

Nature-based integration in the Nordic countries – practices and perspectives

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Nature-based solutions are an efficient way to address simultaneously environmental, economic and social problems especially in urban areas (European Commission, 2016). There is increasing evidence on the positive benefits of natural areas to the mental and physical health and well-being. Further natural areas offer important sites for leisure and recreation and play an important role in promoting the mixing of different people with different ethnic backgrounds, both minority and majority populations (see e.g. Peters, Stodolska and Horolets, 2016).

ORIGIN – outdoor recreation, nature interpretation and integration

In order to increase the understanding of the role of nature and cultural ecosystem services in the social integration of immigrants into the Nordic societies, the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) has funded project ORIGIN (Outdoor recreation, nature interpretation and integration in Nordic Countries). Initially, a survey revealed that various stakeholders across the Nordic countries' have launched a number of practical projects and initiatives to promote the benefits of nature in integration. However, information and documentation about the various experiences was fragmented. In order to facilitate a better knowledge exchange across borders, the ORIGIN project initiated annual Nordic workshops on nature-based integration, and a network of researchers, NGOs and public and private actors working in the fields of immigrant integration and/or nature was formed.

In two workshops in 2016 and 2017 researchers, practitioners and public sector representatives from Finland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden presented and discussed their practices with emphasis on evaluation and lessons learned by the current practices of nature-based integration. During the workshops, similarities and differences across the practices as well as common ideas of the role and use of nature in the integration process were discussed.

What is nature-based integration?

The essential learning from the presented practices is that nature-based integration is about both nature itself and nature as a base for empowering the migrants to take part in their new society.

Based on the empirical practices presented at the workshop we propose a first attempt to define nature-based integration. The definition is an attempt to gain a better understanding of what is at stake in nature-based integration, and further the definition can be used as an inspiration for future initiatives.

There are several forms of integration and several ways nature can support the integration of immigrants (Esser, 1999; Leikkilä, Faehnle and Galanakis, 2013). As a point of departure for dividing the aim and focus of the Nordic practices we used Essers (1999) four dimensions of social integration (structural, cultural, interactive and identificational integration). Although the collected practices vary in terms of e.g. target group, aim, and purpose, all of the collected practices have one way or another aimed at nature-based integration.

In this paper we will discuss the results of the workshop, provide a preliminary attempt to define “nature-based integration” and relate the findings to to Essers (1999) four dimensions of social integration related to nature-based integration practices:

- **Structural integration** refers to the access people have to common resources and main institutions of society such as labour, education, health services or natural areas and recreation opportunities. Besides promoting access to nature, nature-based integration practices can reinforce immigrant’s employment or language skills by providing training or enhance the immigrants’ health and well-being.
- **Cultural integration** refers to acquisition of both knowledge and competences regarding cultural aspects, common practices, general rules of behaviour, things that enable individuals to navigate in the society. Nature-based integration practices are a key means to transfer knowledge related to codes of behavior, legislation, customs and use of nature. The practices and learning by doing, however, can also be a way to transfer more general tacit knowledge about the Nordic societies, which can be hard to verbalize or teach by other means.
- Friendships, partnerships, and other social aspects characterize the **interactive integration**, which refers to the inclusion of immigrants into the primary networks and relationships of society. Nature-based practices should therefore promote local involvement and interactions between immigrants and other local native citizens.
- Lastly, **identificational integration** refers to a sense of belonging to the new society in terms of emotional bonds to other groups or places. By facilitating access to and introducing the newcomers to nature and local green spaces, nature-based integration can foster the creation of positive experiences of the new country and develop the immigrants’ sense of belonging and place attachment to their new country and everyday environment.

References

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