

Accessible Forest Practice Manual





INTRODUCTION	4
THE CONCEPT	5
THE IDEA	6
QUICK NAVIGATION GUIDE: HOW TO USE THIS MANUAL	6
STRUCTURE	7
INTRO / OUTRO PRINCIPLE.....	8
THIS E-BOOK AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL.....	8
A DUAL-PERSPECTIVE EDUCATIONAL APPROACH.....	9
READY TO LEARN?	10
GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXT AND SCOPE OF GUIDANCE	11
LEARNING JOURNEY MAP	11
QUICK REFERENCE CARDS	12
SYMBOLS AND ICONS USED	12
DISCLAIMER: LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR ORGANISING FOREST WALKING ACTIVITIES	13
GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS	14
PART ONE	17
CHAPTER 1: GETTING STARTED.....	19
WHAT IS ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTICE?	20
KEY BENEFITS OF NATURE IMMERSION	21
CHAPTER 2: YOUR EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY AS A PRACTITIONER	25
COMPETENCY COMPASS MODEL	26
HOW TO START	30
CHAPTER 3: THE UNIVERSAL WALK	35
THE FOREST WALK: TOWARDS A UNIVERSAL MODEL	35
THE FOUR STAGES OF THE UNIVERSAL WALK	36
KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR PREPARING THE WALK.....	37
PART TWO	41
CHAPTER 4. ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTICE FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH VARIOUS TYPES OF DISABILITIES	43
SECTION 1. UNDERSTANDING THE GROUP	44
SECTION 2. ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTITIONER COMPETENCIES	53
SECTION 3. PRACTICAL STRATEGIES: WORKING WITH THE TARGET GROUP	66
SECTION 4. BENEFITS FOR THE GROUP.....	98
CHAPTER 5: ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTICE FOR MENTAL HEALTH PATIENTS	105
SECTION 1. UNDERSTANDING THE GROUP	106
SECTION 2. ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTITIONER COMPETENCIES	114
SECTION 3. PRACTICAL STRATEGIES	120
SECTION 4: BENEFITS FOR THE GROUP	137



CHAPTER 6: ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTICE FOR SENIORS (LONG-TERM GROUP)	142
SECTION 1. UNDERSTANDING THE GROUP.....	143
SECTION 2. ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTITIONER COMPETENCIES	152
SECTION 3. PRACTICAL STRATEGIE	158
SECTION 4: BENEFITS FOR THE GROUP	176
CHAPTER 7. ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTICE FOR INDIVIDUALS STRUGGLING WITH EXCESSIVE DIGITAL DEVICE USE	181
UNDERSTANDING THE TARGET GROUPS: GENERAL	182
ACCESSIBILITY ISSUES	182
PART A. ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTICE FOR INDIVIDUALS STRUGGLING WITH EXCESSIVE DIGITAL DEVICE USE – CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS	188
SECTION 1. THE TARGET GROUP – CHILDREN AND TEENS	189
SECTION 2. ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTITIONER COMPETENCIES	198
SECTION 3. PRACTICAL STRATEGIE.....	202
SECTION 4: BENEFITS FOR THE GROUP.....	220
PART B. ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTICE FOR INDIVIDUALS STRUGGLING WITH EXCESSIVE DIGITAL DEVICE USE – SINGLE MOTHERS	224
SECTION 1. THE TARGET GROUP – VULNERABLE MOTHERS	225
SECTION 2. ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTITIONER COMPETENCIES	229
SECTION 3. PRACTICAL STRATEGIE	232
SECTION 4: BENEFITS FOR THE GROUP	246
CHAPTER 8: ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTICE FOR MIGRANTS	251
PART A. REGULAR MIGRANTS	254
SECTION 1. UNDERSTANDING THE TARGET GROUP – REGULAR MIGRANTS	255
SECTION 2. ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTITIONER COMPETENCIES.....	261
SECTION 3. PRACTICAL STRATEGIES	269
SECTION 4. BENEFITS FOR THE GROUP	292
PART B. UNDERSTANDING THE TARGET GROUP – VULNERABLE MIGRANTS (REFUGEES).....	300
SECTION 1. UNDERSTANDING THE TARGET GROUP – VULNERABLE MIGRANTS (REFUGEES)	300
SECTION 2. ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTITIONER COMPETENCIES	306
SECTION 3. PRACTICAL STRATEGIES.....	313
SECTION 4. BENEFITS FOR THE GROUP	332
SUPPLEMENT	338

Accessible Forest Practice Manual © 2025

by MSP Słyszę Serce, KulturNest e.V., Renature, Maria do Carmo Pinheiro de Mello Stilwell,
Szatyor Község a Környezettudatos Életmód Támogatásáért Egyesüle

is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International.

To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

A photograph of a large tree trunk in a forest, heavily covered in green moss. The ground is covered in brown, fallen leaves. A green circular graphic element is positioned on the right side of the image, partially overlapping the tree trunk and the text.

INTRODUCTION



This e-book has been designed as an educational resource to introduce the principles and practices of organising forest walks for groups who normally face obstacles accessing green spaces. We were inspired by the Japanese practice of Shinrin-yoku [Jap.: “forest bathing”], which involves mindful immersion in a natural forest environment. Forest bathing was formally developed in Japan in the 1980s by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, with the intention of promoting health and wellbeing while also fostering deeper connections with the natural environment.

The practice of Shinrin-yoku is deeply rooted in Japanese cultural traditions (particularly the Shinto religion and Zen Buddhist philosophy), which emphasise harmony with nature, mindfulness, and the interconnectedness of all living beings. Nevertheless, it has proved to be adaptable to diverse cultural contexts while preserving its core focus – fostering wellbeing through a connection with nature. Originally conceived as a response to the stresses of urbanisation in Japan, the practice of forest bathing offers benefits that extend far beyond those cultural and historical confines. Moreover, it draws upon ancient traditions of immersing oneself in a natural environment that exist across many cultures. Be it wandering through a dense forest in Japan, strolling through a European meadow, or exploring a desert oasis, the fundamental principles of slowing down, awakening the senses, and cultivating presence hold universal appeal.

The benefits of Shinrin-yoku are both extensive and profound, transcending the individual to influence broader social and environmental dimensions. Scientific research into forest bathing demonstrates that engaging in the practice significantly enhances physical and mental wellbeing, fortifies social connections, and cultivates a deeper sense of environmental stewardship. Forest bathing has been shown not only to alleviate stress and anxiety but also to improve concentration, bolster the immune system, and elevate overall mood.

The practices associated with Shinrin-yoku heighten individuals’ awareness of their surroundings, fostering a sense of responsibility and care for the natural world. Furthermore, immersive experiences in nature, including guided forest walks, have the unique potential to restore and strengthen social relationships by offering a shared space for authentic and meaningful connection. Away from the distractions of modern life, the natural environment provides an ideal setting for open communication and emotional bonding, thereby enriching interpersonal interactions.

While the benefits of spending quality time in nature are well-documented, it is important to acknowledge that not everyone has equal access to this practice. Barriers such as physical disabilities, limited mobility, socio-economic challenges, prohibitive cultural norms, geographic isolation, or lack of awareness can exclude certain groups from experiencing the therapeutic power of nature. Additionally, marginalised communities may face systemic inequities that further restrict their opportunities to engage with forest environments.

As authors of this e-book, we recognise that many professionals work with populations who are underexposed to nature for the various reasons listed above. This e-book seeks to bridge that gap by offering strategies that make nature immersion a viable and beneficial practice, even for those who may not have regular access to forests or nature reserves. By fostering accessibility, we can ensure that the restorative benefits of being in nature are shared by all, regardless of their circumstances.

This e-book has been created specifically for professionals who already possess experience working with disadvantaged populations. Whether you are a counsellor, educator, therapist or community worker, this e-book is for those who see the potential of nature as a therapeutic tool and want to enhance their existing work. And also – maybe even especially – for certified forest guides and forest therapy guides who aim to make forest walking accessible to diverse groups, including those most vulnerable.



QUICK NAVIGATION GUIDE: HOW TO USE THIS MANUAL

Let's begin by exploring the original concept behind this e-book. Then we will break down its structure to understand its organisational principles. After that we'll examine how this e-book serves as an effective educational tool. Finally, we will familiarise ourselves with the key symbols and icons used throughout.

— THE IDEA —

The content of this e-book derives from the experiences of the international initiative „Accessible Forest Project” (2024-2025), which was dedicated to making nature connection possible for individuals who, for various reasons, might face challenges in accessing natural environments.

The project involved four teams from different European countries – Portugal, Germany, Hungary and Poland – each conducting a series of forest walks tailored to their respective groups.

The primary groups of interest included:

- Persons facing mental health challenges, with a particular emphasis on utilising nature as a space for reflection and emotional support in day-care facilities or hospitals (Portugal);
- Senior citizens (Portugal);
- Migrants, including refugees (Germany);
- People experiencing difficulties with excessive use of digital devices; as well as residents of a care home for mothers and families (Hungary);
- Individuals with intellectual and/or physical disabilities (Poland).



While promoting the general idea of wellbeing through nature immersion, this e-book first and foremost offers practical strategies to facilitate nature connection experiences for these populations. It is therefore very important to understand how we organised our e-book according to this task.

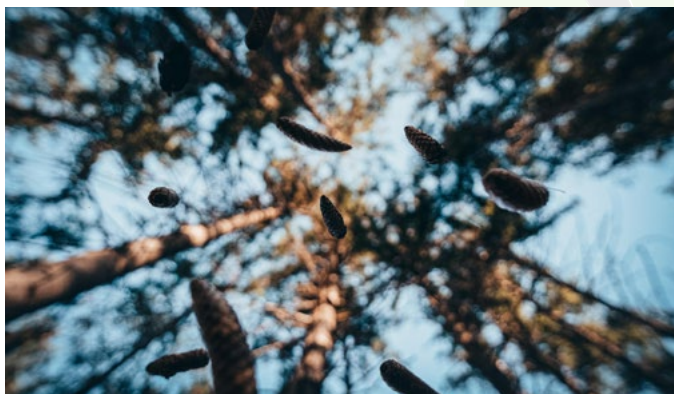
This e-book is primarily composed of two main units, „Part One” and „Part Two,” which are supported by an „Introduction” and a „Supplement.” „Part One” contains three chapters; „Part Two” contains five.

Let’s begin by taking a look at the three chapters comprising „**Part One**” that follow this Introduction.

In Chapter 1 of “Part One” we present the foundational principles of accessible forest practice that underpinned our project “Accessible Forest,” as well as the key benefits of nature immersion for general human wellbeing.

In Chapter 2 of “Part One” we investigate the process of becoming an accessible forest practitioner. A particular emphasis is placed on the competencies required for this role. To facilitate self-assessment, we present the Competency Compass Model, developed as an outcome of the “Accessible Forest Project.”

In Chapter 3 of “Part One” we outline the basic formula for what we call a “Universal Walk,” a walk format established and practiced as part of the project. This format serves as a reproducible model for other groups seeking to operate as



Accessible Forest Practitioners.

Then in “**Part Two**,” arguably the cornerstone of our e-book, we delve into our work with the diverse groups in the „Accessible Forest” project. This section not only details our experiences but also serves as a foundational guide for those aspiring to facilitate forest walks with similar groups who may encounter

significant barriers to accessing natural spaces.

As mentioned above, “Part Two” consists of five chapters. Each chapter was prepared by a different team working in a different country with a different group of participants. As a result, **Chapters 4-8**, prepared by the project teams from Portugal, Germany, Hungary and Poland, are dedicated to practical strategies to facilitate forest walk experiences for, respectively:

- persons facing mental health challenges;
- seniors;
- people with migration backgrounds;
- people experiencing difficulties with excessive use of digital devices; and, finally,
- individuals with intellectual and/or physical disabilities.



To ensure a clear structure and to foster the educational potential of this e-book, each chapter of “Part Two” addresses the same series of four concerns but vis-à-vis a different group of participants.

Each chapter is thus divided into the following Sections:

- Section 1:** addresses general accessibility issues that participants in the groups involved in the „Accessible Forest” project might potentially face;
- Section 2:** addresses the competencies of the Accessible Forest Practitioners;
- Section 3:** addresses the concrete accessibility issues that appeared during the project and how they were solved;
- Section 4:** addresses the question of the benefits of forest walking for the participants of the groups involved.

The last part of this e-book plays a supplementary role. Here the reader will find a list of relevant references as well as information about the Accessible Forest Project and each organisation involved.

INTRO / OUTRO PRINCIPLE

In order to ensure a coherent learning journey, each chapter of this e-book begins with its own Introduction and concludes with a tailored Learning Checkpoints: Progress Tracking Tool. This framework is designed to provide clarity, engagement, and a sense of purpose for the reader, fostering both theoretical understanding and practical application.

An introduction typically provides a clear roadmap for what lies ahead. Here, each chapter Introduction outlines the specific focus of that chapter's conceptual framework as well as the real-world techniques and tools derived from the theoretical content. At this initial stage, readers are encouraged to pause and reflect on their current learning objectives. Are they primarily focused on deepening theoretical understanding, developing practical skills, or a combination of both?

Additionally, each chapter introduction previews the specific competences that the chapter will address, thus ensuring alignment with the broader objectives of the e-book. Finally, a recommended time commitment for the work will be provided.

The tailored Learning Checkpoints: Progress Tracking Tool that close each chapter are intended to foster self-assessment and reinforce information retention through reflective inquiry. These sections focus on reflection on the content covered, assessment of personal growth (evaluation of objectives), satisfaction rating and potential for further inquiry.

This structured approach not only guides readers through the material with precision but also empowers them to connect theory with practice, evaluate their learning journey, and deepen their engagement with the content.



THIS E-BOOK AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL

This e-book is not prescriptive; rather, it is a guide to inspire your own creativity in designing nature connection experiences. While it offers frameworks and ideas, we encourage you to adapt these to your own professional practice, taking into account the unique dynamics of each group you work with.

Our e-book was designed with the belief that connection experiences should be accessible to all, regardless of background, ability, or circumstance. It is our hope that by offering these tools to professionals like you, we can help broaden access to nature's restorative benefits and ensure that everyone – especially those with limited access to green areas – can experience the profound positive impact of nature connection experiences.

A DUAL-PERSPECTIVE EDUCATIONAL APPROACH

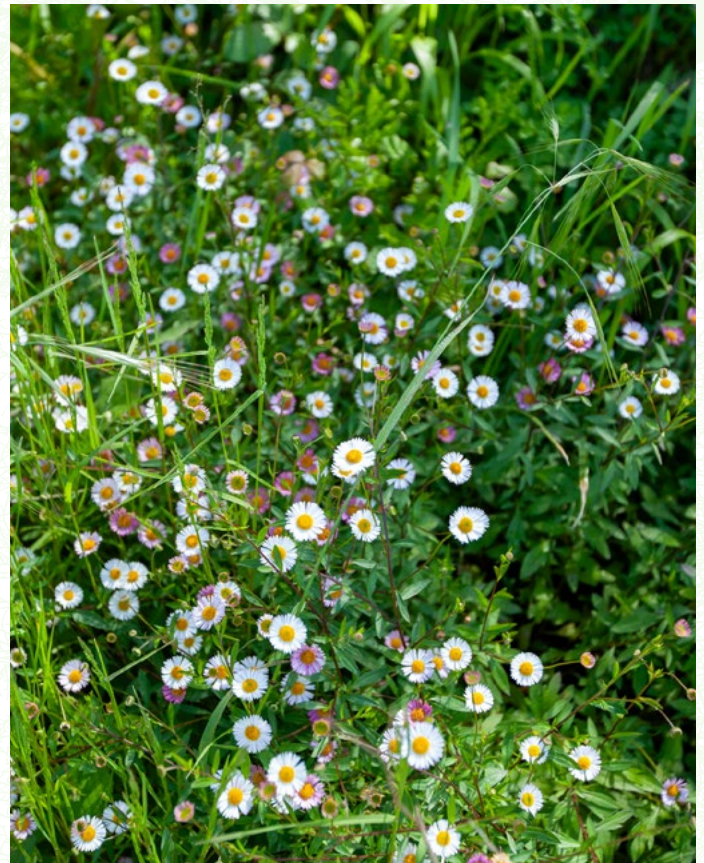
In our e-book we have tried to apply an educational approach that merges the perspectives of the Accessible Forest Practitioners and the participants of the forest walks. This method seeks to connect the expertise of the facilitator with the lived experiences and unique contributions of the participants. In so doing, it creates a learning environment in which all voices hold value and the content becomes dynamic, responsive, and enriched by collective insight.

The principles underlying this approach are threefold. Firstly, it promotes participant-centeredness, emphasising that those engaging with the activity bring their own valuable knowledge and lived experiences that can meaningfully shape their encounter with nature. Secondly, it ensures contextual relevance, requiring organisers to tailor methodologies to the group's specific needs, goals, and constraints while being flexible enough to evolve in real time. Lastly, it fosters shared ownership, encouraging a collaborative spirit whereby both organisers and participants feel invested in the success of the process.

This model offers several benefits. For example, it enhances engagement by making participants active contributors rather than passive recipients. Additionally, it cultivates a sense of agency, empowering participants to take lessons beyond the walk into their broader lives. For Accessible Forest Practitioners, the approach also provides valuable insights, allowing them to refine their practices based on direct feedback and real-world application.

However, there are also challenges. The most significant is the risk of imbalance, where either Accessible Forest Practitioners dominate, thereby undermining participant agency, or participants' needs become so divergent that structure and coherence are lost. Moreover, adapting to diverse groups requires time and resource investment, as well as advanced facilitation skills. Miscommunication can also arise if expectations between Accessible Forest Practitioners and forest walk participants are not clearly aligned.

As the authors of this e-book, we have sought to mitigate these issues through several strategies. For instance, to address potential imbalances, we have provided a structured framework that encourages flexibility without sacrificing coherence. Detailed guidance on pre-walk consultations assists Accessible Forest Practitioners to align their plans with participants' needs and expectations.



Emphasis is placed on clear communication and reflective practices, ensuring that both parties understand their roles and contributions.

Furthermore, to overcome resource and skill constraints, this e-book includes a toolbox of adaptable activities and prompts for various scenarios intended to reduce the cognitive and logistical burden on Accessible Forest Practitioners. Competence assessment tools can guide AF Practitioners in developing the necessary skills to balance structure and spontaneity. By prioritising inclusivity, flexibility, and preparation, this e-book supports a balanced and effective dual-perspective approach, ensuring that both Accessible Forest Practitioners and forest walk participants find value in their shared journey.

READY TO LEARN?

Education is not merely the transmission of information; it is a transformative journey that begins with an individual's readiness to learn. This foundational principle underscores the notion that learning is not simply about assimilating material but is intrinsically tied to one's overarching approach towards the learning process itself. Readiness to learn incorporates the learner's physical, emotional, and cognitive preparedness, as well as their attitude and motivation toward acquiring knowledge and skills.

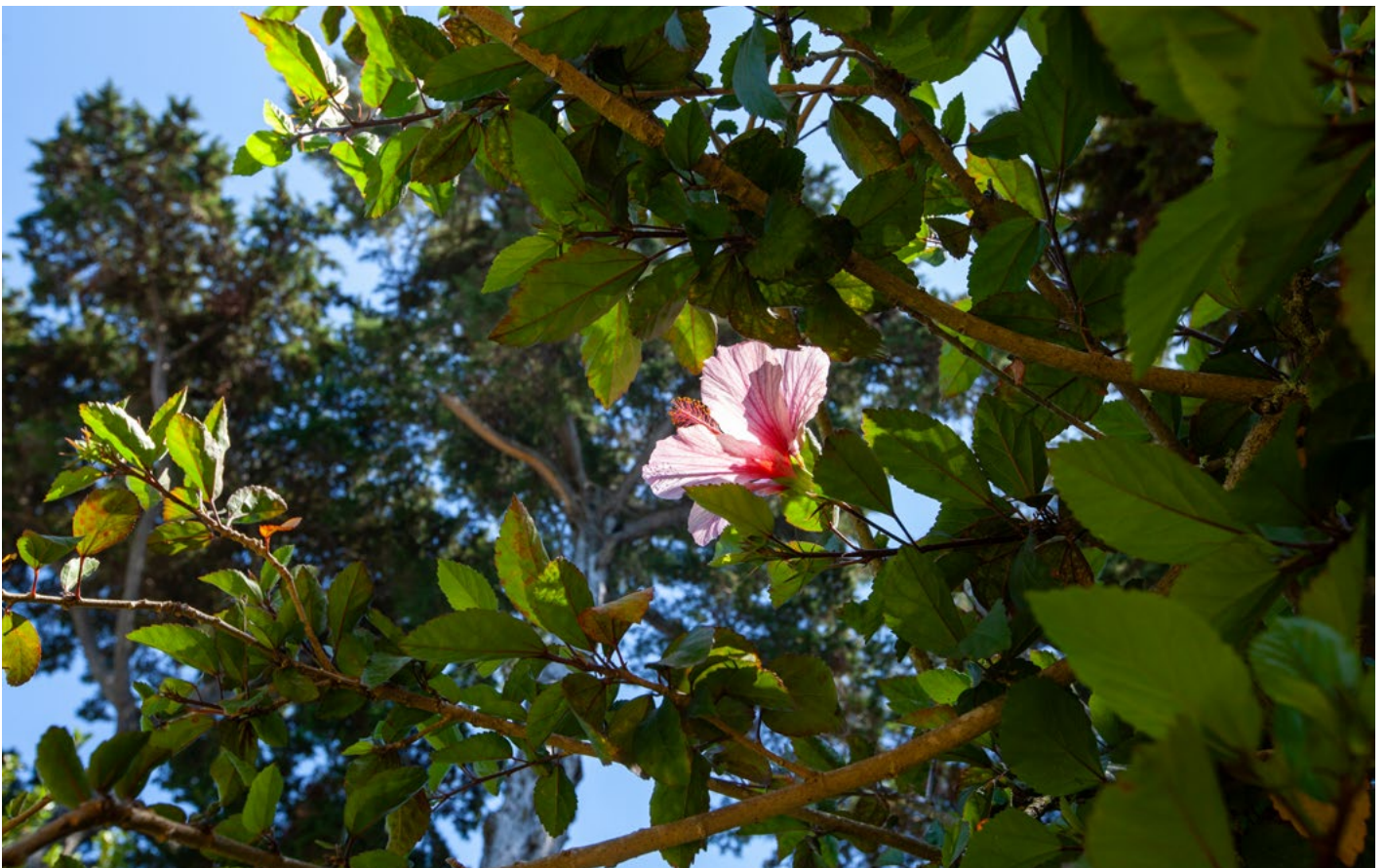
Readiness to learn is fundamentally shaped by both internal and external factors. Internally, it is influenced by the learner's developmental stage, prior experiences, and self-awareness. Externally, it is fostered by a supportive environment that values curiosity and growth. These elements coalesce to create a fertile ground where learning can flourish. Without this foundation, even the most meticulously curated educational materials are likely to fall short of their intended impact.

Readiness to learn is also deeply linked to motivation. A learner who is strongly motivated – who is driven by an innate desire to explore,

understand, and grow – will engage with the material in a way that goes beyond rote memorisation. They will seek connections, challenge assumptions, and apply their knowledge in meaningful contexts. This is where the educator's role becomes pivotal: to inspire, guide, and create a climate that encourages exploration and resilience.

Equally important is the recognition of the learner's agency in their educational journey. When individuals are encouraged to take ownership of their learning process, they are more likely to develop a proactive stance toward acquiring knowledge. This empowerment fosters a lifelong habit of self-directed learning, enabling them to adapt to new challenges and opportunities.

Moreover, readiness to learn is intertwined with emotional safety and wellbeing. Learners who feel supported and valued are more likely to take risks, embrace failure as a stepping stone, and cultivate resilience. These attributes are not merely incidental but are essential components of a robust educational approach.



GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXT AND SCOPE OF GUIDANCE

This e-book has been crafted with the aim of empowering a diverse audience to facilitate nature connection experiences for various groups. Recognising the rich diversity of natural landscapes and local contexts worldwide, it is important to note that this e-book does not delve into specific geographic locations or site-specific recommendations.

This is a deliberate choice arising from the need to address a potentially global readership, each operating within unique environmental, cultural, and logistical frameworks. While this breadth enriches the e-book's universal applicability, it also necessitates a more generalised approach. The principles, methodologies, and tools provided herein are designed to be adaptable, offering flexibility for Accessible Forest Practitioners to tailor their practices to the natural settings and specific needs of their participants.

To support your endeavours, we strongly encourage you to engage with your local environment, exploring its unique characteristics and potential for nature connection activities.

Additionally, collaboration with local ecological experts, community organisations, and stakeholders can further enhance your ability to design meaningful and accessible experiences. In this way, you can ensure that your work is also relevant to your community.



LEARNING JOURNEY MAP

This e-book was created to be a part of a broader, integrated learning experience. It is the cornerstone of a larger educational platform designed to deepen your understanding and practice of forest walking as a transformative tool.

The internet platform for our project “Accessible Forest” will ultimately also include such educational materials as: 1. video-podcasts featuring interviews with experts, practitioners, and participants sharing real-life stories and valuable perspectives; 2. audio-recordings that enable us to deepen our nature connection experience and also develop skills and attitudes; 3. worksheets presenting tips and exercises tailored to enhance your competences in crafting meaningful experiences for diverse groups.

This e-book is thus one part of a series of resources you can draw from. We hope our educational platform will as a whole empower

you to continue exploring, learning, and integrating forest walking into your professional practice. Whether you're a therapist, educator, or community leader, our resources will guide you step-by-step in creating accessible, impactful nature-based experiences.

We invite you to join this journey of connection, growth, and empowerment as we broaden the reach of forest walking to those who were previously excluded, to a substantial degree, from this experience.

We strongly believe that the principles and practices outlined in the e-book can be adapted and applied by other professionals seeking to incorporate nature-based techniques into their work. The versatility of the tools presented ensures that a wide range of future Accessible Forest Practitioners – regardless of their present area of specialisation – will find the content beneficial.

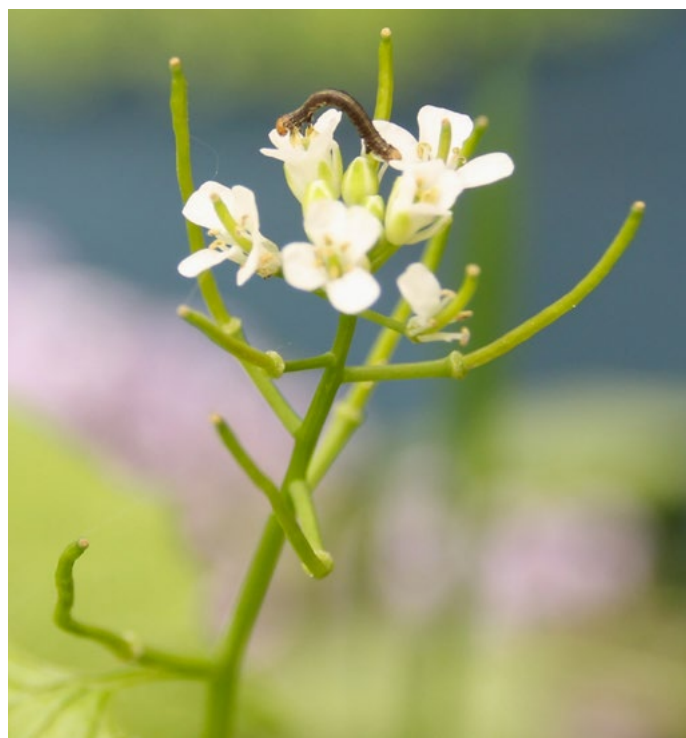
QUICK REFERENCE CARDS

Last but not least, to enhance the usability of this e-book, we have opted to include within it a series of 'Quick Reference Cards' (QRCs) – concise, practical summaries of key concepts, methods, and techniques discussed throughout the text. You will find a collection of QRCs in each chapter of this e-book, just before the "Conclusion" section.

Quick Reference Cards are designed to serve as handy reminders during planning or while leading nature immersion sessions. They distil complex information into clear, digestible points. Each card is focused on a specific topic, such as steps for preparing a forest walk, guidelines for group facilitation, or tips for adapting activities to different populations. They are formatted for quick scanning, with bullet points and short descriptions, and occasionally also visual elements for better retention.

Quick Reference Cards might be an invaluable educational tool, offering several practical advantages. They provide on-the-go assistance, making it easier to locate essential information while working outdoors, where consulting lengthy chapters or detailed instructions may not be feasible. In situations where managing a group can make it challenging to recall all the details of a method or activity, these cards serve as clear, concise prompts to guide your practice in real time. Additionally, they function as a flexible learning aid, supporting various stages of your work – whether you are preparing a session, addressing challenges during a walk, or reflecting on your experience afterwards. Another key benefit is their adaptability; you can customise your set of cards to emphasise the most relevant information for your unique approach or the specific needs of the groups you serve.

By integrating these cards into your toolkit, you will have a reliable and practical resource to strengthen your competence and confidence as an Accessible Forest Practitioner. Keep them handy, and let them be a bridge between your knowledge and practice.



— SYMBOLS AND ICONS USED —



denotes 'Quick Reference Cards'



denotes 'Connection Stage of the Universal Walk'



denotes 'Meaningful Nature Connection Stage of the Universal Walk'



denotes 'Solo Walk Stage of the Universal Walk'



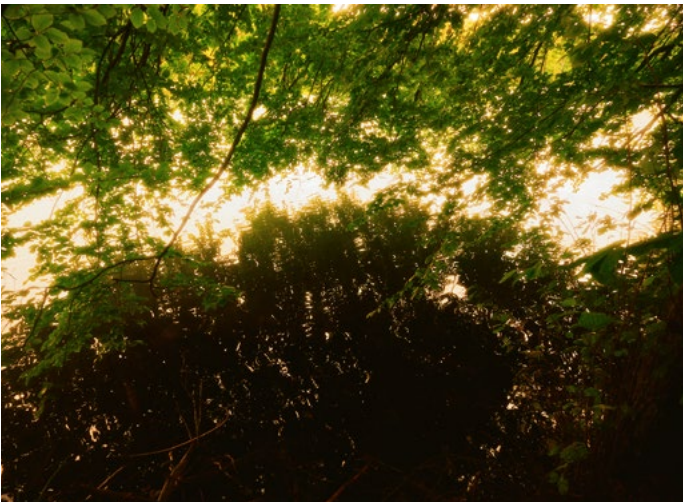
denotes 'Closing Stage of the Universal Walk'

DISCLAIMER: LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR ORGANISING FOREST WALKING ACTIVITIES

The legal framework governing outdoor activities, including forest walking, varies significantly across countries, regions, and local jurisdictions. These differences may encompass regulations concerning access to natural spaces, liability for participant safety, necessary permits for organised events, insurance requirements,

as individuals with disabilities, children, or those with specific health conditions, as additional legal obligations may apply.

While this e-book provides guidance and tools to support your efforts in creating inclusive and impactful forest walking experiences, it does not replace the need for professional legal advice tailored to your location and circumstances. We strongly recommend consulting with the relevant legal, environmental, or administrative authorities to ensure your activities meet all local requirements.



adherence to specific environmental or cultural preservation laws, and medical terminology, e.g., concerning different disabilities.

As an Accessible Forest Practitioner, it is your responsibility to thoroughly understand and comply with the applicable legal and regulatory requirements in your region. This includes, but is not limited to, obtaining necessary permissions, ensuring compliance with health and safety standards, and providing appropriate insurance coverage. Special attention should be given to the rights and safety of vulnerable groups, such

By organising forest walking sessions, you accept full responsibility for addressing and resolving any legal matters associated with your initiatives. This proactive approach will not only safeguard participants but also reinforce the integrity and sustainability of your work.

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Accessibility Expert – A professional with specialised knowledge in working with specific target groups (disability, mental health, elderly, migrant, etc.) who collaborates with forest guides to ensure inclusive nature experiences, according to the needs of each specific population.

Accessible Forest Practice (AFP) – A specialised framework designed to bring nature immersion experiences within reach of individuals who face significant challenges in accessing the natural world, including, for example, people with disabilities, migrants, the elderly, and those experiencing mental health difficulties.

Accessible Forest Practitioner (AF Practitioner) – Someone who informally completes the learning path, which consists of the e-book, templates, podcasts and audiotracks, and gains experience in working with vulnerable groups to facilitate meaningful nature connections. May be either a certified forest therapy guide expanding their practice or a specific population expert who has developed accessible forest practice skills.

Acculturative Stress – Psychological stress experienced by migrants during the process of adapting to a new culture, often contributing to mental health challenges.

Agoraphobia – Fear of public spaces or open areas that can prevent individuals from engaging in outdoor activities, particularly common among some mental health patients.

Biophilia Hypothesis – Hypothesis that humans feel an innate affinity with natural environments and all forms of life. The term was first coined by Erich Fromm and expanded upon by Edward O. Wilson.

Cognitive Overload – Difficulty processing multiple stimuli or instructions simultaneously, often experienced by individuals with intellectual disabilities in complex forest environments.

Competency Compass Model – A competency model specifically designed for Accessible Forest Practitioners, structured as four quadrants: Self-Awareness (North), Practices (South), Nature Connection (West), and Group Facilitation (East).

Connection Stage – The first phase of the Universal Walk where participants are introduced to the experience and begin sensory connection with the natural environment.

Closing Stage – The final phase of the Universal Walk that brings participants together for reflection,

sharing, and integration of their forest experience, often including a tea ceremony or shared meal.

Culture Shock – The disorientation experienced when encountering an unfamiliar way of life, typically occurring during migration; includes phases of euphoria, alienation, crisis, accommodation, and integration.

Day Care Unit – An outpatient facility where psychiatric patients receive intensive care while maintaining some daily routines and connection to their home environment.

Digital Natives – Children and adolescents who have grown up immersed in digital technology, often requiring specialised approaches to nature connection.

Digital Overuse – Defined in this context as spending 2-3+ hours daily on digital devices for non-work/education purposes, often replacing real-life connections and nature experiences.

Ecotherapy – Therapeutic practices rooted in the biophilia hypothesis that utilise nature's healing potential through various interventions, including forest walking and animal-assisted activities.

Forest Bathing (Shinrin-yoku) – A Japanese practice involving mindful immersion in a natural forest environment for health and wellbeing. It was formally adopted by Japan in the 1980s.

Forest Therapy Guide – A certified guide trained by an accredited forest therapy school to facilitate forest therapy and/or forest bathing experiences.

Fox Walk – A silent, mindful way of walking that enables participants to open their senses using their feet as sensory organs, often described to mothers as walking „like when your baby is finally asleep.”

Group Expert – A professional with experience working with a particular target group (e.g., social worker, therapist, educator) who may collaborate with or become an Accessible Forest Practitioner.

Hard Fascination – A type of attention that grabs and holds focus, causing mental fatigue; typically occurs when engaging with digital devices.

Hazard Recognition – The ability to identify and respond appropriately to natural dangers, which may be impaired in individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Intellectual Disability – A condition characterised by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviours, affecting how individuals navigate complex environments like forests.

Long-term Group – Participants who commit to attending multiple forest walks over an extended period (e.g., seasonal cycles), allowing for deeper relationships and nature connections to develop.

Meaningful Nature Connection Stage – The second phase of the Universal Walk, where participants engage in deeper sensory exploration and relationship-building with the natural environment.

Mental Disability – Conditions affecting cognitive function, emotional regulation, or behavioural responses that may require adapted approaches to nature connection.

Multiple Disabilities – The presence of both physical and mental/intellectual disabilities in the same individual, creating compound challenges for forest accessibility.

Nature-Relatedness – The degree to which individuals feel connected to the natural world, measured across dimensions including human-nature relationship, comfort outdoors, comfort in wild nature, and environmental awareness.

Outpatient – A patient who receives medical or psychiatric care without being admitted to a hospital for an extended stay, allowing them to maintain daily routines.

Physical Disability – Conditions affecting mobility, sensory function, or physical capabilities that may create barriers to accessing natural environments.

Profile of Mood States (POMS) – A psychological assessment tool adapted for use in this project to measure participants' mood and stress levels before and after forest walks. The scale was developed in the 1970s by Douglas M. McNair, Maurice Lorr and Leo F. Droppleman, and later refined by other researchers.

Psychosocial Disability – An actual or perceived impairment experienced by someone with a mental health condition in interactions with their social environment. It may reduce a person's capacity to operate efficiently in day-to-day life.

Quick Reference Cards (QRCs) – Concise, practical summaries of key concepts, methods, and techniques included throughout the e-book for easy reference during planning or leading nature immersion sessions.

Regular Migrants – Individuals who have crossed international borders and are legally authorized to enter or stay in a country, with varying degrees of temporary or permanent status.

Residence Permit – A form of legal authorisation allowing non-citizens of a country to reside in it for specific periods, creating varying levels of security and integration challenges for them.

Sensory Overload – An overwhelming response to varied sounds, smells, and sights that can cause anxiety or distress, particularly affecting individuals with intellectual disabilities or autism.

Short-term Group – Participants who attend a single forest walk or limited number of sessions, often including people in crisis situations or those with limited availability.

SNi (Special Needs and Inclusion) – Educational designation for students requiring adapted approaches due to various learning difficulties or disabilities.

Soft Fascination – A type of attention that allows focus to roam effortlessly without settling on any one thing; typically occurs in natural environments and helps restore mental energy.

