

Migrants' perspectives on urban forests: the influence of a migration background on patterns of forest use and perception

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Introduction

Throughout the world, big cities are attractive destinations for migrants of all origins. The urban population is increasingly characterized by a great diversity, especially regarding its cultural and ethnic composition. In the same time, the global trend of urbanization amplifies the use of urban green spaces and city forests for recreation. In this context, it has become a crucial task for forests managers and local planers to understand the values of forests for people.

In Germany, almost 20 % of the population are considered to have a migration background, being either immigrants or descendants of immigrants. Until now, very few studies on outdoor recreation focused on migrant groups, which indicates a need for further research (Dömek et al. 2006, Jay and Schraml, 2009). The present study aims at expanding the knowledge by exploring the following questions: how do people with a migration background perceive and use urban forests? Is it possible to identify typical patterns of perception and use? To what extent does the migration background influence the perception and the recreational use of urban forests?

Theoretical approach

Given the lack of an appropriate and developed theory, the conceptual framework is based on three different theory fields comprising of the forest recreation research, the sociology of leisure and the critical sociology of migration, ethnicity and identity. In the forest recreation research, the recreational forest use is defined as a leisure activity characterized by its frequency, the activity practiced, the place visited, the social pattern and the motives of the visit. In this study, leisure is considered to be structured by social dimensions such as age, gender, social status, ethnic or religious belonging (Lüdtke 2001). Finally, migration is conceptualized as a socially constructed notion. Accordingly, the motives for everyday action are complex and various; they depend on a range of different factors rather than only on the migration background (Riegel 2004, Sackmann et al. 2005, Schmidt-Lauber 2007).

Material and methods

The authors chose a qualitative approach in order to thoroughly explore the various subjective perspectives on urban forests. Face-to-face and problem-centered interviews were conducted in the city of Berlin and the metropolitan area of Stuttgart, Germany. At both sites, the study concentrates on three groups: people with a Turkish migration background, people with a Russia-German migration background and people without a migration background. The interviewees were selected through a theoretical sampling based mainly on the criteria of age, gender, neighborhood, relationship to forests, profession, life situation and migration background (e.g. 1st or 2nd generation). In total, 42 interviews were conducted, the distribution over the 3 cited groups was equal and a great variety of cases could be achieved.

Outline of the results

The interview covered three main topic areas: 1) the perception and recreational use of urban forests; 2) abstract views on forests and nature and their construction in relation to the interviewees' childhood and youth; 3) general leisure patterns, especially the priorities in leisure activities and the use of other city green spaces.

On the one hand the results will provide an insight in everyday practices of migrants and non-migrants concerning their outdoor recreation patterns. On the other hand, the broadened theoretical framework which includes aspects of the leisure organization will allow to analyze the social construction of these

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practices. Beyond a mere description of similarities and differences in perception and use patterns, a comparison of different influencing factors will then be possible among them the migration background.

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