

Referred to an Institute for Sleep Disorders because of wind turbine noise

People living near twelve gigantic wind turbines feel that their quality of life has been considerably impaired because of sleep disturbances, lack of sleep and other clear nuisances.

By Peter Skeel Hjorth, Journalist

“What we treasure most – the peace, the tranquillity and the darkness – has been taken away from us. When I go out at night I see the strong red lights above the trees. Inside the house we also see the red light. Then there is the sound which is another problem. Depending on the direction of the wind we can hear the noise from the wind turbines from both inside and outside.”

This is how midwife Britta Carlsson, 63, describes her problems being the neighbour of a new wind turbine park. Other people in the area near the Oxhult Park in the forests at Hishult in Laholms District Council in Southern Sweden also feel strongly affected by the 12 gigantic Vestas V90 wind turbines of a total height of 150 meters each put up by Arise Windpower. People here experience a noticeable deterioration of the quality of their lives.

“Wind turbines of that size cannot be near habitation. It is perfectly obvious. They are offensive to look at, the sounds are distressing, and so are the flickering shadows,” says chief physician and senior consultant Torben Ishøy who among other things has worked for the Danish Red Cross in Afghanistan, has been commissioned to the UN in the Balkans and Rwanda after the genocide of the Tutsies. He has also participated in the Danish investigations of the so-called “Gulf War syndrome” after the first war against Iraq.

In September 2009 Torben Ishøy toured the Oxhult Park and saw it from many different angles. He had the opportunity to see and hear the wind turbines from both a long and a short distance. In November Torben Ishøy participated in the talks that this article is based on.

“I can understand how people feel strongly affected, and it is obvious that the health authorities must follow the development closely. This is a new area that can influence people’s health. Long periods of sleep disturbances are not a laughing matter, and in the long term there can be other medical consequences that we have not yet seen emerging” Torben Ishøy pointed out.

Quality of Life in ruins

Sleep disturbance, lack of sleep and irritability. Distressed by the wind turbine noise, the rotating shadows and flashing warning lights. A feeling of having lost the values that motivated them to move and live in the countryside. Concern for the future. Fear of being tied to houses that cannot be sold and fear of getting even more disturbing giant wind turbines nearby.

Such conditions have totally upset life for people with a view of the wind turbine park that was inaugurated shortly after Easter 2009. Until then people enjoyed the surrounding peace, tranquillity and darkness of the night. Before the twelve wind turbines were put up people were told that they would practically neither see nor hear them.

From her house assistant nurse Solveig Dalin, 55, can clearly see nine wind turbines that supposedly were not going to obstruct her view. At least that is what she was told. Most of the wind turbines could be seen on a photo montage, viewed from her house. Only four could not be seen as “the angle didn’t allow for them”. However, the photos for this photo montage were taken long after permission was given and the building just about to begin.

Reality proved very different. The enormous wind turbines can be heard strongly when the wind is in a certain direction even though there is 1000 meter to the nearest one.

Solveig Dalin appears transfixed as she is telling how her life has been affected. Torben Ishøy notes “a quiet cry for her present physical and mental situation as questions are asked about the lost sparkle in her eyes, quite apparent to all present”.

About a month after the inauguration of the wind turbine park on 5th 2009 May Solveig Dalin was diagnosed with high blood pressure and is currently receiving treatment.

“I sleep with my window open. Now I experience sleep problems on and off which never happened before. I sleep, but wake up, sleep and wake up. At certain wind directions you cannot even go to the bathroom to get peace. Even there you can hear the noise from the wind turbines”, says Solveig Dalin.”

“In the beginning I wasn’t concerned about the arrival of wind turbines. They are ugly to look at, but I’ll get used to it, I thought. For that reason I didn’t participate in the group of protesters either. I wasn’t especially negative. But after the arrival of the wind turbines I am just not thriving as I used to.”

Neither do the family’s goats. The sheep show no reaction, but her goats are not well. Outside they have plenty access to all the food they want. But they don’t eat, and they prefer to stay inside the stable. It is against the law to keep animals inside all year round. The goats have to be forced to stay outside, but they break through the fence and run back into the stable.

Solveig Dalin fears that the goats may die.

“Our outside dog is not doing very well either and has changed its behaviour,” she says. “I am worried about the animals and I cannot relax and do not feel well. I am not as calm and secure as before. It is no longer relaxing to go for walks in the area because of the sound, the shadows and the red lights that you are drawn to. The red light attracts your eyes even when you sit by your computer inside the house.

My quality of life has been ruined. I do not thrive as I used to. I have always been calm and collected. Now I cannot relax and have become irritable. I no longer feel like meeting other people and having a normal social life.”

Peace of mind disturbed

Britta Carlsson is the neighbour of Solveig Dalin and lives 1100 meters from the nearest giant wind turbine.