Solo Time Stage – The third phase of the Universal Walk where participants engage in individual exploration and reflection, allowing for personal connection with nature away from the group.

Survival Mode – A psychological state where individuals focus primarily on meeting basic needs (food, shelter, safety), often experienced by vulnerable populations including refugees and those living in poverty.

Trauma-Informed Facilitation – An approach that recognizes the impact of trauma and creates physically and emotionally safe environments for participants, particularly important when working with refugees.

Universal Walk – A four-stage forest walk framework developed by the Accessible Forest Project team, adapted from existing models to emphasise inclusivity and adaptability across different locations, populations, and seasons.

Vulnerable Groups – Populations that face significant barriers to accessing nature experiences, including, for example, people with disabilities, mental health patients, elderly individuals, migrants, refugees, and those struggling with excessive digital device use.

Vulnerable Migrants – People forced to leave their homes due to conflict, persecution, or disaster, who are unable to fully enjoy their human rights and are at increased risk of violations and abuse.



PART ONE
FOUNDATIONS

A field of red poppies in a soft, golden light. The flowers are in various stages of bloom, with some fully open and others as buds. The background is a warm, out-of-focus field of similar flowers, creating a sense of depth and tranquility. The overall color palette is dominated by warm tones of gold, brown, and red.

CHAPTER 1

GETTING STARTED



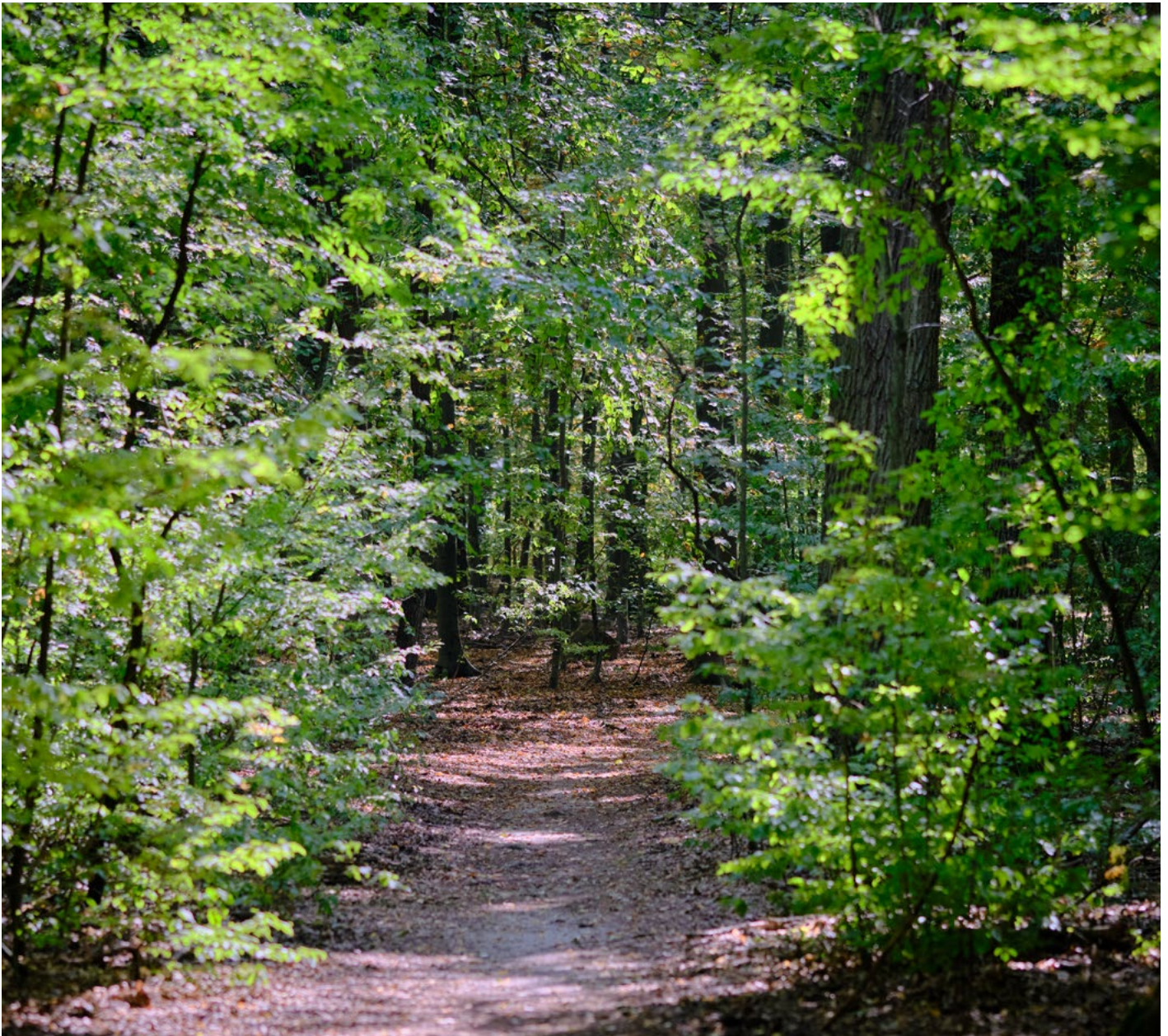
CHAPTER 1: GETTING STARTED

In this chapter, you will learn about the concept and foundational principles of Accessible Forest Practice (AFP), including its focus on making nature immersion accessible to diverse populations. Furthermore, you will explore the key benefits of nature immersion, from the amelioration of physical and mental health to the fostering of environmental consciousness and social connections.

As far as more practice-related knowledge is concerned, you will also discover how AFP provides adaptable tools and methodologies for working with groups that face challenges accessing nature, such as people with disabilities, migrants, or individuals experiencing mental health difficulties. Additionally, you will learn about the resources available to support your journey, such as templates, podcasts, and visual documentation.

Consider what you would like to achieve at this stage of your work. Is your focus on deepening your knowledge of AFP principles and benefits, or are you aiming to develop specific skills for implementing AFP practices with your target group?

Allocate at least an hour to this task. This will allow you to fully engage with the theoretical concepts, reflect on your objectives, and explore how to apply the practices in your work.



The practice of nature immersion transcends merely being present in a natural setting; it cultivates a connection with the environment. Unlike conventional environmental education, which often prioritises structured activities and knowledge acquisition, nature immersion is a fluid and exploratory process. It invites individuals to engage all their senses – visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and even intuitive – encouraging the development of a personal and instinctive relationship with the natural world. Through this holistic engagement, individuals can experience a deeper, more transformative interaction with nature, thus reigniting the innate connection between humanity and the earth.

Accessible Forest Practice is a specialised framework designed to bring nature immersion, such as forest walking, within reach for individuals who face significant challenges in accessing the natural world. These groups include people with disabilities, migrants, elderly, those experiencing mental health difficulties, and younger generations increasingly disconnected from nature due to overreliance on digital technology.



This e-book aims to empower educators and forest therapy guides who work with these diverse populations, equipping them with adaptable, practice-based tools. The strategies outlined in this resource have been meticulously developed and tested in four countries, ensuring that they can be applied in varied environments and cultural settings. These methods have been rigorously refined to address the specific needs of individuals who might otherwise be excluded from the therapeutic benefits of nature.

As previously mentioned, this e-book is part of a comprehensive suite of resources supporting AFP. In addition to detailed

chapters providing step-by-step instructions for working with different groups, we offer a range of supplementary materials. These include podcasts, customizable templates, and audio-tracks, all of which are available through our website. These tools are designed to enhance the learning experience and offer practical support for both educators and forest therapy guides as they implement Accessible Forest Practice in their own work.

How to become an Accessible Forest Practitioner? Accessible Forest Practice is not simply an accumulation of knowledge; rather, it represents a dynamic and transformative educational journey. This e-book was therefore created as a component of a broader learning framework designed to cultivate your competencies, enhance your awareness of diverse social needs, explore practical methodologies, and create immersive experiences that foster meaningful connections with nature.

It is crucial to emphasise that this material is not intended to serve as formal certification for becoming a forest bathing and/or forest therapy guide. The journey of mastering the practice of forest bathing and forest therapy extends far beyond the scope of this e-book, requiring continuous learning, reflection, and a deepening engagement with nature-based practices. Our resources are designed to complement existing approaches to forest walking and nature education, serving as a foundational stepping stone rather than a comprehensive qualification. Those interested in acquiring formal forest bathing/therapy qualifications should seek out an appropriate organisation.

We encourage you to approach this material as an open invitation to embark on your own personalised journey. Along the way, you will have the opportunity to consult with experts, collaborate with peers, and continually expand your knowledge as you further immerse yourself in AFP.

In our rapidly urbanising world, the intrinsic value of nature in enhancing human physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing is increasingly recognised by researchers and policymakers alike. Immersing oneself in nature yields a spectrum of transformative benefits for human health and wellbeing, seamlessly integrating physical, emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions. The physical health advantages of nature immersion are profound and stem from the synergy between outdoor activities and natural environments. Engaging in pursuits such as hiking, kayaking, or even a leisurely walk outdoors invigorates the body, enhances energy levels and promotes effective weight management. The exposure to sunlight during such activities also catalyses Vitamin D production, a crucial element for maintaining bone health, regulating immune function, and mitigating inflammation. Moreover, natural light

plays a pivotal role in harmonising the body's circadian rhythm, thereby fostering restorative sleep cycles and overall vitality.

There is also compelling evidence for the unparalleled ability of nature to alleviate stress and cultivate emotional equilibrium. Immersion in natural settings has consistently been linked to a reduction in anxiety and depression, offering a sanctuary where the mind can momentarily escape the pressures of modern life. Scientific studies suggest that the tranquil ambiance of green spaces lowers cortisol levels, heart rate, and blood pressure, and provide both immediate relief and long-term resilience against stress-related disorders. Being in nature can also redirect attention from ruminative thoughts, facilitating mental regeneration and fostering a positive outlook on life.



Beyond improving emotional wellbeing, nature can serve as a powerful catalyst for happiness and mood enhancement. The experience of immersion in natural landscapes stimulates the release of mood-regulating neurotransmitters like serotonin, often promoting a profound sense of joy and inner peace. Such environments are capable of effecting a unique interplay between sensory engagement and emotional elevation, offering a refuge that nourishes mental health and kindles feelings of contentment.

As the natural world acts as a conduit for mental clarity and innovation, the cognitive benefits of nature immersion are equally remarkable.

These interactions build networks of social resilience, reinforcing the importance of collective wellbeing and interdependence.

On broader cultural and environmental levels, direct engagement with nature can deepen one's connection to the environment and foster sustainable practices. Many communities find spiritual and cultural significance in natural landscapes, which are often integral to their belief systems and traditions. Nature serves as a powerful medium for reflection and meditation, offering moments of profound spiritual insight and an enduring connection to the earth.



The diversity of landscapes and sensory stimuli stimulates creativity, enhances attention, and sharpens problem-solving skills. This cognitive invigoration often emerges as individuals detach from the monotony of urban life, and find solace in serene vistas and the gentle rhythms of the natural world. The tranquillity of such spaces provides fertile ground for fresh ideas, innovative thinking and artistic expression. In this sense, nature becomes a sanctuary not only for relaxation but also for intellectual and creative growth.

Furthermore, the communal aspect of outdoor activities nurtures social relationships and strengthens community bonds. Whether through group hikes, team sports, or other shared experiences, time spent together in nature can foster a sense of belonging and mutual support.

This interplay between cultural identity and environmental stewardship underscores the need to preserve natural spaces, thus ensuring their benefits for generations to come.

Finally, the therapeutic dimensions of nature immersion are undeniable. Ecotherapy, which is rooted in the 'biophilia hypothesis' (see the "Further Reading" section of this e-book), highlights humanity's innate desire to connect with the natural world. This form of therapy encompasses a range of practices, from forest walking to animal-assisted interventions, all of which harness nature's healing potential. By aligning physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing with the rhythms of the natural world, ecotherapy not only alleviates symptoms of mental distress but also promotes a holistic model of recovery and renewal.



CHECK POINTS:

- Can you describe what Accessible Forest Practice (AFP) is?
- In what ways can we benefit from nature immersion?
- How can nature immersion support marginalised populations?



CRITICAL QUESTIONS:

- Might learning about Accessible Forest Practice be useful for your professional practice?
- Are you inspired to become an Accessible Forest Practitioner?
- Can you envision applying these practices with the populations you serve?



QUICK REFERENCE CARDS:



CARD 1: ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTICE

Accessible Forest Practice (AFP) is a specialised framework designed to bring nature immersion, such as forest walking, within reach for individuals who face significant challenges in accessing the natural world.



CARD 2: KEY BENEFITS OF NATURE IMMERSION

MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING:

- Reduced anxiety, stress and depression
- Increased self-esteem and confidence

PHYSICAL HEALTH:

- Improved cardiovascular health
- Lower blood pressure and heart rate
- Immune system boost
- Vitamin D production boost

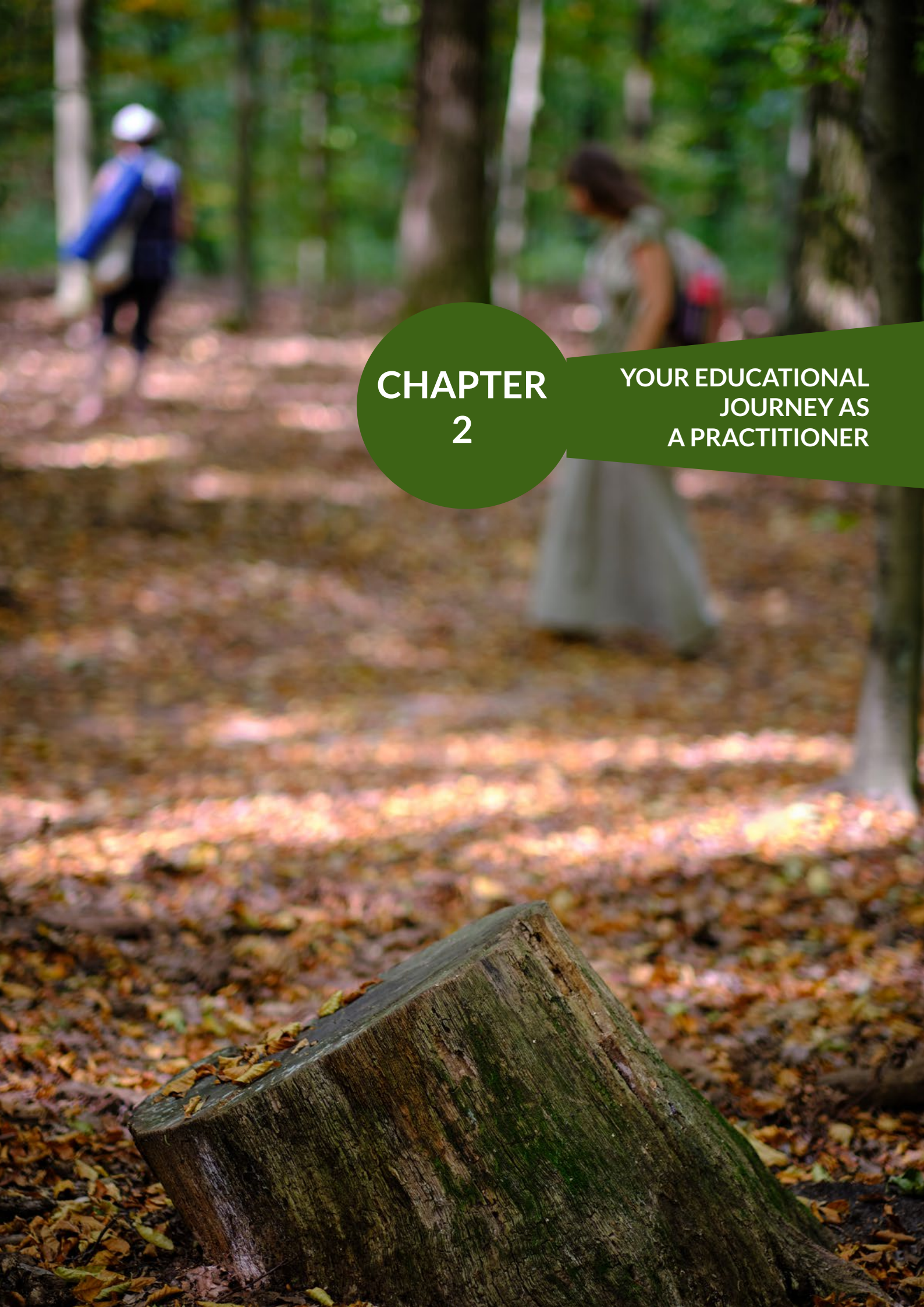
COGNITIVE BENEFITS:

- Improved attention and focus
- Enhanced creativity

SOCIAL BENEFITS:

- Teamwork and collaboration
- Empathy and understanding
- Alleviated loneliness
- A sense of belonging and responsibility



A photograph of a forest floor covered in fallen leaves. In the foreground, a large, mossy tree stump is visible. In the background, two people are walking away from the camera on a path. The scene is softly blurred, creating a sense of depth and tranquility.

CHAPTER 2

YOUR EDUCATIONAL
JOURNEY AS
A PRACTITIONER



CHAPTER 2: YOUR EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY AS A PRACTITIONER

This chapter is dedicated to exploring the essential competencies required for an Accessible Forest Practitioner. The content has been carefully structured to provide you with a comprehensive understanding and a practical approach to developing your skills, attitudes, and knowledge in this specialised field.

To begin, you will be introduced to a new and innovative model of competencies that extends beyond conventional frameworks. This model, called the „Accessible Forest Practice Compass,“ was developed by our team in the course of the Accessible Forest Project. It is specifically designed to address the unique demands faced by Accessible Forest Practitioners and to ensure inclusivity and adaptability in practice.

This model will serve as a foundational tool for reflecting on and enhancing your professional journey.

Following the introduction of the Compass, we will provide a detailed list of key competencies crucial for success in this role. These competencies encompass a wide range of domains, including interpersonal skills, environmental knowledge, adaptability, and the ability to foster inclusive and meaningful connections with nature. Each competency is

designed to empower you to effectively support diverse groups in accessing and benefiting from nature immersion practices.

Finally, this chapter includes a set of reflective questions to guide you in becoming an effective Accessible Forest Practitioner. These questions focus on self-assessment of your competencies, motivations, and values, and encourage introspection and alignment with your professional goals. By engaging with these questions, you can better understand your current stage of development and identify areas for growth.

As you work through this chapter, we encourage you to consider what you want to achieve at this stage of your work. Your goals and aspirations will shape your approach and commitment to this meaningful practice.

To fully engage with this chapter, we recommend allocating approximately three hours of focused working time. This investment will ensure you have the space to deeply reflect, absorb the concepts presented, and begin applying them to your practice.

Let us embark on this journey together as we delve into the competencies that define an effective Accessible Forest Practitioner.





Traditionally, competencies are understood as a combination of skills, knowledge, and attitudes. These three elements collectively form the foundation of professional effectiveness across disciplines. However, through the work of our „Accessible Forest Project,“ we have refined this conventional model to better meet the unique demands of Accessible Forest Practitioners. This tailored model reflects the nuanced realities of facilitating forest walks for diverse groups, and integrates insights from educators who participated in the project and organised forest walking sessions for various populations.

The result is the „Accessible Forest Practice Compass,“ a competency model specifically designed to support practitioners in this specialised field.

As the name suggests, our model takes the form of a compass; it is structured as a circle divided by two intersecting axes into four equal quadrants. Each axis – North-South and West-East – directs attention to one of the four primary competency areas essential for Accessible Forest Practitioners. These areas, namely self-awareness, practices, nature connection, and group facilitation, serve as a comprehensive guide for practitioners seeking to hone their expertise.

Each quadrant represents a distinct yet interconnected dimension of competency development, ensuring a holistic approach to practice.



The North quadrant of the compass emphasises self-awareness, which is symbolically referred to as the zone of „I.“ This area focuses on competencies related to the practitioner’s self-reflection.

Self-awareness is foundational to guiding others effectively, as it involves understanding one’s strengths, limitations, and resources. The key competencies in this area include the capacity for self-reflection, an ability to balance self-criticism constructively, knowledge of personal professional advantages and disadvantages, and the flexibility to adapt to varying circumstances.

AREA I: NORTH – SELF-AWARENESS („I“)

Reflective questions to assess this area of competency include:

- What are my strengths and limitations in this practice?
- What resources do I need to create a conducive environment and direct the session effectively?
- How do my personal vision and intentions influence the way I lead?

By exploring these questions, practitioners can develop a deeper understanding of their own role in facilitating forest walks, and so cultivate the confidence and humility necessary for impactful practice.



The South quadrant focuses on practices as a foundation for preparing and guiding groups through specific processes in natural settings.

This area emphasises the practical competencies required for session planning, organisational skills, resource management, and adaptability to dynamic conditions during practice. These competencies are rooted in the practitioner's previous experiences, which inform their ability to design and deliver meaningful forest walking sessions.

AREA II: SOUTH – PRACTICES

Reflective questions for this component include:

- Considering what I did before, what steps do I need to take to prepare the location and tools for the session?
- What specific actions will I undertake to support participants' experiences during the practice?
- What resources are essential to make participants feel comfortable and safe?

Through these inquiries, practitioners can leverage their personal experiences to enhance their ability to plan, adapt, and execute sessions effectively, ensuring a seamless and supportive environment for participants.



The West quadrant centres on the practitioner's relationship with nature and their ability to foster a conscious connection

between participants and the natural world. This area prioritises ecological awareness, an understanding of ecosystems, and interpretative skills that enable practitioners to guide participants in meaningful interactions with their environment.

AREA III: WEST – NATURE

Reflective questions for this area include:

- What actions can deepen a connection with nature?
- How can I approach the natural environment to create a better-quality experience for the forest walk participants?

By cultivating these competencies, practitioners can become effective stewards of nature, inspiring participants to connect with the environment in potentially profound and transformative ways.



AREA IV: EAST – THE GROUP

The East quadrant highlights competencies related to working with forest walk participants. This area focuses on understanding participants' needs, emotional states, and group dynamics, as well as tailoring communication and facilitation styles accordingly. Practitioners must also consider how to make paths and language accessible to all in order to ensure inclusivity and foster a sense of unity within the group.

Reflective questions for this area include:

- What needs and expectations do the participants have?
- How can I adjust my language and facilitation style to the group's characteristics?
- What communication tools and methods will be most effective?
- How can the natural environment support the unity and internal dynamism of the group?

These competencies enable practitioners to create a supportive and inclusive environment, enhancing the collective experience of forest walks and addressing the unique needs of different groups.



INTERCONNECTED COMPETENCIES

It is important to note that the competencies within the Accessible Forest Practice Compass are not mutually exclusive. Each area interacts dynamically with the others, creating a cohesive framework that reflects the multifaceted nature of forest walk facilitation. For example, self-awareness (North) influences how practitioners create experiences for others (South), while a deep connection with nature (West) informs how they engage with the group (East).

This interconnectedness ensures that practitioners develop a balanced skill set that supports all aspects of their practice. Furthermore, all competencies in the compass can still be interpreted through the traditional model of skills, knowledge, and attitudes. This alignment allows practitioners to draw on familiar frameworks while embracing the specific nuances of the Accessible Forest Practice Compass.

SUPPORTING DEVELOPMENT THROUGH REFLECTION AND PRACTICE

The Accessible Forest Practice Compass is designed to support the optimal development of personal competencies in each area. By providing detailed descriptions of competencies, reflective questions, and examples of practices, the model empowers practitioners to engage in continuous growth. This structured approach ensures that practitioners can address their unique developmental needs, enhancing their effectiveness and confidence as Accessible Forest Practitioners.



ADVANTAGES OF THE ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTICE COMPASS

One of the key advantages of the Accessible Forest Practice Compass is its holistic and integrative design. By encompassing four distinct yet interconnected areas of competency, the model provides a comprehensive framework for professional development. It encourages practitioners to explore their practice from multiple perspectives and to foster a deeper understanding of their role and responsibilities.

Additionally, the compass's emphasis on reflection and self-awareness promotes a

mindful approach to practice walking in nature. By engaging with the model, practitioners can cultivate the competencies needed to create meaningful and accessible nature-based experiences for diverse groups.

Below is a visual representation of the Accessible Forest Practice Compass that illustrates its structure and the relationships between the four competency areas. This model serves as a guide for practitioners, offering a clear and actionable pathway for development in the field of Accessible Forest Practice.



Becoming an Accessible Forest Practitioner is a transformative journey and as such, some might find the process a challenging one. At its core, the practice requires sensitivity, adaptability, and a commitment to inclusivity. However, one of the most significant hurdles lies at the very beginning: starting the process properly. Unlike some professional pathways, there is no universal blueprint or rigid formula to follow here. Each practitioner's journey is unique and shaped by their personal experiences, the needs

of the groups they aim to serve, and the specific environments in which they work.

To navigate this complexity, it is essential to begin by asking the right questions. These questions serve as a guide for the aspiring Accessible Forest Practitioner to identify their strengths, address their limitations, and align their efforts with values promoting accessibility and inclusivity. Below is a list of crucial questions that every aspiring AF Practitioner should consider.



Why Do I Want to Become an Accessible Forest Practitioner?

Understanding your motivation is fundamental. Reflect on whether your desire stems from personal experience, professional growth, or a commitment to serving marginalised communities. Knowing your „why” will provide clarity and sustain you through the challenges to come.

What Are My Existing Strengths and Skills?

Consider the skills and experiences you already possess. Are you experienced in working with specific populations, such as individuals with disabilities, refugees, or children? Do you have specific knowledge or competencies with respect to therapeutic practices, environmental education, or group facilitation? Identifying your strengths will help you determine how to integrate them into your practice.

What Are My Knowledge Gaps?

Acknowledge the areas where you need to grow. Are you familiar with the physical, emotional, and cultural barriers that may prevent certain groups from accessing nature? Do you understand the ecological aspects of your local environment? Identifying gaps will allow you to focus your learning effectively.

Who Do I Want to Work With?

Define your target audience. Each group – whether individuals with limited mobility, those experiencing mental health challenges, or people affected by excessive screen use – requires tailored approaches and tools. Understanding their specific needs is crucial.

How Can I Ensure Accessibility in My Practice?

Reflect on the practical and logistical aspects of accessibility. Are the locations you plan to use physically accessible? Can you adapt your communication and activities to accommodate diverse abilities and preferences? Accessibility should be a cornerstone of your practice.

Am I Ready to Challenge My Own Assumptions?

Working inclusively requires humility and openness. Are you prepared to question your biases, seek feedback, and continuously learn from the individuals and communities you serve?

This self-awareness is vital for fostering trust and respect.

What Support Systems Do I Need?

Recognise that this journey is not one you take alone. What networks, mentors, or collaborations can support you? Engaging with peers, local organisations, and professional communities will provide valuable guidance and encouragement.

How Will I Sustain My Practice?

Consider the sustainability of your efforts. Are there financial, emotional, or logistical factors that could hinder your ability to continue? Planning for long-term sustainability ensures that your practice remains impactful and fulfilling. Approaching these questions with honesty and reflection will help lay a strong foundation for your work as an Accessible Forest Practitioner. It is through this self-inquiry that you can begin to create a practice that is not only effective but also deeply meaningful – for yourself and the individuals you serve.



We encourage you to approach this e-book as an open invitation to embark on your own personalised journey. Our education materials will help you along the way to expand your knowledge about Accessible Forest Practice.

Please don't forget to begin by engaging with nature on a personal level. To provide a starting point for your journey of immersion, audio recordings of guided walks, which are available on our website, may assist.

KRYSTIAN'S STORY

Krystian's journey to becoming an Accessible Forest Practitioner exemplifies the transformative potential of the „Accessible Forest Practice Compass” model proposed here. Krystian started out as a passionate nature enthusiast who relished the tranquillity of forest walks. However, the idea of facilitating forest walks for individuals with disabilities was daunting. “I was afraid,” he admitted. “I didn't know how to engage with people who had different needs, and I was worried I'd fail them.” This fear, rooted in a misconception that his skills and knowledge were inadequate, kept him from pursuing what might be a profoundly rewarding practice.

Upon engaging with the first version of this e-book and exploring the Accessible Forest Practice Compass, Krystian's perspective began to shift.

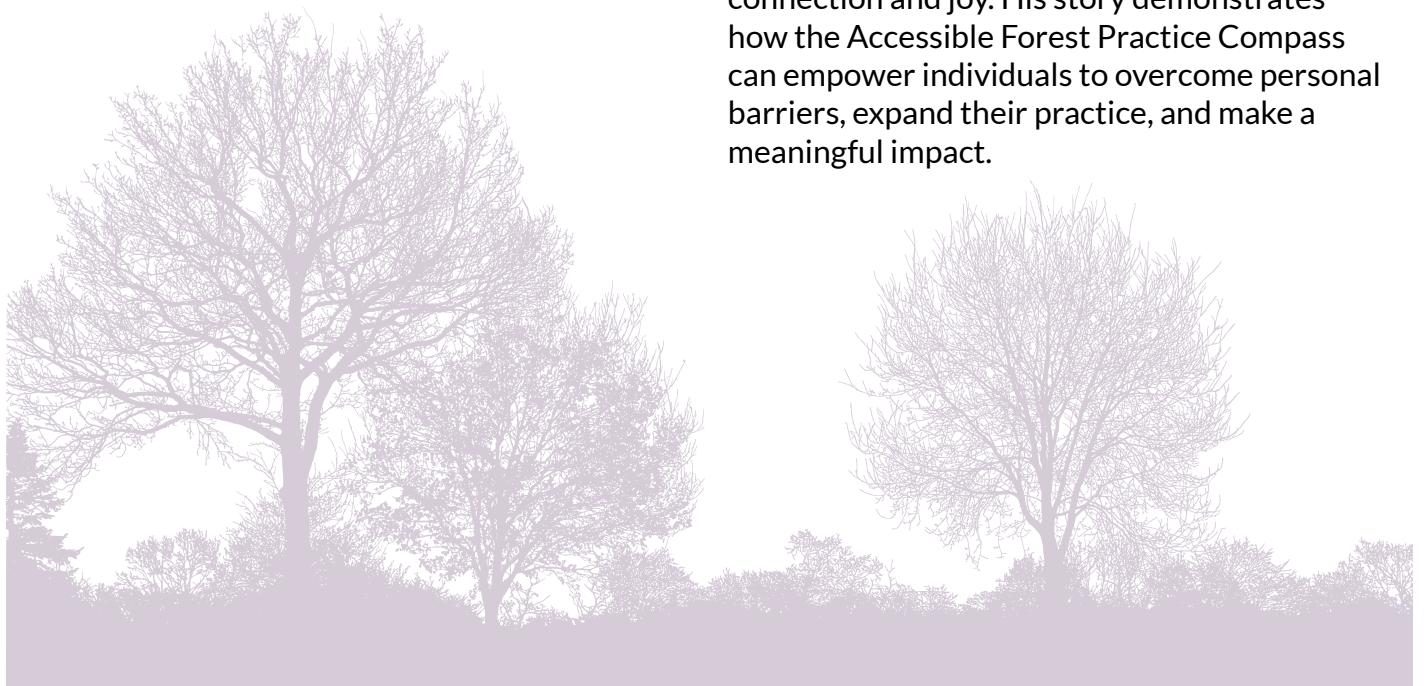
Krystian realised that his extensive understanding of forest ecosystems and their therapeutic benefits were valuable assets. Though he had previously undervalued them, these skills were in fact essential for guiding forest walks. The e-book's resources further helped him expand his knowledge base to include practical insights into disability inclusion, such as the sensory experiences of individuals with limited mobility or vision.

Krystian's initial apprehension stemmed from unconscious biases and a lack of exposure to people with disabilities. By engaging in guided exercises in empathy and exploring real-world success stories included in the e-book, he was able to challenge and reframe these fears. “I realised my fear wasn't about the people but about my own misconceptions.”

As he learned how to adapt routes, incorporate sensory-based activities, and ensure safety for diverse participants, Krystian's confidence grew. The e-book's step-by-step guidance, along with opportunities to practice these skills in controlled environments, proved invaluable.

In navigating the Compass, Krystian saw a comprehensive map of his competencies emerge. This map didn't demand perfection but identified a balanced foundation that could support growth. The realization that his existing capabilities were already sufficient – when combined with targeted skill development – was a breakthrough. “Once I understood the Compass, everything clicked. It gave me the structure to work on my fears and focus on what really matters: making forest walks accessible for everyone.”

Today, Krystian is an enthusiastic advocate for accessible forest walking. He leads inclusive walks that bring the healing power of nature to people with disabilities, thereby fostering connection and joy. His story demonstrates how the Accessible Forest Practice Compass can empower individuals to overcome personal barriers, expand their practice, and make a meaningful impact.





CHECK POINTS:

- Can you describe the essential competencies required for an Accessible Forest Practitioner?
- Can you assess your own competencies based on the model we call the „Accessible Forest Practice Compass“?



CRITICAL QUESTIONS:

- Do you think you have the competencies required to become an Accessible Forest Practitioner?
- Why do you want to become an Accessible Forest Practitioner?
- Are you ready to start by engaging with nature on a personal level?



QUICK REFERENCE CARDS:



CARD 1: KEY COMPETENCES OF AN ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTITIONER

- A deep and nuanced understanding of the multidimensional benefits of nature immersion
- Ability to recognise and mitigate barriers that may prevent individuals or groups from accessing nature
- Ability to meet the specific needs of walk participants
- Capacity to prioritise inclusivity and adaptability in their facilitation methods
- Commitment to environmental stewardship and ethical considerations



A photograph of a forest floor. In the foreground, a stack of four reddish-brown stones is balanced on a weathered tree stump. A thin, light-colored stick lies horizontally across the top of the stones. The background is a lush, green forest with many trees and foliage, slightly out of focus.

CHAPTER 3

THE UNIVERSAL WALK

CHAPTER 3: THE UNIVERSAL WALK

This chapter is necessarily concise. By its conclusion, you will possess both the theoretical framework and the practical insights necessary to implement the model of forest walking developed as part of our project “Accessible Forest Walks.”

While the matter of competencies will not be explored in this section, we do encourage you to reflect on your personal objectives for engaging with this part of the e-book. What specific outcomes do you aim to achieve at this juncture in your journey?

To make the most of this material, we recommend setting aside approximately 30 minutes of focused working time. This will allow you to absorb the concepts presented and begin considering their application within your own practice.



THE FOREST WALK: TOWARDS A UNIVERSAL MODEL

Forest walks can take a variety of forms, with different organisations and individuals employing diverse approaches, and each presenting unique benefits and challenges. Drawing inspiration from the model originally developed by the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy – Guides and Programs (ANFT), and with their formal permission, our project’s team has adapted this model to create what we have called a “Universal Walk” formula. As it emphasises inclusivity and adaptability, this framework is applicable across different locations, populations, and seasonal contexts. It also empowers practitioners to tailor the experience to meet the specific needs of any group or environment, thereby fostering an accessible and transformative connection with nature.



Connection Stage

The connection stage forms the foundation of the forest walk. It introduces participants to the experience, enabling their sensory connection with the natural environment, and facilitating a gradual transition from the fast pace of daily life to the slower rhythm of nature. This stage includes:

- **Framing the Walk:** The practitioner sets the tone, introducing the walk's purpose and expectations while encouraging openness to the sensory experiences ahead. Grounding participants in the present moment is crucial. It is also important to emphasise the absence of judgement and the freedom to engage at their own pace.
- **Guided Exploration of the Senses:** Participants are invited to awaken their senses through guided activities. These might include listening to subtle sounds, feeling the texture of tree bark, observing the intricate patterns of leaves, or inhaling the forest's earthy scent. Practitioners can rotate sensory activities to maintain novelty and adapt to the group's needs.
- **Physical Slowing Down:** A gradual reduction in the pace of physical activity helps participants align with nature's rhythm. This might involve deliberate and slower walking, deep breathing exercises, or a mindful pause to attune to their surroundings.



Meaningful Nature Connection Stage

Building upon the sensory engagement established in the first stage, this phase deepens participants' interactions with the natural environment. The practitioner facilitates opportunities for both structured and self-directed exploration:

- **Sensory Exploration:** Participants continue exploring the environment through touch, sight, sound, and other senses. Activities may include walking barefoot on soft ground, tasting edible plants (with prior guidance), or feeling the breeze against their skin.
- **Self-Directed Exploration:** Guided prompts encourage participants to engage with their surroundings in ways that feel personal and meaningful. They might explore textures, find patterns in nature, or observe the interactions of flora and fauna. For flexibility and inclusivity, this exploration can be done individually, in pairs, or in small groups. This stage is pivotal in fostering a sense of connection and belonging, enabling participants to experience nature not merely as an observer but as an integral part of it.



