a land register and in Poland marked with the symbol Ls. In planning documents, they are described as forest greens and given the symbol Z_L. Because these forests serve recreational needs of people, they have trails for strolling, hiking, cycling or horse riding. There are also roofed shelters, seats and other elements of street furniture. Sites for picnics are arranged as well. Because such woods serve mainly social functions, they must be equipped with necessary technical infrastructure. Among the elements which decide about the use and utilization of a forest is its location within physical space, which is shaped according to the spatial planning goals and should be subordinated to previously determined connections between the characteristics of social and economic spheres and – on the other hand - the most closely corresponding form of physical space [11].

In this case study we investigated a municipal forest which covers an area of 1055 ha and lies in the northern outskirts of Olsztyn, to the west and south bordering with the housing estates called Osiedle nad Jeziorem Długim and Likusy, and to the north delineated by the valley of the Wadąg River. The forest is crossed by the Łyna River and roads leading from Olsztyn to Moraąg, Dobre Miasto, Wadąg, Zalbki and Nikielkowo. There is also a lake in the forest, called Długie Lake. No traces of harmful emission of gases, dusts, smoke or wastewater have been observed in the wood. For decades, the municipal forest in Olsztyn has been appreciated by the town residents as a place for strolling and relaxation. The first adaptations made to facilitate its recreational use date back to 1862, when the first walking paths were set to enable strolls along the Łyna River and through the whole forest. The areas in the close proximity to Długie Lake (fig. 1) were especially favoured for doing sports and taking a rest. There Olsztyn inhabitants, all ages and social status, enjoyed free time and made picnics. In 1867, a ballroom dance hall and an indoor games hall were constructed. Afterwards, an outdoor stage was opened. All these venues provided the visitors with many opportunities to enjoy their time. A shooting alley was also arranged in the forest, and there were boat trips

available on Długie Lake (fig.2). After 1882, two bathing beaches were prepared on Długie Lake. One, situated at the end of the lake near Bałtycka Street, was arranged by the council for the general public. The other one was made by the army for soldiers in the local garrison. It was situated on Długie Lake, too, but in its north-eastern part. Both bathing beaches were designed not only for recreational swimming but also as sanitary facilities [12].



Fig.1: Footpaths along Długie Lake in the 1940s.

Source: [13]

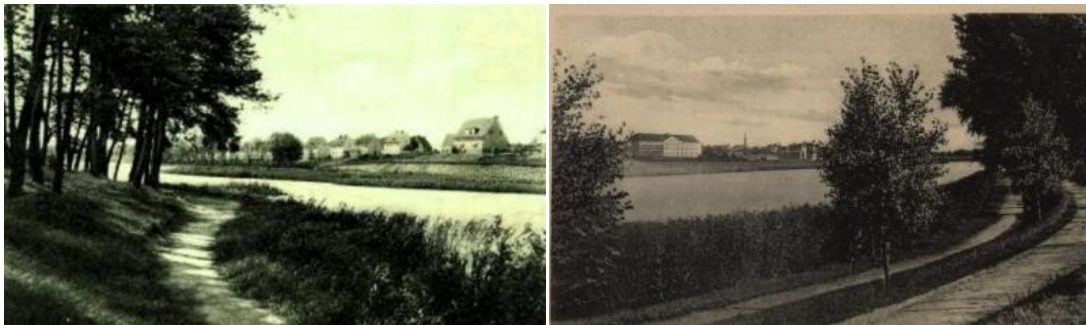


Fig.2: Boats on the Lyna River in 1920 and on Długie Lake in 1942.

Source: [13]

Unfortunately, none of these beaches has survived. Today, the lake attracts residents of the nearby houses who sunbathe and swim on some wild beaches, and one of the breweries has raised a recreational platform near the site where one of the 19th century beaches was situated.

In the early 20th century, young people from wealthier families became interested in tennis. This is why, sports grounds, tennis courts and some outdoor sports facilities were built in a park adjacent to the municipal forest, near the Spa House [14]. Residents of the town could reach them on foot, walking along the banks of the Lyna River, from the castle to the Municipal Forest. In the inter-war years, most young residents of Olsztyn practiced some form of sports. This is when a decision was made to build a stadium. It was located on a site where some marshes were drained and dried back in 1862. The Forest Stadium was erected in 1920. First stadium in Olsztyn, this exceptionally beautiful construction (fig. 3) was unique on the European scale [12].



Fig. 3. The Forest Stadium in its heyday [15] and today (photo J. Pawłowicz in 2010).

