

Healthy parks healthy people Finland

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Introduction

Natural settings can contribute positively to human health in a variety of ways. They may provide medicinal resources or important settings for recreational activities that improve people's physical and mental health. Parks and other green spaces can reduce crime, foster psychological wellbeing, reduce stress, boost immunity, enhance productivity, and promote healing. Multiple benefits can also arise from brief encounters with nature or experiencing nature on a smaller scale in settings such as in urban parks.

In recent years, many park management bodies have resolved to enhance such health benefits. One good example of such progress is the "Healthy parks, healthy people" concept, launched by Parks Victoria in Australia. Programmes with similar messages have also been introduced by other agencies such as the U.S. National Park Service and Natural Heritage Services in Finland. The concept is based within park management bodies, but it also involves managers of other kinds of green spaces, as well as business innovators, health care professionals, scientists and NGOs interested in public health.

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Metsähallitus Natural Heritage Services (NHS) manages all of Finland's national parks, other state-owned protected areas, wilderness areas, national hiking areas and public waters. NHS works to improve public well-being and the viability of tourism, as well as the state of biodiversity in Finland. In 2010 NHS launched Finland's Healthy Park Healthy People programme with the overall aim that: *Public health will improve as people get out into natural settings, enjoy positive and genuine experiences, and improve their physical health through a wide range of outdoor activities.*

The programme has nine more specific objectives covering four key issues: 1) strategic partnerships, 2) research and monitoring, 3) the accessibility of green spaces, and 4) nature and health for people of all ages. The programme is to be implemented all around Finland, and it also has strong national and international dimensions. One expected outcome is new methodology to improve our understanding of health benefits of green settings and our ability to monitor related progress. International cooperation will play crucial role, as this challenge is global in scope. Park managers have been assigned to join public health forums, since in addition to protecting essential ecosystems and biodiversity, parks also provide a vital setting for health promotion and the creation of wellbeing.

OpenAir in Oulu region

Oulu is the largest city in northern Finland, with a population of about 250,000. The city's demographic structure is younger than many other localities in Finland and also

in comparison with other European cities. This is a great advantage, but at the same time the region is facing public health challenges. Health inequality is rather high, and occurrences of common Finnish health problems are more frequent here than in most other regions of Finland. Such health problems have probably had some connection to an increase in relative poverty among young families over the last 15 years. For example, more than half of local children do not get enough exercise, and mental health problems are increasing among young people. On the plus side, Oulu is an excellent location to deliver a Healthy Parks Healthy People programme, as the region is blessed with many attractive protected areas and other natural settings.

Metsähallitus NHS has launched the OpenAir development project (Oulu Parks, Enjoying Nature – Activation, Interaction, Recreation) in collaboration with the local health and administrative authorities, research organisations and NGOs.

The project aims to get key actors in the Oulu region involved in international and cross-sectoral networks that will capitalize and promote measures to enhance the health benefits of green spaces. The project has also launched the "Oulu Parks" concept to activate people, to remove barriers hindering the use of green spaces, and to diversify the recreational spectrum. The guiding idea is that nature, outdoor life and the related benefits should be accessible to everyone, which would reduce health inequalities.

National and international cooperation can provide a framework for spreading innovations and sharing good practices. Research cooperation can increase our understanding of the health benefits of recreation in green spaces and help to create efficient methods for monitoring these benefits. Other outcomes of the project should include a wider recognition that parks and other green spaces are integral elements of the quality of life, and a better understanding among health care professionals and policy-makers of the importance of the quality of the natural environment.



Oulu Parks, from urban Parks to Wilderness areas and National Parks

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