Solo Walk Stage

Solo walk (or 'Solo time') serves as an integrative moment for participants, allowing them to internalise and distil their experiences in nature. This phase is characterised by personal reflection and minimal guidance:

- **Invitation to Solitude:** Participants are invited to choose a quiet space away from the group. This physical separation enhances their capacity to engage deeply with the environment and their inner thoughts.
- **Freedom of Engagement:** Individuals may sit, lie down, sketch, journal, meditate, or simply observe. This unstructured time respects diverse preferences, giving participants autonomy in their interaction with nature.
- **The reflective quality of this stage ensures that the forest walk experience resonates personally with each participant, fostering a profound sense of connection with the natural world.**



Closing Stage

The final stage brings participants back together and provides a shared space to reflect upon, celebrate, and conclude the experience. It comprises:

- **Group Reflection:** Participants are encouraged to share their observations, feelings, or insights. This collective dialogue fosters a sense of community and validates individual experiences.
- **Closing Invitations:** Practitioners may offer gentle prompts to inspire gratitude or highlight key takeaways. Symbolic acts, such as planting a seed or leaving a small nature-inspired creation, can reinforce the experience's themes.
- **Picnic or Tea Ceremony:** Ending the walk with a communal activity, like sharing foraged tea or snacks, adds a grounding and celebratory touch, helping participants transition back to their daily lives.

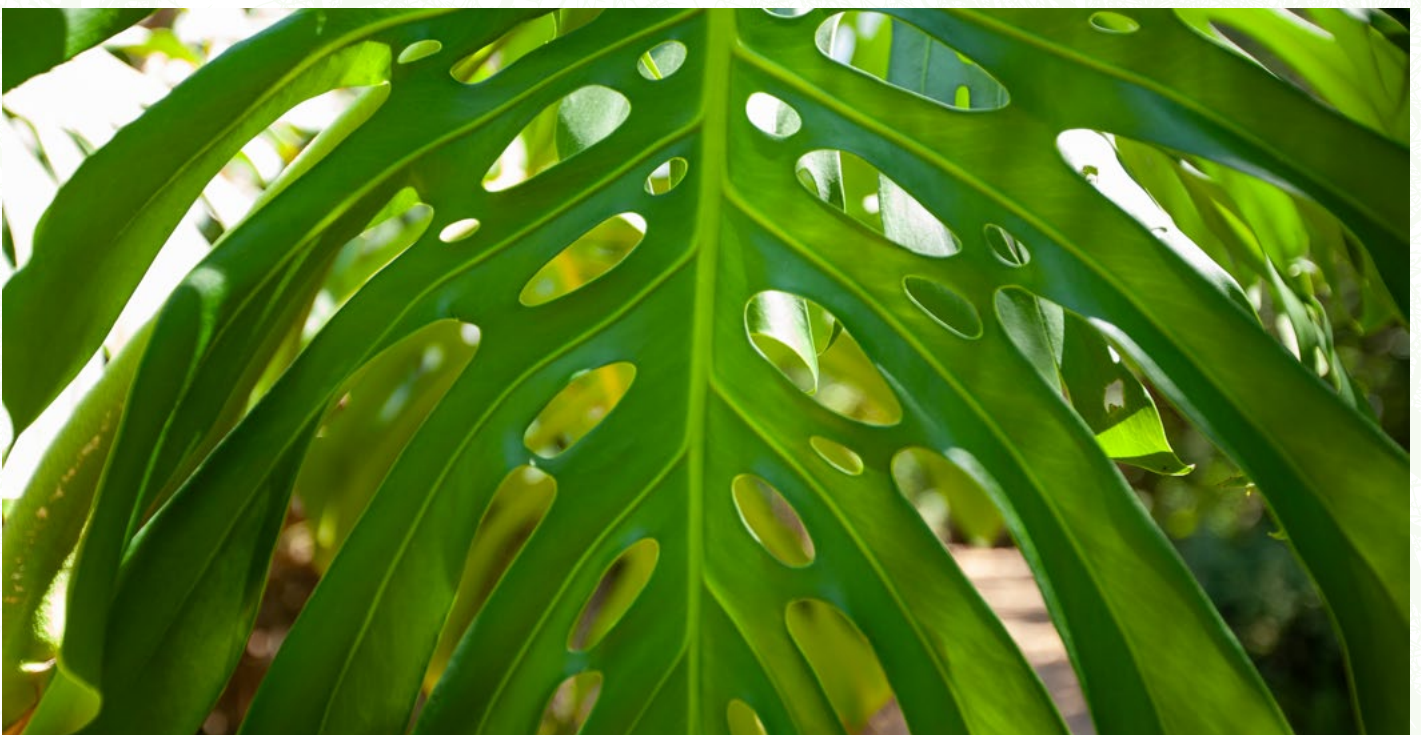


KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR PREPARING THE WALK

While the universal model provides a solid framework, preparation for a walk should always take into account the unique needs of the specific population, the season, and the location. Below are general guidelines to ensure the walk's success:

1. **Duration and Timing:** The walk should last approximately 90 minutes, allowing depth while considering the participant group's comfort and attention span. Adjust timing to accommodate seasonal daylight and weather conditions.
2. **Participant-to-Practitioner Ratio:** Maintain a manageable ratio of participants to forest therapy guides to ensure safety and personalised attention. The ideal proportion will vary according to the population and practitioners' experience.
3. **Weather Preparedness:** Always prioritise safety by avoiding extreme weather conditions. Ensure participants are dressed appropriately for the season and provide contingency plans for unforeseen changes.
4. **Route Selection:** Choose a path that aligns with the group's physical abilities and needs. Accessibility is vital, especially for groups with mobility challenges, and the route should be free of significant hazards.
5. **Special Equipment:** Prepare equipment relevant to the walk's style, weather, and population. Items such as blankets, portable stools, or nature journals may enhance the experience. A well-stocked first aid kit is essential.
6. **Cultural Sensitivity:** Tailor the walk to reflect the cultural background and preferences of the participants. Refer to the relevant chapters in this e-book for detailed guidance on specific populations.
7. **Pre-Walk Preparation:** Practitioners should familiarise themselves with the location, assess risks, and decide what they want to achieve from the walk. Creating a welcoming and supportive atmosphere is fundamental.

By adhering to this universal model and preparing thoughtfully, forest walks can offer transformative experiences for diverse groups. Accessible Forest Practitioners are encouraged to use this formula as a flexible blueprint, adapting it to their unique local and personal context. For further guidance, refer to the specific population chapters and the practitioner's compass included in this e-book.





CHECK POINTS:

- Can you describe the four stages of the Universal Walk?
- Do you know what to consider while preparing a forest walk to ensure the event's success?



CRITICAL QUESTIONS:

- Do you understand the meaning of each of the stages of the Universal Walk?
- Do you think you will adapt the four-stage model in your own Accessible Forest Practice?



QUICK REFERENCE CARDS:



CARD 1: THE FOUR STAGES OF THE UNIVERSAL WALK

- The Connection Stage (1) introduces participants to the experience, fosters a sensory connection with the natural environment, and facilitates a gradual transition to the slower rhythm of nature
- The Meaningful Nature Connection Stage (2) deepens participants' interaction with the natural environment
- The Solo Time Stage (3) allows walk participants to internalise and distil their experiences in nature
- Closing Stage (4) brings participants back together to create a shared space to reflect, conclude, and celebrate the experience



CARD 2: KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR PREPARING THE WALK

- Duration and Timing
- Participant-to-Practitioner Ratio
- Weather Preparedness
- Route Selection
- Special Equipment
- Cultural Sensitivity
- Pre-Walk Familiarisation with the Location and Risk Assessment

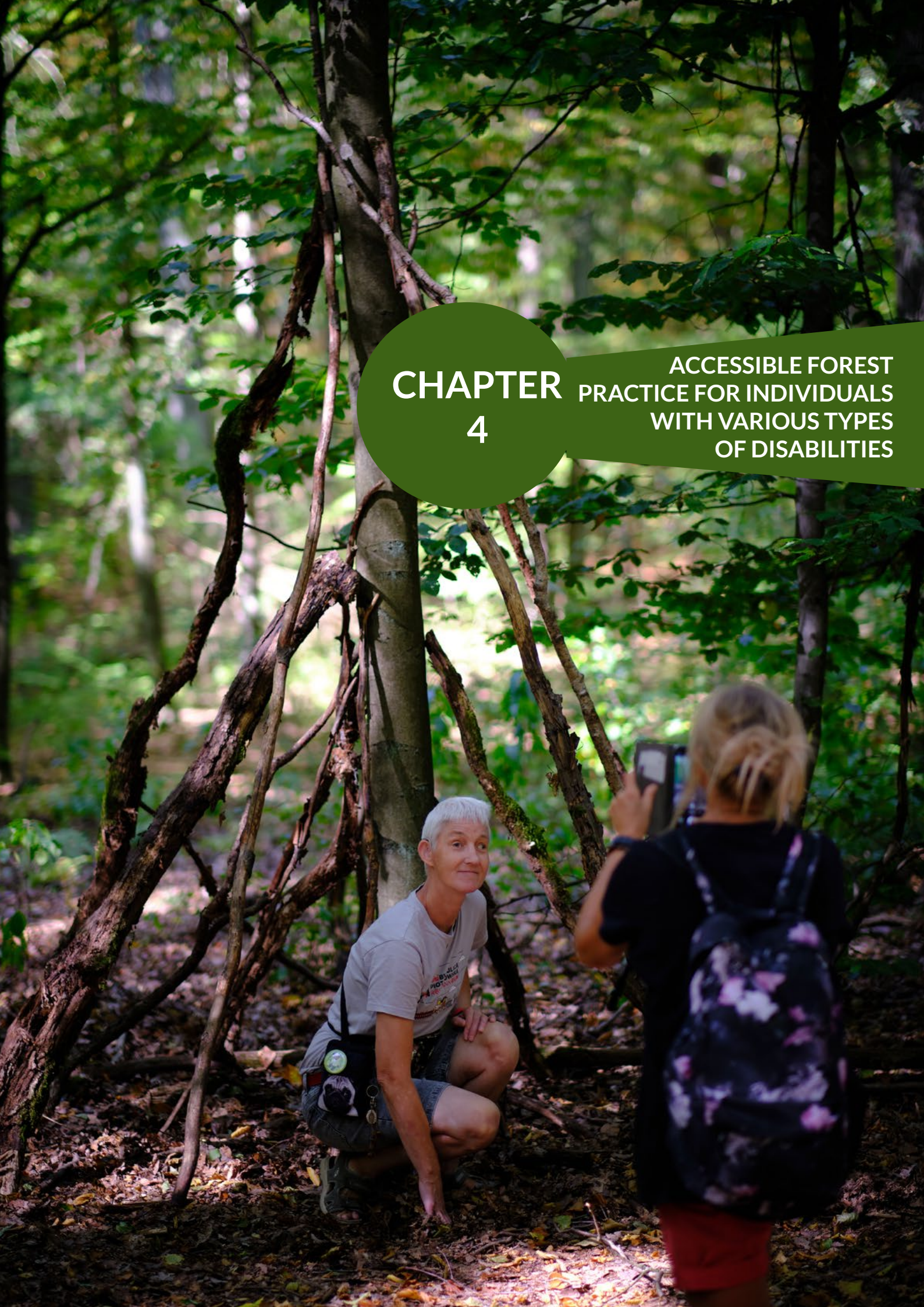








PART TWO: WORKING WITH DIVERSE GROUPS

A photograph of a woman with short grey hair crouching in a forest, looking towards the camera. She is wearing a light grey t-shirt and dark shorts. A black bag with a pug face patch is slung over her shoulder. In the foreground, the back of a person with blonde hair tied back, wearing a black shirt and a floral backpack, is visible as they hold a smartphone to take a picture of the woman. The forest floor is covered in dry leaves, and the background is filled with green foliage and tree trunks.

CHAPTER 4

ACCESSIBLE FOREST
PRACTICE FOR INDIVIDUALS
WITH VARIOUS TYPES
OF DISABILITIES



CHAPTER 4. ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTICE FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH VARIOUS TYPES OF DISABILITIES

In this chapter, we will delve into the critical yet underexplored topic of making forest walks accessible to individuals with disabilities.

By examining both the theoretical foundations and practical insights, you will gain a comprehensive understanding of how to create meaningful nature immersion experiences for this diverse group.

The chapter is designed to inspire empathy, expand knowledge, and equip you with the tools to make your practice more inclusive.

Section 4.1 begins by exploring different forms of disability, such as mental and intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, and multiple disabilities. This section will also address the factors that can make forest walks less accessible for individuals with various disabilities, offering you valuable perspectives on the barriers they face. To foster empathy and deepen understanding, this section will conclude with a series of reflective questions designed to help you understand the perspective of and challenges faced by those living with disabilities.

Section 4.2 delves into the essential competencies required for an Accessible Forest Practitioner to effectively and empathetically work with individuals who have mental and/or physical disabilities. You will explore the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to create inclusive and supportive nature-based experiences tailored to the unique needs of this population. This section will equip you with a deeper understanding of how to foster accessibility, ensure safety, and promote meaningful connections with nature for all participants.

Section 4.3 shifts the focus to practice by sharing insights from the „Accessible Forest Project” conducted in 2024. In this initiative, our team organised a series of forest walks tailored

to individuals with disabilities. You will learn about the participants, their diverse needs, and the unique challenges the aspiring Accessible Forest Practitioners encountered during these sessions.

By engaging with real-world examples, you will see how theory meets practice in creating inclusive forest experiences.

This section also offers practical guidance on how to address similar challenges in your own work. Drawing from our experiences with the Accessible Forest Project, we will present actionable tips and strategies for organising forest walks for individuals with mental and/or physical disabilities. This section will provide concrete solutions to common obstacles, empowering you to create safe, enjoyable, and enriching experiences for the participants.

Section 4.4 to conclude explores the benefits of forest walks for individuals with disabilities. By presenting practitioner accounts and participant testimonies from our walks, this section will highlight the profound impact of nature immersion on mental and physical wellbeing.

Before diving in, we encourage you to take a moment to reflect on what you hope to achieve by engaging with this chapter. Consider your goals, and whether they aim to deepen your understanding, enhance your skills, or develop empathy for the individuals you aim to support. Allocating approximately two hours of your working time to this chapter will allow you to fully engage with the material and apply it meaningfully to your practice.

By the end of this chapter you will be equipped with the knowledge and tools needed to make forest walks more inclusive and impactful for people with disabilities, and so to foster both connections with nature and mutual understanding. Let's begin.



SECTION 1. UNDERSTANDING THE GROUP

INTRO

What You Will Learn in this Chapter:

1. Theoretical insights: Understanding the specific barriers that make forest experiences challenging for individuals with mental/intellectual and physical disabilities
2. Practical applications: Recognising how to create more inclusive and accessible nature experiences through thoughtful planning and environmental adaptations

Reflective Consideration: Take a moment to reflect on your objectives at this stage of your work. Are you focused on expanding your understanding of diverse accessibility needs, enhancing your ability to create inclusive nature experiences, or both?

Key Competences: This section will delve into the following relevant competencies:

- Identifying barriers to forest accessibility for different disability types
- Developing empathetic understanding of diverse disability experiences
- Recognising the unique challenges faced by individuals with multiple disabilities
- Planning for inclusive nature experiences that accommodate various needs

Time Allocation: Dedicate approximately one hour to fully engage with the material and activities presented.

Over the course of several project walks, elements hindering the accessibility of forest trails for individuals with various disabilities could be observed. The conclusions of our project, which are derived directly from our firsthand experiences, build upon those of other practitioners in the field.

For those looking to support individuals with disabilities in forest settings, it is essential to address these barriers with thoughtful planning, the provision of clear information, and the creation of accessible environments. By doing so, we can make the benefits of nature accessible to everyone, regardless of their cognitive or physical abilities.

Please note: the terminology used in this chapter vis-à-vis different types of disability is descriptive (and simplified); therefore, it should not be interpreted in legal terms. When working with groups of people with disabilities, you must refer to legal frameworks in the jurisdiction you are operating in.



Mental/Intellectual Disabilities

The factors that make forest walks less accessible for people with mental/intellectual disabilities can generally be divided into five categories:

- **Difficulty with orientation:** people with mental/intellectual disabilities may struggle navigating complex forest paths, leading to disorientation.
- **Sensory overload:** the varied sounds, smells, and sights in a forest can be overwhelming, causing anxiety or distress.
- **Lack of clear signage:** inadequate or confusing signs can make it difficult to understand directions or follow safety guidelines.
- **Cognitive overload:** processing multiple stimuli or instructions simultaneously can be challenging, leading to frustration or confusion.
- **Inability to recognise hazards:** people with mental/intellectual disabilities may not easily identify natural hazards, such as uneven ground, roots, or wildlife.

Let's take a closer look at the factors above.

One of the main difficulties faced by individuals with mental/intellectual disabilities during forest walks concerns orientation. Forests are often dense and filled with winding paths that can be disorienting even for those without cognitive impairment. For those with mental/intellectual disabilities, the challenge may be magnified. They may struggle to understand directions or remember the way back, which can lead to a sense of being lost or confused. This difficulty with navigation not only diminishes the enjoyment of the walk but can also lead to anxiety or panic, making the experience more stressful than enjoyable.

Sensory overload is another significant factor that can make forest walks overwhelming for individuals with mental or intellectual disabilities. Forests are rich sensory environments, filled with a variety of inputs. While many appreciate this diversity, it can be overwhelming for those who are sensitive to sensory input. The rustling of leaves, the sound of animals, and

the variety of scents from different plants can create an environment that is altogether too stimulating. This sensory overload can lead to anxiety, distress, or even a shutdown, where the individual becomes unresponsive or highly agitated. For people with mental/intellectual disabilities, who may already experience heightened sensitivity to sensory stimuli, a forest walk might quickly turn from peaceful to chaotic.

The lack of clear and accessible signage in many forested areas further complicates the experience for individuals with mental/intellectual disabilities. Signage that is confusing, poorly placed, or written in complex language can be difficult to understand and follow. This is especially problematic in environments where the ability to follow directions is critical for safety. Without clear signage, individuals may struggle to stay on the correct path, leading to further disorientation or even dangerous situations, such as becoming lost in the forest. For those with mental/intellectual disabilities, who may rely heavily on clear visual cues and simple instructions, the absence of appropriate signage can make forest walks inaccessible.

Cognitive overload is another factor that can hinder forest walk accessibility for individuals with mental/intellectual disabilities, who may find the need to process multiple stimuli or instructions simultaneously overwhelming. Forest environments often require individuals to pay attention to a variety of factors, such as uneven terrain, the presence of wildlife, and the need to stay on a designated path. For someone with a mental/intellectual disability, juggling these different demands can lead to frustration or confusion. This cognitive overload can detract from the enjoyment of the walk and increase the likelihood of mistakes or accidents, further exacerbating feelings of anxiety or inadequacy.

Furthermore, the inability to recognise hazards in a natural environment poses a significant risk for individuals with mental/intellectual disabilities. Forests are inherently filled with potential dangers, such as uneven ground including

exposed roots, sudden changes in terrain, or wildlife. For someone with a mental/intellectual disability, the ability to identify and respond to these hazards may be impaired. For instance, they may not recognise a tripping hazard, or be unsure how to react if they encounter a wild animal. This lack of hazard recognition not only increases the risk of injury but also adds an additional layer of stress and uncertainty to the experience.

Finally, it should be noted that people with mental health issues sometimes suffer from so-called psychosocial disability, which may impair their interactions within a social environment, and reduce their capacity to operate efficiently in day-to-day life. Psychosocial disability can restrict a person's ability to cope in certain types of environments. A forest might be one of them.

Physical Disabilities

The accessibility of forest walks for individuals with physical disabilities can be hindered by factors that typically fall into five distinct categories:

- Uneven terrain: roots, rocks, and slopes make paths difficult or impossible for those using wheelchairs, walkers, or canes.
- Lack of accessible trails: many forest paths are not designed with the width, surface, or gradient suitable for mobility devices.
- Obstacles on pathways: fallen branches, narrow bridges, or steep inclines can create barriers for those with limited mobility.
- Limited rest areas: a lack of benches or accessible rest areas can make it difficult for people with physical disabilities to take breaks.
- Inaccessible facilities: restrooms, shelters, or parking areas may not be designed to accommodate those with physical disabilities.

For many, forest walks are a cherished experience that offer a chance to engage with the natural world, find peace, and enjoy physical activity. However, for individuals with physical disabilities, these walks can present significant challenges that limit their accessibility. Understanding these barriers is essential for anyone seeking to make forest environments more inclusive.

One of the most significant barriers to accessibility in forest environments is uneven terrain. Forest paths are often characterised by roots, rocks, and slopes that can be difficult or even impossible to navigate for those using wheelchairs, walkers, or canes. These natural features, while integral to the forest's ecosystem,

pose substantial challenges for individuals with mobility impairments. A person using a wheelchair, for example, might find it difficult to traverse a trail where tree roots cross the path or where the ground is too soft or uneven. Similarly, those who rely on walkers or canes may struggle with balance on rocky or sloping surfaces, increasing the risk of falls or injury. This uneven terrain can make forest walks not only physically challenging but also potentially dangerous for people with physical disabilities.

In addition to uneven terrain, the lack of appropriate trails is another significant factor that limits forest accessibility. Many forest trails are not designed with the width, surface, or gradient necessary to accommodate mobility devices. Narrow paths can make it difficult for wheelchair users to navigate without risking tipping over or becoming stuck. Trails with steep inclines or loose gravel surfaces can also be problematic, as they require more strength and stability to navigate. Without designated accessible trails, individuals with physical disabilities are often excluded from enjoying forest walks, as the trails do not accommodate their needs. This lack of accessibility not only limits their ability to engage with nature but also contributes to a broader sense of exclusion from outdoor activities.

Obstacles on pathways might cause further complications. Fallen branches, narrow bridges, or steep inclines can create barriers that are difficult to overcome. For example, a fallen branch across a trail might be a minor inconvenience for someone without a disability, but for a person using a wheelchair or walker,

it may present an insurmountable obstacle. Similarly, narrow bridges without railings or with uneven surfaces can be hazardous for those with limited mobility. These obstacles can turn what should be an enjoyable excursion in the forest into a frustrating and potentially dangerous experience. The presence of such barriers highlights the need for regular maintenance and thoughtful design in creating accessible forest paths.

Limited rest areas is another factor making forest walks less accessible for people with physical disabilities. Forest walks often require significant physical exertion, and without adequate places to rest, individuals with disabilities may find it difficult to complete a walk or fully enjoy the experience. A lack of benches or accessible seating areas along the trail means that those who tire easily or who need to take frequent breaks are left without a place to sit and recover. This can lead to increased fatigue, discomfort, or

even the abandonment of the walk altogether. Accessible rest areas are essential not only for physical recovery but also for providing a sense of security and comfort during the walk.

Finally, the inaccessibility of facilities such as restrooms, shelters, or parking areas poses a significant challenge for individuals with physical disabilities. Many forest areas do not have facilities that are designed to accommodate the needs of those with mobility impairments. For example, restrooms may lack the necessary space or features, such as grab bars or lower sinks, to be used comfortably by someone in a wheelchair. Shelters may be located in areas that are difficult to reach due to uneven paths or steps, and parking areas may not have appropriate designated spaces. Without accessible facilities the overall experience of a forest walk is diminished, as those with physical disabilities may find themselves unable to fully participate in the outing or even have to cut their visit short.



Multiple Disabilities

The accessibility of forest walks for individuals with multiple disabilities (both physical and intellectual) is often impeded by factors that can be classified into five distinct categories:

- Complex navigation issues: the combination of cognitive and physical challenges makes it extremely difficult to navigate uneven and poorly marked trails.
- Increased risk of injury: physical limitations combined with difficulty recognising hazards heightens the risk of accidents occurring.
- Need for constant assistance: individuals may require continuous support to manage both physical barriers and cognitive challenges, making independent forest walks impractical.
- Lack of inclusive design: most forest areas lack both physical accessibility and easy-to-understand guidance, and are not designed to cater to the combined needs of these individuals.
- Fatigue and overwhelm: the combination of physical effort required to navigate the terrain and the cognitive load of processing the environment can quickly lead to exhaustion.

One of the most significant challenges individuals with multiple disabilities might face concerns navigation. Forest environments are often characterised by intricate paths, uneven terrain, and minimal signage. When cognitive impairment is compounded by physical disability, such as difficulties with mobility, the task of navigating a forest becomes even more daunting. Individuals may struggle to understand directions, remember the way back, or physically manage the demands of the trail. This combination of cognitive and physical barriers can lead to a heightened sense of disorientation and frustration, making the forest walk stressful rather than therapeutic.

The increased risk of injury is another factor making forest walks less accessible for people with multiple disabilities. For someone with physical disabilities, natural hazards already pose a significant risk, but combined with mental/

intellectual disabilities the risk is amplified. Individuals may not recognise potential dangers or may have difficulty responding appropriately to unexpected obstacles. For instance, a person with limited mobility might struggle to maintain balance on a rocky path, while simultaneously being unable to process the need to avoid certain areas due to cognitive limitations. With an increased likelihood of accidents and injuries, these individuals are especially vulnerable, and this may deter them from taking part in forest walks altogether.

The need for constant assistance may also be a deterrent to participation. Navigating a forest trail can be challenging enough for someone with a physical or mental/intellectual disability, but when both are present adequate support is even more critical. Individuals may require help with physical tasks, such as moving over rough terrain, as well as cognitive support, like help understanding directions or identifying hazards. The necessity to provide continuous assistance may in fact render independent forest walks impractical, as it reduces the participants' sense of autonomy and freedom that nature walks should ideally promote. Reliance on a caregiver or companion might also hinder spontaneity, if the participant finds themselves unable to explore the forest at their own pace or on their own terms.

Another barrier to accessibility for individuals with multiple disabilities is the lack of inclusive design in most forest environments. Many forest trails and facilities are not designed to accommodate the diverse needs of people with both physical and mental/intellectual disabilities. For instance, paths may not be wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs, or they may lack clear and simple signage that can be easily understood by those with cognitive impairments. Additionally, features such as steep inclines, narrow bridges, or poorly marked trails can exclude those with combined disabilities from fully participating in the experience. The absence of inclusive design means that these individuals are often unable to access the full range of

experiences that forests offer, from walking the trails to enjoying the sights and sounds of nature.

The combination of physical and cognitive fatigue presents further challenges. Navigating a forest environment requires physical exertion, especially on uneven or sloping terrain. At the same time, it requires mental effort to process one's surroundings, follow directions, and stay

alert to potential hazards. For individuals with multiple disabilities, these combined pressures can quickly lead to exhaustion. The physical effort required to move through the forest, along with the mental strain of processing various stimuli and instructions, can overwhelm and tire the individual. This fatigue may limit the duration of the walk and reduce the overall positive impact of the experience.



Invitation to Empathy:

How Does it Feel to be a Vulnerable Person with a Disability?

- Imagine you are unable to see the world around you. How would you navigate your daily life?
- Imagine you need to communicate but cannot speak or write. How would you express your thoughts and feelings?
- Imagine you want to participate in a social event, but the venue is inaccessible. How would you feel?
- Imagine you will never hear your favourite music again. How would that change your appreciation of sound?
- Imagine you are in a forest, but the path ahead is uneven and rocky. How do you navigate it with a physical disability that limits your mobility?
- Imagine you want to feel the tranquillity of the forest, but anxiety prevents you from enjoying the peaceful surroundings. How do you cope with these overwhelming feelings?
- Imagine you want to experience the scent of fresh pine trees, but sensory processing difficulties make the smell overpowering. How do you find balance in such a situation?
- Imagine you will never have the ability to walk through the forest unaided. How do you adapt and still find joy in nature?





CHECK POINTS:

- Can you identify the specific challenges that make forest environments difficult for people with mental or intellectual disabilities?
- Do you understand the physical barriers that limit forest accessibility?
- Are you familiar with the compounded challenges faced by individuals with multiple disabilities?
- Have you considered how to develop empathy for diverse disability experiences?



CRITICAL QUESTIONS:

1. How might forest practices be adapted to create more inclusive experiences for people with various disabilities?
2. In what ways might the principles of universal design be applied to make forest environments more accessible to everyone?
3. How can we balance preserving the natural character of forest environments while enhancing their accessibility?



QUICK REFERENCE CARDS:



CARD 1: MENTAL/INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY BARRIERS

ORIENTATIONAL CHALLENGES:

- Difficulty navigating complex forest paths
- Struggles understanding directions
- Problems remembering routes
- Potential for anxiety or panic when disoriented

SENSORY FACTORS:

- Overwhelming sensory input from forest environments
- Rustling leaves, animal sounds creating overstimulation
- Multiple scents causing sensory overload
- Potential for anxiety, distress, or shutdown responses

INFORMATIONAL BARRIERS:

- Lack of clear, simple signage
- Complex or poorly placed directional information
- Difficulty understanding safety guidelines
- Reliance on visual cues that may be insufficient

COGNITIVE DEMANDS:

- Challenges in processing multiple stimuli simultaneously
- Difficulty juggling awareness of path, terrain, and wildlife
- Increased frustration or confusion arising from cognitive load
- Higher likelihood of mistakes or accidents

HAZARD RECOGNITION:

- Impaired ability to identify natural dangers
- Difficulty recognising uneven ground, roots, or wildlife risks
- Uncertainty about appropriate responses to hazards
- Increased stress caused by safety concerns





CARD 2: PHYSICAL DISABILITY BARRIERS

TERRAIN CHALLENGES:

- Uneven ground with roots, rocks, and slopes
- Challenges navigating with wheelchairs, walkers, or canes
- Difficulty balancing on rocky or sloping surfaces
- Increased risk of falls or injury

TRAIL DESIGN ISSUES:

- Paths too narrow for mobility devices
- Inappropriate surface materials (loose gravel, mud)
- Steep gradients exceeding accessibility standards
- Lack of designated accessible routes

PHYSICAL OBSTACLES:

- Fallen branches blocking pathways
- Narrow bridges without adequate railings
- Steep inclines requiring significant strength
- Natural barriers that become impassable

REST AREA LIMITATIONS:

- Insufficient benches or seating along trails
- Long distances between rest opportunities
- Lack of accessible seating design
- Inadequate shelter from the elements

FACILITY INADEQUACIES:

- Inaccessible restrooms lacking necessary features
- Shelters in hard-to-reach locations
- Parking areas without designated accessible spaces
- Picnic or gathering areas with barriers to accessibility



CARD 3: MULTIPLE DISABILITY CHALLENGES

COMPOUNDED NAVIGATION PROBLEMS:

- Combined cognitive and physical challenges creating complex barriers
- Struggles with both understanding and physically managing terrain
- Heightened disorientation from overlapping challenges
- Increased stress and frustration during navigation

ELEVATED SAFETY RISKS:

- Multiplied vulnerability to hazards
- Physical limitations combined with hazard recognition difficulties
- Limited ability to respond appropriately to dangers
- Higher probability of accidents and injuries

ASSISTANCE REQUIREMENTS:

- Need for continuous support with physical and cognitive aspects
- Reduced autonomy and independence

- Limited spontaneity in exploration
- Constraints on preferred pace and personal experience

DESIGN EXCLUSION:

- Lack of environments addressing both physical and cognitive needs
- Insufficient width, surface, and gradient for mobility devices
- Absence of clear and simple cognitive guidance
- Presence of features that create barriers for those with combined disabilities

FATIGUE FACTORS:

- Dual physical and cognitive exhaustion
- Overwhelming combined demands of terrain and processing
- Reduced duration and enjoyment of experiences
- Limited capacity to manage multiple challenges simultaneously



CARD 4: DEVELOPING EMPATHETIC UNDERSTANDING

PERSPECTIVE-TAKING EXERCISES:

- Imagine navigating without sight
- Imagine communication without speech or writing
- Reflect on exclusion from inaccessible environments
- Contemplate loss of sensory experiences

FOREST-SPECIFIC REFLECTIONS:

- How would you navigate uneven paths with mobility limitations?
- How might anxiety affect your enjoyment of peaceful surroundings?
- What if sensory processing made forest scents overwhelming?
- How would you adapt if you could not walk unaided through nature?

KEY INSIGHTS:

- Disabilities create experiences unique to each individual
- Barriers are both physical and psychological
- Accessibility is about both practicality and dignity
- Inclusion requires thoughtful planning and adaptation

EMPATHY FOUNDATION: „For those looking to support individuals with any sort of disabilities in forest settings, it is essential to address these barriers through thoughtful planning, the provision of clear information, and the creation of accessible environments.”



INTRO

Accessible Forest Practitioners working with individuals who have mental and/or physical disabilities must possess a holistic set of competencies that align with the guiding principles of the Accessible Forest Practice Compass. These competencies are not only grounded in technical skill and professional knowledge but are also informed by self-awareness, personal experiences, a deep connection with nature, and the ability to adapt facilitation practices to the unique dynamics of diverse groups. Below, we explore how the compass model applies to practitioners working with people with mental/intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, and those living with both types of challenges.

Mental/Intellectual Disabilities: Navigating the Emotional and Psychological Terrain

When engaging with individuals with mental/intellectual disabilities, AF Practitioners must operate with a heightened sensitivity to psychological and emotional nuances. The North quadrant of the compass, which emphasises self-awareness, is crucial here. Practitioners must reflect on their own mental and emotional states, as their presence significantly influences the participants' experience. This includes recognising any biases or preconceived notions that could negatively impact facilitation, as well as cultivating an attitude of acceptance and empathy vis-à-vis complex mental health conditions.

Equally vital is the West quadrant, where the practitioner's connection to nature serves as a therapeutic bridge. A thorough understanding of how natural environments can influence mental health is essential. For instance, practitioners should be able to identify elements within the environment – such as the sound of rustling leaves, the texture of tree bark, or the rhythm of bird calls – that can evoke a calming or grounding effect for participants. This knowledge must be paired with the ability to interpret and adapt these elements to suit the specific needs of individuals with anxiety, depression, or other mental health challenges.

The East quadrant underscores the importance of group facilitation, where practitioners must create a safe and inclusive atmosphere.

This requires not only observing group dynamics but also understanding the emotional states of participants, ensuring that each feels supported and valued. Practitioners must be prepared to adapt their communication styles, employing clear and compassionate language that fosters trust. Encouraging mindfulness and sensory engagement with nature can also help participants to anchor themselves in the present moment, alleviating feelings of stress or disconnection.



Finally, the South quadrant, which focuses on personal experiences, comes into play as practitioners draw on their own encounters with nature's therapeutic effects. Sharing stories or practices that illustrate the mental health benefits of forest immersion can inspire participants and create a sense of connection. However, this must always be done with sensitivity and respect for participants' lived experiences, ensuring that personal narratives do not overshadow or invalidate their own perspectives.

Physical Disabilities: Bridging Accessibility and Connection

For individuals with physical disabilities, the competencies of an AF Practitioner must extend beyond facilitating a connection with nature towards actively addressing and removing physical barriers. In the North quadrant, self-awareness plays a pivotal role as practitioners critically evaluate their own understanding of what accessibility and inclusivity mean. This includes recognising gaps in their knowledge and seeking out training or resources that will allow them to create environments that accommodate varying physical abilities.

The West quadrant addresses the practitioner's ability to create a meaningful connection with nature despite physical limitations. This requires a creative and sensory-rich approach, where practitioners highlight aspects of nature that can be experienced through senses other than sight or touch. For example, guiding participants to focus on the scents of the forest, the sounds of a nearby stream, or the feeling of sunlight filtering through the trees can foster a sense of connection. The practitioner's role here is to ensure that every participant, regardless of physical ability, can engage with nature in a way



In the South quadrant, the practitioner's personal experiences and organisational skills are crucial. This involves meticulous planning to ensure that forest paths are accessible, whether by selecting trails that are wheelchair-friendly or modifying activities to accommodate participants with limited mobility. Practitioners must also be resourceful, employing adaptive tools and technologies, such as assistive listening devices for participants with hearing impairments or tactile maps for those with visual impairments. Flexibility and preparedness are key, as unforeseen challenges – such as adverse weather conditions or equipment malfunctions – may require on-the-spot adjustments.

that is both enriching and empowering.

In the East quadrant, group facilitation requires an inclusive mindset. Practitioners must be adept at fostering a sense of community among participants, ensuring that those with physical disabilities feel fully integrated and valued. This includes setting a pace that accommodates everyone, providing clear and comprehensible instructions, and encouraging mutual support among group members. By cultivating an atmosphere of respect and collaboration, practitioners can help participants form meaningful connections with both nature and each other.

Dual Disabilities: Integrating Holistic Competencies

When working with individuals who experience both mental and physical disabilities, AF Practitioners must adopt a truly integrative approach that synthesises all four quadrants of the competency compass. Self-awareness becomes even more critical, as practitioners must navigate the complexities of addressing overlapping needs. This involves a deep commitment to ongoing self-reflection and professional development, ensuring that they are equipped to provide holistic support.

The South quadrant highlights the importance of drawing on diverse personal experiences and adaptive strategies. Practitioners must be prepared to anticipate and address a wide range of challenges, from ensuring physical accessibility to recognising and responding to emotional triggers. This necessitates a balance of proactive planning and situational adaptability, so that practitioners can create a seamless and supportive environment for all participants.

In the West quadrant, the practitioner's connection to nature serves as a unifying thread that can bridge physical and mental barriers. By facilitating sensory-rich and inclusive experiences, practitioners can help participants engage with nature in ways that go beyond their disabilities. This might include guiding a mindfulness exercise that combines gentle movement with focused attention on natural sounds or textures, thereby fostering a sense of presence and connection.

The East quadrant underscores the importance of inclusive group facilitation. Practitioners must be attuned to the unique dynamics that arise when working with individuals who have both mental and physical disabilities. This includes creating a supportive and adaptable group environment in which participants feel seen, heard, and valued. Encouraging peer support and collaboration can also enhance the group's sense of cohesion and mutual understanding.