The Municipal Forest and the Forest Stadium, ever since they were opened to the public until the late 1960s, enjoyed immense popularity among inhabitants of the town. They were favourite destinations for weekend outings and on other holidays free from work and school. In the 1950s and 60s, the forest and the stadium were venues for numerous sports competitions, shows and dance parties. It was also possible to take part in shooting contests in a forest shooting range. The municipal forest and stadium lost importance when the town began to develop in another direction. The recreational facilities began to deteriorate and the parachuting tower, a unique construction in the whole province, was demolished in 1968 due to its bad state of repair [14].

SURVEY

In order to find out what expectations today's residents of Olsztyn have with respect to this area, a survey was designed and carried out. The results presented in this article are limited to the question of using the forest for sport purposes, but the whole survey dealt with a broader issue of the social use of woods.

The forest as a recreational space is visited by people of different ages and professional or social status, who declare different preferences regarding the way of spending their leisure time. The questionnaire was addressed to all forest visitors over 18 years old, regardless of their sex, marital status or interests. The results imply that the south-western and western parts of the Municipal Forests, where different types of sports and recreational facilities are located, were most attractive. Another reason why more visitors come to these fragments of the forest is their superior landscape qualities, including the immediate proximity to the Łyna River and Długie Lake.



Fig.4. A toboggan track in 2005 (photo: J. Pawłowicz)

The answers given by the respondents also indicate that popularity of some parts of the forests depends on the season of the year, for example the area with toboggan tracks (fig. 4) will attract a great number of visitors on snowy winter days.

The survey included questions designed to help to define the respondent's preferences with respect to the form of relaxation in woodlands. The answers suggest that an average respondent comes to take a rest in the forest once a week (34% answers) or once a month (35% answers) and the preferred form of relaxation is strolling (31% answers) and doing sports (26% answers). Different sports can be pursued owing to such facilities as a network of cycling and jogging paths, a bike park for extreme bicycle rides, and rope courses. Other amenities such as roads, car parks, benches, seats and tables, as well as objects documenting history and culture, e.g. remains of the Forest Stadium and war cemeteries, make the forest a more likely destination chosen by many town's residents for rest and relaxation.

Most respondents (78% answers) believe that the forest should be arranged for recreational purposes. The preferred forms were linear ones, such as footpaths, jogging paths (26% replies), cycling paths and fitness courses (15% answers). 10% of the interviewed were in favour of outdoor fitness facilities, an idea worth considering in subsequent works on the spatial arrangement of the forest. Unfortunately, the arranged part of the Municipal Forest is often vandalized, for example some elements of the skiing slope were damaged and the slope itself has been devastated by bikers holding illegal rallies in the forest. Thus, the skiing slope has survived in lamentable condition and needs levelling and repairs.

In order to improve the functionality and safety in the forest, social consultations have been started regarding bicycle trails. Some preliminary solutions have been contained in the Concept of Bicycle Paths for Olsztyn. The work so far completed enabled opening a pilot fragment of running and cycling paths in the Municipal Forest in 2010 (fig.5). These paths represent different levels of difficulty:

- a ‘family’ cycling trail – using existing forest roads which are in the best state of repair. The trail runs for about 10 km through historically and naturally interesting environs.
- The XC (cross country) bicycle path – which resembles routes of MTB marathons,
- The ENDURO track – runs through winding and narrow paths and requires more technical preparation.
- The EXREME bicycle trail – an extremely difficult trail, demanding much technical preparation and experience. To go on this trail, users must have a special bike, helmet and pads [16].

Another document which expressed the need to create bicycle trails in the Municipal Forest was the Concept for Developing Recreational Trails [17,18]. This initiative had another goal, namely supporting educational and promotional activities pursued in the Municipal Forest and addressed to the whole society.



Fig.5. Official opening of the bicycle trails in the Municipal Forest (photo: J. Pawłowicz 2010 rok)

SUMMARY

Forest management is essential for taking advantage of and developing social functions of the Municipal Forest. The forest management works should focus on the forest marginal zone, near Długie Lake and the Łyna River, as well as in the central part of the forest, near the historic Forest Stadium. It is recommended to maintain or create footpaths and bicycle lanes there as well as all elements of the so-call street furniture, including bins, seat, benches, tables, roofed shelters and a forest clearing for a bonfire. It is also advisable to furnish the linear components of the forest arrangement with benches, bins and point sites for resting. Equally important is to keep all these elements in good working order and to maintain and repair of the recreational equipment, which will guarantee their pleasant and safe use.

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