

Nature based integration in Europe – a review

Sandra Gentin, Department of Geosciences and Natural Resource Management, University of Copenhagen, Danish, sgentin@ign.ku.dk

Kati Pitkänen, Finnish Environment Institute SYKE, Finnish

Anna Maria Chondromatidou, Department of Geosciences and Natural Resource Management, University of Copenhagen, Greek.

Ann Dolling, Department of Forest Ecology and Management, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Swedish

Søren Præstholt, Department of Geosciences and Natural Resource Management, University of Copenhagen, Danish,

Anna Maria Palsdottir, Department of Work Science, business economics and environmental psychology, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Icelandic

Introduction

Immigration and the successful integration of migrants into the European societies have become hot topics due to, not the least, the recent influx of asylum seekers and refugees to Europe. The number of asylum seekers to EU member states increased from approximately 300 000 in 2012 to 1.3 million in 2015. These developments have promoted revisiting and developing approaches for the successful integration of migrants all over Europe. Therefore, the European Commission emphasizes that, integration policies should go beyond participation in the labor market and mastering the language of the host country, as integration is most effective when anchored in what it means to live in diverse European societies (European Commission, 2016).

Nature-based potentials and solutions

One possible response to address this challenge is using nature as an arena for socio-cultural integration of the newcomers, as “nature-based solutions” have been proposed to address simultaneously environmental, economic and social problems especially in urban areas across Europe. For example a variety of practical examples in a study by Ambrose-Oji et al (2015) have shown that urban green spaces are used to stimulate social integration and cohesion. Also in the Nordic Countries NGO’s and third sector’ actors have used nature and outdoor recreation as a point of departure for integrating new citizens. A survey in four Nordic Countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden) followed by several workshops with various stakeholders revealed a range of examples where local groups, organizations or authorities had arranged activities in natural areas and urban green spaces to pursue integration purposes (Pitkänen *et al.*, 2017). Systematic evaluations of the outcome on socio-cultural integration barely exist within the examples, and the experiences and lessons learnt from these cases are promising (Pitkänen *et al.*, 2017). However, the potential of nature-based solutions has not until now been capitalized at the public sector policies and immigration work. Moreover, the practitioners do not effectively apply current research and academic knowledge on the relationship between immigrants and nature in their new country of residence. Pitkänen et al. (2017) claims that these shortcomings relate to a lack of common concepts and definitions and suggest that a common understanding of ‘nature-based integration’ is needed in order enhance cooperation and knowledge exchange across borders; which is also emphasized by Kloek et al. (2013)

Aim of paper – linking immigration, integration and nature?

Following from above it becomes clear that there is a need for investigating the links between immigration and nature; and there are two perspectives, which this review aims to contributing. The first perspective relates to what role nature can play or already plays in terms of integrating immigrants into their new countries of residence. The second perspective is rooted in a social environmental justice perspective, where focusing on the new Europeans should have the same rights and treatment (e.g. benefits of natural areas in terms of ecosystem services; or access to high quality natural environment) regardless of their ethnic background.

The following questions have guided the review process: 1) To which extent can nature function as place for social interaction? 2) Which influence has nature on identification and attachment? 3) How does nature function as an institution such as education, employment, health etc.? 4) Does nature play a role in terms of cultural understanding?

Based on the review we will discuss, the links between nature, immigrants and integration. Further, we will discuss how the relationship between natural areas and integration is understood in the reviewed papers and how this relationship could be conceptualised?

Results

The results are based on a literature study conducted from July 2017 to December 2017, on peer-reviewed articles on the topic. The key words of the review are based on the title and its synonyms: “Nature based integration in Europe”. We operated with three key-word groups 1) environments and contexts of nature based integration; 2) concepts and synonyms based on definitions of immigration, 3) definitions of integration.

Based on this systematic review, we identified 13 European papers that have addressed this relationship. Majority of the papers come from North-Western Europe, the papers presented case studies from the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, UK, Spain, Poland and Finland. Most papers presented a single country case study, only one presented a comparison between several countries.

References

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