The Interconnected Nature of Competencies

In each case, it is important to recognise the dynamic interplay between the competencies outlined in the Accessible Forest Practice Compass. Self-awareness informs how practitioners draw on personal experiences, while a deep connection with nature shapes their approach to group facilitation. This interconnectedness ensures that AF Practitioners develop a balanced skill set that supports their ability to address the unique needs of individuals with mental and/or physical disabilities.

By embracing this holistic and integrative model, practitioners can cultivate the competencies needed to create meaningful and accessible nature-based experiences. Through self-reflection, adaptability, and a commitment to inclusivity, AF Practitioners can empower individuals with disabilities to connect with nature in transformative and impactful ways, fostering a sense of belonging, resilience, and wellbeing.





SELF-AWARENESS ('I') – NORTH QUADRANT

This domain centres on the practitioner's introspective capacity and emotional maturity. It encompasses an awareness of one's internal landscape and how it shapes the facilitation of inclusive forest walks for individuals with disabilities.

The competencies in this quadrant underpin the integrity, presence, and ethical grounding of the practitioner.

Key competencies include:

- **Self-confidence**
The assurance in one's ability to create safe, inclusive, and meaningful nature-based experiences for participants with diverse needs.
- **Capacity for self-criticism**
The aptitude to critically evaluate one's actions, biases, and assumptions in a constructive manner that fosters continuous growth and professional development.



PRACTICES – SOUTH QUADRANT

This domain encompasses the practical and procedural competencies required to design, prepare, and facilitate forest-based experiences with a high degree of intentionality and adaptability. It reflects the practitioner's ability to transform insight and inclusive values into concrete action, ensuring both the physical and emotional accessibility of nature experiences.

Key competencies include:

- **Planning and preparation skills**
The ability to methodically organise inclusive sessions, selecting appropriate locations, materials, and safety protocols tailored to the needs of participants with disabilities.
- **Experience-based decision-making**
Drawing upon prior facilitation encounters to inform real-time judgements, and anticipating the needs and responses of diverse groups.
- **Adaptability and responsiveness**
The capacity to adjust plans, pacing, or methods in response to emerging conditions, participant feedback, or unforeseen obstacles.
- **Resource management**
Effective coordination of tools, materials, and human support to ensure accessibility, comfort, and safety.
- **Accessibility logistics**
Knowledge and application of infrastructural and procedural adjustments that accommodate varying physical, sensory, or cognitive abilities.
- **Safety awareness and risk management**
Anticipating, assessing, and mitigating environmental and interpersonal risks to safeguard participants' wellbeing.
- **Use of adaptive tools and technologies**
Proficiency in employing assistive devices and accessible formats, such as tactile maps, mobility aids, or alternative communication tools.
- **Inclusive activity design**
Creating multisensory and flexible nature-based activities that can be meaningfully accessed and enjoyed by all participants.
- **Backup planning and flexibility under pressure**
Maintaining readiness for unplanned disruptions, and responding calmly and creatively to changing circumstances.
- **Time and energy pacing**
Structuring the session to balance stimulation and rest, ensuring sustained engagement without fatigue.
- **Environmental readiness**
Assessing and modifying the natural setting to optimise safety, navigability, and sensory richness.
- **Empowerment through practice**
Facilitating activities that support autonomy, agency, and dignity among participants, enabling them to engage with nature on their own terms.



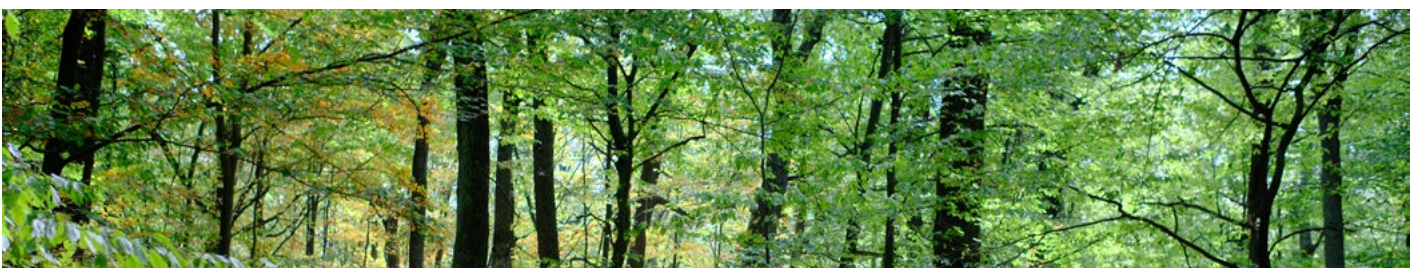


NATURE – WEST QUADRANT

This quadrant emphasises the practitioner's ecological literacy and their capacity to cultivate meaningful, multisensory relationships between participants and the natural world. The competencies within this domain involve interpreting the environment so as to render it accessible and emotionally resonant. The practitioner becomes a facilitator of nature's therapeutic potential, ensuring that each encounter with the landscape is inclusive, empowering, and rich in connection.

Key competencies include:

- **Deep personal connection with nature**
An embodied, intuitive relationship with natural environments that informs the practitioner's presence, confidence, and capacity to guide others.
- **Ecological literacy**
A sound understanding of ecological systems, seasonal patterns, and biodiversity, and the ability to communicate these insights in a comprehensible and engaging manner.
- **Interpretive skills**
The ability to translate natural phenomena – such as bird calls, light patterns, or forest textures – into meaningful experiences through metaphor, narrative, or sensory exploration.
- **Sensory-rich facilitation**
Designing experiences that rely on smell, sound, touch, and body awareness to ensure participation for individuals with visual, auditory, or mobility impairments.
- **Therapeutic use of natural elements**
Recognising and utilising specific environmental stimuli – like wind, birdsong, or tree canopy movement – for their grounding and calming effects.
- **Creativity in nature engagement**
Adapting methods and inventing new approaches to help participants engage with their surroundings in imaginative and personalised ways.
- **Environmental stewardship**
Modelling respect, care, and reciprocity toward the natural world, while encouraging participants to develop their own ethical relationship with nature.
- **Mindfulness in natural settings**
Facilitating stillness, sensory focus, and reflective presence that supports emotional regulation and depth of experience.
- **Inclusivity in nature interpretation**
Ensuring that stories, symbols, and ecological explanations are accessible to participants of varying cognitive and cultural backgrounds.
- **Capacity to evoke wonder and curiosity**
Creating opportunities for awe and discovery through subtle or overlooked aspects of nature
- **Nature as co-facilitator**
Approaching the natural environment not merely as a backdrop but as an active partner in the session, and allowing the landscape to shape the process.



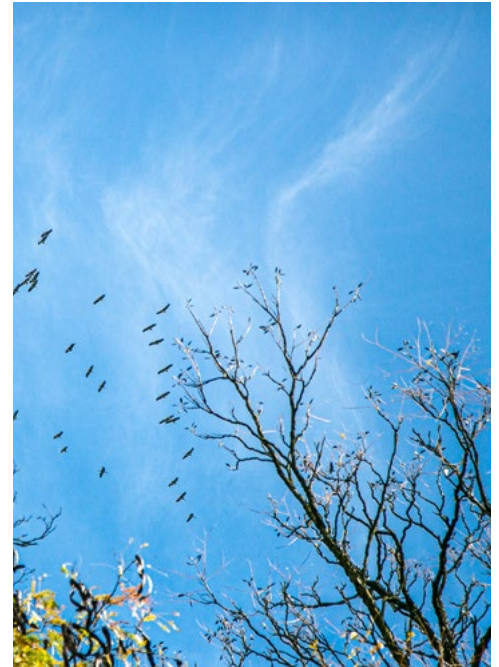


THE GROUP – EAST QUADRANT

This quadrant centres on the practitioner's ability to facilitate inclusive, emotionally attuned group processes. It emphasises relational intelligence, communication adaptability, and the creation of environments where all participants – regardless of ability – feel welcomed, respected, and empowered. The competencies here ensure that the forest walk becomes not only a personal journey but also a shared experience of connection and mutual support.

Key competencies include:

- **Understanding individual and group needs**
The capacity to recognise and sensitively respond to participants' physical, emotional, cognitive, and sensory requirements throughout the session.
- **Inclusive communication**
Using clear, respectful, and accessible language – spoken, visual, or tactile – that is adapted to the communication styles and comprehension levels of all participants.
- **Facilitation of psychological safety**
Creating a group atmosphere where vulnerability is met with respect, and participants feel safe to engage, share, or remain silent without judgement.
- **Observation and attunement**
Reading verbal and non-verbal cues, sensing changes in group energy or individual wellbeing, and adjusting facilitation accordingly.
- **Relational empathy and emotional intelligence**
Demonstrating genuine interest, sensitivity, and appropriate emotional responsiveness in interpersonal interactions.
- **Adapting facilitation to group composition**
Modifying activities, tone, and structure based on the specific dynamics, capacities, and preferences in each group.
- **Pacing and group rhythm awareness**
Managing the tempo of engagement to maintain balance between stimulation and rest, thus ensuring inclusivity and sustained attention.
- **Conflict prevention and resolution**
Addressing tensions or misunderstandings clearly, calmly, and fairly, to maintain group cohesion and emotional safety.
- **Encouraging peer support**
Fostering relationships of mutual assistance, shared reflection, and cooperative interaction.
- **Creating shared meaning**
Guiding the group in collectively processing experiences and co-constructing significance through dialogue, ritual, or reflection.
- **Accessibility in group settings**
Designing and moderating group interactions that accommodate diverse participation needs, including those related to mobility, communication, and cognitive processing.
- **Empowerment of participant voices**
Actively encouraging self-expression, feedback, and decision-making from all members of the group, including those with limited expressive language or confidence.





SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

Below, using a scale from 1 (disagree) to 10 (strongly agree), you can assess your current position with respect to each of the identified competencies. This self-evaluation will offer a comprehensive overview, enabling you to discern which competencies warrant further investment of your time and intellectual effort. Based on this assessment, formulate a personalised strategy aimed at deepening your understanding of each competency, and establish priorities that most effectively complement the distinct course of your individual learning journey.

Here is a comprehensive, ready-to-use list of reflective self-assessment questions – each aligned with a specific competence relevant to organising forest walks for people with disabilities. Each question is formulated to help the reader gauge their current capabilities.



SELF-AWARENESS ('I') – NORTH QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Self-Confidence: Do I believe in my ability to safely and meaningfully guide diverse groups in natural settings, even when challenges or unexpected situations arise?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Capacity for Self-Criticism: Am I willing and able to reflect honestly on my actions and decisions – acknowledging both successes and mistakes – and use these reflections to grow as an AF Practitioner?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Recognition of Personal Limitations and Strengths: Do I have a clear understanding of my own strengths and limitations, and am I comfortable asking for support, delegating tasks, or adapting my role when needed?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Emotional Regulation: Am I able to stay emotionally grounded and present – especially in moments of stress, conflict, or when participants are in distress – so that I can offer stable support?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Empathy Toward People with Disabilities: Do I approach people with disabilities with sincere empathy and respect, recognising both visible and invisible challenges without making assumptions or offering pity?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Bias Awareness and Mitigation: Am I actively aware of any unconscious biases or assumptions I may hold about disability, and do I take steps to challenge and transform them in my language and behaviour?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Authenticity: Do my actions and words reflect my inner values, and do I show up with honesty and sincerity in a way that helps participants feel safe and respected?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Commitment to Inclusive Values: Do I actively embody inclusive values in my facilitation – ensuring that equity, dignity, and accessibility are present not only in what I say but in how I lead?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Openness to Feedback and Lifelong Learning: Do I welcome constructive feedback from others and remain open to continuous learning and change, even when it challenges my existing habits or beliefs?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Clarity of Intention: Am I clear about why I lead forest walks – both personally and professionally – and do I reflect on how my motivations shape the experience for participants?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Adaptability of Mindset: Am I willing to change my plans or perspective when the group needs to shift focus or feedback suggests a new direction, even if it challenges my initial expectations?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

THE EXPERIENCE – SOUTH QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Planning and Preparation Skills: Am I able to manage the complex task of organising forest walks for people with mental and/or physical disabilities, considering that it involves selecting appropriate natural locations, preparing materials in accessible formats, ensuring necessary permissions, and implementing safety protocols based on participants' individual needs?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Experience-Based Decision-Making: Can I effectively draw on my previous experience when facilitating forest walks, using it to anticipate potential challenges, understand the dynamics of diverse participant groups, and make sound decisions in the moment?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Adaptability and Responsiveness: Do I feel confident in my ability to adapt the flow of a session – such as modifying an activity or changing the walking route – in response to participants' energy levels, weather conditions, or unexpected accessibility issues?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Resource Management: Am I skilled in organising and coordinating all necessary resources – including assistive devices, materials in alternative formats, and support personnel – to ensure that every participant feels safe, included, and supported throughout the walk?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Accessibility Logistics: Do I have the knowledge and capacity to identify and implement accessibility solutions such as choosing barrier-free trails, providing transportation options, or creating alternative communication paths for participants with varied abilities?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Safety Awareness and Risk Management: Am I prepared to evaluate and respond to safety risks – such as uneven terrain, behavioural emergencies, or allergic reactions – while maintaining a calm and reassuring presence for all participants?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Use of Adaptive Tools and Technologies: Do I know how and when to use assistive tools – such as visual aids, audio guides, or sensory materials – to enhance accessibility and ensure that each participant can meaningfully experience the forest environment?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Inclusive Activity Design: Can I design and facilitate nature-based activities that engage multiple senses and can be adapted to different levels of ability, interest, and communication style?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Backup Planning and Flexibility Under Pressure: Am I prepared with alternative plans and creative solutions in case of unexpected disruptions – such as sudden weather changes, transport delays, or emotional crises among participants?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Time and Energy Pacing: Do I plan sessions with thoughtful pacing – balancing active and restful moments – to ensure that participants remain engaged without becoming overwhelmed or fatigued?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

THE EXPERIENCE – SOUTH QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Environmental Readiness: Am I able to evaluate the physical and sensory qualities of a natural site, and make necessary adjustments – such as preparing quiet zones, guiding participants through tactile experiences, or removing obstacles from paths – to ensure readiness and safety?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Empowerment Through Practice: Do I intentionally design forest walks in a way that supports each participant's sense of agency – encouraging choice, self-expression, and independence – while respecting their pace and preferences?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

NATURE – WEST QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Deep Personal Connection with Nature: Do I feel a deep, personal connection to natural environments – one that grounds me, nourishes my intuition, and supports my ability to be fully present and confident while guiding others through nature?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Ecological Literacy: Am I able to recognise and understand the ecological dynamics of the areas I guide walks in – including seasonal changes, native species, and ecosystem relationships – and explain them in ways that are clear, inclusive, and engaging for diverse participants?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Interpretive Skills: Do I feel confident in translating subtle elements of the natural world into meaningful stories, metaphors, or sensory experiences that help participants connect emotionally and imaginatively with their surroundings?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Sensory-Rich Facilitation: Do I intentionally design nature-based activities that engage a variety of senses – including touch, sound, smell, and body movement – so that people with sensory or mobility impairments can fully participate and feel included?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Therapeutic Use of Natural Elements: Am I attuned to the therapeutic qualities of the natural environment, and do I know how to use elements such as birdsong, flowing water, or gentle breezes to support participants' emotional regulation and wellbeing?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Creativity in Nature Engagement: Am I able to creatively adapt activities – or invent new ones on the spot – that help participants interact with nature in ways that are playful, personal, and meaningful, especially when standard methods do not suit their needs?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

NATURE – WEST QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Environmental Stewardship: Do I consistently demonstrate respect for the natural world through my actions and words, and do I encourage participants to explore their own values and responsibilities in relation to nature?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Mindfulness in Natural Settings: Do I create space for mindful presence in nature – guiding participants to slow down, tune into their senses, and notice small details as a way to calm the mind and deepen their connection to the environment?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Inclusivity in Nature Interpretation: Do I take care to offer nature-based stories and explanations that are respectful, easy to understand, and relevant to people with different learning styles, cognitive abilities, and cultural perspectives?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Capacity to Evoke Wonder and Curiosity: Do I intentionally guide participants' attention toward surprising, beautiful, or rarely noticed elements of nature – such as the shape of a fallen leaf or the rhythm of bird calls – to awaken a sense of curiosity and wonder?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Nature as Co-Facilitator: Do I treat the forest not just as a setting but as a living co-facilitator – allowing the terrain, weather, and natural occurrences to influence the pace, tone, and direction of the walk?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

THE GROUP – SOUTH QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Understanding Individual and Group Needs: Am I able to recognise the diverse needs of each participant – whether physical, emotional, sensory, or cognitive – and respond with empathy and appropriate adjustments throughout the forest walk?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Inclusive Communication: Do I use communication methods (spoken, visual, tactile, or alternative formats) that are adapted to the various comprehension levels, cultural contexts, and communication preferences of the participants?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Facilitation of Psychological Safety: Do I create an atmosphere in which participants feel emotionally safe – free to speak, participate, or remain silent – without fear of judgement or pressure?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Observation and Attunement: Am I attentive to subtle changes in participants' body language, tone, or energy – and can I adjust my facilitation style in response to what I observe?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

THE GROUP – SOUTH QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Pacing and Group Rhythm Awareness: <i>Do I consciously manage the rhythm of the session – balancing active and quiet moments – so that participants remain engaged without becoming overstimulated or fatigued?</i>	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Adapting Facilitation to Group Composition: <i>Am I able to adjust the structure, pacing, and tone of a session depending on who is in the group – their needs, energy levels, and interpersonal dynamics?</i>	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Conflict Prevention and Resolution: <i>Can I recognise early signs of tension or conflict and respond calmly and fairly – preserving a respectful and emotionally safe group environment?</i>	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Encouraging Peer Support: <i>Do I encourage participants to support each other – whether by sharing observations, offering help, or engaging in group reflection – so that a sense of community can develop?</i>	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Creating Shared Meaning: <i>Do I create opportunities for the group to reflect together and build shared meaning – through conversation, silence, symbolic actions, or closing rituals?</i>	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Accessibility in Group Settings: <i>Am I attentive to accessibility in group interactions – ensuring that everyone can contribute in a way that works for them, regardless of physical, cognitive, or communicative differences?</i>	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Empowerment of Participant Voices: <i>Do I intentionally create space for each person's voice to be heard – by encouraging choice, offering alternative ways to express feedback, and supporting those with less confidence or limited verbal language?</i>	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10





SECTION 3. PRACTICAL STRATEGIES: WORKING WITH THE TARGET GROUP

INTRO

What You Will Learn in this Section:

1. Theoretical insights: Understanding the practical implementation of forest walks for individuals with multiple disabilities through a detailed case study in Poland
2. Practical applications: Recognising effective strategies, adaptations, and considerations needed to create meaningful nature experiences for diverse disability needs

Reflective Consideration: Take a moment to reflect on your objectives at this stage of your work. Are you focused on deepening your understanding of inclusive forest practices, enhancing your ability to adapt nature experiences for specific disability needs, or both?

Key Competences: This section will address the following relevant competencies:

- Adapting forest walk phases for different disability requirements
- Facilitating meaningful sensory connections despite communication barriers
- Creating structured yet flexible nature experiences for participants with multiple disabilities
- Developing empathy and appropriate support approaches to be an AF Practitioner

Time Allocation: Dedicate approximately one hour to fully engage with the material and activities presented.

In 2024, a series of forest walks brought together a diverse group of participants – six individuals with varying disabilities – accompanied by forest therapy guide, an assistant, a group expert, and a person tasked with aiding in the operation of wheelchairs. The participants with disabilities – normally under the care of the Association “Słyszę Serce” – all had complex needs, and each had to navigate the challenge of their physical and mental/intellectual disabilities. Of the six, three were wheelchair users relying on mobility aids to traverse the forest terrain, while the remaining three were able to move independently, albeit with limitations. Each participant, despite their unique challenges, exhibited a shared resilience and embraced the opportunity to connect with nature through the guided walk.

The disabilities affecting this group were multifaceted, involving significant impairments in speech, intellectual function, and motor skills. Communication within the group was marked by slurred speech, restricted vocabulary, and

an overall reliance on short, simple messages. One participant, limited to answering with only „yes” or „no,” exemplified the profound impact of their conditions on verbal communication. The participants’ intellectual abilities were similarly constrained – each was capable only of understanding simple and concise instructions. The understanding of written material also presented a challenge. While some individuals could cope with clearly printed or simple formulations, one was entirely unable to comprehend any text. These difficulties demonstrated the complex nature of their disabilities and the necessity for a tailored approach to guidance and engagement.

To this end, assistants and group experts were included in the endeavour. The assistant provided essential support, ensuring that the physical needs of the participants were met, while the group expert focused on creating an inclusive and meaningful experience, mindful of the participants’ limited cognitive capacities. The group then embarked on their journeys

through the forest together and, with the carefully coordinated support and a great deal of determination, were able to overcome its obstacles. The outing ultimately proved enriching and accessible for all involved.

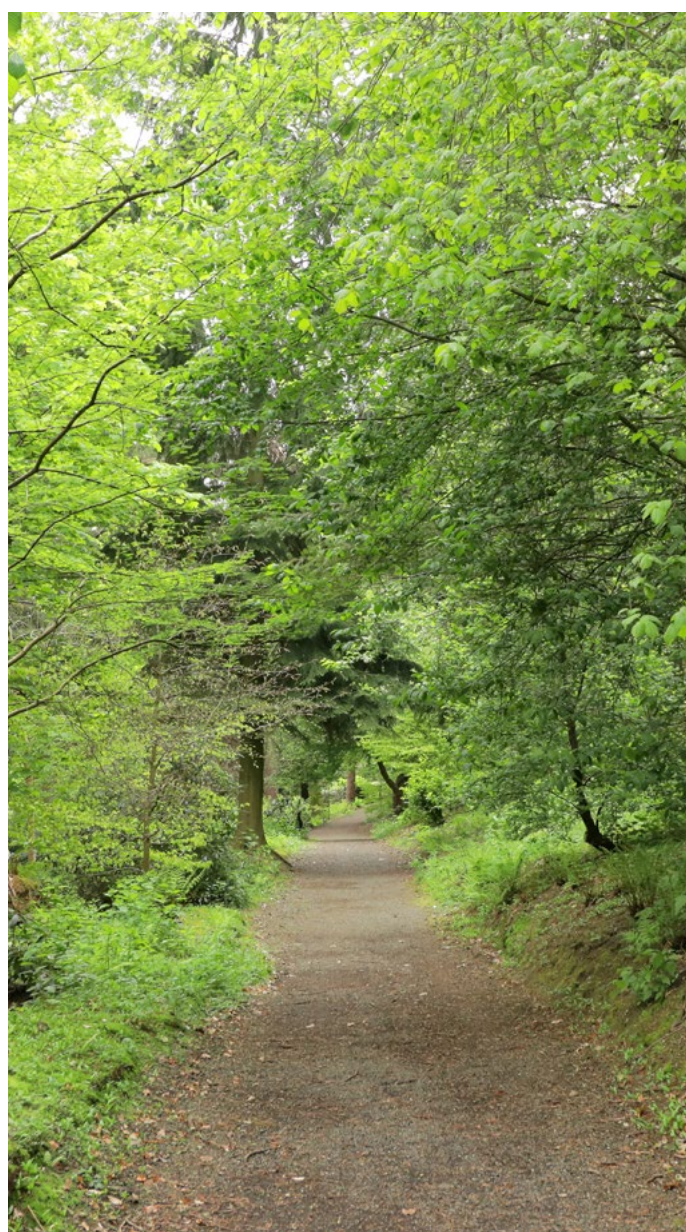
The series of walks took place in Łagiewnicki Forest, in the city of Łódź (Poland). Located on the city's outskirts, it is one of the largest city forests in Europe. While not especially biodiverse, it offers a vast space for recreation

and immersion in nature, with large ponds, trails, and areas of dense forest. A wide forest road blanketed in fallen leaves serves as the main artery through this woodland, while narrower paths branch off from the side. The main road leads to the heart of the forest and a tranquil clearing that borders a creek. Here, picnic tables and benches offer a space for rest, recuperation and reflection. A small parking area and toilet are conveniently located nearby, ensuring that the forest remains accessible to all.

THE PHASES OF THE WALKS

In the process of organising nature-based activities for individuals with physical and mental/intellectual disabilities, it is important to recognise that participants who join a single forest walk and those who engage over multiple seasons will have different kinds of experience. Some individuals will only take part in one walk, while others may have the opportunity to return several times throughout the year. These two forms of participation can be described as „short-term” and „long-term” forest walks. Both offer valuable experiences, but they do differ in the depth of connection, familiarity, and comfort participants are able to develop with the environment and the guiding process.

Participants who returned for several walks across different seasons exhibited higher levels of confidence and engagement. With each session they became more at ease, they began to recognise familiar paths, and could tune more quickly into the rhythm of the forest. This allowed them to establish stronger relationships both with their natural surroundings and the facilitation structure. Moreover, their growing connection to nature often served as a gentle encouragement for first-time participants, as it showed that comfort and curiosity could deepen over time. In the following section, two examples will be presented: a spring walk illustrating a “short-term” outing, and an autumn walk representing a “long-term” experience.



Each walk was structured according to the four-stage universal model of the forest walk developed during our project, and provides a practical framework for planning inclusive forest activities.



1. The “Connection Stage” of the forest walks began with a gathering of the participants in a serene, shaded area at the forest’s entrance. The

session was initiated by welcoming everyone and introducing – in the simplest way possible – the concept of the forest walk. While the general atmosphere was calm, some apprehension and uncertainty could be observed among the participants, many of whom were experiencing such an activity for the first time.

The forest therapy guide also introduced herself and her assistants, explaining their roles in ensuring both safety and enjoyment for all. They also outlined the structure of the walk, detailing the various phases the group would go through. This was particularly important as the group included individuals who would be more comfortable when they knew what to expect. It was explained clearly that the pace would be gentle and accommodating, and that everyone would be able to move at a speed that was comfortable for them.



A primary challenge was ensuring that everyone felt included and understood in a group with such diverse needs. Some participants required physical assistance, while others needed reassurance or additional explanations to feel comfortable with the process. Extra time was allocated to ensure that everyone had the opportunity to ask questions and express any concerns they might have. This sometimes led to delays but was essential to foster a sense of safety and trust.

The guide then moved onto an exploration of



their hands to touch different textures, like the rough bark of a tree or the softness of moss.

Next came hearing. Here, the guide asked everyone to close their eyes and listen to the sounds of the forest. This was a moment of stillness, but also a challenge for those with anxiety or heightened sensitivity to noise. The group was reminded that it was okay to hear sounds of civilization in the distance, and that they might coexist with the natural ones of the forest. For some participants this was a difficult concept to embrace, with a few evidently struggling to focus. Speaking to them in a soothing and encouraging manner, the guide was able to gently lead them back to the exercise.

Then the sense of touch was explored, with the participants invited to feel the textures of various natural objects. This phase required careful supervision, as some had limited mobility or were easily overwhelmed by new sensations. Different offerings were provided for those who were hesitant, such as leaves, stones, and other items that they could explore at their own pace. This

the five senses, which is a key element of the Connection Stage, guiding the group through each sense one by one. The group began with sight, encouraging participants to look closely at the details of the natural world around them: the colours, the shapes, the interplay of light and shadow. For some participants, particularly those with visual impairments, this exercise had to be adapted. They described their surroundings in vivid detail, and their assistants helped them by guiding



flexibility was critical in ensuring that everyone could participate in a way that felt comfortable to them.

Taste and smell were introduced last, with participants encouraged to notice the earthy scents of the forest and, for those who were willing, to taste edible plants like wild mint. Here too there were challenges, particularly for those who had sensory processing difficulties



or dietary restrictions. The team had anticipated such issues, ensuring that only safe, non-allergenic plants were offered, and making it clear that participation in this part was entirely optional.

Throughout the Connection Stage, the emphasis was on slowing down and truly being present in the moment. Here the group also met with difficulties. Some participants found it hard to not to be



distracted, whether by anxiety, discomfort, or unfamiliarity with the setting. Nevertheless, their team remained patient, offering gentle reminders and support to help them stay engaged. The goal was not to force a connection with nature, but to create an environment in which such a connection could naturally unfold, at each participant's own pace.

As they concluded the Connection Stage and prepared to move on to the next phase of the walk, the group leaders gathered everyone together once more, inviting participants to share any thoughts or feelings they had experienced so far. In this way they reinforced the idea that this

their eyes and extend their hands, preparing them to receive a natural object from the forest. However, they quickly encountered difficulties with those with sensory sensitivities or anxiety disorders. Some participants expressed apprehension about touching an unfamiliar object without the ability to see it, even after being reassured of its safety. The guide had to be especially patient, offering additional comfort and alternative options such as allowing these participants to keep their eyes open while still focusing on the tactile experience.

For participants with physical disabilities, such



was a shared journey, and one in which each person's experience was valued.



2. During the second stage of the forest walk, the „Meaningful Nature Connection Stage,” the forest therapy guide faced significant challenges due to the participants' varying physical and mental/intellectual disabilities. This phase, intended to deepen the participants' connection with nature through sensory exploration, required careful attention to each individual's unique needs and limitations.

The guide began by inviting participants to close

as limited mobility or impaired hand function, the simple act of holding the forest object was itself a challenge. The project team had to adapt their approach, selecting objects that were easier to handle or offering to assist the participants directly by holding the objects for them. This required a delicate balance between providing support and allowing the participants to maintain as much independence as possible.

The sensory exploration phase also presented difficulties for those with cognitive impairments. The guide found that some participants struggled to engage with the activity in the intended way, either due to difficulty understanding the

instructions or challenges in processing the sensory input. In these cases, the guide offered more explicit instructions, breaking down the activity into smaller, more manageable steps and providing verbal cues to help participants focus on each sense individually.

Despite these challenges, the guide observed moments of profound connection and engagement within the group. Some participants who had initially been hesitant began to relax and immerse themselves in the experience. The act of touching, smelling, and even tasting the forest objects allowed them to connect with nature in a way that was both personal and meaningful. However, this required the guide and the rest of the team to remain constantly attentive, ready to adjust the activity to accommodate the varying needs of the group.

The final aspect of this phase involved participants attempting to identify the objects they had explored with their eyes closed. This task proved difficult for some, particularly those with cognitive or sensory processing issues. The guide needed to be sensitive in encouraging participation without causing frustration. When

participants were ready to open their eyes, the guide facilitated a moment of reflection, helping them compare their initial impressions with the actual appearance of the object.

Ultimately, the „Meaningful Nature Connection Stage” of the walk highlighted both the potential and the challenges of engaging people with disabilities in nature-based sensory activities. The guide learned the importance of flexibility, patience, and a deep understanding of each participant’s needs. While this stage required significant adaptation and problem-solving, it also provided some of the most rewarding moments of connection between the participants and the guide ensured that, regardless of the difficulties faced, each participant had the opportunity to experience the forest in a way that was safe, supportive, and enriching.



3. Next, the “Solo Walk Stage”

allowed participants to explore the forest environment in solitude and find a space to engage with their surroundings. Once again during this stage the





forest therapy guide and team faced significant challenges in ensuring that this part of the experience was accessible and meaningful for everyone.

One of the main difficulties arose in accommodating participants with physical disabilities, particularly those using wheelchairs or with limited mobility. The uneven forest terrain, coupled with natural obstacles like roots or stones, required careful planning and adaptation. The team had to identify accessible paths and ensure that participants could safely navigate the area. They also encouraged participants to place their feet on the ground or, for those in wheelchairs, to feel the earth beneath them in any way possible. This required a delicate balance between providing support and allowing participants the freedom to connect with the forest on their own terms.

Mental/intellectual disabilities presented another set of complex challenges. Some participants, for example, would experience anxiety or discomfort when asked to engage in

solitary activities. The team members therefore had to attune themselves to each participant's emotional state, offer reassurance and modify the experience as necessary. They needed to create an environment in which participants felt safe enough to explore their surroundings independently, while also being close enough to intervene if anyone became disoriented or distressed.

The invitation to engage in individual activities, such as selecting a tree and establishing



contact through touch or visual observation, was both a highlight and a challenge. While many participants found this exercise deeply enriching, some struggled with the concept of solitary exploration. The guide had to provide clear instructions and encouragement, at times even modelling how one might engage with a tree in this context. They also had to be mindful of participants who might become overwhelmed or confused, ensuring that everyone could participate in a way that was comfortable and meaningful.

As the participants engaged in these solitary activities, the guide discreetly moved to a designated spot, ready to summon them back by imitating a cuckoo's call. This part of the process required careful timing. The guide had to gauge each participant's immersion in the experience, which often led them to extend the duration of this phase. The profound silence that often accompanied this part of the walk was a testament to the participants' deep connection with the forest, but it also posed a challenge for the guide in determining when to bring the group back together. This was a question of striking a balance between allowing enough time for personal reflection and ensuring that no participant became too isolated or lost in the experience.

While the participants were thus engaged, part of the team set up a forest table in a clearing by the pond and prepared tea and snacks. This task, though apparently uncomplicated, nevertheless required them to remain aware of

the participants' needs and potential difficulties in rejoining the group. The transition from solitary exploration back to a communal setting would need to be handled gently, especially for those who might find it challenging to shift from introspective solitude to social interaction.

Upon returning, the participants were invited to complete the sentence: „I feel...“. This simple yet powerful exercise encouraged them to articulate their emotions and experiences. For some, this was an opportunity to share profound insights, while others found it more difficult to express their feelings. The guide had to be sensitive to the varied responses, offering support and encouragement to those who struggled to find the words. This part of the walk underscored the importance of patience, empathy, and adaptability in guiding participants with disabilities through a deeply personal and therapeutic experience.





The solo walk phase, a time for participants to explore the forest independently, presented further challenges. Logistical and emotional hurdles emerged that required careful consideration and adjustment of the intended program.

areas of the forest that are typically used in solo walks, as these areas were simply too hazardous for some participants. It was also important that participants not stray too far from the group. This was resolved by setting up clear boundaries and using visual markers that were easy to recognise. For individuals with severe mobility restrictions, the team had to consider the option of guided or assisted solo walks, where a carer would remain at a distance to assist if needed.

The solo walk posed different challenges for participants with mental/intellectual disabilities. Many individuals experienced anxiety or discomfort at the prospect of being alone in the forest, even for a short time. Here, additional reassurance was offered; these participants were also monitored from a distance, so as to respect their experience of solitude while ensuring their emotional wellbeing. Participants were also



The primary challenge was ensuring the safety of participants while allowing them the freedom to experience solitude in nature. For those with mobility issues, navigating the uneven terrain of the forest was particularly difficult. It was therefore necessary to identify suitable paths that were accessible but still provided an immersive nature experience. This often meant compromising on the more secluded, wilder

provided with sensory aids, such as tactile objects or prompts, to help ground them in the experience and alleviate anxiety.

Further difficulties arose in managing the varying paces at which participants moved through the forest. Some participants, especially those with cognitive impairments, could become disoriented or lose track of time, leading them to linger in one

spot for too long, or conversely to rush through the walk without truly engaging with their surroundings. The team had to develop strategies to gently guide these participants back on track without intruding too much on their personal experience. This often involved subtle cues or quietly checking in with them, offering a word of encouragement or a reminder of the time remaining.

Communication barriers also presented a significant challenge. Participants with hearing impairments or non-verbal communication styles benefited from alternative methods of interaction, such as sign language, written instructions, or visual cues, to understand the purpose of the solo walk and to navigate it safely. It was ensured that these alternative communication methods were consistently available and that all team members were prepared to use them as needed.

Despite these obstacles, the solo walk phase was carefully managed to accommodate the diverse needs of the participants. Each participant was given the opportunity to engage with the forest in a way that was meaningful and appropriate to them, whether that meant shortening the walk, providing additional support, or offering an alternative way to experience solitude. Through



careful planning, clear communication, and a deep commitment to inclusivity, the aspiring Accessible Forest Practitioners succeeded in guiding the participants through this phase of the walk, allowing each person to connect with nature in a way that was both safe and therapeutic.

On one walk a profoundly moving experience occurred. A few participants had been invited to lie down on the grass for the very first time in their lives. This seemingly simple gesture – easing oneself down onto the soft ground – became a milestone of embodiment and connection. For those used to navigating the world from wheelchairs or who experienced difficulty walking, lying on the forest floor offered a new tactile and emotional experience. The sensation



of grass beneath their bodies, the scent of soil, and the perspective shift from upright to grounded created a moment of deep joy and awe.

During the summer forest walk, participants engaged in the spontaneous and exhilarating activity of building miniature shelters and creative structures using fallen branches and wooden sticks found along the trail. The forest floor thus became a lively workspace, where each individual, regardless of their physical or cognitive abilities, was able to contribute in their own way: some gathering materials, others carefully arranging them, and others offering ideas and encouragement. These natural constructions took various forms: tiny huts nestled between tree roots, bridges across mossy stones, or abstract installations inspired by the surrounding landscape. The atmosphere was filled with laughter, focus, and a shared sense of purpose, transforming the forest into a temporary village of the imagination. This collective act of creation not only sparked curiosity and collaboration but also fostered a deep sense of connection with nature and with one another.

As the participants emerged from the immersive forest walk, the guide led them to a serene and secluded spot within the forest to provide them with an opportunity to assimilate their experiences and to deepen their connection with the natural environment. In these tranquil surroundings they took a moment to honour and express gratitude for the forest and its inhabitants.



