

81 The importance of nature during the COVID-19 pandemic - experiences of national outdoor recreation demand inventory in Finland

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Access to natural environments has been linked to have positive effect on physical and mental health (WHO 2016, Markevych et al. 2017, Tyrväinen et al. 2019). Because of the COVID-19 outbreak different countries enacted restrictions, the close down of public places, rejections for travelling and leisure time activities, reduce of social contacts to slow down the virus spreads. Differences exists how the countries or specific regions put into practice these restrictions. In Finland visiting natural spaces and outdoor recreation areas has been allowed in all times during the covid-19 pandemic.

This study provides insights into how the pandemic has impacted outdoor recreation in Finland. The national outdoor recreation inventory 2019-2021 (LVVI3) provides new knowledge of the use of the forests and natural areas during the period of COVID-19 in 2020. The aim of the national recreation monitoring study is to produce comprehensive and ground level information of outdoor recreation demand in Finland, to monitor long term changes of outdoor recreation, but also to support the sustainable use of natural areas.

The data for this study is based on six survey rounds performed in 2019-2021 (ca. 8600 respondents): rounds 1-2 before the covid-19 in the autumn 2019, and winter 2020, round 3 in the spring 2020, and round 4 in the autumn 2020. Rounds 5-6 were conducted in 2021. The questionnaire in the autumn 2020 included questions targeted to the effects of COVID-19 on outdoor recreation (n=1500). Data consist of a random sample of Finns aged 15 to 80 years. Data collection is conducted in cooperation with Statistics Finland.

Around 96% of Finns annually participate in outdoor recreation. The estimate has been very

stable in 20 years' time of outdoor recreation monitoring. There was a small decrease (94 to 91 %) in outdoor recreation participation among the age group 65-80 years in the spring 2020 compared to other time points of the study 2019-2021. This may be linked to the health communication and instructions focusing on citizens over 70 years. In the number of recreational visits, the results show a clear increase during the spring 2020 in all age groups. The respondents living in the cities reported also more frequent use of urban green areas and other managed and constructed outdoor areas than before the pandemic. On the contrary, residents living in the countryside reported less effects of covid-19 on outdoor recreation participation.

Over 70 percent of respondents reported that important motives for outdoor recreation and visiting green areas during the pandemic were engaging with physical activity, beautiful scenery, stress recovery and relaxation, and searching for the silence and peaceful nature as well as enjoying the own time and quietness.

The resilience of a community is reflective to cope with the effects of changed situations and stressed conditions (here pandemic) (Adger, 2006). Green areas and forests have been important for reducing the impacts of covid-19 on residents' wellbeing, especially in urban environment. We need more research on residents' experiences, to identify the group of residents most vulnerable to restrictions as well as information to support the sustainable use of natural environments.

References

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