

(Source unknown)

When I wrote about [what I learned from trespassing as a kid](#), I argued that property rights—though most likely necessary—are tools to achieve a certain end, not ideological absolutes. Anthony Albert proved my point by noting that many large landowners in Maine cooperate with the public to provide access. And then a Finnish cousin of mine reenforced the notion by reminding me on Facebook about a concept called "Everyman's right" that is widely accepted throughout the Nordic countries. While private ownership of land is common, every citizen (and foreign nationals too) are granted free right of way across any undeveloped land and waterways, and they are also free to collect natural products such as mushrooms and berries.

How could this possibly work? Leaving aside the surprisingly (for Scandinavia) un-PC, gender-biased name, Everyman's Right is a point of huge pride for many in the Nordic countries. Finland's Ministry of the Environment has an excellent English-language summary of [what is, and what is not, covered under the concept of Everyman's Right](#):

**Everyone may:**

- 
- walk, ski or cycle freely in the countryside, except in gardens, in the immediate vicinity of people's homes, and in fields and plantations which could easily be damaged
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- stay or set up camp temporarily in the countryside, a reasonable distance from homes
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- pick wild berries, mushrooms and flowers, as long as they are not protected species
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- fish with a rod and line
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- row, sail or use a motorboat on waterways, with certain restrictions; swim or wash in inland waters and the sea
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- walk, ski and fish on frozen lakes, rivers and the sea
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**You may not:**

- 
- disturb other people or damage property
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- disturb breeding birds, or their nests or young
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- disturb reindeer or game animals
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- cut down or damage living trees, or collect wood, moss or lichen on other people's property
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- light open fires on other people's property, except in an emergency
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- disturb the privacy of people's homes, by camping too near them, or making too much noise, for example
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- leave litter
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- drive motor vehicles off road without the landowner's permission
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- fish or hunt without the relevant permits
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What this has to do with sustainability is an important question. As I mentioned in my post on trespassing, there is an ongoing debate [between conservation and access to land in many parts of the world](#). But I tend to believe that people only protect what they have a stake in—so unless we accept that there is such a thing as a "commons", and that commons includes the forests and waterways and

countryside that surround us, we lock ourselves out of our collective heritage—and we make ourselves more inclined to destroy it.

According to Finland's Environment Ministry there is general accord among landowners, hikers, and authorities that Everyman's Right is working well. And there are examples of similar rights granted all across Europe to varying degrees. Whether a similar rethink of what it really means to "own" land is conceivable here in the US is a matter I shall leave up for debate—as a half-British, half-Finnish resident in the Land of the Free, I have gotten myself into enough trouble by [questioning certain aspects of American culture in the past](#). (Hey, I've [given Uncle Sam a good deal of love](#) too...)