4. In the Closing Stage of the walk,

the forest therapy guide began by informing the participants about the importance of giving back to the forest, especially in winter – a time when animals might need extra sustenance. They further explained that this act of giving was symbolic, a gesture of appreciation and reciprocity for the time spent in the forest and the peace and healing it had provided. The guide then produced a bag filled with acorns and nuts, inviting each participant to take a handful. One by one, in a moment of silent reflection, they walked to a tree of their choice and gently placed their offering at its base. This act was performed in silence,

allowing each person to reflect on the experience and to offer their thanks in their own way. This moment of quietude and respect fostered a deep sense of connection, not only to the forest but also among the community of participants.

Afterwards the group moved towards the edge of the forest, where a sun-dappled clearing awaited them. Here, benches were arranged in a circle around a central table, creating a communal space for the next part of the walk – with the tea ceremony. The team had thoughtfully prepared

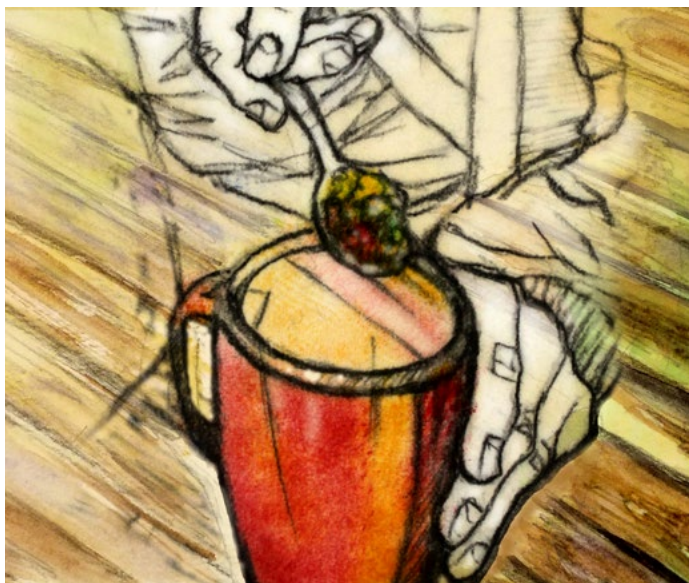


for this moment by spreading blankets on the benches to ensure the comfort of the participants. As everyone settled into their spot, they introduced the final element of the experience: a tea ceremony featuring a special herbal tea blend called „The Forest,” which had been selected for its soothing properties.

The tea ceremony began with an invitation to the participants to engage their senses by smelling the dried herbs before they were brewed. This simple act of inhaling the earthy, fragrant aroma was grounding, bringing their awareness back to the present moment and to the shared experience of the group. The team members then poured the dried tea into cups and added hot water from thermoses, allowing the tea to steep as they encouraged the group to reflect on their journey.

As the tea was brewing, the guide prompted a conversation among the participants, asking them to share their final reflections on what the walk had meant to them. This dialogue served as an essential part of the integration process, providing a space for each to articulate their

thoughts, feelings, and any insights they had gained. The guide listened attentively, fostering an atmosphere of openness and mutual respect in which each participant felt heard and valued.



The ceremony concluded with the group sipping their tea in quiet contemplation, with the warmth of the beverage and the peaceful setting facilitating this moment of deep tranquillity. The guide then reminded the participants that the Closing Stage was not just about reflecting on the walk, but also about carrying the calm and connectedness they had experienced back into their daily lives.

As this part of the walk came to a close, the guide led the participants back towards the forest's

edge, from where they would eventually depart. Before leaving, the guide offered one final moment of stillness, allowing the participants to take a last look at the forest, to feel again the connection they had formed, and to retain it as they stepped back into their everyday world. This final act of gratitude and reflection marked the end of the walk, but also the beginning of a new way of relating to nature, instilled with a sense of respect, reverence, and reciprocal care.



AGNIESZKA'S STORY: GUIDING THROUGH NATURE

Agnieszka joined the Accessible Forest Project driven by a passion for nature and a desire to create inclusive experiences for people with disabilities. She embraced the preparation stage by immersing herself in learning about accessibility and communication techniques. Yet her initial excitement was tainted by apprehension. Although thrilled with the prospect of sharing her love for the forest, Agnieszka worried about being able to meet the group's unique needs, and some of her attempts to coordinate logistics, like securing accessible trails, caused a lot of frustration.

Meeting her group for the first time, she could sense a kind of mutual curiosity. As the walk slowly unfolded, with Agnieszka guiding participants through sensory exercises, she noticed her own apprehension and wondered if she was offering enough. Ultimately however the participants' engagement reassured her. Naturally, challenges also arose, such as the need to adapt to unexpected physical limitations and maintaining focus amidst distractions.

Reflecting on the walk, Agnieszka particularly valued the shared laughter, quiet moments, and the participants' newfound connection to nature. "Adopt the pace of nature: her secret is patience," she said, quoting Ralph Waldo Emerson.



1. The “Connection Stage” of the forest walk

began in crisp early autumn. The participants, now well acquainted with the walk format, arrived visibly enthusiastic, exchanging greetings and chatting among themselves. Unlike in the initial spring walk, where their curiosity was mixed with uncertainty, the mood this time was confident and buoyant and marked by a sense of familiarity and anticipation.

The forest therapy guide, with the assistants, opened the session with a brief welcome, acknowledging the group’s growing bond with the forest and with each other. Avoiding an unnecessary full introduction to the format, she instead reminded them of the walk’s purpose: to reconnect with nature, with themselves, and with one another through a slower rhythm. The structure of the walk was mentioned briefly, but more as a reaffirmation than an explanation. The guide also emphasised the freedom to move at one’s own pace and engage in the activities in a personally meaningful way.

Since the participants had already built a sense of safety and trust during the previous walks,

the time usually devoted to orientation could now be spent on deepening the quality of their engagement. The guide acknowledged this evolution, expressing appreciation for the group’s growth and encouraging them to embrace the seasonal transition – the shift from the bright and vibrant days of summer to a darker, more subdued autumn. There was a conscious invitation to notice change, both in the forest and within themselves.

The sensory invitation began with sound. The group was invited to close their eyes and tune in to the unique soundscape of autumn: the crunch of fallen leaves underfoot, the rustling of branches, and the distant calls of migrating birds.





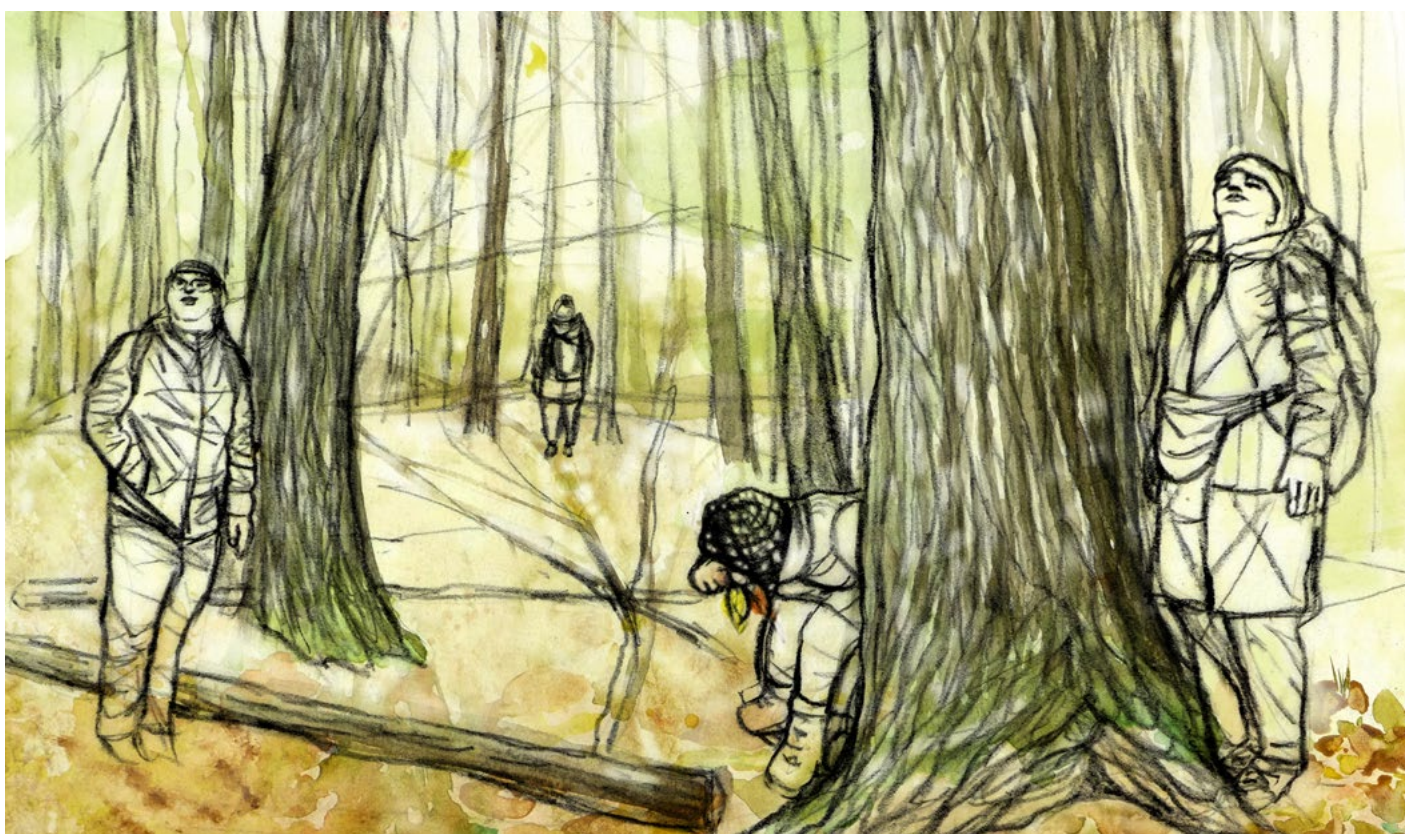
There was a sense of stillness that contrasted with the animation of springtime, and it also seemed emptier, perhaps offering a greater space for reflection. The participants settled into the silence with ease, with a readiness that hadn't been so evident in earlier walks. In hushed voices, some instinctively began to share their impressions, noting the subtle changes of tone or rhythm from previous seasons.

Next came the sense of touch. Here, participants were invited to explore textures that had changed with the season: the now papery feel of fallen leaves, the firmness of acorns underfoot, the cool, damp surfaces of stones and bark. While those who needed help reaching or bending were

supported by assistants, many participants appeared more self-directed than before. Their earlier hesitation had given way to curiosity and anticipation. One of the couples, holding hands, shared their discoveries aloud; this brought a new dimension of connectivity not only to nature but also to the group dynamic, which felt more lively and open this time.

As the group moved slowly along the forest path, the pace naturally adjusted to them. There was less need for instruction; collectively the participants slowed down, intuitively aligning with the walk's intention. A mindful breathing practice was proposed, however, several of the participants were already pausing spontaneously – touching tree trunks, observing the ground, or simply standing still to take in the filtered autumn light. Although the guide remained nearby to provide support when needed, her role became more that of a quiet companion than an active leader.

During a short rest, some participants shared dried fruit they had brought along. These personal rituals, developed over the previous walks, were now seamlessly integrated into the shared experience. The sense of agency and ownership among the group was palpable.





The guide also invited the participants to form a loose circle and share their immediate impressions. Unlike in spring, where their responses had been hesitant and few, their voices now emerged quickly and confidently. One participant noted the softness of the earth; another spoke of the comfort in seeing the trees change; someone else remarked simply, “I feel full.” There was laughter, a bit of storytelling, and a mutual appreciation that transcended the need for any formal structure.

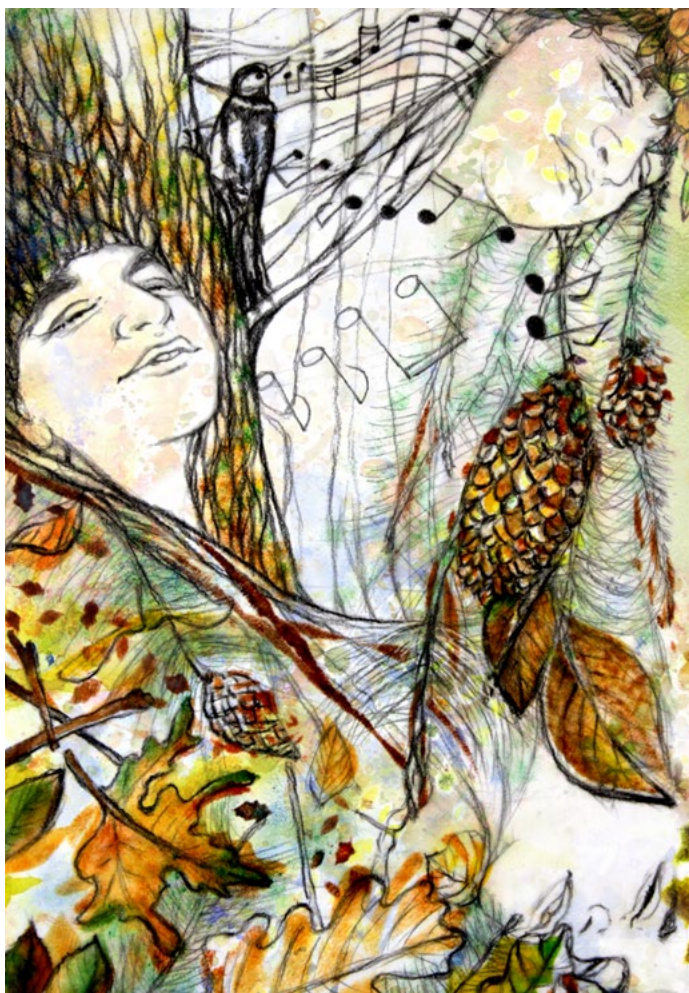
The Connection Stage closed not with any declaration, but with a natural pause. Without

needing to be asked, the participants began to walk forward together, relaxed and aligned, ready for the next phase of the journey.



2. During the second phase of the autumn forest walk, the **„Meaningful Nature Connection Stage”**, the experience took on a notably different character to that in springtime. As the walk progressed, the forest therapy guide encouraged self-directed and sensory exploration; this time it occurred without the hesitation that marked the earlier walk. The group was clearly more comfortable touching, smelling, and engaging





with the forest elements. Early on in this stage, the participants passed two wooden churches nestled among the trees – historic buildings from the 17th Century. Here the air was filled with the rich and comforting aroma of varnish, which many participants noted with delight.

Some paused to place their hands on the sun-warmed walls, inhaling deeply and sharing their impressions with others. The churches had unexpectedly become sensory anchors, connecting the participants not only to the forest, but also to the human stories of those who preceded them. Shortly after passing the churches the path curved, presenting a new challenge: a steep hill covered in damp leaves and exposed roots. Those participants using wheelchairs quite literally faced an uphill task, requiring coordinated support from peers and team members alike. Although the wheelchairs frequently slid backwards, the group responded with humour, determination, and a striking sense of solidarity. Several of the participants who were not wheelchair-bound spontaneously offered help, placing their





that the forest floor looked like “a patchwork quilt made by giants,” which prompted laughter and a wave of similar metaphors.

The final moments of this stage focused on group sharing. Some participants offered to describe their chosen discoveries: leaves like feathers; bark like cracked earth; a mushroom that smelled like damp bread. The act of voicing these observations and listening to others created a sense of shared narrative. Even those who had previously remained silent now contributed. The

hands on the backs of the chairs, while others encouraged and cheered them on. Far from being a disruption, the climb became a powerful and symbolic moment of connection – with nature, with others, and with one’s own capacities.

At the hilltop clearing, the group paused to catch their breath and engage in some quiet reflection. Here the guide initiated an open-ended activity: participants were invited to wander within a defined area, engaging with the textures, colours, and sounds they encountered there. Slowly they moved over the autumnal forest floor, and between trees with darkening bark and moss.

Some participants knelt to trace with their hands the patterns on fallen trunks; others stood still with their eyes closed listening to the whisper of wind in the canopy. Some collected colourful autumn leaves and pinecones, holding them as if they were precious. The couples in the group naturally split off, moving hand in hand and occasionally sharing impressions aloud. Their model of intimacy and trust seemed to affirm that the forest experience could be relational as well as personal.

Unlike in spring, few adaptations were necessary at this stage. Most participants remembered earlier practices and were confidently engaged. For those with cognitive disabilities, the guide offered prompts – questions like “What shape do you see in that branch?” or “Can you find something round and rough?” These questions were met with thoughtful engagement that often led to remarkable creative or poetic expression. One participant remarked



team members observed a marked increase in confidence, attentiveness, and the ability to remain present in the moment.

One of the most touching moments in this phase occurred as the group gathered around a simple bird feeder that had been installed along the forest path. Above it hung a small wooden sign with the inscription “Owl-Bar” – this immediately sparked joy and laughter. The playful name gave the place a sense of character and familiarity, as if one was encountering a woodland café for birds.



As small birds flitted in and out, feeding and interacting, the group observed in hushed enchantment. For many, it was a rare opportunity to watch wildlife up close. The scene unfolded as if a living theatre, with the birds appearing as graceful actors in a rhythmic performance. The feeder served as a point of visual and emotional focus as well as an invitation to be present, slow down, and fully experience the moment.

This second stage of the autumn walk demonstrated the depth of nature connection that is possible when trust, familiarity, and group cohesion have been nurtured over time. The sensory experiences were richer, the interactions more spontaneous, and the sense of belonging to the forest – rather than merely visiting it – was palpable. The uphill struggle, the scent of the churches, the close-up encounter with the birds, and autumn’s rich tapestry were all instrumental in making this phase not only meaningful, but also transformative.



3. The “Solo Walk Stage” offered participants the opportunity to deepen their personal relationship with the forest through quiet, reflective solitude. Largely due to the participants’ growing familiarity with the practice, this phase unfolded with relative ease. Having already experienced two prior walks – in spring and summer – the group could approach the next step with a sense of anticipation and comfort. They knew the structure, trusted the process, and eagerly dispersed into the forest to find their own space.

This sense of safety and predictability allowed the participants to engage more freely. The team noticed significantly less anxiety and hesitation, especially among individuals who had previously required additional support. There was a notable increase in autonomy: participants chose their spots confidently, some returning to favourite trees from past walks, others exploring new corners of the forest.





The physical terrain, while still challenging in some areas, was navigated with greater awareness and coordination.

Informed by their shared memory of previous adaptations and mutual understanding, the participants took the initiative to support each other, sometimes without saying anything.

Another remarkable development was the change in group dynamics. The presence of two couples among the participants introduced a sense of liveliness and mutual care, characterised by playful gestures and warm encouragement. In preparing for the Solo Walk, the whole atmosphere felt markedly more relaxed; and, even when the participants went off into their own spaces, the sense of community remained. They parted warmly, then reconvened with visible connection. This suggests that the emotional undercurrent of the group also enriched their individual experiences.





This solo time, typically characterised by stillness and quiet, was on this occasion marked by an unexpected change in weather. Shortly after the group dispersed into their chosen spaces, it began to drizzle. Though initially a source of concern for the team, the advent of rain proved to be serendipitous.

Even as it intensified into steady rainfall, participants did not retreat or express discomfort. Instead, they embraced the moment with striking openness. For many, the experience of being in the forest while rain was falling, and not being uninterrupted or rushed to shelter, was entirely new. The rhythmic sound of raindrops on leaves, the shifting light, and the feeling of water on their skin created a rich multisensory experience.

Some lay down with their eyes closed, absorbing the sounds and sensations; others extended their hands to catch the rain or leaned against trees to feel the texture of wet bark. The rain appeared to dissolve the boundaries between forest and human presence, creating a more embodied connection. The team watched on

quietly. Sensing that the group was experiencing something profound, they extended the duration of the stage accordingly.

Eventually, while maintaining their discreet distance, the forest therapy guide prepared to call the group back using the familiar cuckoo's call. The decision to end the solo phase was more difficult this time. Many participants were so absorbed in the moment that they seemed unaware of the passing time. Certainly, the rain added a timeless quality to the experience, as it created a kind of natural cocoon that the participants were reluctant to leave. The call therefore had to be repeated gently, at increased intervals, to avoid abrupt disruption.

In the background, some of the team had prepared a sheltered forest table with warm tea and snacks, to which the participants gradually returned. Though they were wet, the atmosphere was of serene contentment, laughter, shared glances, and camaraderie. This transition from introspective solitude to group interaction was apparently facilitated by the shared encounter with the rain.

Once again, participants were invited to complete the sentence: „I feel...“. This time their responses flowed more readily. Words like “alive,” “cleansed,” and “free” emerged. Instead of being a barrier, the rain had become a catalyst for deeper emotional expression. Even those who had previously struggled to articulate their feelings managed to share some simple but meaningful reflections. The guide remained attentive, allowing the participants to interpret their experience as needed, be it through silence or expressiveness.

This phase of the walk also emphasised the group’s growing resilience and receptivity. Their ability to adapt, to find joy in an unexpected element, and to engage meaningfully with nature despite external changes was a testament to their evolving relationship with the forest. The solo walk in autumn was not only a continuation of a familiar practice – it was a transformation of it. The participants, now attuned to both the forest and themselves, were able to affirm that nature,

in all its unpredictability, could still offer refuge, wonder, and deep connection.



4. The Closing Stage of the walk

began with the forest therapy guide gathering the group in a gently sloped forest clearing carpeted with amber and copper leaves. By this stage, the sense of ease and familiarity that had developed between participants was especially evident in their laughter, eye-contact, and general warmth. The guide acknowledged this change, inviting everyone to reflect on how their journey through the seasons had shaped not only their connection with nature, but also their relationships within each other. To mark the walk’s end, a symbolic act of continuity was proposed. Instead of placing offerings at the base of a tree, as they had in previous seasons, each participant was invited to select a fallen leaf that ‘spoke’ to them.

They were then encouraged to write or draw a message of gratitude on it – either in words or





symbols – using the natural ink and charcoal pencils provided. Afterwards these leaves were placed into a shallow stream nearby. As the leaves floated away, carrying the personal reflections with them, a sense of quiet release settled over the group. This gesture, at once personal and collective, also rooted their experience in the transience of the season.

As the forest walk drew to a close, the group entered a quiet clearing where a surprising sight awaited them. Although the participants were aware that a tea ceremony was part of the experience, they had not witnessed any signs of its preparation. Now the occasion revealed itself: on the trunk of a fallen tree, a series of tea cups had been placed in a line, as if arranged by unseen hands. No one could be seen tending to them, and there were no signs of brewing or bustling movement, only the steam unfurling from the cups. The suddenness of the discovery, paired with the meticulous setup, created a sense of awe.

The rain cast a silvery veil over the scene. Its droplets fell into the warm herbal tea, creating soft ripples and rhythmic plinks.

The contrast between the rainy weather and

the ritualised arrangement, and the unexpected comfort of home in the open wilderness, gave the moment a cinematic feel. Participants often refer back to this memory with vivid appreciation. It became a symbol of how nature's caprices, when met with openness and attention, can in fact deepen sensory connection and emotional resonance.

As the tea steeped, the guide invited the participants to share some final reflections, to which they offered stories, insights, and even jokes. One person described how the forest had become a place where they felt “not different, just present.” Another reflected on how the sound of the rain reminded them that things do not have to go according to plan to be meaningful. The couples spoke about how walking in nature had given them new ways of being together – slower and more attuned. The guide facilitated the conversation with a light touch, allowing the group's natural flow to lead.

The participants savoured the tea, slowly warming their bodies in the cool, damp air. As the ceremony drew to a close, the guide offered a final invitation: to take the calm, the connection, and the adaptability they had experienced

and carry it into the approaching winter. They emphasised that the walk was not an isolated event but part of cycles – natural and personal – that continue to unfold.

Before leaving, the group stood quietly observing the golden canopy above and the raindrops

falling from between the leaves. There were no formal goodbyes, just slow steps toward the edge of the forest, where the world of routine awaited them once more. The Closing Stage of the autumn walk left the group with a shared sense of rhythm – with the forest, the weather, and themselves.



When working with individuals who have mental and/or physical disabilities, challenges such as communication barriers, accessibility issues, and social stigmas often arise. These challenges can hinder effective interaction and create difficulties in everyday situations. However, understanding these challenges and implementing solutions can foster better communication and inclusivity.

Communication barriers are among the most common challenges. Difficulty in expression is a significant issue, as some individuals may struggle to articulate their thoughts and needs clearly. This can lead to misunderstandings and frustration on both sides. To address this, it is crucial to practice patience and active listening. Utilising alternative communication methods, such as visual aids or communication boards, can also increase clarity.

Non-verbal communication, especially for those who rely heavily on gestures, facial expressions, or other non-verbal cues, can also present difficulties. When the observer is unfamiliar with these cues, misinterpretation often occurs. Appropriate training and education on how to interpret non-verbal signals specific to the individual's needs can help in this regard.

Language and cognitive barriers present another element of complexity. Individuals with cognitive disabilities may find it difficult to comprehend complex instructions or information. Simplifying communication by, for example, using plain language, breaking down information into smaller steps, and providing repetition when necessary can significantly improve understanding. Ensuring that written communication is clear and accessible is also vital.



As a general rule, Accessible Forest Practitioners should foster an environment where participants feel comfortable expressing their needs and preferences, so that everyone's voice is heard and respected.

Accessibility issues can also pose significant challenges for individuals with mental and/or physical disabilities, and hinder their full participation in various aspects of life. Barriers to accessibility can manifest in natural and built environments, technology and transportation, among other realms. Addressing these challenges necessitates a multifaceted approach that focuses on inclusivity and universal design.

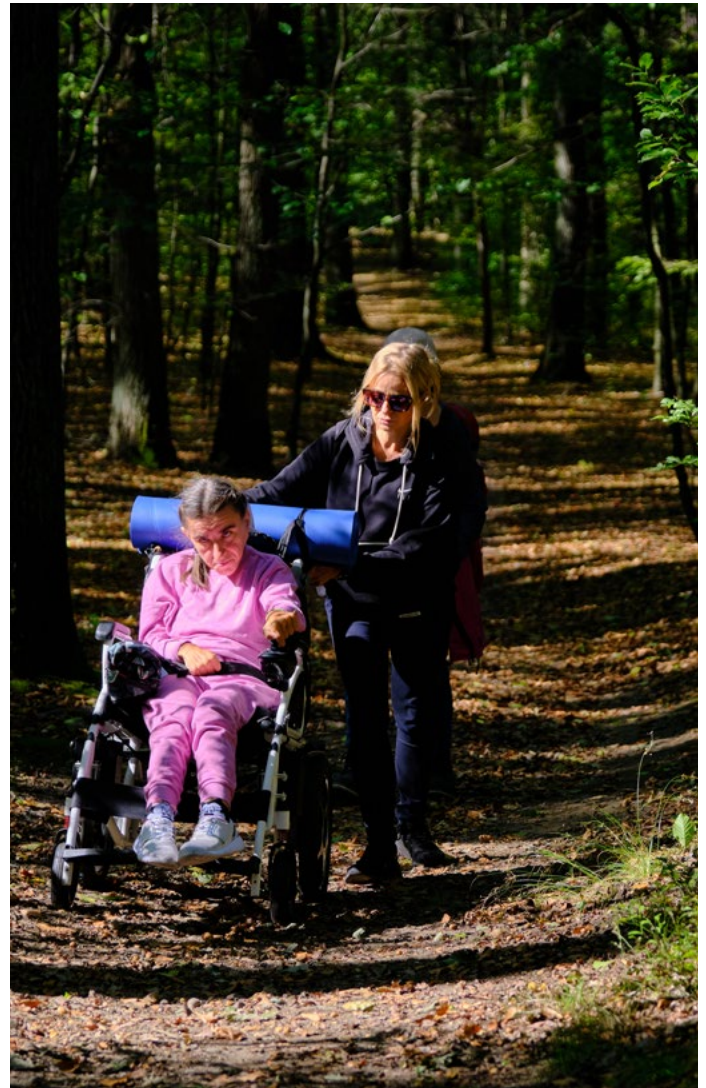
For forest walk practitioners, the first challenge comes in ensuring that the chosen trail is accessible for those using mobility aids such as wheelchairs. Selecting trails that are flat, wide, and have a stable surface is crucial. Trails should also have rest areas with benches, and accessible facilities like restrooms. Pre-walk site assessments can help identify potential obstacles and ensure that the environment is accommodating.

In consideration of those with sensory processing issues, Accessible Forest Practitioners should also be able to anticipate the sensory environment, and avoid routes with overwhelming stimuli.

To address transportation challenges, AF Practitioners should arrange accessible transportation options, such as wheelchair-accessible vans or buses. Providing transportation assistance can ensure that all participants have the opportunity to join the walk, regardless of their level of mobility.

In organising forest walks for individuals with mental and/or physical disabilities, one of the primary challenges is a **lack of awareness and understanding** among those who do not have direct experience with disabilities. This can lead to unintentional exclusion or inappropriate behaviour from peers or coworkers. Accessible Forest Practitioners should therefore prioritise education and awareness programs that inform all team members about the diverse needs and

experiences of individuals with disabilities. These programs can include sensitivity training, workshops, and open discussions aimed at fostering empathy and understanding.



There may also be challenges around ensuring that caregivers and assistants are adequately trained to support participants with disabilities. Insufficient training can result in inadequate care, potentially putting participants at risk or diminishing their experience. To counter this, Accessible Forest Practitioners should provide specialised training for all staff and volunteers involved in the walks. This training should cover not only the practical aspects of assisting individuals with disabilities but also emphasise the importance of communication, patience, and adaptability.

One major issue is the limited access to resources. Individuals with disabilities often require specialised equipment or medical care, which may not always be readily available.

To overcome this, AF Practitioners should establish partnerships with local healthcare providers, charities, and equipment suppliers. These partnerships can facilitate access to necessary resources, such as mobility aids or medical assistance during the walks. AF Practitioners could also seek funding or sponsorships to cover the costs of these essential resources for inclusivity.

The question of emotional support for participants, or lack thereof, must also be addressed. For instance, setting up pre-walk meetings or group sessions might foster a sense of community among participants and allow them to share their concerns and experiences in a supportive environment.

exclusion from public spaces, or a lack of necessary accommodations during activities like forest walks. Accessible Forest Practitioners must therefore be proactive in understanding local laws and advocating for stronger protections where necessary. Collaborating with disability rights organisations should be considered to more effectively lobby for better legal frameworks ensuring that all individuals can participate in outdoor activities without fear of discrimination or exclusion.

Other issues may arise around the complexity of bureaucratic processes. Systems that are intended to support individuals with disabilities – such as for obtaining permits for group activities or securing funding for



It must be recognised that our efforts to organise forest walks for individuals with mental and/or physical disabilities might sometimes be hindered by various legal and policy barriers, and these will have to be navigated to ensure the success and inclusivity of these activities.

One such concern is inadequate legal protection. In many regions, the laws designed to protect the rights of people with disabilities are either weak or inadequately enforced. The absence of robust legal frameworks can result in discrimination,

necessary accommodations – are often mired in red tape. These bureaucratic processes can be overwhelming for Accessible Forest Practitioners, and lead to delays or even the cancellation of planned events. Simplifying where possible or seeking assistance from professionals who specialise in navigating these systems can significantly ease the burden on AF Practitioners. In addition, advocating for policy changes that streamline these processes is essential. Governments and local authorities should be encouraged to create more user-friendly systems

that facilitate rather than hinder the organisation of inclusive activities.

Moreover, **legal requirements** related to liability and safety must also be taken into account. Practitioners must navigate insurance policies, waiver forms, and compliance with health and safety regulations, all of which can be more complicated when working with individuals who have disabilities. AF Practitioners are therefore advised to seek legal counsel to ensure that all necessary legal precautions are taken. Working closely with local authorities to understand and meet safety regulations will also help to avoid legal pitfalls.

Another possible solution to these legal and policy barriers is to form partnerships with organisations that have experience in advocating for disability rights. These organisations often have the expertise needed to navigate legal complexities and can potentially provide valuable support in ensuring that forest walks are both legally compliant and inclusive. Creating a network of volunteers and professionals who are knowledgeable about disability issues will further help in overcoming these barriers.

Finally, continuous education and awareness-raising about the rights of individuals with disabilities are crucial. By educating policymakers, local authorities, and the general public about the importance of inclusive outdoor activities, AF Practitioners can be part of communal efforts to foster a more supportive legal and policy environment. This in turn might lead to long-term changes that benefit not only forest walks but also other community activities aimed at promoting inclusivity.

In organising forest walks for individuals with mental and/or physical disabilities, it is crucial to understand and address the mental health impact associated with the experience of disabilities, such as increased stress, anxiety, and the risk of social exclusion.

Forest walks can offer numerous mental health benefits, including stress reduction, improved mood, and enhanced cognitive function. However, the stress and anxiety experienced

by individuals with disabilities may be amplified by the uncertainty of navigating natural environments. To mitigate this, practitioners should do their best to create a calming and supportive atmosphere. This might include offering detailed information about the walk beforehand, and allowing participants to



familiarise themselves with the route, terrain, and any potential obstacles. Incorporating mindfulness exercises or guided meditation sessions during the walk might also help to reduce participants' anxiety.

The issue of social exclusion is critical and must be addressed from the outset. Because of societal barriers and a broader lack of understanding, people with disabilities often face isolation. AF Practitioners should therefore retain a focus on inclusivity in their practice, as well as emphasising the importance of community and shared experience to those they lead.

Encouraging group activities that require collaboration, such as team-based nature scavenger hunts or group discussions on the surrounding environment, can promote a sense of belonging. Bringing in volunteers or support staff who are trained in disability awareness will also help ensure that each participant feels welcomed and supported at all times.

In addition to these measures, it should be recognised that mental health issues like depression can be exacerbated by feelings of isolation and a lack of engagement with nature. Forest walks provide an opportunity to counteract these feelings by facilitating meaningful connections with the natural world. Accessible Forest Practitioners can enhance this experience by incorporating sensory activities, such as listening to the sounds of the forest, feeling the textures of leaves and bark, or even engaging in light physical activities like stretching or gentle yoga.

Crucially, this mental health support can be continued even after the walk is over. AF Practitioners should consider partnering with mental health professionals who can offer post-walk debriefings or follow-up sessions. This will ensure that participants have access to the support they may need to process their experiences and continue benefiting from the positive effects of nature. By creating a supportive environment, fostering inclusivity, and facilitating meaningful connections with nature, AF Practitioners might help mitigate the ongoing challenges of stress, anxiety, and social exclusion experienced by participants, and continue to support their wellbeing as a whole.

In organising forest walks for individuals with mental and/or physical disabilities, AF Practitioners must address the inherent tension between their dependency and their autonomy. Striking a balance between them is crucial for fostering an environment in which participants feel at once safe and supported, and confident and empowered.

The issue of over-dependence often arises during such activities. Participants may be accustomed to relying heavily on caregivers,

reducing their sense of autonomy. This can then limit their ability to engage with nature on their terms and diminish their confidence in navigating the environment independently. The



walk should therefore be designed in a way that encourages self-reliance. For example, providing clear instructions and simple navigational tools, like marked paths or easy-to-use maps, can help participants feel more in control of their experience. Or offering adaptive equipment, such as specialised walking aids, to those with physical disabilities will help them to traverse the terrain more independently.

Offering support while fostering independence can be difficult. Accessible Forest Practitioners should strive to provide the necessary assistance without overshadowing the participants' ability to make decisions and take actions independently. One approach is to offer graduated levels of support, where participants can choose the level of assistance they need and decide how much to challenge themselves within a safe and supportive framework. Involving participants in the planning process, such as working with them to select routes or set goals for the walk, can help to build a sense of ownership and responsibility, and ultimately result in a more autonomous experience.

It is vital that volunteers and caregivers are trained to recognise and respect the autonomy of participants. They should be ready to step in but only when necessary, encouraging participants to try tasks independently first. This approach not only helps to build the participants' confidence but also shifts the focus from what they can't do to what they can.

By prioritising autonomy while providing support, AF Practitioners can create an enriching experience that empowers participants to engage with nature independently, fostering their personal growth and a deeper connection to the environment.

Understanding the specific cultural norms and beliefs related to disabilities within the community can help tailor an approach that is sensitive and inclusive. It is also crucial to engage with community leaders or cultural mediators who can bridge the gap between the AF Practitioners and participants, facilitating better communication and trust.

Social acceptance plays a significant role in the success of these activities. In cultures where disability is not well understood or accepted, people with disabilities often suffer from exclusion. Forest walks should therefore be designed to promote social inclusion, actively



Accessible Forest Practitioners must also take into consideration the cultural and social norms in the communities in which they work. Because cultural misconceptions about disabilities often lead to misunderstandings, it is essential to foster an inclusive environment that respects diverse perspectives. A lack of understanding may arise from deeply rooted cultural beliefs that perceive disabilities as a sign of weakness or as something to be hidden. These beliefs can create additional barriers to participation. For instance, some individuals with disabilities might feel discouraged or ashamed to join in on activities.

To address these challenges, AF Practitioners should first educate themselves on the participants' cultural backgrounds.

fostering interactions between participants with and without disabilities. This can be achieved by encouraging group activities that require cooperation, thus breaking down social barriers and promoting mutual understanding.

