

## 130 From idea to practice: potentials and obstacles in engaging volunteers and refugees in nature based integration in five Danish municipalities.

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The European Commission has promoted revisiting and developing approaches for the successful integration of migrants all over Europe. One possible response to address this challenge is using nature as an arena for social integration of newcomers, as discussed by Gentin et al (2019). The aim of the project – “Nature friend – integration through outdoor recreation and nature activities” was to enroll new volunteers and test new approaches in integration of refugees and newly arrived asylum seekers through nature based activities. Local groups of the Danish Refugee Council in five different municipalities in Denmark participated in the project.

The theoretical point of departure was Essers (1999) four basic forms of social integration: structural, cultural, interactive and identificational integration. Based on Esser (1999) the relationship between nature and integration can be understood in terms of: 1) Structural integration describing access to common resources and main institutions of society, 2) cultural integration with acquisition of knowledge and competences, cultural aspects, common practices, general rules of behaviour, 3) interactive integration describing friendships and social interactions, 4) identificational integration with emotional bonds to other groups and places. In this relation, “Nature friend – integration through outdoor recreation and nature activities” focused on social interactions and language learning (interactive integration), as well as getting to know near-by nature (identificational integration). Further, the work by Rishbeth and Finney (2006) and their focus on novelty and nostalgia was found in the refugees’ thoughts about the nature-based activities inspired the theoretical understanding of the refugee perspective of this project.

All activities within the project took place in easy accessible nature, and required no previous knowledge about nature, nor the activity. Volunteers introduced activities such as fishing, tadpole fishing, catching of crabs, socializing around the bonfire,

beach wellness only for girls etc. in which the refugees and newly arrived asylum seekers could enroll. Focus was on introducing the refugees and newly arrived refugees to nature, outdoor recreation and show where and what can be done outdoors during spring, summer and autumn. The aim was to empower the participants to do similar activities on their own or with family and friends after participating in the project, which is in line with Pitkänen et al (2017) and Gentin et al (2018).

The volunteers evaluated each trip quantitatively through a small questionnaire, further, selected trips were observed, as well as selected participants (both volunteers and refugees) were interviewed after participating in the trip.

Although the refugees and newly arrived asylum seekers had no prior knowledge about the Danish nature, nature did not play a negative role in the activities. Nature made a positive difference for the participants as they often mentioned the activities as something they valued the most. Some of the activities reminded them of their former home country (nostalgia), while other activities were completely new to them (novelty). Participants also mentioned their sudden understanding of Danes’ relationship to nature (e.g. anemones Anemone nemorosa, the smell of rape Brassica napus, or the leafing of the beech Fagus sylvatica), and other signs of spring, which taps into cultural integration (Esser 1999). Further, nature gave the participants an immediate feeling of stress-relief, which also was mentioned as a positive outcome of the trips.

The results of the questionnaire also shows that the refugees after participating have a better understanding of opportunities for outdoor recreation in the near-by nature, as well as the activities have brought volunteers and refugees closer together. The volunteers also mention that good leadership of the trips, their own knowledge about outdoor recreation opportunities in the near-by nature, as well as the provided activities had a positive influence on the outcome of the trips.

Based on the experiences of this project the following recommendations can be given:

- Numbers of participants: Few participants enhance the opportunities for nature interpretation – accordingly nature plays an important role on trips with only few participants. More participants enhance opportunities for socializing, and the activities in nature accordingly are important to a lesser degree (e.g. it can be difficult to hear and listen to birds singing in the forest

if many people are walking and talking together).

- Provision of activities: Few activities are better than a filled program with a variety of activities. Many activities can make the trip stressful as participants can get the feeling that there is not enough time for participating in the activities, and that they have to rush through.

## References

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