

Integrating immigrant communities in recreation planning for the Wienerwald Biosphere Park, Austria: first results

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Introduction

Underrepresentation of ethnic minority groups in outdoor recreation has been described by researchers in many Northwest European countries, the US, Canada and Australia. People from ethnic minorities are often observed using public urban spaces close to their neighborhood (Kloek et al., 2013), but may not be represented in peri-urban recreational areas. Differences in socioeconomic status can explain these phenomena, but differences in cultural backgrounds also affect preferences in leisure activities (Kloek et al., 2013; Peters, 2010).

Peri-urban forests and larger recreational areas provide important functions for their users, and access to natural areas is particularly important for people living in dense urban settings, as exposure to nature can contribute to physical and mental well-being (Hartig et al., 1996; Kuo and Faber Taylor, 2004; Morris and O'Brien, 2011; O'Brien and Morris, 2013; van den Berg et al., 2003). Green spaces can potentially support integration processes, as landscapes and forests can create a link between the host country and the country of origin, e.g. by evoking nostalgic feelings (Jay et al., 2012; Madge, 1997; Rishbeth and Finney, 2006).

Peri-urban recreation areas are usually publicly funded and therefore access should be provided for all segments of society; dismantling barriers to these places becomes a matter of justice. Even if these areas can be accessed for free, though, economic, cultural or organizational barriers can limit access for people from ethnic communities.

Study context

The Wienerwald Biosphere Park (~1056 km²) is located in the federal provinces of Vienna and Lower Austria and offers outdoor recreation opportunities for a catchment of more than 2 million inhabitants. Though the population in these two provinces is characterized by a high ethnic

diversity, park managers have observed that certain minority groups are poorly underrepresented among park visitors. The research project “Attitudes and Satisfaction of Ethnic Groups regarding the Wienerwald Biosphere Park: A pilot study towards the integrative function of peri-urban protected areas” was thus commissioned by the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Program of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. This study undertakes a qualitative investigation of influences on outdoor recreation and activities of two specific ethnic communities - Turkish and Chinese.

Gaining access to ethnic communities

A transdisciplinary research approach was applied, using three stages – stakeholder interviews, focus group meetings with stakeholders, and interviews with people from the communities. Where necessary, bi-lingual researchers were employed to avoid language barriers. First, Chinese and Turkish stakeholders were identified and semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain practical knowledge about migration processes and outdoor recreation, as well as to specify knowledge gaps and topics important to the stakeholders. The stakeholder interviews also provided information about strategies for accessing potential interviewees in those ethnic communities. Stakeholders were identified from park management/forestry, integration/diversity, cultural and health/sports organizations.

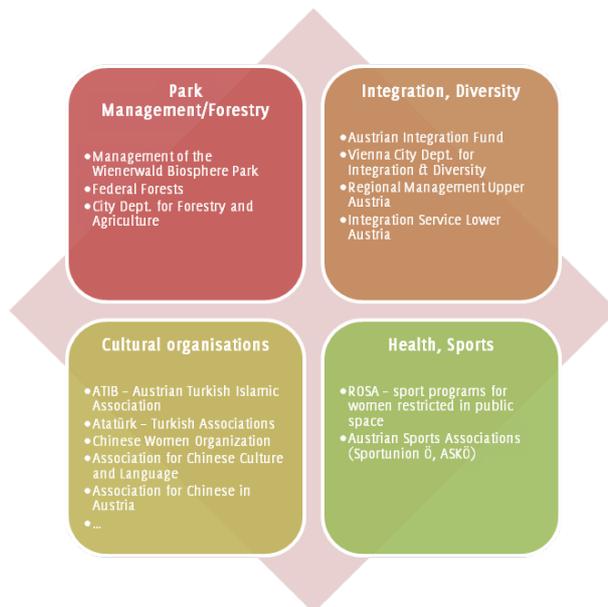


Figure 1: Examples of stakeholders involved in the research process (Höglhammer et al., 2014, modified)

Second, focus group meetings with stakeholders were conducted, with the goal to explore shared interests in research topics and to identify relevant target groups. Based on the findings and results of the stakeholder interviews and the focus group meetings, guidelines for semi-structured interviews with community members were developed.

In these first two steps, the Turkish community was relatively easy to access, as their associations are well known by administrative authorities. The Turkish Islamic Union in Austria, the rather secular Atatürk Center, and other relevant organizations were quickly identified in initial stakeholder interviews; this also included the sports initiative ROSA addressing Muslim women, who want to practice sports and health gymnastics but suffer from restrictions in public space when wearing the veil. Much less information was available about the Chinese community, and initial access was limited. Communication had to be conducted almost entirely in the Chinese language, while in the Turkish community most key stakeholders spoke German.

In the third step semi-structured interviews with individual Chinese and Turkish immigrants are being held. First interviews could already be conducted though gaining access to individual members of the two communities was quite different. So far it was more difficult to reach female interviewees within the Turkish community, particularly elderly women tended to direct researchers to speak with their husbands or other men sitting in the surrounding area. Within the Chinese community it appeared crucial to be introduced by a key person to build up trust towards the researchers; without this trust, potential interviewees sometimes misunderstood the intention of the study.

Cultural habits and notions of leisure

Interviews are on-going but preliminary results suggest that notions of leisure and its significance differ from mainstream Austrian understandings. For interviewees in both ethnic groups, there seems to be a strong linkage between immigration purpose and perception and value of leisure time. For first generation Turkish immigrants, leisure has a negative connotation, and people often emphasized commitments to work over leisure. Also Chinese interviewees expressed the view that time is money and leisure is perceived as a waste of time.

Further investigation will show the impact of personal histories of immigration as well as socioeconomic and ethnic-cultural backgrounds. The relation between these findings and outdoor recreational use of peri-urban green spaces will be explored in the next phases of the data analysis, and the results will inform managerial actions in the Wienerwald Park.

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