Finally, Accessible Forest Practitioners should be ready to challenge cultural misconceptions by providing positive representations of disability during the walks. This could involve inviting role models from the community who have disabilities and have thrived regardless, which might help to inspire participants and change perceptions. Creating a safe space where all participants feel valued and respected is paramount.



CHECK POINTS:

- Can you identify the specific adaptations needed for each phase of a forest walk when working with people with multiple disabilities?
- Do you understand how to achieve a balance between providing support and fostering independence for participants?
- Are you familiar with the specific communication strategies that can overcome barriers with participants who have mental/intellectual disabilities?
- Have you considered the preparation needed both environmentally and personally to facilitate such experiences?



CRITICAL QUESTIONS:

1. How might you adapt the universal sequence of forest walks to address specific physical and mental/intellectual disability needs in your context?
2. What specific preparation would you need to undertake before offering forest walks to individuals with multiple disabilities?
3. How can you create an experience that honours participants' autonomy while ensuring their safety and comfort?



QUICK REFERENCE CARDS:



CARD 1: PARTICIPANT CONSIDERATIONS

MULTIPLE DISABILITY CONTEXT:

- Combined physical and mental/intellectual disabilities requiring comprehensive support
- Wheelchair users alongside those with mobility limitations
- Communication challenges including slurred speech and limited vocabulary
- Restricted comprehension requiring simple, concise instructions
- Limited writing abilities

PREPARATION NEEDS:

- Specialised team including guides, assistants, group experts
- Careful evaluation of participant capabilities

- Multi-layered support planning
- Location selection based on accessibility
- Tailored communication approaches

KEY SUPPORT COMPONENTS:

- Physical assistance for mobility challenges
- Cognitive support for understanding activities
- Communication adaptations for varied expression abilities
- Emotional support for anxiety or overwhelm
- Safety monitoring throughout experience

LOCATION FACTORS:

- Wide forest road with soft surface
- Accessible clearing with picnic facilities
- Available parking and toilet facilities
- Gentle terrain manageable with assistance



CARD 2: ADAPTING THE UNIVERSAL SEQUENCE

CONNECTION STAGE ADAPTATIONS:

- Extended welcome and clear, simple introduction
- Extra time for questions and orientation
- Simplified sensory exercises with

individualised guidance

- Physical assistance for sensory exploration
- Flexibility when participants struggle with focus
- Patience with varied response times and abilities

MEANINGFUL CONNECTION ADAPTATIONS:

- Modified invitation delivery (simpler language, demonstrations)
- Alternatives for those with sensory sensitivities
- Physical support for object handling
- Breaking activities into smaller, manageable steps
- Verbal cues to help maintain focus
- Acceptance of varied engagement levels

SOLO WALK ADAPTATIONS:

- Clearly defined, accessible paths
- Shorter distances with visual markers

**CARD 3: PRACTICAL CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS****COMMUNICATION BARRIERS:**

- Challenge: Limited verbal expression, restricted vocabulary
- Solutions:
 - Visual aids and communication boards
 - Simple language with clear instructions
 - Breaking information into smaller steps
 - Patience and active listening
 - Training in non-verbal cue interpretation

ACCESSIBILITY ISSUES:

- Challenge: Uneven terrain, limited mobility, transport difficulties
- Solutions:
 - Pre-walk site assessment
 - Selecting flat, wide trails with stable surfaces
 - Including rest areas with accessible facilities
 - Arranging appropriate transportation
 - Providing specialised equipment

**CARD 4: GUIDE PERSPECTIVE & INSIGHTS****PREPARATION PROCESS:**

- Learning about accessibility and communication techniques
- Securing appropriate trails and locations
- Coordinating specialised support team
- Addressing personal concerns and uncertainties
- Mental preparation for flexibility and patience

EMOTIONAL JOURNEY:

- Initial apprehension about meeting unique needs
- Uncertainty about offering sufficient experience
- Reassurance through participant engagement
- Adaptation to unexpected limitations
- Satisfaction in witnessing connections form

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM AGNIESZKA'S EXPERIENCE:

- „Adopt the pace of nature: her secret is

- Monitoring from appropriate distance
- Sensory aids to reduce anxiety
- Alternative solo experiences for those unable to navigate independently
- Clear return signals (cuckoo call imitation)

CLOSING STAGE ADAPTATIONS:

- Simplified reciprocity activities (placing acorns/ nuts for animals)
- Accessible seating with thermal blankets
- Multi-sensory tea ceremony
- Simple reflection prompts
- Patience with varied communication abilities

SUPPORT BALANCE:

- Challenge: Finding equilibrium between dependency and autonomy
- Solutions:
 - Graduated levels of assistance
 - Clear instructions with simple navigation tools
 - Involving participants in planning when possible
 - Respecting individual decision-making
 - Training volunteers to recognise when to help

EMOTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS:

- Challenge: Anxiety, stress, and social isolation
- Solutions:
 - Creating calming, supportive atmosphere
 - Providing advance information
 - Incorporating mindfulness exercises
 - Designing inclusive group activities
 - Offering post-walk support

patience” (Emerson)

- Value in shared laughter and quiet moments
- Importance of focusing on connection rather than perfection
- Recognition of small victories and transformations
- Reward of facilitating newfound connections to nature

EMOTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS:

- Patient, flexible approach prioritising experience over agenda
- Willingness to adapt in the moment
- Focus on abilities rather than limitations
- Recognition of universal human need for nature connection
- Commitment to creating safe, supportive environment



SECTION 4. BENEFITS FOR THE GROUP

INTRO

What You Will Learn in this Section:

1. Theoretical insights: Understanding the specific mental, physical, and holistic benefits of forest walks for individuals with disabilities, supported by both research and direct observations
2. Practical applications: Recognising how nature immersion can address unique challenges faced by people with disabilities and create transformative experiences beyond conventional therapeutic approaches

Reflective Consideration: Take a moment to reflect on your objectives at this stage of your work. Are you focused on understanding the therapeutic potential of forest environments, exploring how nature can transcend conventional barriers for those with disabilities, or both?

Key Competences: This section will cover the following relevant competencies:

- Recognising nature's therapeutic impact on mental and emotional wellbeing for those with disabilities
- Understanding how forest environments can enhance physical experiences despite mobility limitations
- Identifying the synergistic benefits of addressing both mental and physical disabilities in nature
- Creating experiences that honour the whole person beyond their disability labels

Time Allocation: Dedicate approximately one hour to fully engage with the material and activities presented.

In Chapter One, we explored the overarching benefits of nature immersion for all individuals, laying the groundwork for understanding the profound and universal impact of connecting with the natural world. Building on this foundation, we now turn our attention to a more focused discussion: the specific benefits that forest bathing can bring to people with mental and physical disabilities. This draws not only on established research, but also on the direct experiences and observations gathered from the Accessible Forest project walks.

For **individuals with mental health challenges**, forest walks have emerged as a uniquely effective practice for fostering emotional resilience, reducing stress, and cultivating a sense of inner calm. The multisensory environment of the forest – its sounds, textures, and scents, the shifting light – engages participants in ways that overcome verbal or cognitive barriers. The experience of immersion also promotes sensory and intellectual awareness, by providing a restorative break from the pressures of daily life and allowing participants to reconnect with a sense of presence and self.

One participant, a young man who often struggled to find words, shared his feelings while on a walk. He said: "I feel... soft here. Like... nothing heavy. Trees... they don't ask me to be fast. I like trees." Touching the bark of an old oak his eyes lit up, and though he said little else, his body communicated the rest. He was visibly calmed, shoulders relaxed and breathing steady.

Another participant, a woman with moderate cognitive challenges, found joy in imitating the sound of birds. She laughed as she mimicked the calls she had heard. "Birds talk funny," she said. "I am a bird." She remained cheerful well after the session ended.

Participants often find the rhythmic sounds of the forest, like those produced by rustling leaves or flowing streams, help them to forget if only briefly the constant attention their bodies require in other environments. One walker remarked, “Here, I feel less... less broken. The forest doesn’t notice my limp.”

For some with mental/intellectual disabilities, the forest seems to speak in ways the outside world cannot, to welcome their pace and way of being. One guide observed how participants who are often hesitant in social settings began interacting more with one another after spending time among the trees. Human connections were formed more easily, and verbal communication, though simple, was less inhibited and strained.

Similarly, for **individuals with physical disabilities**, the act of being in nature offers not only physiological benefits but also an increased sense of agency and inclusion. When made accessible, the forest can become a space in which other barriers break down. Participants often report an enhanced connection to their bodies and experience subtle shifts in their perception of physical effort and ability. Be it through the rhythmic breathing of fresh air, or tactile engagement with natural textures, these experiences can open pathways for physical relaxation and empowerment.

One participant, a man who uses a wheelchair, expressed his thoughts thus: “It’s... good here. My chair... it moves, yes, but I don’t feel... stuck. The trees? They’re tall. I look up. Not down all the time.”

A young woman recovering from a spinal injury marvelled at the textures of moss. She ran her hands over its surface, saying, “Soft. Green soft. I like this better than my room’s walls.” Though her voice was small, her tender, deliberate gestures demonstrated the scale of the meaning this experience of touch had for her.

The Accessible Forest walks revealed a transformation in how participants engaged with themselves, each other, and their surroundings. The forest was no mere setting; rather, it was an active partner in the process of healing and connection. Individuals found moments of joy, discovery, and even deep contemplation, which in turn cultivated a sense of community.

For individuals with **both mental and physical disabilities**, the forest can become a holistic sanctuary. The interplay between its mental and physical benefits creates a synergy wherein improvements in one area support growth in another. A reduction in mental stress often leads to decreased physical tension, while movement in nature can enhance mood and promote a sense of achievement. Furthermore, the multi-sensory engagement of forest walks activates both body and mind, nurturing the whole person. The forest thus emerges as a transformative space where personal limitations give way to possibility and presence.

For those living with both mental and physical disabilities, forest walking can offer relief and connection. One middle-aged participant with cerebral palsy and a learning disability explained, in a halting but earnest voice, “I don’t feel small here. Not like... buildings make me feel. Forest is big, but not scary big.”

Another individual, a teenager with Down syndrome and limited mobility, found joy in simple rituals such as collecting leaves as splashing water. She said, “Leaves fall... like me when I’m tired. But they are happy leaves.” Her mother, watching from a distance, remarked how rare it was to see her daughter so animated.

In the forest, the interplay of sensory input – soft sounds, textured surfaces, fresh air – seems to allow participants to step beyond the limitations they face in other settings. One participant put it like this: “Forest doesn’t look at my legs or my words. I want to live in the forest!”

The intersection of theory and practice plays a pivotal role in creating inclusive forest walks for individuals with disabilities. While exploring the material, some readers may have encountered concepts or approaches they found challenging or even problematic. These concerns are valuable, as they invite deeper critical thinking and encourage practitioners to adapt methodologies to fit their own values and experiences. Whether these concerns relate to a specific strategy or an overarching principle, your engagement helps to contribute to an ongoing dialogue about the accessibility of nature walks. It is equally important to recognise moments of surprise or familiarity, as these are indicators of where your expertise aligns with or diverges from the concepts presented, and a good foundation for further growth.

In terms of competencies, we hope that the insights gained into the role of an Accessible Forest Practitioner have been transformative. Perhaps you learned new strategies to address barriers, or came to better understand the profound benefits of nature immersion for individuals with disabilities. In any case, the material likely enriched your knowledge and skills, and may even be a catalyst to pursue the

role of an AF Practitioner or to incorporate similar practices into your current work.

Regarding the achievement of aims, this chapter invited you to reflect on your personal goals and assess your satisfaction with your progress. Using the provided scale, where do you currently stand? For those who feel fully satisfied, this chapter perhaps reinforced their confidence and clarity around the practice. For those who encountered unanswered questions or areas for further exploration, this is a reminder that learning is a continuous process. Perhaps you are curious about diving deeper into specific techniques, research, or participant experiences that were touched upon but not fully unpacked here.

As you conclude this chapter, please take a moment to acknowledge the knowledge, empathy, and tools you have gained. Whether you feel fully prepared to apply these insights in practice or are still processing and formulating your approach, you are now better equipped to make nature immersion experiences more inclusive and impactful for individuals with disabilities. Let this be a step forward in your journey to foster connection, accessibility, and mutual understanding through nature.







CHECK POINTS:

- Can you identify the specific benefits forest bathing offers for people with mental/intellectual disabilities?
- Do you understand how natural environments impact those with physical limitations?
- Are you familiar with the synergistic effects when addressing both mental and physical disabilities in nature?
- Have you considered how participant testimonials reflect deeper transformations beyond conventional therapeutic outcomes?



CRITICAL QUESTIONS:

1. How might forest walks complement other therapeutic approaches for individuals with disabilities?
2. In what ways does the forest environment uniquely address barriers that people with disabilities face in conventional settings?
3. How can the transformative experiences described by participants inform your approach to inclusive forest practices?



QUICK REFERENCE CARDS:



CARD 1: MENTAL/INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE:

- Reduction in anxiety and stress levels
- Enhancement of emotional regulation
- Development of adaptive coping mechanisms
- Creation of a safe space for emotional expression

SENSORY ENGAGEMENT:

- Multi-sensory environment transcending verbal barriers
- Natural stimuli providing appropriate sensory input
- Rhythm of forest sounds creating calming effects
- Textural diversity offering enriched sensory exploration

SOCIAL CONNECTION:

- Increased social interaction in natural settings
- Reduced social pressure compared to conventional environments
- Formation of connections through shared experiences
- Enhanced communication despite verbal limitations

PARTICIPANT VOICES:

- „I feel... soft here. Like... nothing heavy.”
- „Trees... they don't ask me to be fast.”
- „Birds talk funny. I am a bird.”
- „The forest doesn't notice my limp.”





CARD 2: PHYSICAL DISABILITY BENEFITS

EMBODIED FREEDOM:

- Renewed sense of inclusion and agency
- Enhanced connection to bodily sensations
- Reduced focus on limitations
- Gentle movement opportunities without pressure

PERCEPTUAL SHIFTS:

- Changed relationship with physical effort
- Expanded focus beyond mobility challenges
- Vertical perspective (looking up at trees) rather than down
- Sensory exploration independent of mobility level

KEY INSIGHT: „For individuals with physical disabilities, the act of being in nature offers not only physiological benefits but also an increased sense of agency and inclusion.”

EMPOWERMENT ELEMENTS:

- Decision-making about personal exploration
- Self-directed pace and engagement
- Activities accessible despite mobility limitations
- Validation of physical existence beyond disability

PARTICIPANT VOICES:

- „My chair... it moves, yes, but I don't feel... stuck.”
- „The trees? They're tall. I look up. Not down all the time.”
- „Soft. Green soft. I like this better than my room's walls.”



CARD 3: HOLISTIC BENEFITS

MIND-BODY SYNERGY:

- Reduction in mental stress leading to decreased physical tension
- Physical movement enhancing mood and cognitive clarity
- Multi-sensory engagement activating integrated responses
- Whole-person nourishment beyond compartmentalised approaches

TRANSFORMATIVE SPACE:

- Dissolution of conventional limitations
- Shift from disability-focused identity to human experience
- Expansion of potential and possibility
- Connection to something larger than self

COMMUNITY BUILDING:

- Shared experiences fostering connection
- Communal discoveries building relationships
- Safe space for authentic expression
- Validation through collective experience

PARTICIPANT VOICES:

- „I don't feel small here. Not like... buildings make me feel.”
- „Forest is big, but not scary big.”
- „Leaves fall... like me when I'm tired. But they are happy leaves.”
- „Forest doesn't look at my legs or my words. I want to live in the forest!”



CARD 4: NATURE AS THERAPEUTIC PARTNER

BEYOND SETTING:

- Forest as active participant in healing process
- Natural environments as co-facilitators
- Ecological elements providing therapeutic metaphors
- Nature offering undemanding relationship with participants

UNIQUE QUALITIES:

- Non-judgemental acceptance of diverse abilities
- Appropriate pacing without external pressure
- Multi-layered engagement opportunities
- Absence of conventional social expectations

TRANSFORMATIVE ELEMENTS:

- Spontaneously emergence of discovery and joy
- Moments of deep contemplation
- Shifting from object of care to active experienter
- Transcendence of disability narratives

COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGES:

- Less clinical than conventional therapeutic settings
- Fewer social barriers than human-centred environments
- Rich sensory input without overwhelming stimulation
- Natural rhythms supporting regulation and calm

A photograph of a misty forest with tall, thin trees and a forest floor covered in ferns and moss. Three people are sitting on a large, mossy log in the middle ground. One person is wearing a green beanie and a brown jacket, another is in a dark jacket, and a third is in a blue jacket. The scene is serene and atmospheric.

CHAPTER 5

ACCESSIBLE FOREST
PRACTICE FOR MENTAL
HEALTH PATIENTS



CHAPTER 5: ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTICE FOR MENTAL HEALTH PATIENTS

In this chapter we will look at the realities for psychiatric patients who attend day care or outpatient units or hospitals, the challenges they face, and the impact of meaningful nature connection practice on their wellbeing. We will also address how nature can be utilised as a space for stress reduction, relief from sensory and mental hyperstimulation, and body work and self-reflection.

In technical terms, mental health patients attending a psychiatric day care service are individuals who receive psychiatric and psychological intensive care according to an outpatient model of treatment. Most of the patients attending the walks from this project have come out of an inpatient unit after an acute psychiatric crisis and are now in the first recovery stage of their treatment. These patients are also building insight for their psychopathological situation, developing autonomy and other basic life skills to allow them to return to a more independent and self-driven life. At this stage of their journey, being outpatients allows them to maintain some of their daily routines and connection to their home environment while undergoing intensive treatment. This chapter will also cover the key competences and practical strategies necessary for an Accessible Forest Practitioner to be able to safely and competently facilitate a meaningful nature connection experience with this population.

What You Will Learn in this Section:

Theoretical Insights:

- An overview of the challenges **individuals with mental health challenges might face**.
- The competences regarding knowledge, skills and attitudes that an aspiring Accessible Forest Practitioner wanting to work with this specific population might consider developing.
- Scientific evidence of the benefits of nature connection practices for this population.

Practical Applications:

Practical examples and strategies from forest walks conducted for a group in this population and how to apply these to develop meaningful nature connection experiences with your own cohort.

Reflective Consideration:

Take a moment to reflect on your objectives at this stage of your work. Are you focused on expanding your knowledge, enhancing your skills, or both?

Key Competences:

This chapter will delve into the following relevant competences:

Knowledge

- A basic understanding of the **mental health** population and the challenges they face.
- Orientation on how to develop basic **naturalist knowledge** of the area where you want to

locate your nature connection experiences.

- Orientation on how to build your knowledge around different **group dynamics** that might arise and how to effectively manage them.

Skills

- You will be invited to develop your **communication** skills with this population.
- You will be encouraged to reflect and develop your skills in facilitating **group motivation**.
- You will have the opportunity to develop your skills in facilitating **relaxation techniques** and **anxiety control techniques**.

Attitudes

You will be invited to cultivate the following attitudes:

- **Respect for Nature**
- **Enthusiasm**
- **Tranquillity**
- **Empathy**
- **Unconditional Acceptance**
- **Physical Vitality**
- **Surrender**
- **Positive Attitude**
- **Confidentiality**

Time Allocation:

Dedicate approximately three hours to fully engage with the material and activities presented in this chapter.

In this section we are going to look at the general accessibility issues facing individuals with Mental Health challenges living in urban environments in the Western world.

Invitation for your mindset: Mental Preparation

Read through this section with an attitude of curiosity. Maybe some of the issues this population faces are ones that you are already aware of; others might be new. As you read, make notes and reflect on how these issues might be relevant to how you might design a nature connection experience for this population.

Overview – Challenges Faced by Mental Health Populations in the Western World

The social problems faced by mental health populations in the West are many and multi-faceted. They include: stigma, unequal access to care, inadequate support systems and discrimination. These issues are exacerbated by

socio-economic factors, systemic healthcare gaps, and insufficient public policies aimed at supporting mental health. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive healthcare reforms, better social support systems, and public awareness campaigns. Together, these can work to reduce stigma, improve accessibility, and integrate mental health care into broader societal frameworks and preventative health care strategies.

In many Western societies, mental health issues are still heavily stigmatised. Individuals diagnosed with conditions like depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia often face judgement, labelling, and social exclusion. The stigma associated with mental illness can prevent people from seeking help, disclosing their condition, or accessing necessary support. In professional settings, individuals with mental health conditions may encounter discrimination, such as being passed over for promotions, being fired, or facing hostile work environments due to misunderstandings about their capabilities.



Fear of losing their job may prevent them from taking time off for treatment or seeking necessary accommodations. Internalised stigma, where individuals feel ashamed of their mental health conditions, often leads to low self-esteem, isolation, and a reluctance to seek help. This can worsen their symptoms and perpetuate a cycle of untreated illness.

Despite growing mental health awareness, access to services and treatment is also often limited. Mental health care – especially for long-term therapy and psychiatric services – can be expensive, and not all insurance plans in Western countries provide adequate coverage for these services. The result is that many individuals, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, are unable to afford the care they need.

illness due to factors like poverty, chronic stress, and inadequate access to resources. Social determinants of health, such as housing instability, unemployment, and poor education, exacerbate mental health challenges. Racial and ethnic minorities in Western countries commonly face additional obstacles to mental health care, such as cultural stigma, language barriers, and discrimination within the healthcare system. These groups are less likely to receive adequate mental health treatment and more likely to be misdiagnosed or undertreated.

Public mental health services in many Western countries are often underfunded and overburdened, leading to long wait times, especially for specialised services such as psychotherapy or psychiatric care. This creates



There is a further disparity in the availability of mental health services between urban and rural areas. In rural or underserved regions, mental health professionals are often few, making it difficult for residents to access care. Urban areas may have more services, but these are frequently overwhelmed by demand, resulting in long wait times.

Mental health issues disproportionately affect marginalised and low-income populations, who often experience higher rates of mental

delays in treatment, sometimes exacerbating patients' conditions. Mental health care in these countries is often fragmented, with poor coordination between primary care, mental health specialists, and social services. This lack of integration can lead to gaps in care, miscommunication, and poor outcomes for individuals who need comprehensive and continuous support. Many people with acute mental health crises are treated in emergency rooms, which are not designed to provide long-term mental health care. The reliance



on emergency services to treat mental health conditions reflects a broader systemic problem where preventive and ongoing mental health care is in short supply, and patients are only seen when in crisis.

The lack of accessible mental health services has also contributed to the criminalisation of mental illness. In many Western countries, people with untreated mental health conditions are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system. Prisons and jails have become de facto mental health institutions, but they are ill-equipped to provide appropriate care, and their conditions often exacerbate mental health problems. Individuals experiencing severe mental health crises are often confronted by law enforcement instead of mental health professionals. This can lead to unnecessary arrests, police violence, or fatal encounters, particularly when mental health issues are mistaken for criminal behaviour.

Perhaps the most daunting situation that mental health patients face is social isolation. Mental health conditions like depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia often lead to social withdrawal and isolation. Individuals may struggle to maintain relationships or participate in social activities due to fear of stigma, lack of motivation, or difficulties with social functioning.

While digital technology has increased connectivity in some ways, it has also contributed to social isolation for many people, especially those with mental health conditions who may find in-person interactions more challenging. Digital platforms can indeed cultivate loneliness, making it harder for users to build real-world support networks. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated social isolation for people with mental health conditions. Lockdowns, social distancing measures, and overall uncertainty during the pandemic triggered an increase in anxiety, depression, and loneliness, particularly among vulnerable populations such as the elderly,

the disabled, and those with preexisting mental health conditions.

Mental health issues can limit a person's ability to work, resulting in high unemployment rates among those with such conditions. Even when employed, individuals with mental health challenges may struggle with consistent attendance, productivity, or workplace accommodations, leading to underemployment or job instability.

Furthermore, many workplaces fail to provide employees with mental health conditions, adequate accommodations, such as flexible schedules, remote work options, or access to mental health resources. As a result, some may feel unsupported or be forced out of the workforce. The cost of untreated mental illness is high, not just for individuals but for society as a whole. The Western world faces a significant economic burden due to lost productivity, the provision of disability benefits, and the cost of emergency care and criminal justice interventions for individuals with untreated mental health issues.

For this part of the project, we worked with patients who were attending an outpatient mental health clinic at a hospital in Cascais, Portugal. Being outpatients, they received psychiatric or psychological care without being admitted to the hospital for an extended stay. Most of the patients attending the walks from this project had in fact come out of hospital after being admitted during a crisis, and were now in the recovery stage of their treatment. Moving into the outpatient category allowed them to maintain their daily routines while undergoing therapy or receiving medication.

Obstacles to Connecting with Nature in the Mental Health Population

Nature connection activities are often less accessible for mental health populations due to a combination of clinical, psychological, logistical, social, and systemic barriers. Activities such as hiking, forest bathing, forest therapy, gardening, and wildlife observation, offer numerous benefits for mental wellbeing, yet remain difficult for many people dealing with mental health conditions to regularly engage in.

Physical and Psychological Barriers

- 1. Lack of Motivation and Energy:** Many mental health conditions, such as depression or schizophrenia, are characterised by low energy, lack of initiative and motivation, fatigue and psychomotor retardation. These symptoms can make it difficult for individuals to initiate outdoor activities or engage in regular physical exercise, which are often key components of nature-based activities. Common side effects of psychiatric medication, such as weight gain and slowed-down movement and thought, can also negatively affect adherence to nature connection practices.
- 2. Social Anxiety:** For individuals with social anxiety disorder or other anxiety-related conditions, participating in outdoor activities that may involve unfamiliar people or crowds can be overwhelming. Even simple activities like going to a park or walking on a trail may induce significant stress, leading to avoidance behaviours.
- 3. Avoidance of Public Spaces:** Some mental health patients experience agoraphobia or fear of public spaces, which prevents them from leaving their homes or venturing into open areas, particularly in unfamiliar environments. This can limit opportunities to engage in nature connection activities.
- 4. Cognitive Challenges:** Individuals with cognitive acquired or developmental disorders (e.g., schizophrenia, ADHD, and autism) may face difficulties navigating outdoor environments, especially in terms of visuospatial orientation or planning and decision-making. Cognitive issues like disorganised thinking or poor concentration may also hinder their ability to safely engage in nature-based activities.

Logistical and Environmental Challenges

- 1. Accessibility Issues:** Many nature spaces, including parks, hiking trails, and conservation areas, are not designed to accommodate individuals with mobility challenges or special needs. Mental health populations with chronic or severe conditions commonly also face mobility limitations, and struggle to use public transportation or walk unfamiliar trajectories. These people may find such areas physically inaccessible or daunting to navigate.
- 2. Transportation:** Access to nature often necessitates private transportation, especially in rural or suburban areas where public transportation options are limited. Many individuals dealing with mental health conditions might not have access to a car or the financial means to travel, restricting their ability to reach natural environments.
- 3. Urbanisation:** Many people in Western countries, particularly those with mental health challenges, live in urban environments where access to nature is limited. Concrete cities and a lack of green spaces make it harder to find areas for meaningful nature engagement, especially for individuals who may not have the resources to visit parks or rural areas.
- 4. Time and Resources:** Individuals dealing with mental health challenges may also struggle with financial difficulties or time constraints, especially if they are unemployed, underemployed, or working irregular hours. Lack of money or time can make engaging in nature-based activities, which might require time off work or specialised equipment, less feasible.

Healthcare System Gaps

- 1. Lack of Integration into Mental Health Care:** Even though research shows that spending time in nature can improve mental wellbeing, nature connection activities are not always integrated into mainstream mental health care. Most treatment plans focus on medication and psychotherapy, and mental health professionals may not also emphasise the therapeutic benefits of spending time outdoors or connecting with nature.
- 2. Limited Availability of Programs:** Few healthcare systems offer structured nature connection programs as part of mental health treatment. Even in regions where ecotherapy or nature-based therapy is recognised, these programs are often limited, underfunded, or available only to specific groups, making it difficult for many mental health populations to participate.
- 3. Lack of Training for Providers:** Mental health providers are not always trained to recommend or facilitate nature connection activities for their patients. The benefits of exposure to nature for mental health are well-documented, yet many clinicians lack the awareness or tools to incorporate nature-based interventions into their care plans.



Social and Cultural Factors

1. **Stigma and Social Isolation:** People with mental health conditions often experience social isolation and stigma, making it harder to engage in group activities or outdoor events. They may feel disconnected from social networks that might otherwise encourage participation in nature-based activities, such as hiking groups or gardening clubs. The fear of judgement from others can prevent them from venturing outdoors.
2. **Lack of Social Support:** Many nature activities, particularly those involving unfamiliar environments, can feel overwhelming for individuals without adequate social support. For someone with mental health challenges, not having a companion or caregiver to accompany them can limit their willingness to engage in outdoor activities, especially in more remote or wilderness settings
3. **Cultural Disengagement:** Some cultures or communities may not prioritise outdoor or nature-based activities as part of their lifestyle. People with mental health conditions who are part of these communities may not see nature engagement as a therapeutic option or may lack awareness of its mental health benefits.

Fear of Safety and Security

1. **Perceived Risk:** Individuals with mental health conditions may suffer from heightened fear related to a perceived lack of personal safety in natural environments. These concerns might stem from paranoia, excessive worry, or a lack of confidence in their ability to navigate outdoor spaces. For example, individuals with PTSD may feel unsafe in isolated or unfamiliar areas, while those with anxiety may fear accidents, injuries, or getting lost.
2. **Trauma and Nature:** For some individuals, nature environments may be associated with past traumatic experiences, making them hesitant to participate in outdoor activities. Trauma triggers related to open spaces, isolation, or natural disasters can hinder their ability to comfortably engage in nature connection activities.

Economic Barriers

1. **Cost of Participation:** While some nature activities, like visiting a park, are generally free, others require financial investment. Adventure-based ecotherapy, guided hikes, outdoor retreats, or specialised nature therapy sessions often come at a cost, which can be a significant barrier for individuals with mental health conditions who are often economically disadvantaged.
2. **Access to Gear and Equipment:** Certain nature activities, such as camping, hiking, or birdwatching, require specialised equipment that can be expensive. This may include proper footwear, clothing, backpacks, or binoculars, making these activities inaccessible for individuals with financial constraints.

Lack of Tailored Programs

1. **Few Customised Programs on Offer:** Nature-based activities may not be adapted for individuals with specific mental health needs. Standard outdoor programs may not offer adjustments in pace, structure, or support required by individuals with depression, anxiety, or other mental health challenges. Programs may also lack flexibility in accommodating emotional or psychological needs, leading to exclusion from meaningful participation.
2. **Insufficient Accessibility in Design:** Many outdoor programs do not consider the emotional, mental, or physical challenges faced by people with mental health conditions, such as the need for rest areas, quiet spaces, or shorter, easier trails. Without proper accommodations, individuals with mental health conditions may feel that nature connection activities are not accessible or welcoming for them.



Invitation to Empathy:

How Might it Feel to be a Psychiatric Patient?

Imagine that the way you perceive the world is very different from the way you are told you should perceive the world. Some traumatic event in your life, one that you might not even identify as being traumatic, has caused you to experience a crisis that has led your family to bring you to a doctor. You are perceived by those around you as being “crazy”. This doctor that you see prescribes medication and suddenly the way you see the world shifts completely, and again you feel lost.

You want to reach out to people but are not able to as you fear that they might fear you. You decide to create your own little world within the confines of your room and your screen on your phone.

You rarely leave the house. It is hard for you to find a job and the “snowball effect” compounds your problems: no job – no money – increased isolation and insecurity – mental health crisis – admission to hospital – medication adjusted – admission as an outpatient – go to clinic everyday – stay confined within very built environments, surrounded by people in the same situation as you – go back home – feelings of guilt, self-depreciation, incapacity – numb out in front of TV or phone – wake -up – everything starts all over again.

This metaphorical journey demonstrates some of the challenges that mental health patients face in their everyday lives. With respect to isolation and confinement to built environments, many of these patients experience the fear of being outside and also not knowing how to be safe outside. Furthermore, most do not have the clinical insight, motivation or autonomy to consider the natural environment as a tool to support their journey towards health.

Mental health populations face numerous barriers to accessing nature connection activities, ranging from psychological hurdles like anxiety and low motivation, to logistical and systemic issues such as limited access to suitable programs, transportation, and support. Addressing these barriers requires more integrated approaches in mental health care that emphasise the therapeutic benefits of nature, alongside the development of more inclusive and accessible outdoor programs tailored to individuals with mental health conditions.

Reflections on Section 1

Now that you have read through this comprehensive analysis of the reality faced by mental health populations in the Western world, reflect on ways in which you can creatively address some of the issues mentioned above.





CARD 1: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

OUTPATIENT MENTAL HEALTH SETTING

- Typically first recovery stage after acute psychiatric crisis
- Patients building insight into their condition
- Developing autonomy and basic life skills
- Maintaining some daily routines while undergoing treatment
- Transitioning toward independent, self-driven living

REFERENCE CARDS



BENEFITS OF NATURE CONNECTION

- Stress reduction
- Relief from sensory and mental hyperstimulation
- Space for connection to nature and self-reflection
- Maintaining connection to home environment
- Building autonomy in a supportive setting



CARD 2: KEY COMPETENCES FOR PRACTITIONERS

ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

- Basic understanding of mental health conditions
- Familiarity with group dynamics management
- Naturalist knowledge of the local environment

CRITICAL SKILLS

- Clear, accessible communication
- Group motivation techniques

- Facilitation of relaxation and anxiety control
- Safety management in outdoor settings

IMPORTANT ATTITUDES

- Respect for nature
- Tranquillity and patience
- Empathy and unconditional acceptance
- Confidentiality
- Enthusiasm and positive energy
- Capacity for surrender to the process



CARD 3: BARRIERS TO NATURE CONNECTION

PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS

- Lack of motivation and energy
- Social anxiety and fear of judgement
- Agoraphobia/fear of public spaces
- Cognitive challenges with navigation and planning
- Perceived safety risks
- Past trauma associated with natural environments

PRACTICAL BARRIERS

- Limited mobility and transportation options
- Urban living with minimal green spaces
- Financial constraints

- Lack of suitable equipment
- Time limitations
- Social isolation and lack of companions

SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

- Nature activities rarely integrated into mental health care
- Limited availability of structured programs
- Insufficient provider training in nature-based interventions
- Few programs tailored to specific mental health needs
- High costs of participation in specialised programs



CARD 4: SOCIAL CHALLENGES FACED BY PATIENTS

STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

- Judgement and social exclusion
- Workplace discrimination
- Internalised shame
- Reluctance to seek help
- Criminalisation of mental illness

HEALTHCARE LIMITATIONS

- Expensive treatment options
- Inadequate insurance coverage
- Urban/rural disparities in service availability
- Long wait times for care

- Fragmented, uncoordinated services
- Over Reliance on emergency interventions

DAILY LIFE REALITIES

- High unemployment rates
- Financial insecurity
- Difficulty maintaining relationships
- Digital dependency
- Isolation exacerbated by COVID-19
- "Snowball effect" of compounding difficulties
- Confinement to built environments



SECTION 2. ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTITIONER COMPETENCIES

INTRO

In this section we cover the competences that will support you to deliver a safe and enjoyable nature connection experience to psychiatric patients who attend an in-patient and/or out-patient facility.

Now that we have explored some of the important characteristics of the mental health population with respect to the challenges they face in general, and also with respect to nature connection activities, we are going to take a closer look at the competences that Accessible Forest Practitioners can develop to meet these challenges and develop effective practical strategies that allow them to deliver meaningful nature connection experiences to this population.

Let's start by outlining some of the competences that should be developed by Accessible Forest Practitioners who wish to work with mental health populations, and embarking on a self-assessment journey based on these competences.





SELF-AWARENESS ('I') – NORTH QUADRANT

This area of the learning compass focuses on competences related to self-awareness as a practice facilitator. This includes the attitudes, skills, and knowledge needed to consciously guide the practice for individuals facing mental health challenges.

Practitioners are encouraged to cultivate the competences suggested here, as well as others they feel might be relevant and added to the list.

Key competencies include:

- Emotional regulation
- Skill in relaxation techniques
- Awareness of one's own psychological processes or struggles
- An attitude of enthusiasm
- An attitude of unconditional acceptance
- An attitude of vitality
- An attitude of confidentiality
- An attitude of humility



THE EXPERIENCE – SOUTH QUADRANT

This part of the compass represents the realm of experience, and is focused on competencies in preparing and guiding the specific group and population through a specific process in a particular location.

Key competencies include:

- Confidence in the Universal Walk flow
- Capacity to adapt the flow of the experience
- Use of appropriate language
- Listening to the group's needs
- Choosing an appropriate location for the experience
- Considering hospitality needs



NATURE - WEST QUADRANT

This area of the compass is dedicated to the relationship with nature, and focuses on competences that foster a conscious connection with the natural world, inviting its collaboration in the process. In order to invite walk participants into this relationship with the natural world, it is essential that the AF Practitioner cultivates their own personal relationship with the natural world. They will then be able to facilitate the experience from a place of authentic experience, rather than cognitive learning, and be able to embody it from a place of authenticity.

