

Generation Y and outdoor recreation. Changing meanings of nature in Finland

Riikka Puhakka, University of Helsinki, Finland, riikka.puhakka@helsinki.fi

The value of natural environments and green spaces in urban environments on promoting human well-being has been widely recognized (Chiesura, 2004). People's personal experiences and affective relationship to nature are also integral predictors of environmentally responsible behaviour (Ojala, 2012). Hence, it is increasingly important to take human values of nature into account in urban planning.

The urbanization and digitalization process taking place in Finland and other western countries has led to changes in the ways people spend their free time. Leisure behaviour of today's youth, so called Generation Y, is different from that of the previous generations (Puhakka, Poikolainen and Karisto, 2014). This development has also had impacts on outdoor recreation and the human relationship with nature. Recently nature-based tourism has grown fast and patterns of outdoor recreation have become more diverse (Bell et al, 2007). Natural environments are increasingly valued for their beauty and aesthetic experiences they afford. While the public use of nature is changing from subsistence to recreation, the role of direct contact with nature has appeared to decrease in society. Children's and adolescents' independent mobility and the possibilities to connect with nature in everyday life have diminished (Skår and Krogh, 2009).

Study methods

This study explores Generation Y's outdoor recreation and relationship with nature in Finland. The research questions are: 1) how do today's young people recreate outdoors, 2) what values and meanings do they attach to outdoor recreation and nature, and 3) how their relationship with nature is developed. The study aims to distinguish potential future changes in outdoor recreation and the human relationship with nature. The study was conducted in the town of Lahti and the surrounding area in 2013 (Puhakka, 2014).

The method of thematic writing was used in the study. Young people were asked to respond to open-ended questions related to five themes: (1) leisure time and favourite places, (2) definitions of nature, (3) leisure time outdoors and the importance of nature, (4) most preferred natural environments, and (5) the knowledge and skills learned from the previous generations. Moreover, young people responded to a structured question about their participation in various outdoor activities. The data were collected from the pupils of two schools (N=184). The respondents were born between 1992 and 1998, and over two thirds (69%) of them were female.

Results

Among the young respondents, the most popular outdoor activities in summer time were sunbathing and spending time on the beach or in nature, and swimming in natural waters (Figure 1). During wintertime, the participation rates were lower than in summer time, but around a fifth of the respondents participated in nature photography and cross-country skiing every month. Thematic writings gave further information about the respondents' outdoor recreation. The most common activity, mentioned by almost two thirds (63%), was walking, jogging and spending time in nature. Young people also mentioned some new forms of outdoor recreation, such as airsoft. However, nature may be important although it is not 'used' for special activities.

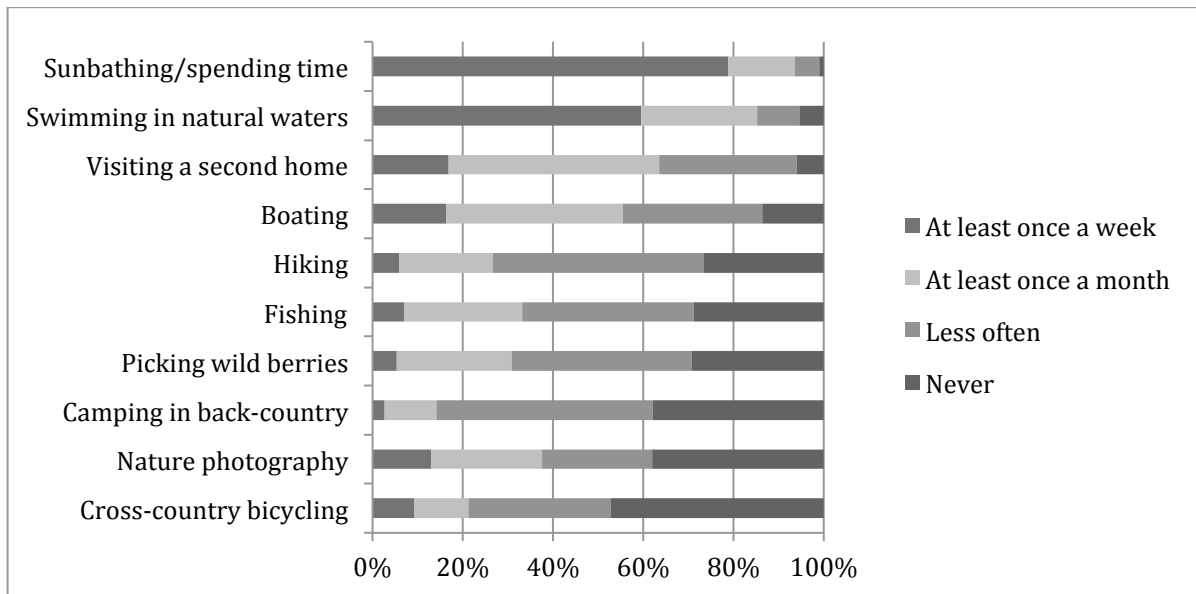


Figure 1. Most participated outdoor activities in summer time among the young respondents (% , N=184).

Almost half (44%) of the young respondents recreated outdoors actively and considered nature important, while nature was somewhat important for 45 percent and not at all important for 11 percent of the respondents. Nature turned out to be more important for women than men. Some young people (12%) had a favourite place located in natural environment, for instance at the shore of the lake or on the hill in the forest. Second home was mentioned by eight respondents (4%). Although the young respondents usually spent leisure time with their friends, nature was also a place of being alone.

The most important motives for outdoor recreation were relaxation, good feeling and escape from everyday life (31 %), peacefulness and silence (18 %), freshness and cleanliness (6 %) and the beauty of nature (6 %). The most common reason for not spending as much time in nature as the respondent would like to was the lack of time (6 %). Negative aspects of nature were also reasons for not spending time in nature, for instance insects (10 %), weather conditions (4 %), lack of activities, unsafety etc.

The study results emphasize the importance of the previous generations in transferring the close relationship to nature. Most of the respondents who considered nature important (84%) or somewhat important (71%) had learned nature-related skills and knowledge from their parents or grandparents. Of those who did not consider nature important, less than half (47%) had learned these skills and knowledge from the previous generations.

Discussion

Nature is primarily a recreational environment and a source of experiences for Generation Y. This generation is from the background more urbanized than older generations, which reflects in their perception of nature and outdoor recreation. There are signs of polarisation: some young people

have inherited the valuation of nature and emphasize its importance, while some others do not have any connection to it. The study results stress the role of summer cottages as 'gates to nature' in the urbanized society.

Outdoor recreation seems to be dependent on the age and life phase of individuals. Therefore, it is challenging to predict the future. Today's young people may increase outdoor recreation in later phases of their life span; they have nature-related skills and interest towards nature, but other issues are currently more important in their lives (e.g. friends, other hobbies, school). Longitudinal research is needed to identify the generational differences.

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