“If you go 25 meters away from the house you see all twelve. They were not supposed to be visible because of the trees, and certainly not to be heard, we were told when we talked to the council,” relates Britta Carlsson who feels deceived by the council.

Until half a year ago she had an undisturbed view of the surrounding countryside from her house. Now she can see the unwanted red lights already when leaving her work in Laholm 20 km from the giant wind turbines. Both the noise and the lights disturb her peace of mind.

“When I return from work where I am surrounded by people all the time I need the peace and quiet that nature here affords. This is why we live here. To go for walks in the forest is no longer the relaxation it used to be. It has made me more irritable.

I have had sleep problems before, and that certainly has not improved. I cannot leave my window open at night any more because of the noise that I can only describe as the sound of an old dishwasher. I suffered with high blood pressure before the wind turbines were put up. This has now increased. You are often met with scepticism when you say that you have a feeling as if your whole body hurts. But this is how I experience it”, says Britta Carlsson.

“The difference between now and before is huge. One day when taking the dog for a long walk I was driven totally crazy by the sounds and just wanted to get home. It was torture. The quietness has been taken from us. I want to live in the forest and have no desire to move for we can just as easy end up in the same situation somewhere else. We worry a lot about what to do.”

Wakened by wind turbine noise

Christina Johnsson, 45, is a cab driver and lives about two kilometres from the nearest wind turbine. She has lived here for 25 years. One night during the last week of June she was wakened by a resounding noise. She had no idea what it was. To her it sounded as if a truck had veered off the road and kept revving up the engine to get back on track. But it was the noise from the wind turbine.

At certain wind directions she experiences it as very powerful even though the distance to the nearest giant turbine is two kilometres. Because of the wind turbine noise she didn't get much sleep all summer. Seven weeks of holiday didn't help. Her sleep disturbances continued, despite never having had any problems sleeping before.

After having virtually not slept for several weeks Christina Johnsson felt so exhausted that she went to the doctor. She was given a prescription for some tablets that would help her fall asleep, took the first one and slept till about 2 am. Then she woke up. The following day when she was out driving her cab she was so disorientated that she had trouble finding her way around.

Christina Johnsson felt certain that the medicine was the cause and she has not taken any more of the tablets. So her sleeping problems continued. She gives an example:

“Last Friday I didn't sleep until 2 am and woke up 5 am. It upsets one's day and night rhythm and I was yawning all day long.”

A four week sick leave didn't help Christina Johnsson either. Now she has been referred to an Institute for Sleep Disorders to learn to sleep again. The cause of her sleep problems: wind turbine noise.

"It is evident that my life has taken a turn for the worse. Moving to the other bedroom didn't help either, rather the opposite. If the wind turbine park is extended to Kåphult on the other side of my house it'll become even worse. It may be that wind power is necessary but the human costs must be taken into consideration," she says.

Least possible invasion?

In stark contrast to these people's experience of having their lives ruined by wind power is the following legal assessment:

"In summary the chosen locality is equitable based on the regulations in chapter 2, 6 § in the environmental legislation with regards to the purpose of the wind turbine park being achieved *with the least possible invasion of and inconvenience to people's health and environment (italised by editor)* as far as the limits being observed by the practising company is concerned".

This long sentence has been written by a young lawyer, Cand. Jur. Elisabeth Månson* from the big legal firm Setterwals Advokatbyrå in Malmo, legal advisor to Arise Windpower. The sentence can be read in a letter of 3rd November 2009 to the Environmental Court to whom a number of residents have complained about the permission to extend the Oxhult Park to Kåphult which is on the other side of the houses where the residents feel badly affected. In the same letter one can read:

"To the surrounding residents the sound from the wind turbine is felt to be louder when the wind comes from a certain direction, however the sound levels no matter from which direction the wind blows are within the limits that have been decided upon by practice, according to the reliable calculation that is carried out considering the wind direction under any weather conditions."

There is no mistaking the meaning. There is no considering the residents of the area when the wind turbine noise is calculated to stay under the limits. This is the opinion of the young lawyer from Setterwal who on her webpage describes herself as working at one of Sweden's fastest growing commercial legal bureaus with 150 lawyers and offices in three of the biggest towns in the country.

In stark contrast to the young lawyer's emphasising of the reliability of the noise calculations is what emerged at the third international conference about wind turbine noise in Alborg, Denmark, 17th -19th June 2009. It is clearly evident that the computer calculated noise levels are relatively precise and yet flawed by insecurities as regards to the methods of calculation. Big discrepancies of the calculated results are possible, it transpired. But the young lawyer's interpretation is naturally only her presentation of the case.

On October 19th 2009 the environmental Court toured the area around the Oxhult Park. On this occasion the executive director Peter Nygren from Arise Windpower was quoted in the newspaper: "The interest of the majority must take preference over the individual".

This statement raises a fundamental question:

Where does the common good end. And where does the tyranny begin?