Key competencies include:

- Naturalist knowledge
- Cultivating respect for nature
- Nurturing relationship with place
- Fostering a sensory intimacy with nature
- Encouraging playfulness
- Cultivating environmental awareness



THE GROUP – EAST QUADRANT

The East quadrant represents working with the specific group of participants, and focuses on analysing needs, emotional states, language, and group dynamics. For individuals with mental health issues, this involves creating a supportive environment that fosters trust and reduces feelings of isolation.

Key competencies include:

- Managing group dynamics
- Motivating the group
- Confidence in offering anxiety management techniques
- Cultivating an attitude of empathy
- Cultivating an attitude of respect
- Cultivating and attitude of trust in patients' own processes and capabilities
- Listening without judgement
- Attention to the possible heterogeneity of the group and to specific needs
- Capability to recognise signs of acute psychiatric distress/decompensation, which might require medical attention
- Commitment to establish contact with patients' families/therapeutic team if alert signs are identified

Now let's take a closer look at each of the competences and what that means for you as a possible future Accessible Forest Practitioner.



SELF-REFLECTION ON THE ABOVE COMPETENCES

Below you will find a self-assessment tool for each one of the competences listed above

On a scale of 1 (very unfamiliar) to 10 (very familiar), evaluate where you would position yourself in relation to each of the competences. This will give you an overview of which competences to focus on and dedicate your time and energy to. Create a strategy for deepening your understanding of each competence, establishing priorities in your own unique learning journey.

SELF-AWARENESS ('I') – NORTH QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assesment scale 1 to 10
Emotional Regulation I am able to manage my emotions and maintain a calm and supportive presence.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Skilful in relaxation techniques I am skilful in self-managing and applying relaxation techniques, like breathwork, that support me to show up in a positive way for participants.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Awareness of one's own psychological processes or struggles I am aware of my own internal processes and any struggles that might arise for me. I am able to maintain clarity and presence so as not to transfer these to the participants.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
An attitude of enthusiasm I am aware that cultivating an attitude of enthusiasm can positively experience the experience of participants. I am able to reflect on how I am showing up and make the necessary adjustments in my attitude so as to express enthusiasm.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
An attitude of unconditional acceptance I am open and am able to create an environment where all the participants feel free of judgement and feel totally accepted as they are.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
An attitude of vitality I am aware of my physical vitality and cultivate the health of my body so that I can be strong and able to facilitate the experience without it feeling too strenuous.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
An attitude of confidentiality I am aware of the relevance and necessity for absolute confidentiality so as to create a safe environment for the experience. I commit to not sharing any personal details about the participants and/or about any interactions or incidents that might occur during the experience.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

THE EXPERIENCE – SOUTH QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Confidence in the Universal Walk flow I am confident in the flow of the Universal Walk model and understand the rationale for the sequence of experiences as it is presented in the Universal Walk.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Capacity to adapt the flow of the experience I feel confident in adapting any element of the universal flow to participants' emotional states and/or external conditions such as weather.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Use of appropriate language I feel confident about the type of language to use with the mental health population in order to create an environment where they feel safe and understand the instructions. I am aware that excessively metaphorical language can be difficult to comprehend.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Listening to the group needs I am confident that I can create moments and pauses in the experience in which I can listen to the needs of the group, both silently and through welcoming the input of participants by checking-in with them.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Choosing an appropriate location for the experience I feel confident that I know how to choose a location that will be conducive to a relaxing experience for the participants. A location that is physically easily accessible, with comfortable terrain, open spaces with possible visual "exit routes" and away from disturbing noises.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Considering hospitality needs I am confident that I can offer both tangible (blankets, seating) and intangible tools (grounding exercises) to meet participants' needs during the experience.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

NATURE – WEST QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Naturalist knowledge I feel confident about my knowledge of the biome in which I intend to facilitate the nature connection experiences. I am familiar with the fauna and flora of the location and am aware of any dangers they might pose to the participants.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Cultivating respect for nature I cultivate respect for the natural world in my day-to-day life. I strive to inspire others to do the same through my own example.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

NATURE – WEST QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Cultivating relationship with place I regularly hold a practice of deepening my relationship with the place where I will be facilitating the nature connection experiences. I visit this place at least once a week and dedicate time to deepening my relationship with the living beings that call that place home.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Sensory intimacy with nature I allow myself time to explore sensory connection to the natural environment.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Cultivating playfulness I feel confident that I can bring a light-hearted and playful attitude to my facilitation of the nature connection experience	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Cultivating environmental awareness I am aware of the environmental policies and attitudes in the location where I guide. I am confident in being able to share and inspire participants to adopt an environmentally friendly attitude in their day-to-day lives.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

THE GROUP - EAST QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Managing group dynamics I am confident that I am able to manage group dynamics that might arise during the experience. (An example of this might be one participant always taking the lead with voicing their opinions.) I am able to direct the attention of the group and make sure that everyone feels heard.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Group motivation I am confident in my ability to keep the group motivated and engaged in the activities proposed. If necessary, I will adapt the experience to maintain healthy levels of motivation.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Confidence in offering relaxation techniques I am confident that I know how to facilitate relaxation techniques to support mental health patients in case they feel anxious. I am confident that I can apply the appropriate trauma-informed language and attitudes towards mental health patients.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Cultivating an attitude of empathy I am able to be empathic with the participants of the experience. I am able to facilitate a space of non-judgmental listening.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

THE GROUP - EAST QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Cultivating an attitude of respect I hold myself in a respectful way and, through my actions and choice of language, demonstrate respect for every participant in the group.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Cultivating and attitude of trust in patients' own processes and capabilities I am able to offer enough space for participants to find their way within the experience and, cultivating that attitude, build my trust in their capability to participate in the experience in a way that feels comfortable for them.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Cultivating an attitude of listening without judgement I cultivate an attitude of listening without judgement. I pay close attention to my mental discursive narrative, and consciously bring myself to a place where I offer no judgement on what is being shared in the context of the nature connection experience.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Attention to the possible heterogeneity of the group and to specific needs I feel confident that I am able to identify and cater for the needs of participants with different diagnoses.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Capability to recognise signs of acute psychiatric distress/decompensation which might require medical attention I feel confident that I am able to identify signs of psychiatric distress and that I know how to connect with the medical professional that might need to intervene.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Commitment to establish contact with patients' families/therapeutic team if alert signs are identified I am committed to keeping a list of emergency family and medical team contacts for each of the participants, and I commit to reaching out to them in case there are any alert signs.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



Now that you have a clearer understanding of the competences required for the facilitation of a meaningful nature connection experience for psychiatric patients in an outpatient facility, and you are aware of your own position in relation to each of them (your self-evaluation), consider making a list of the competences that you would like to deepen your experience and knowledge of.

Please refer to the Learner's Journey and the variety of learning materials available to you.



SPECIFIC DESCRIPTION OF THE TARGET GROUP

The mental health population participants in the short-term group were all patients integrated into the psychiatric day care unit of the Hospital de Cascais, which is a regional hospital in the district of Lisbon.

In terms of their mental health assessments, they

presented as a heterogeneous group with the following diagnoses:

- 5 Psychosis (1 Schizophrenia; 2 Schizoaffective disorder; 2 Psychosis SOE)
- 1 Personality disorder (paranoid type)
- 1 Major depressive episode

A WINTER WALK IN THE FOREST FOR THE MENTAL HEALTH PATIENT POPULATION

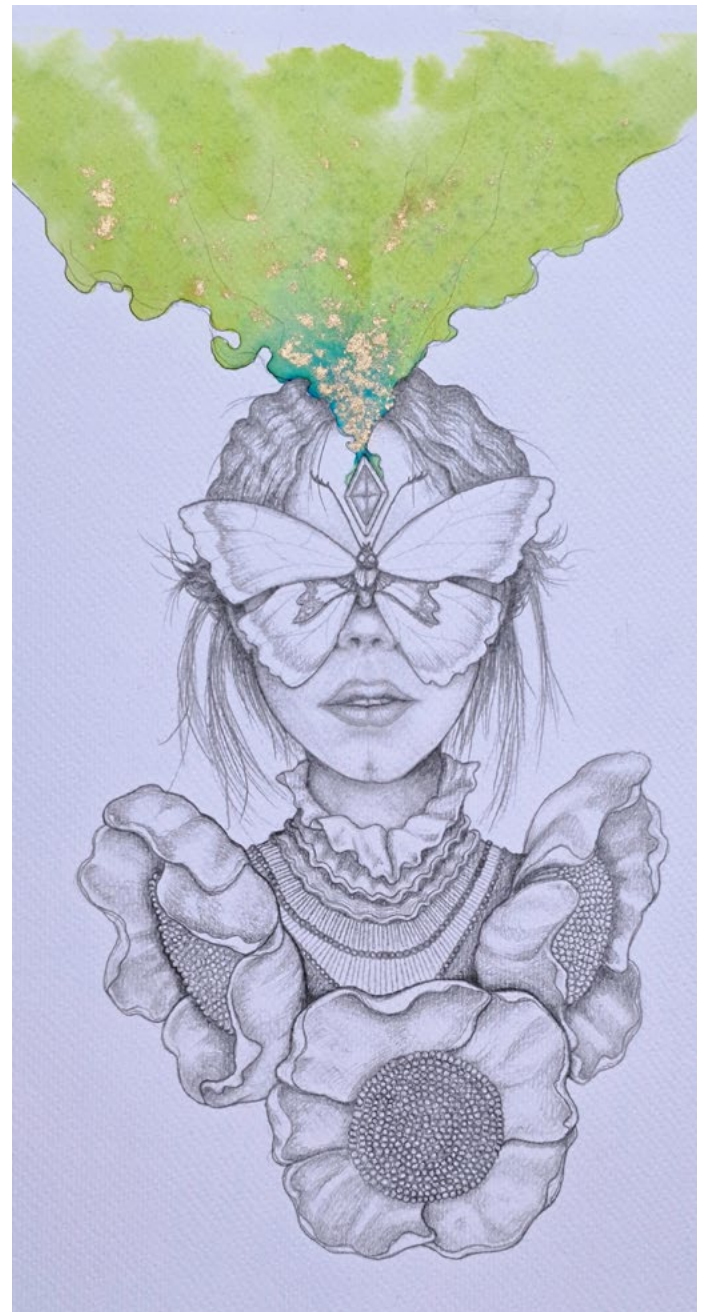
We might typically consider warmer weather as a better time to be outdoors, while winter may seem like an unlikely season to go outside and connect with nature. However, being outside at this time of year can – especially on a crisp sunny day – be surprisingly pleasant, and offer increased opportunities for connection and community-building at a time of the year when this population tends to isolate itself even more than usual. This was exactly the case in the experience of our group, when we gathered on a cold crisp day and were greeted by sunlight.

It began when the guide and photographer met the patients at the day care unit of the Hospital de Cascais, where a bus was waiting to bring the participants and group experts to the walk location: the Santuário da Peninha Forest in the Sintra Cascais Natural Park, roughly 20 minutes' drive from the hospital.

Upon arrival at the forest, the participants were welcomed by the guide, Geeta, who gave a brief introduction and explanation of the project. An accessibility expert was also present.

The Use of Likeness agreements were signed, and stress level self-evaluation forms were distributed and filled in by the participants. Once all the forms were collected, the nature connection experience could begin.

Led by the guide, the group headed out together towards a boulder haven on the side of the road.





There we stopped and formed a circle, where Geeta explained in greater detail how the experience would unfold: how long it would be, that every experience was an invitation, and that everyone was welcome to adapt it as they wished. This was followed by a sharing circle, in which participants were invited to say their names and share what they were noticing at that moment.

We then moved to another part of the forest, an open clearing with tall Lebanese cedars and low rocks that offered comfortable sitting places.

Geeta then led the group through a journey of the senses, one sense at a time so that each could be experienced individually. For most participants, the strongest sense was that of smell. Geeta invited everyone to pick up some earth in their hands and bring it closer to their nose. There is something quite unique about the smell of the earth and its impact on each individual.

After this initial sensory exploration we took a moment to share our experiences. While each participant had their own response to the smell, for many it evoked memories of childhood, a sense of longing, and a recognition of how relaxed they felt in that moment.





From there, we proceeded very slowly through an avenue of tall trees and moss-covered boulders towards a new clearing alongside a large inviting boulder and mother tree. For this part of the journey the participants were accompanied by the group experts, who encouraged them to slow down and drew their attention to elements that emerged as they moved through the forest: the spider webs swaying in the breeze; the details on the leaves; the sunlight filtering through the branches of the trees.

After this slow wander we arrived at a new location that felt open and inviting. At this point the guide, together with the accessibility expert, decided to organise the participants in pairs. The aim was that they feel accompanied while also stimulating connection and interaction both with the forest and with each other. The guide invited them to go off and explore the textures of this place, and then to bring back at least one example.





This exploration went on for about 20 minutes, during which time the guide darted from pair to pair, offering her support and witnessing their process of discovery. Smiles and expressions of awe and delight soon began to appear on the faces of the participants and group experts alike, and laughter echoed through the group.

Upon returning with their finds, the participants were invited to create an offering for the forest together, arranging their textures on the forest floor in whatever way felt right for them.

Participants were then invited to share how that experience had made them feel. It was moving to witness the sensory awakening that the forest's different textures provoked in the participants. Some of them ventured to apply the textures to different parts of their body, for instance the skin of the cheek.

There was an evident awakening of curiosity around the shapes and colours of the different elements they had collected.

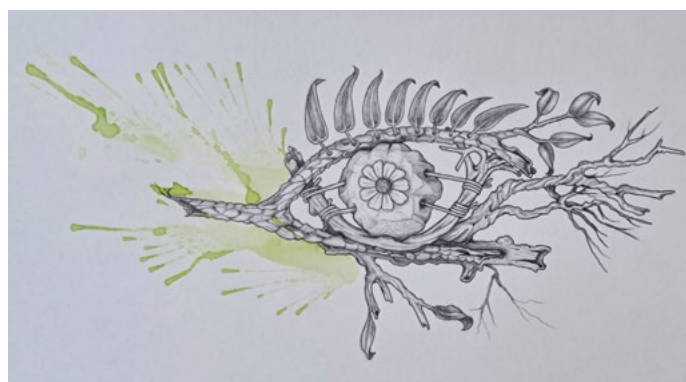
After completing this textural exploration, the participants were invited to go on a solo wander and find a place where they could remain alone for about 15 minutes. Most, however, came back before the 15 minutes was up. It appeared as if they did not feel safe being in the forest on their own. This was an important lesson for future walks.

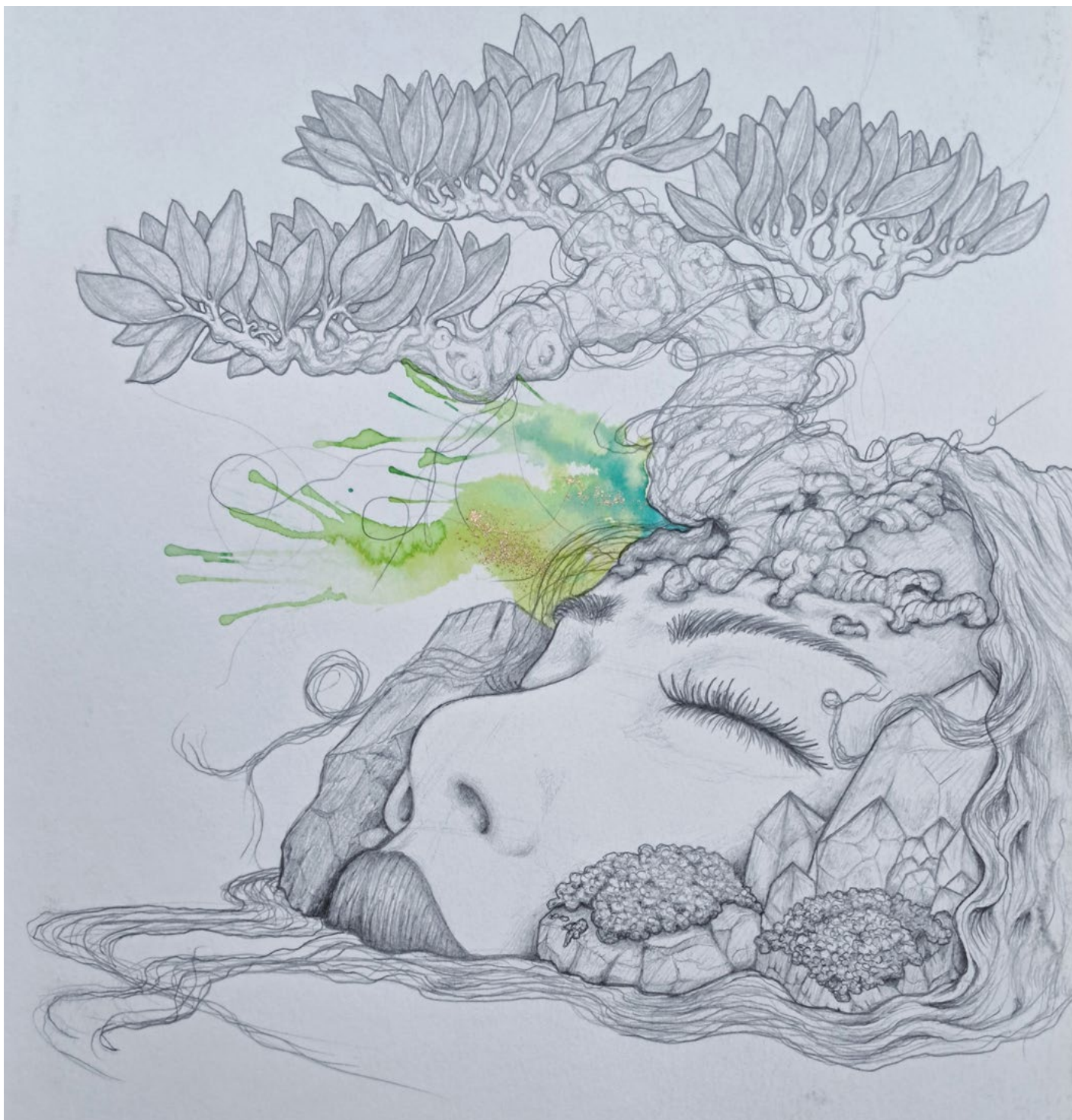
Once all the participants had returned we took a moment for tea and snacks. Geeta prepared a tea with some wild blackberry leaves and informed the participants about the medicinal properties of the tea plant, which opened up space for the others to share their knowledge of the local tea plants.

The participants very much appreciated the tea and the snacks, and a final sharing circle took place. It was evident that everyone felt grateful

for the opportunity to be outside, and felt much more relaxed and with an improved mood. This was also clearly reflected in the evaluations at the end of the walk.

It is interesting to note that the principal group expert was also challenged by the moments of silence and inner reflection. She kept drawing the participants attention to her own personal process. Instead of supporting the experience by keeping the participants attentive to what was happening in the forest at that moment, she introduced ideas and reflections on activities that had happened in the past or were going to happen in the future, outside the forest. This highlights the importance of group experts cultivating presence and awareness techniques that allow them to facilitate experiences free from personal agenda, whether consciously or unconsciously.





SPECIFIC DESCRIPTION OF THE TARGET GROUP

Below you will find a summary of the exercises and exploration offered in the different walk stages, each taking place across four different seasons. Please refer to the Universal Walk flow for a clearer understanding of the four phases of the walk.

With the psychiatric patients, we opted to hold all the walks in the same location in the Santuário da Peninha in the Sintra-Cascais Natural Park so as to create a sense of safety and routine for the participants in always returning to the same place. The sole exception was the Summer walk, which was held in a local public park because an obstacle emerged with the bus transportation to the forest. Instead, we had to opt for taxis to the local park.

With this particular population, the intention with each walk was to explore different senses more deeply.



Winter

- General introduction to the experience
- Sitting down, journey through each of the senses with particular focus on the sense of smell and the smell of the earth.
- Slow wander through the forest, slowing down and observing what was moving in the forest.
- Each exploration finished with an opportunity for participants to speak about their experience, creating a space for everyone's voice to be heard.

Spring

- A welcome followed by a reminder of the different elements of the experience and a more detailed introduction for new participants who had not attended the previous one (Winter).
- Walking in pairs to a new location in the forest. During the walk, participants were invited to share a story of a time in nature that was meaningful for them.
- Upon arrival in the forest, in a grove of trees, participants were invited to choose a tree and find a comfortable position to lean into the tree. Whilst leaning into the tree, they were guided through the senses, one sense at a time, but with particular emphasis on hearing.

Summer

- A welcome followed by a reminder of the different elements of the experience and a more detailed introduction for new participants who had not attended either of the previous ones (Winter and Spring).
- An introduction to the new location, as this walk was held in a public park.
- We found an ample lawn surrounded by old pine trees and a bush garden. Here we sat in a circle on the ground and experienced the journey through the senses, this time with a particular focus on sight as there were many different species compared to the previous experiences in the forest. There was also a focus on what may be called the 'heart sense.'

Autumn

- A welcome followed by a reminder of the different elements of the experience and a more detailed introduction for new participants who had not attended the previous ones (Winter, Spring and Autumn).
- A foggy day. We walked together to a familiar place in the forest, stopping where there were moss-covered rocks. Each participant chose a rock to sit on and the guided journey through each of the senses began. The primary focus here was touch – exploring the texture, temperature and softness of the moss.
- After the sharing circle, we walked slowly towards another familiar place in the forest where we would move into the meaningful connection part of the experience.





Winter

- Exploration of the sense of touch. Participants were invited to explore the textures that attracted them in the forest. They were invited to do this in pairs with the intention of mutual support. Group experts accompanied those participants who had the most severe diagnoses and who felt more challenged to explore the forest.
- Each bringing back at least one texture and building an offering for the forest together.

Spring

- Exploring the sense of smell. Participants were paired up and invited to explore different smells, then to create a perfume potion based on a combination of these. They were also encouraged to find a name for their perfume and to present their scent to the other pairs.

Summer

- Participants were invited to explore in pairs “all the little things” and to bring back a selection of “little things.” Each pair had the opportunity to talk about their “little things” and why they had selected them.

Autumn

- The participants were encouraged to take a wander, again in pairs, and find elements of the forest that seemed to support each other. This exercise was inspired by a remark a participant in the previous exploration had made, about how every element in the forest was supporting the others.
- Participants were invited to visit each other’s support networks and share their observations with one another.





Solo Time

Winter

- Participants were invited to take a solo wander in the forest and find a tree or a stone that they would like to sit with. However, most were not able to remain for all of the time allocated to the exploration and they returned early to the group. This was an important insight into what this particular group felt comfortable with.

Spring

- After the winter walk it was decided, together with the accessibility expert, that we would henceforth avoid solo forest experiences.

Participants were instead invited to find another partner and together to create an offering for the forest. It was a beautiful spring day. Participants created bouquets of flowers for the forest and then found places to lay them.

Summer

- In pairs, participants were invited to find a tree with which they would like to sit as if with a friend.

Autumn

- In pairs, participants were invited to find a rock they would like to sit with as if with a friend.





Winter

- Tea and snacks were served and there was a final sharing circle on what they were taking away from the experience. Everyone participated in the sharing and there was an overall sense of gratitude and joy.

Spring

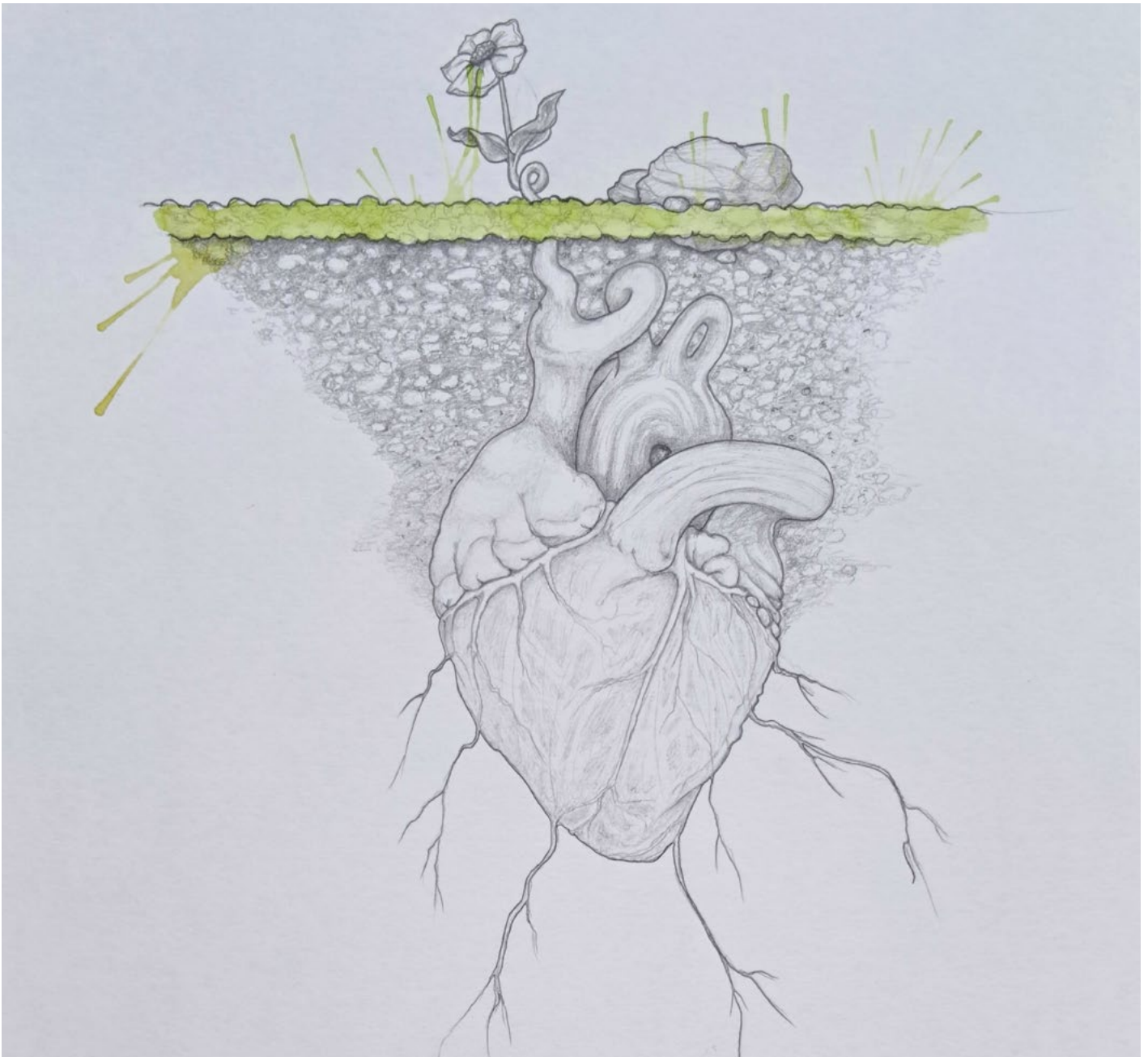
- Tea and snacks (biscuits, strawberries, walnuts, and dates) were served and there was a final sharing circle. This time the tea was made with nettle and the medicinal properties of nettle were described.

Summer

- Lemonade and snacks (biscuits, chocolates, grapes, and walnuts) were served. This time we chose lemonade because it was not safe to harvest tea plants in the public park. There was a final sharing circle and an open conversation about the heart sense and how to cultivate it.

Autumn

- Tea was made with wild mint and snacks were served. To close the experience, participants were invited to sing a call and response song.



Here are some key considerations and practical tips for working with a mental health population:

Duration and Capacity to Focus:

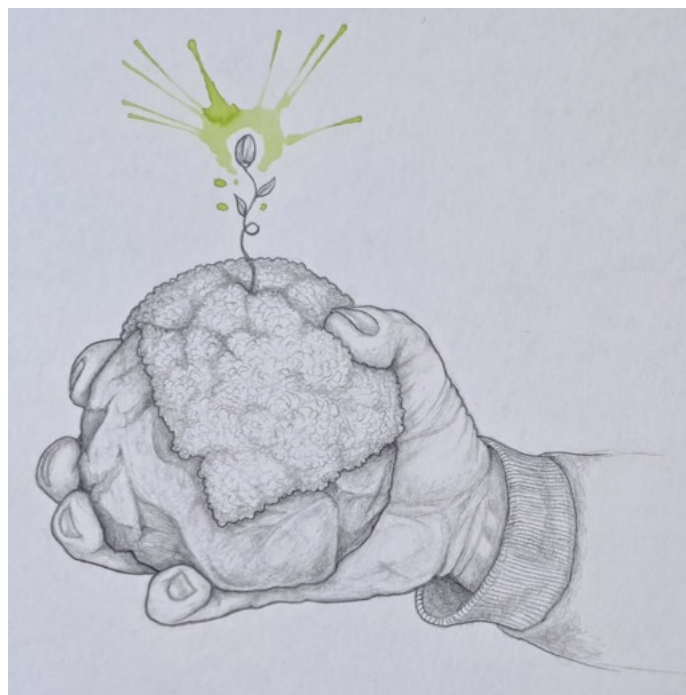
Why it matters: Most patients with a serious mental health diagnosis face cognitive impairments, like attentional focus and concentration deficits; some of them might be heavily medicated, and their capacity to focus can be greatly impacted. Besides medication, there are many other factors that can impact a participant's capacity on any given day, such as: emotional or mental stimulation, their domestic or family situation, interactions with carers, and weather conditions.

How to implement: Make sure you are present and attentive to how participants respond to your cues. Observe their body language and their level of engagement in the experience, and listen to what they are saying. Be ready to modify the experience at any moment. The duration of the nature connection experiences should be flexible and adaptable to the participants' capacity on that particular day. It is very important that we meet the participants where they are in their capability to follow and enjoy the experience. It is not about what the practitioner thinks is good for the participants. Rather, it is about being present to attend to the needs of the participants and being able to continuously revise and adapt the experience according to how it is being received by the participants from moment by moment.

Create a Safe Container:

Why it matters: Mental health patients can be triggered when they find themselves in an unfamiliar environment and with a new person they have not previously spent time with (i.e., the facilitator). In order for them to benefit from the practice, it is important that the facilitator assumes a calming presence that fosters a feeling of safety in being guided in this particular place and in this particular way.

How to implement: During the introduction moment of the experience, it is important to deliver clear information about what the experience will entail, how long it will take, and what is expected with respect to participation and engagement.



Language and Sensory Experience:

Why it matters: Depending on their diagnosis, patients can struggle to understand metaphoric or abstract language. With respect to the sensory experience, patients may be either hyper- or hypo- stimulated. For some, like for instance those suffering from psychosis, a sensory experience might be too overpowering.

How to implement: The facilitator should express themselves with utmost care: deliberating over their choice of words and offering clear and concise discourse. They should also pay close attention to how the sensory experience is landing with the patient.

Encourage exploration with partners:

Why it matters: Mental health patients often suffer from isolation and a diminished ability to create bonds with others. By encouraging exploration with other participants we can foster

engagement and socialisation, which might also benefit the participant's mood and overall wellbeing.

How to implement: Design and offer explorations and experiences in groups of two or three participants to stimulate interaction between them.

Plan Multiple Walks:

Why it matters: While one-off experiences can be impactful, taking part in a series of walks allows participants to build a sustained relationship with nature and each other. These repeated experiences create a sense of continuity and belonging that can significantly enhance their wellbeing.

How to implement: Organise walks for once a month. Encourage participants to commit to attending multiple sessions, letting them know that each experience will be unique and different to the previous one. Help them to prepare for the walk by asking them to recall a meaningful time in nature that they can share later. This approach helps establish a deeper connection to the environment as well as fostering stronger community bonds.

A Consistent and Reliable Experience:

Why it matters: Consistency provides structure and comfort, and is foundational for a sense of psychological safety. When participants know what to expect they can allow themselves to relax more fully into the experience.

How to implement: Begin each walk with a sensory connection phase, followed by relationship-building with nature, a solo exploration, and a group integration ceremony. Consistency in these rituals helps participants to anticipate what is coming up, making them feel safer and more engaged.

Choose the Right Location:

Why it matters: The location of the walk can greatly influence participants' comfort, sense of safety and integrity, and engagement. Urban parks offer accessibility and familiarity, while natural parks outside the city provide

participants with a more immersive experience, and a real outing for those who seldom have the opportunity to leave their home or outpatient facilities at the daycare hospital.

How to implement: Start with walks in local parks to foster trust in the experience itself and support the community-building aspect. Once the relationship amongst participants is established, the invitation can be extended to bringing the group to a more remote location. The shared sense of experience and adventure will act as a support when taking a "risk" outside their comfort zone.

Be Open with Invitations:

Why it matters: A nature walk is most powerful when participants feel free to explore and connect with nature in their own way. Overly structured activities can stifle this personal connection.

How to implement: Offer open-ended invitations rather than impose strict tasks. For example, invite participants to "explore what draws your attention" rather than "find a specific type of leaf." This openness encourages self-directed exploration and a more personalised experience.



Offer an exceptionally delicious closing to the experience:

Why it matters: This closing stage, where snacks are offered, is very well received by patients. The enthusiasm is enormous. These experiences are part of the treatment program. Even though participants are free not to take part, doing so is not a spontaneous choice resulting from their initiative. Thus, the forest walks, though pleasant and different, continue to be seen by some patients as an “obligation/activity” imposed as part of their treatment program. The snack thus functions as a reward for their participation. Symbolising the end of the session, the snack can be especially well received by those who made the greatest effort to participate, signifying the end and return to their comfort zone. These people, who are treated in public health services,

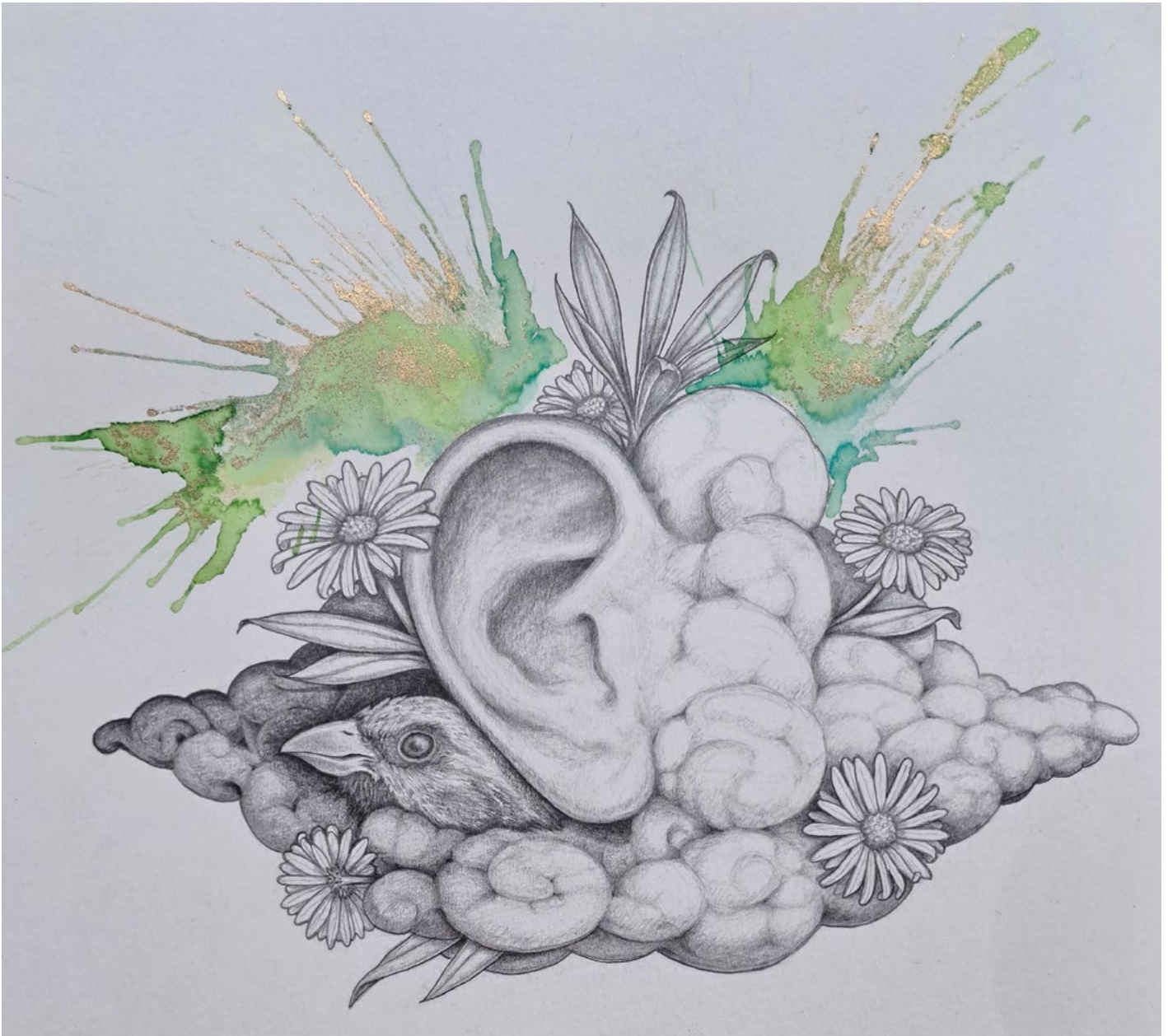
tend to live on state pensions and help from family members, and manage only with great difficulty. Access to “gourmet snacks and treats” is a privilege that they cannot have on a daily basis.

