



Waxholm III arrives and fetches summer guests at Marum on Björkö. Image from the early 1900s.

# Entrepreneurship in the Stockholm Archipelago

A historical perspective

by **Christian Widholm**

A cursory reading of the literature describing yesterdays' societies in the Stockholm Archipelago tells us that people in the archipelago heavily relied on fishing and small-scale farming for their living. With the arrival of modern industrialized society during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, things changed, and other opportunities to earn a living appeared. However, there were and are certain circumstances in the Stockholm Archipelago that make it somewhat inert, preventing it from taking a place in the modern labor market. Some of these have to do with its geographical location and legal frameworks, while others derive from cultural constructions among the nearby town-dwellers over the last one hundred and fifty years. The following reflections will focus on how some of these circumstances have affected entrepreneurs in the archipelago from the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to today, and what follows is a sketch of a broad outline of the history of entrepreneurship in the Stockholm Archipelago. In addition, being aware of anachronistic pitfalls and possible theoretical shallowness, I

will focus on the element of self-employment in the concept of the entrepreneur in order to be able to generalize among different kinds of entrepreneurial enterprises over time – keeping in mind that a common way to make ends meet in the archipelago has also been to work part time as employees, e.g. as customs officials and/or pilot boat operators.

**BEFORE THE ADVENT** of modern society, that is, roughly prior to the 1850s, when it comes to Sweden and the Stockholm Archipelago, the entrepreneur in the modern sense of the word (an innovative and self-employed person running a company with or without employees) did not really exist in the archipelago. People living in the archipelago worked as self-reliant small-scale farmers and fishers. Thus, the pre-modern society's labor system cannot easily be assessed against the categories of self-employed and employee. However, yeomen were concentrated in the northern parts of the archipelago while a considerable number of the farmers and fishers in the south lived under the

yoke of the nobility, forcing them to day labor and paying taxes to mansions.<sup>1</sup>

During the time of the guild system, the people of the archipelago were prohibited from doing business in some sectors, e.g. transporting cargo by sea, which was the prerogative of the burghers. With the abolition of the guild system in 1846, a new possibility for maintenance was made available, and entrepreneurs started to transport passengers, firewood, and other kinds of goods. This business became unprofitable after the First World War, and the entrepreneurs enrolled as sailors, customs officers, or pilot boat operators.<sup>2</sup> During roughly the same period, the fishers also became exposed to competition from the emergent fishing industry of the Swedish west coast at the same time as developments on the mainland steadily made the infrastructure and agriculture of the archipelago appear inefficient and archaic.<sup>3</sup> From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, strawberry cultivation became a rather successful enterprise on the islands of Möja and Husarö. Strawberries thrived in the sunny weather that is relatively typical of the archipelago, although the meager archipelago soil, which negatively affects most kinds of cultivations in the region, was a challenge. To solve the fertilizer problem, the strawberry entrepreneurs bought latrine waste from the town of Stockholm.<sup>4</sup>

AS THE MAINLAND steadily entered the modern age during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the archipelago seemed to face a period of irreversible decline and oblivion. However, at the same time as the archipelago apparently was left behind, it became the modern city dwellers' idyllic recreational haven, a place where the wealthy families, with their servants, could spend the summer. To begin with, it was the upper strata of Stockholm that purchased land from the archipelago inhabitants and erected impressive merchant villas in the inner parts of the archipelago, but some of them rented their accommodations, which could be of benefit for the island entrepreneurs.

This trend, which eventually spread to the middle class of Stockholm, was founded on romantic ideas about the traditional and untouched countryside and seaside. The ideas originated in Great Britain from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and would soon take hold in Northwestern Europe and North America.<sup>5</sup> Such visions would turn the archipelago into a specific cultural construction that entrepreneurs and others had and still have to relate to whether they like it or not. Thus, besides selling land and renting out houses, entrepreneurs at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century started to make money by operating tenders and taxi boats and, in the vicinity of Furusund, running hotels, spas, and boarding houses.<sup>6</sup> However, these businesses were usually dormant before and after the summer season, and well into the first half of the new century the entrepreneurs had to supplement their earnings with traditional activities like fishing and

farming even though a few novel businesses within fur farming (on the island of Lidö) and mechanical workshops (on the island of Möja) now existed.<sup>7</sup>

From the 1930s onwards, the archipelago was turned into a recreation area. At the beginning, the transformation was unregulated. The Stockholm middle-class city dwellers purchased land, and second homes were erected in their thousands resulting in a situation where most of the islands' shores were turned into small private lots at a time when the political norm stated that the public should have access to the shores and the countryside. Hence, the public authorities soon intervened, ratifying in the early 1950s a law that prohibited further exploitation of the shores (strandskyddslagen).<sup>8</sup> Despite new regulations and traditionalist notions that obstructed modernization, entrepreneurs in the archipelago were able to take some advantage of the tourists and second home owners' arrival. At the same time, the imbalance between the summer hausse and the rest of the year's almost complete standstill appeared to become cemented.<sup>9</sup> By the early 1970s, a few of the challenges that the entrepreneurs faced were admitted among state and county bureaucrats who had already investigated the archipelago from many different perspectives since the 1930s. An official report from the 1970s said that ice during winters made transport difficult, that high prices on estates hampered development, that lack of fresh water was a challenge for everyone living in the archipelago, that

the region suffered from lopsided seasonality, and that the military's presence caused unwelcome restrictions.<sup>10</sup> The report, called *A living archipelago* [En levande skärgård], also stated this about the entrepreneurs in the archipelago:

Probably the most striking difference between the mainland and the archipelago entrepreneur is that the latter to a greater extent has to rely on more than one business. For example, farming, service jobs, and cottage lettings [...] the occupation

