

## 188 Nature-based vocational training for nature conservation and human wellbeing in Skåne, Sweden

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There has been an increase in the flow of refugees, migrants, immigrants, and asylum seekers into Europe from the Middle East and Africa, which has meant that their integration into societies has become an important topic. The Nordic countries have received a higher number of migrants per capita basis over the past few years than other European countries (Pitkänen et al.2017; Gentin et al., 2019). In 2015, about 163,000 people sought asylum in Sweden and the integration of these people into Swedish society has become an important focus for the government (Swedish Institute 2015-2018).

Nature-based solutions have been defined by the European Commission as 'solutions that are inspired and supported by nature' (European Commission, 2015 p5), and nature-based interventions can be used as solutions for a variety of purposes and with different groups within society. Pitkänen et al. (2017) found there is increasing interest in nature-based solutions which are seen as having the potential to be a cost-effective and efficient means of integrating migrants into host societies. A number of nature-based integration projects have been created in Nordic countries; they are mainly voluntary for migrants but can combine integration or labour market training or vocational and medical rehabilitation. One of the ways in which new people from other countries can become integrated into Swedish society is through employment and one innovative approach to enabling this is the 'Vocational training and integration through nature conservation' programme. This is a collaboration between the Swedish Public Employment Service, Swedish Forestry Agency and the Swedish Nature Conservation Unit is using a nature based integration programme to bring together migrants as well as long term Swedish unemployed to participate in a year (for migrants) and two-year-long (for Swedish

unemployed) vocational training programme (Pálsdóttir, O'Brien and Dolling, 2020). The nature-conservation work covers 350 nature conservation sites in Skåne and 3 national parks. The sites cover a varied landscape from the coast in the south of Skåne to hilly forest sites in the north of the County. The programme provides training in nature conservation skills for all the participants and lessons in the Swedish language for the migrants. An evaluation of the programme is exploring whether it has brought about changes in general health, physical activity, self-efficacy and nature connectedness. A mixed methodological approach is being used through the use of questionnaires and in-depth interviews to explore the impacts of the programme on wellbeing. All questionnaires are self-administered on perceived health, physical activities, sleepiness and sleep qualities, nature connectedness, and self-efficacy The study ran from 2018 to 2019, including both Swedish and migrants. The data was collected as 3 survey waves; at the start of the program (baseline) then again after 12 months and 16 months. The trainees received both oral and written information about the study before deciding on participation. The information and questionnaires were provided in Swedish, Arabic, Tigrinya, Urdu, Farsi, Dari, and Somalian and a certified interpreter in respective language was present on all occasions. Altogether 214 individuals participated in the study thereof 88 Swedish trainees (11 females) and 126 migrants (3 females). The results show that to date there has been no change in physical activity levels or connectedness to nature over the 3 survey waves for migrants or Swedes. There has been a small but statistically significant change in perceived health for both Swedes and migrants between the baseline and follow-up at the end of the program. There was one significant result, which was overall sleep. This significant difference is driven by improved overall sleep across the three waves. Nature connectedness

showed a significant positive correlation with both the health scores and the total general self-efficacy scores. The qualitative results highlight that the trainees feel the conservation activities are physically demanding and are perceived as meaningful work. Many of the trainees talked about inviting friends and family to the sites where they worked and proudly showing them what they have been doing. This has meant the migrant families have been introduced to nature sites they would not have visited otherwise. Many migrants talked about starting to feel more rooted in Swedish society. The trainees are in excellent health both mentally and physically at the start and therefore hard to expect improvement at significant levels. The vocational training program provides a good opportunity to learn new skills such as practical work in nature conservation and language as well as

cultural exchange. For both groups, the program can help to prepare the trainees for entering the labor market and provide them with transferable skills that they can use for future employment or further training in similar work. As for the migrants, not only did they gain new skills but also this supported a connection to the new country through working with nature but also gradually included the families by bringing them out of the urban setting into nature conservation sites. This value-added outcome could be developed further by networking with the migrants' communities for introducing nature sites to a population otherwise not familiar with outdoor reaction in nature.

## References

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