[of the archipelago entrepreneur] is characterized by being an organized jack-of-all-trades.<sup>11</sup>

Other occupations among the entrepreneurs were also mentioned, e.g. handicrafts, shipping (e.g. timber, gravel, and refuse), and carpentry.<sup>12</sup> The report proposed a specific term for the entrepreneurial enterprises in the archipelago. The term was informative, though not very creative:

An archipelago company (skärgårdsföretag) is a business with a multi-tasking entrepreneur who combines traditional occupations like farming, forestry, and fishing with cottage lettings, supervision, and service jobs. The report estimates that this kind of occupation has the best prospects of all the businesses in the archipelago.<sup>13</sup>

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Elsewhere in the report it was stated that the most promising sector for the entrepreneurs would be tourism because already in 1969 more than 50% of the turnover in the archipelago derived from tourism.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the entrepreneurs seemed to require support. Thus, during the 1970s the national employer organization (SAF) offered managerial support, and the state and Stockholm County subsidized loans for the entrepreneurs.<sup>15</sup> Other subsidies, like the yearly one hundred thousand Swedish crowns allowance to the grocery stores in the archipelago and free trips on the passenger boats (via the publicly financed passenger shipping company in the Stockholm Archipelago, Waxholmsbolaget) for all permanent inhabitants of the archipelago, were mentioned in the *Living archipelagos* report from the mid-1990s.<sup>16</sup> This report repeated the challenges for entrepreneurs stated in earlier reports, and it also said, which public officials had not admitted before, that “the law which prohibits exploitation of the shores (*strandskyddslagen*) obstructs development in the archipelago”.<sup>17</sup> In addition, it presented a less optimistic view on the expectations pertaining to the tourism sector.<sup>18</sup> Thus it advocated continuing subvention of the entrepreneurs in the archipelago.<sup>19</sup>

From the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, subsidies have been combined with several public/private-financed projects, mostly about tourism, in order to help entrepreneurs to flourish. However, the businesses still show signs of inertia, and the entrepreneurs appear to have faced a new challenge – so-called project fatigue.<sup>20</sup> Another sensation among the archipelago’s entrepreneurs today seems to be frustration<sup>21</sup> given what they believe to be the unequal competition from business on the mainland that does not have to bother about slow and difficult transport or regulations to preserve yesterday’s archipelago, etc. Still, politicians and representatives from trade and industry repeatedly tout that the future for the archipelago is entrepreneurship, preferably within the tourism sector.<sup>22</sup>

**FROM THE EXAMPLES** above, it appears rather apparent that being an entrepreneur in the archipelago is not an easy ride. The archipelago comprises natural barriers (e.g. rough seas, frozen waterways during the winter, shortage of fresh water, etc.) that subsidies and projects cannot remove. The man-made obstacles, on the other hand, i.e. laws and regulations, might be abolished. In theory it would only take zeal and hard political work. However, and this brings us back to the archipelago as a cultural construction I mentioned earlier, the Stockholm Archipelago is so laden with symbolic content for Swedes in general and the inhabitants of Stockholm in particular that being an entrepreneur there partly includes negotiating with a fiction of the archipelago. The advent of this fiction materialized during the first wave of temporary recreational residents in the archipelago at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and this romantic and traditionalist fiction was introduced by novelists, songwriters, and artists. Soon it became a given part of Swedish popular culture and strengthened its position through movies, television series, and even more so in songs and novels. It has evolved somewhat over the decades, but the main theme persists: the Stockholm Archipelago is the place



PHOTO: SVEN OSTERMAN

Summer guests at Blidö, in the beginning of the 1900s.



PHOTO: JAN EHEMARK/STOCKHOLMSKÄLLAN

Nils Jansson ran this food store at Dalarö. Image from 1952.



PHOTO: SCREENSHOT FROM THE FILM JORDGUBBSBÅTEN

Strawberries being loaded for delivery to Stockholm. Möja, 1967.

of an idyllic summer life. This aspect, that romantic notions about the archipelago can be seen as obstacles for the entrepreneurs and others living on the islands, has not yet been acknowledged in research on the Stockholm Archipelago, with the exception of a couple of fruitful works by the human geographer Urban Nordin.<sup>23</sup> When it comes to politicians, policymakers, and representatives from trade and industry, on the other hand, the fiction seems to be treated as plain reality and as beyond question, and perhaps something that could be turned into business in the name of the so-called experience economy.

**DURING A MEETING** in October 2014 within the project “The Archipelago Strategy” [Skärgårdsstrategin], which is a publicly funded program for the development of tourist destinations in Sweden, several speakers touched upon the constellation of entrepreneurs and the archipelago. The head of the project said that the entrepreneurs in the archipelago “are of enormous importance” for the project; a liberal politician from one of the municipalities of the archipelago, though with its office located on the mainland, said, “We require creative solutions for how to make our beautiful archipelago better”; a representative from another collaborating body, Stockholm Business Region, said, “We have failed when it comes to the information about the archipelago, and without tourism it will die”; and an archipelago entrepreneur, with a business located on the mainland, said, “The most important wisdom is to take advantage of the positive players in the archipelago. Dare to exclude negative attitudes and focus on those who are positive.”<sup>24</sup> Judging by the records from the meeting, it looks as if those who attended first and foremost tried to convince themselves, and maybe the rest of us, that the romantic archipelago fiction should be treated as reality and that possible ontological divergence has to do with managerial failures or plain sullenness. No wonder the entrepreneurs of the archipelago proper, not the ones residing safely on the mainland, suffer from project fatigue. ❌

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