How to implement: Choose high-quality snacks that the participants might not usually have access to. Choose seasonal fruits and also cater for the most common food intolerances like gluten, lactose and nuts, so that everyone will have something they can eat.

Listen to Yourself:

Why it matters: Leading a group of psychiatric patients can be challenging because they might all demonstrate different levels of engagement – for example with the different explorations and exercises. Trusting your intuition and





staying connected to your own sense of calm and presence can help guide the group more effectively.

How to implement: Before the walk, take time to ground yourself in nature. Embrace any uncertainties as part of the process, and trust that your connection with nature will guide you in leading the group.

Accept the Unknown:

Why it matters: Nature walks are inherently unpredictable – weather, group dynamics, and individual responses can all vary. Embracing this unpredictability allows for a more authentic and flexible experience.

How to implement: Be prepared for a range of possibilities, from weather changes to

unexpected participant needs. Trust that the experience will unfold as it should, and be open to adjusting the plan as needed.

Simplicity and Accessibility:

Why it matters: Many people, regardless of their age group, may not immediately understand the value of slowing down and connecting with nature. Simplifying the experience and making it accessible helps participants overcome these preconceptions.

How to implement: Use simple, clear language and visuals when introducing the walk. For example, describe the event as a “Picnic in Nature” rather than a “Forest Immersion Experience.” This makes the activity more approachable and easier to explain to others.

GEETA'S STORY - HER FIRST WALK WITH PSYCHIATRIC PATIENTS

Geeta was invited by Dagna, in her capacity as an expert in the practice of Forest Therapy, to be part of the Accessible Forest project as the coordinator for Portugal as well as a guide for the populations in that country. Dagna is the Accessible Forest Executive Coordinator.

Because of her past personal experience of burnout and recovery, Geeta was interested in the health benefits and impact of nature connection practices for people facing mental health and psychiatric challenges. She teamed up with the project's accessibility expert, Dr. Inês Macedo, a medical doctor and psychiatrist who was highly motivated to employ nature connection practices as a therapeutic tool for her patients. Together they discussed the best way of bringing Forest Therapy to this particular population.

In Geeta's own words: "As a guide, I was very aware of the importance of the language to be used and was unsure and afraid of how the sensory element of this practice would land with these patients. Because I don't have a lot of experience working with this population and am not trained to deal with any possible acute response or crisis, I was aware that I did not want to trigger anyone.

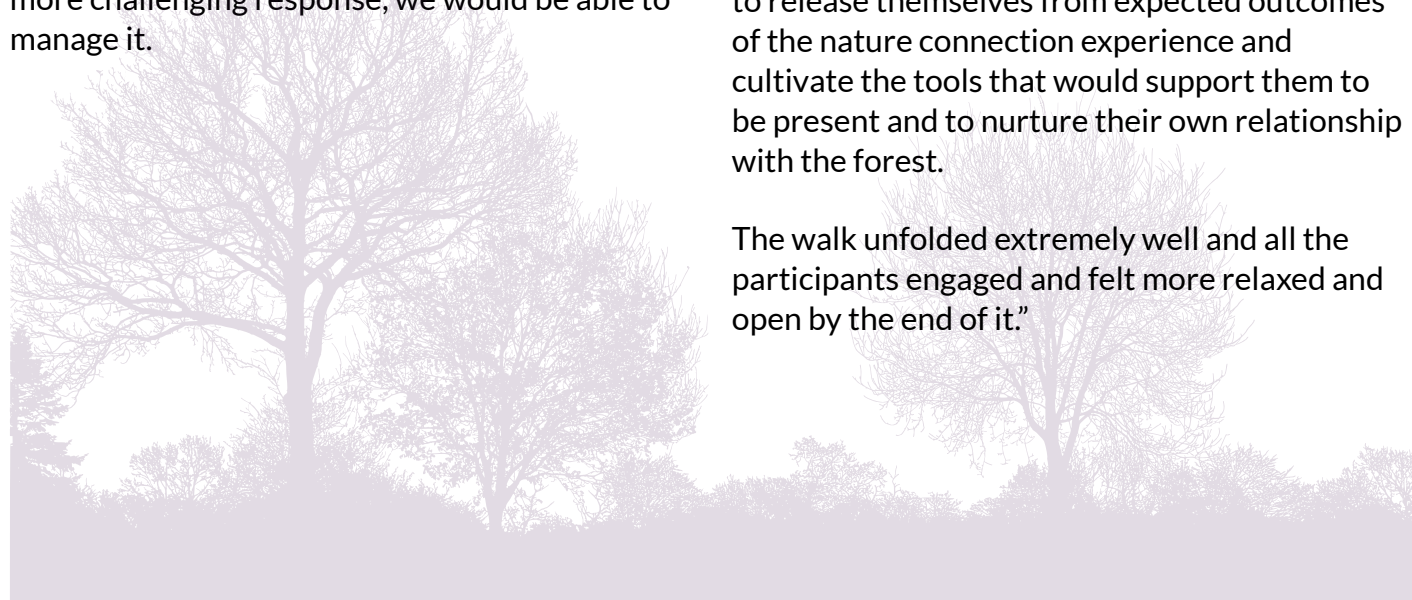
Inês prepared the walk well by having technical staff, along with the group experts, attend the walk to make sure that, in case there was a more challenging response, we would be able to manage it.

I was very touched when I met the group for the first time. I could feel their enthusiasm about going outside and to a new place. I was moved because this population is sometimes disregarded, and the methodologies that are used to treat these patients in the context of public hospitals in Portugal are often outdated. This is because often there is lack of funding and the technical health professionals are overworked and don't have the time or resources to explore new treatment interventions. I was inspired because the Accessible Forest Project was able to offer a new experience to these patients.

During this first walk I learned a lot about how to guide this population, and also received clarity on the challenges I might face with the experts that work with these patients. My experience as a Forest Therapy guide has taught me to create a space and container for the experience that is wide open and where my entire focus is on the relationship with the forest and allowing participants to have their own unique experience without my interference.

With these patients I realised that, on one hand, they needed greater attention from the group experts and guides with a lot more close facilitation and encouragement than regular participants on Forest Therapy walks, and also that a big part of the learning journey for the group experts of this particular group would be to release themselves from expected outcomes of the nature connection experience and cultivate the tools that would support them to be present and to nurture their own relationship with the forest.

The walk unfolded extremely well and all the participants engaged and felt more relaxed and open by the end of it."





CARD 1: STRUCTURING THE SEASONAL WALKS

LOCATION & CONSISTENCY

- Use familiar locations to build safety (same forest area for most walks)
- Consider accessibility needs when selecting locations
- Adapt activities for different seasons while maintaining basic structure
- Winter walks can offer unique connection opportunities despite cold

SENSORY FOCUS BY SEASON

- Winter: Focus on sense of smell (earth contact) and texture exploration
- Spring: Emphasis on sense of hearing and smell (creating “forest perfumes”)
- Summer: Visual focus with “little things” exploration and heart sense
- Autumn: Tactile focus with moss and texture exploration, noticing support systems



CARD 2: ADAPTING THE WALK PHASES

CONNECTION STAGE

- Simple introduction with clear explanation of process
- Journey through senses while seated in comfortable location
- Slow wander through forest with guided attention to details
- Create opportunities for sharing after each exploration

MEANINGFUL CONNECTION STAGE

- Partner-based explorations rather than individual activities
- Texture exploration and creating forest offerings (Winter)
- Creating “perfume potions” from forest scents (Spring)

- Collecting and sharing “little things” (Summer)
- Finding elements that support each other in nature (Autumn)

SOLO TIME ADAPTATIONS

- Be flexible about solo experiences (many returned early in Winter walk)
- Offer paired alternatives if solo time causes anxiety
- Shorter durations for individual reflection
- Sitting with trees or rocks “as if with a friend”

CLOSING STAGE

- Share seasonal tea and snacks (foraged when appropriate)
- Final sharing circle with space for all voices
- Simple closing rituals (songs, gratitude expressions)



CARD 3: PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION TIPS

ADAPTING TO PATIENT NEEDS

- Monitor focus capacity and adjust activity duration accordingly
- Observe body language for signs of discomfort or disengagement
- Create clear container for safety through precise instructions
- Use concrete rather than metaphorical language
- Be attentive to sensory sensitivity (hyper/hypo stimulation)

BUILDING CONNECTION

- Encourage partner exploration to combat isolation
- Plan multiple walks to build continuity and relationships
- Maintain consistent structure while varying

content

- Offer open-ended invitations rather than strict tasks
- Balance familiarity (urban parks) with immersion (natural forests)

GUIDE PREPARATION

- Ground yourself before leading the group
- Trust your intuition about group needs
- Embrace unpredictability and flexibility
- Use simple, accessible language (“picnic in nature” vs. “forest immersion”)
- Prepare for various weather conditions and participant responses
- Few programs tailored to specific mental health needs
- High costs of participation in specialised programs



CARD 4: WORKING WITH MENTAL HEALTH POPULATIONS

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

- Outpatients in first recovery stage after psychiatric crisis
- Mixed diagnoses (psychosis, schizophrenia, depression, personality disorders)
- Varied medication impacts on attention and energy
- Often experience isolation and difficulty with social bonds
- Limited experience with outdoor/nature activities

GROUP EXPERT COLLABORATION

- Include care workers and clinical staff in the experience
- Provide clear guidance to accompanying

professionals

- Help staff cultivate their own nature connection
- Encourage staff to let go of expectations about outcomes
- Ensure professional support in case of triggering experiences

OBSERVED BENEFITS

- Improved mood (documented through pre-/post- evaluations)
- Increased relaxation and sensory awakening
- Social connection through shared experience
- Expressions of gratitude and joy
- Appreciation for rare opportunity to leave clinical settings



Benefits – as supported by research

Several scientific studies support the premise that nature connection activities are relevant interventions for psychiatric patients, some of which are summarised below. Full citations and links to the research papers can be found in the 'Further Reading' section in this e-book.

For instance, a review by Mikkel Hjort et al (2023), shows that 'patients with mental health diagnoses experience less anxiety and depressive symptoms and higher levels of 'well-being' when they spend time in natural environments as part of their treatment,' and that 'there is a relationship between the outdoor settings and the recovery of psychiatric patients.' It concludes that 'outdoor settings can be seen as a comprehensive resource for mental health.'

A 2021 paper in the British Journal of Psychiatry (Sharon Cuthbert et al) addresses the mental healthcare implications of engagement with natural environments, advocating for 'the implementation of targeted nature-based interventions (green care) to meet recovery needs that would enable research to develop, clarifying what works best for whom.'

A pilot study by Lilly Joschko et al (2023), attentive to recent stress factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, seeks to 'evaluate the effectiveness of nature-based therapy for young psychosomatic patients,' reporting 'improvements in mental wellbeing and connectedness to nature through therapy,' as well as lower depression scores.



Benefits – as suggested by our experiences

The choice of this particular population derived from the interest of the forest therapy guide / coordinator of the Portugal team and the accessibility expert in bringing an innovative practice and intervention to this population.

As mentioned previously, with a scarcity of resources and many health professionals overworked, the capacity to bring new and more progressive interventions like green care in psychiatry is limited. It was therefore with great excitement that we set out to evaluate the benefits of meaningful nature connection experiences with this population.

Taking into consideration the population's characteristics (as described above), we created a very flexible and open experience designed to offer comfort and the possibility for quality time outdoors.

These were the benefits that emerged:

Direct benefits:

- Direct physiological and psychological benefits of being outside their habitual closed environment: being physically outdoors, walking in and experiencing the forest.
- Sharing quality time together, stimulating the senses and conversation
- Being offered a novel experience that none had previously experienced created a sense of self-importance and self-esteem; also from the understanding that someone cared for them and wanted them to have a pleasurable experience
- Relaxation and stress relief
- Opening up of new possibilities in ways to spend their day, rather than just in closed environments and with excessive use of digital devices
- Shared experience within the group
- Offering the group experts and health professionals alternative interventions to the ones they usually rely on, which typically include art activities within a closed space



Longer-term benefits:

Identifying the long-term benefits of this particular walk program was difficult, as each excursion to the forest (once per season) hosted a different group of patients, with only two participants being present for three of the four walks.

- In the sharing sessions many participants recalled their times spent in nature and how they felt good in a natural environment. We believe that repetition of such experiences could create new habits that prove to be healthy and beneficial for this population
- A renewed relationship with nature and its positive impact on their wellbeing
- The offer of a recreational option that may supplement or replace indoor activities and empty times with no structured activity at all



Benefits – as reported in participant feedback

By evaluating the effects of each walk with participant questionnaires and group expert feedback forms, we were able to identify the benefits defined by our target groups.

The **group experts** reported the following benefits:

- Decrease in anxiety levels
- Improvement in interpersonal relationships
- Autonomy
- Personal development
- Adaptation to new contexts
- Sharing of emotions and feelings after contact with a natural environment
- Increased sensory stimulation
- Increase in overall wellbeing
- Connection with nature and self enhances an individual's reflective process
- Support in socialisation and interaction
- Nature connection increases tranquillity and overall improvement in mental health

The **participants** (psychiatric patients) reflected on the experience throughout the walk, during the sharing moments. They also reflected on the impact of their experience through the adapted POMS (Profile of Mood States) scale evaluation that was reviewed before and after the walks.

Benefits included:

- Improved mood
- Decreased stress levels
- Improved mood associations





QUICK REFERENCE CARDS



CARD 1: RESEARCH-SUPPORTED BENEFITS

SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE

- Reduced anxiety and depressive symptoms (Hjort et al, 2023)
- Improved mental wellbeing scores (Joschko et al, 2023)
- Enhanced recovery process on psychiatric wards
- Increased connectedness to nature
- Decreased depression scores

KEY RESEARCH INSIGHTS

- Natural environments support psychiatric recovery processes

- Outdoor settings function as comprehensive mental health resources
- Safe environments combined with nature exposure relate to wellbeing
- Gardening and direct nature contact show therapeutic value
- All patients in studies reported nature-based therapy as effective
- Importance of therapist creating supportive environment
- Similar effects observed across different diagnoses



CARD 2: OBSERVED PROGRAM OUTCOMES

IMMEDIATE BENEFITS

- Measurable mood improvement (3.2 to 4.4 on a 5-point scale)
- Relief from closed indoor environments
- Sensory stimulation and awakening
- Relaxation and stress reduction
- Decrease in anxiety levels
- Reawakening memories of positive nature experiences

PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPROVEMENTS

- Enhanced self-importance and self-esteem
- Feelings of being valued and cared for
- Improved interpersonal relationships
- Support for socialisation and interaction

- Sharing of emotions and feelings
- Building autonomy and adaptation
- Opportunity for personal development
- Alternative to excessive digital device use

HEALTHCARE PROVIDER ADVANTAGES

- Alternative intervention options beyond traditional approaches
- Expanding beyond indoor art activities
- Observing patients in different contexts
- Supporting patients' reflective processes
- Evidence-based complement to standard treatments
- Increased patient engagement and interaction

OUTRO

LEARNING CHECKPOINTS: PROGRESS TRACKING TOOL

Theory and Practice

Reflect on the material covered in this chapter:

- Did any concepts or ideas seem problematic, or is there anything with which you partially or fully disagree? If so, how would you articulate and support your position?
- Were there elements that surprised you, or conversely, felt very familiar?

Competences

Consider your personal development:

- Did you gain any new insights into Accessible Forest Practice (AFP) or the benefits of nature immersion?

- Has this chapter inspired you to consider becoming an Accessible Forest Practitioner yourself?

Achieved Goals

Evaluate your progress and satisfaction:

- Have you achieved the objectives you set for yourself at this stage?
- On a scale from 1 (no satisfaction) to 10 (complete satisfaction), how would you rate your overall satisfaction?
- Are there any remaining questions or areas of curiosity you would like to explore further?



CHAPTER 6

ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTICE FOR SENIORS



CHAPTER 6: ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTICE FOR SENIORS (LONG-TERM GROUP)

In this chapter we will look at the circumstances and realities of life for an elderly population with limited financial means living in a neighbourhood in Lisbon. These individuals were connected with the Alegria de Viver Foundation, which is dedicated to facilitating social services and activities, combating isolation and loneliness, and promoting healthy and active aging. We will explore how to use nature as a space for community building, promotion of wellbeing and connection, stress reduction and as an antidote to depression and anxiety.

In technical terms, the elderly population typically refers to individuals who are in the later stages of life, generally categorised as being aged 60 years and older. However, this definition can vary based on context, including geographic, social, and health perspectives. According to some international organisations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), individuals aged 60 and above are often categorised as “elderly.” In many developed countries, including those in North America and Europe, the elderly population is generally defined as those aged 65 and older. This aligns with the age of retirement or eligibility for social benefits like pensions. In specific contexts, such as health care planning and medical research, an additional subdivision of the elderly population may include those aged 75 and older, often referred to as the “older elderly.”

What You Will Learn in this Section:

Theoretical Insights:

- An overview of the challenges faced by elderly populations in the Western world
- The competences regarding knowledge, skills and attitudes that an Accessible Forest Practitioner wanting to work with this specific population might consider developing
- Scientific evidence of the benefits of nature connection practices for the elderly population

Practical Applications:

Practical examples and strategies developed from the walks held for this population, and how to apply these in the meaningful nature connection experiences you might want to create.

Reflective Consideration:

Take a moment to reflect on your objectives at this stage of your work. Are you focused on expanding your knowledge, enhancing your skills, or both?

Key Competences:

This chapter will delve into the following relevant competences:

Knowledge

- A basic understanding about the **elderly population** and the challenges they face.
- An orientation on how to develop a basic understanding of **naturalist knowledge** in the area where you want to hold your nature connection experiences.
- An orientation on how to build your knowledge around the appropriate **language** to use

when working with this population.

- A basic understanding of **Emergency First Aid** in order to be able to attend to any acute episodes that might occur.

Skills

- You will learn to develop your **communication** skills with this population.
- You will be encouraged to reflect and develop your skills **facilitating nature connection experiences**.
- You will learn how to **communicate** effectively with this population, including knowing how to choose the appropriate **language** to use.

Attitudes

You will be invited to cultivate the following attitudes:

- **Empathy**
- **Sensitivity**
- **Respect for nature**
- **Patience**
- **Flexibility**
- **Serenity**
- **Trust**
- **Openness**
- **Respect for the group**
- **Positive energy**
- **Environmental awareness**

Time Allocation:

Dedicate approximately three hours to fully engage with the material and activities presented in this chapter.

In this section we are going to look at the General Accessibility Issues faced by the Elderly population living in urban environments in the Western world.

Invitation for reflection

Read through this section with an attitude of curiosity. Maybe some of the issues this population faces are ones you are already aware of, while others might be new. As you read, make notes and reflect on how these issues might affect how you design the nature connection experience for this population.

THE TARGET GROUP

In pre-industrial societies, both in the Western world and globally, the elderly typically held important roles in their communities. Revered as sources of leadership and wisdom, they were valued as repositories of cultural knowledge, traditions, and oral history, and their role in ensuring cultural continuity. Elders often served as leaders, decision-makers, and spiritual guides. Their experience in managing communal affairs, resolving conflicts, and teaching younger generations was valued. In hunter-gatherer and agrarian societies, older people were often integral to the social fabric of the community, in which extended families lived in close-knit groups and the contributions of each member, including elders, were necessary for survival.

Many cultures in Africa and Asia, and Indigenous communities worldwide, still hold a strong reverence for elders as custodians of cultural wisdom.

The advent of industrialisation in the 18th and 19th centuries marked a significant turning point in the role of the elderly in Western societies. As economies shifted from agriculture to industry, and urbanisation accelerated, family and societal structures began to change, often diminishing the roles and status of older people.

The rise of the wage economy during the Industrial Revolution reduced the dependence of younger family members on the knowledge





and experience of elders. In pre-industrial times, elders often controlled resources like land and livestock, making them central figures in family and economic decision-making. Industrialisation shifted economic power away from families and towards factories and businesses.

As younger generations migrated to cities for work, often leaving rural or agrarian communities, the extended family structure began to break down. This geographic separation weakened the elder's influence within the family unit and broader community.

Industrial societies valued innovation and the adoption of new technologies, often at the expense of traditional knowledge. Younger generations were now seen as more adept in adapting to modern technologies and systems, further marginalising the elderly.

The introduction of state-sponsored retirement systems in the late 19th and early 20th centuries marked another turning point. The very concept of retirement, popularised through policies like Bismarck's pension system in Germany (1889), led to the formal disengagement of elderly individuals from the workforce and community.

Once people reached a certain age, they were



no longer expected to contribute economically. While this shift provided security for older people, it also contributed to their isolation and reduced their role in the economy and public life. Losing their role in community rituals, storytelling and moral guidance. The elderly were now more likely to live on pensions or savings, separating them from the working and decision-making classes. In the past, economic activity was closely tied to family units wherein the elderly continued to exert influence, but retirement systems contributed to a view of old age as a

Dependency on elder wisdom and experience waned as younger generations gained access to formal education, the media, and technological advancements. This shift relegated the elderly to more peripheral roles, as their knowledge was often seen as outdated or irrelevant in modern contexts. Another factor contributing to the decline of the status of older people in society was the professionalisation of care and knowledge.

As healthcare systems developed, the elderly became more dependent on medical

professionals and formal institutions for care, shifting away from traditional family-based care systems. The nursing home or retirement community emerged as a common solution for their care, physically and socially distancing the elderly from their families and communities.

In modern societies, where knowledge is often specialised and certified



period of withdrawal from public and family life.

In the post-World War II era, the shift toward nuclear families further diminished the roles of the elderly in Western communities. Smaller family units, often comprising only parents and children, became the norm, and the multi-generational households that had been common in agrarian or pre-industrial societies became less prevalent. With increased economic mobility and the rise of suburban living, many families moved away from their hometowns and traditional family settings, leaving the elderly behind in rural areas or old neighbourhoods.



through formal education, the authority of elders as community leaders and knowledge holders diminished. Younger generations sought guidance from professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and educators rather than elders within the community.

The rise of youth culture in the 20th century, particularly from the 1960s onward, contributed to a growing ageism – a cultural bias that values youth, productivity, and innovation while viewing old age as a period of decline and obsolescence.

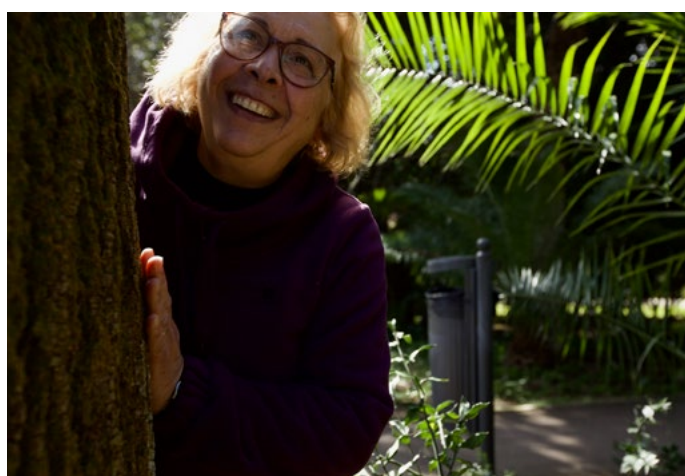
Mass media and advertising increasingly promoted youthfulness as the ideal, marginalising the elderly in both social representation and public life. As youth culture became dominant, older generations were viewed as less adaptable and relevant to the quickly changing social and technological landscape.

The rapid development of technology created a digital divide, further exacerbating the gap

between younger and older generations. The elderly, especially those who are not technologically adept, are often excluded from the increasingly digital nature of communication, commerce, and even social interaction.

In recent years, there has been a partial resurgence of the roles held by older people, particularly in terms of their contribution to intergenerational knowledge sharing and as caretakers in some family structures. Many elderly individuals continue to contribute economically by working past the traditional retirement age or taking on volunteer roles.

However, ageism and the marginalisation of





elderly voices remain widespread problems, particularly in media representation, political engagement, and technological access.

To summarise, the decline of the elderly's position in Western communities can be attributed to significant social, economic, and cultural transformations, particularly industrialisation, the rise of nuclear families, retirement systems, and the professionalisation of knowledge. These changes de-emphasised the traditional roles of elders as wisdom keepers and community leaders. While elderly populations still play important roles in some capacities, modern Western societies often marginalise older people, a trend that contrasts sharply with the reverence shown to elders in pre-industrial and non-Western cultures.

Nature connection activities, such as the Accessible Forest project walks, hiking, birdwatching, or gardening, can provide numerous physical, mental, and emotional benefits for elderly populations. However, due to a combination of physical, logistical, socio-economic, psychological, and cultural barriers, they often face challenges accessing such activities. Improved access can however be achieved by creating more inclusive programs, developing age-friendly infrastructure, and raising awareness of the benefits of nature for older people. Adaptive equipment, transportation solutions, and social support systems also play crucial roles in overcoming these obstacles.



Obstacles to Connecting with Nature for the Elderly Population

For elderly people living in an urban setting, there are several challenges that may discourage participation in nature connection activities. These include:

Accessibility of Natural Areas

1. **Insufficient Infrastructure:** Many nature reserves, parks, and trails are not designed with the elderly in mind. Lack of accessible pathways (e.g., smooth, level surfaces) can prevent elderly people from safely navigating these areas, especially those who use mobility aids like walkers, canes, or wheelchairs.
2. **Transportation Challenges:** Reaching nature areas can be difficult for elderly individuals, particularly if they no longer drive or have reduced access to transportation. Many natural environments, especially more scenic or less urbanised areas, require private vehicles for access, making them harder to access for those who rely on public transportation.
3. **Rural-Urban Divide:** For older individuals living in urban areas, access to natural spaces can also be limited by geographical distance. Urban parks might be available, but more immersive nature experiences, such as visiting forests, may be out of reach.

Socio-Economic Barriers

1. **Cost of Nature Activities:** While some outdoor activities are free, others, like guided forest therapy walks or access to natural parks, can involve fees that may be prohibitive for elderly people living on fixed incomes and social security benefits (which in Portugal are very low).
2. **Cost of Adaptive Equipment:** Elderly individuals may require specialised equipment, such as walking aids or adaptive gear, to comfortably participate in outdoor activities. The cost of such equipment may prevent them from engaging in nature connection activities. In the case of our group in Portugal, the Accessible Forest budget allowed for the purchase of portable benches for greater comfort.

Lack of Age-Friendly Programs

1. **Few Tailored Programs:** Many nature

connection programs, such as guided hikes or educational tours, are not designed with the elderly in mind. They may cater to more physically able participants and lack slower-paced or adaptive activities more suitable for those with reduced stamina or mobility. In this project, we have largely tailored the activity to the (long-term) population.

2. **Lack of Inclusive Design:** Programs might not consider elderly-specific needs such as shorter walking distances, more frequent breaks, shaded areas, seating, or access to restrooms. Without these accommodations, participation can be daunting or impossible for many.

Mental and Psychological Barriers

1. **Fears about Safety:** Concerns about physical safety, such as falling or getting lost, are common among elderly individuals. In some cases, these fears can discourage participation in outdoor activities, especially in unfamiliar or isolated natural environments.
2. **Cognitive Decline:** For elderly individuals with conditions such as dementia or Alzheimer's disease, navigating natural spaces can be challenging. They may struggle with disorientation or confusion, increasing their reliance on caregivers or guides, which might limit their independence and spontaneity regarding outdoor activities.
3. **Social Isolation:** Many elderly individuals experience social isolation, which can prevent them from participating in outdoor activities that are typically enjoyed in groups. Without social support or companions, they may feel less inclined to engage with nature.

Cultural and Psychological Disengagement

1. **Perception of Nature as Youth-Oriented:** Many nature-based activities are marketed or perceived as being for younger, more physically fit individuals. This perception can lead elderly individuals to believe that

these activities are not for them or that they might be unwelcome, and feel uncomfortable participating.

2. **Cultural Disengagement:** In some modern cultures, elderly individuals are not encouraged to engage with nature as part of their lifestyle. The elderly may prioritise other activities or may not have had previous exposure to nature-based activities, making them less likely to seek out such experiences later in life.

Caregiver Dependence

1. **Need for Assistance:** Many elderly individuals require assistance from caregivers or family members to participate in outdoor activities. This can limit their ability to spontaneously engage with nature, as they must rely on someone else's availability and willingness.
2. **Caregiver Availability:** Family caregivers or professional caretakers may have limited time or resources to take elderly individuals to nature areas, especially if those activities are regarded as secondary to more immediate health and care needs.

Lack of Awareness or Encouragement

1. **Underrepresentation in Outreach:** Public initiatives or programs designed to promote nature activities often do not specifically target or include the elderly population. As a result, older adults may not be aware of available opportunities or may not feel that these activities are suitable for them.
2. **Insufficient Promotion of Health Benefits:**

While nature connection activities are known to have positive health effects, including reduced stress and improved mental wellbeing, the specific benefits for the elderly – such as improved cognitive function or reduced depression – may not be adequately promoted.

Weather Sensitivity

1. **Sensitivity to Extreme Weather:** The elderly are more vulnerable to extreme weather conditions, such as heat, cold, or humidity. Engaging in nature-based activities under these conditions can pose health risks like heat stroke, dehydration, or respiratory issues. These risks can limit when and where older individuals comfortable engaging with nature.
2. **Lack of Suitable Clothing and Gear:** The elderly may lack the appropriate clothing or gear (e.g., sun protection, sturdy shoes) that make spending time outdoors safe and comfortable.

Elderly populations face numerous obstacles to accessing nature connection activities, ranging from socio-economic barriers, accessibility to natural spaces, lack of age-friendly programs, mental and psychological barriers, dependence on caregivers and insufficient awareness and encouragement. Addressing these barriers requires more integrated strategies and interventions that will allow the elderly to remain vital and healthy and engaged in community life, as opposed to isolated or confined to nursing homes.





Invitation to Empathy:

How Might it Feel to be an Older Adult?

Imagine that you have not actively contributed to society in the past ten years, and your daily life has been reduced to waking up, often painfully and noticing a gradual decline in your physical ability, rummaging around your house a bit, then sitting in front of the TV while frequently dozing off.

Your family members seldom come and see you as they have very busy lives, and on weekends are so tired that they often forget to visit. You see your grandchildren only on special occasions and as a result you become more and more distant from each other.

As the months pass you feel increasingly lonely and depressed and start to lose interest in life.

You live in a city and your neighbours are busy people who also rarely check in on you.

You live on a very limited pension from the social services that is just about enough to purchase the medications you need and a little food.

You hear terrible stories on the news about elderly people being tricked and scammed and you have become more fearful of going outside on your own, preferring to stay at home behind locked doors.

This metaphorical journey demonstrates some of the challenges that the elderly population faces today. With respect to physical limitations, many older individuals experience age-related conditions such as arthritis, reduced mobility, cardiovascular issues, or chronic pain.

These conditions can make physically demanding nature activities like walking on uneven terrain difficult or even impossible. Physical stamina also tends to decrease with age, making it harder for elderly individuals to engage in prolonged outdoor activities. Even mild activities like walking through a park can become challenging if facilities like benches or rest areas are not readily available. The elderly are at a higher risk of falls and injuries, especially in natural environments where the ground may be uneven, slippery, or otherwise unsafe. Fear of falling can therefore also deter participation in nature-related activities.

Reflections on Section 1

Now that you have read through this analysis of the situation faced by elderly populations in the Western world, reflect on ways in which you might creatively address some of the issues mentioned above.





CARD 1: UNDERSTANDING THE ELDERLY – CONTEXT

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

- Traditionally valued as wisdom keepers and community leaders
- Industrialisation leads to diminished roles in family and society
- Shift from extended to nuclear family structures
- Retirement systems formalise disengagement from workforce
- Modern society often marginalises elderly voices and experiences

CURRENT CHALLENGES

- Physical decline and health limitations
- Social isolation and loneliness
- Limited financial resources (fixed incomes)
- Fear for personal safety
- Reduced transportation options
- Digital divide and technological challenges
- Declining family support systems
- Cultural perception as less adaptable or relevant



CARD 2: BARRIERS TO NATURE CONNECTION

PHYSICAL & LOGISTICAL BARRIERS

- Inaccessible paths and terrain
- Transportation challenges to natural areas
- Reduced stamina and mobility
- Fear of falling or injury
- Lack of accessible facilities (restrooms, seating)
- Weather sensitivity and vulnerability
- Distance between urban residences and nature areas

SOCIOECONOMIC & PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS

- Limited financial resources for equipment or program fees
- Social isolation impeding group participation
- Fear of going outdoors alone
- Perception of nature activities as youth-oriented
- Lack of companions or caregivers for support
- Cognitive decline affecting navigation abilities
- Insufficient awareness of available opportunities
- Cultural disengagement from outdoor activities



CARD 3: PRACTITIONER COMPETENCIES

ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

- Understanding age-related physical limitations
- Familiarity with common health conditions
- Basic emergency first aid skills
- Naturalist knowledge of accessible local areas
- Awareness of appropriate communication approaches

CRITICAL SKILLS

- Clear, respectful communication
- Patience and flexibility in facilitation
- Ability to adapt activities to varying abilities
- Group management with attention to individual needs
- Creating inclusive, supportive environments

IMPORTANT ATTITUDES

- Empathy and sensitivity
- Respect for autonomy and dignity
- Patience and serenity
- Flexibility and openness
- Positivity without condescension
- Environmental awareness and respect for nature



SECTION 2. ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTITIONER COMPETENCIES

INTRO

This section covers the competencies that will support you to deliver a safe and enjoyable nature connection experience to elderly people living in constrained social and economic conditions, who require support and/or who are suffering from isolation and/or depression, yet who seek to age well, in a way that is active and pleasurable and nourished by community life.

Now that we have explored some of the important characteristics of the elderly population with respect to the broad challenges they face, and also with respect to nature connection activities, we are going to take a closer look at the competencies that Accessible Forest Practitioners can develop to meet these challenges and to develop effective practical strategies that will allow them to deliver meaningful nature connection experiences to this population.

Let's start by taking a look at some of the competencies that AF Practitioners who work with the elderly should develop. You will then take yourself on a self-assessment journey based on these competencies.





SELF-AWARENESS ('I') – NORTH QUADRANT

This area of the learning compass focuses on competences related to your self-awareness as a practice facilitator. This includes the attitudes, skills, and knowledge needed to consciously guide the practice for elderly individuals. Practitioners are encouraged to cultivate the competences suggested here; any others they might also feel are relevant can also be added to the list.

Key competencies include:

- Skilful communication
- Skill of developing a personal relationship with nature
- An attitude of patience
- An attitude of openness
- An attitude of kindness
- An attitude of playfulness



THE EXPERIENCE – SOUTH QUADRANT

This area of the compass refers to personal experiences; it focuses on those competencies needed to prepare and guide the specific group and population through a defined process in a particular location.

Key competencies include:

- Confidence in the Universal Walk flow
- Capacity to adapt the flow of the experience
- Use of appropriate language
- Listening to the group's needs
- Choosing an appropriate location for the experience
- Considering hospitality needs



NATURE - WEST QUADRANT

This area of the compass is dedicated to the relationship with nature, and focuses on competences that foster a conscious connection with the natural world, inviting its collaboration in the process. In order to invite walk participants into this relationship with the natural world, it is essential that the AF Practitioner cultivates their own personal relationship with the natural world. They will then be able to facilitate the experience from a place of authentic experience, rather than cognitive learning, and be able to embody it from a place of authenticity.

Key competencies include:

- Naturalist knowledge
- Cultivating respect for nature
- Cultivating trust in nature
- Sensory intimacy with nature
- Cultivating playfulness
- Cultivating awareness of the local natural environments



THE GROUP – EAST QUADRANT

The East quadrant represents working with the specific group of participants, focusing on analysing needs, emotional states, language, and group dynamics. For elderly individuals, this involves creating a supportive environment that fosters trust and reduces feelings of isolation.

Key competencies include:

- Knowledge about the population
- Knowledge in Emergency First Aid
- Cultivating an attitude of respect for the group
- Cultivating an attitude of empathy
- Cultivating an attitude of sensitivity
- Cultivating an attitude of flexibility

Now let's take a closer look at each of these competences and what they mean for you as a potential Accessible Forest Practitioner.



SELF-REFLECTION ON THE COMPETENCES LISTED ABOVE

Below you will find a self-assessment tool for each one of the competences listed above

On a scale of 1 (very unfamiliar) to 10 (very familiar) evaluate how you would position yourself in relation to each of the competences. This will give you a sense of which competences to dedicate more or less of your time and energy to. Create a strategy for yourself for deepening your understanding of each competence, establishing the priorities that you feel are most appropriate to your own unique learning journey.

SELF-AWARENESS ('I') - NORTH QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assesment scale 1 to 10
Skilful communication: I am aware of how I communicate with this population with respect to my tone of voice and volume, and intentionality in the words I choose. I maintain an open channel of communication.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
My relationship with nature I am aware of my relationship with nature and what it offers me and my life, and I maintain regular practice so that it is part of who I am.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
An attitude of patience I am aware that cultivating an attitude of patience is important when working with the elderly population. I am able to listen without judging and to repeat the same thing over and over again without feeling or appearing to feel frustrated.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
An attitude of openness I am open and am able to create an environment in which all participants feel free from judgement and totally accepted as they are.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
An attitude of kindness I am aware that being kind is an important quality to cultivate and embody it when working with the elderly population. I am aware that kindness generates kindness, and that this population thrives on and is enlivened by acts of kindness.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
An attitude of playfulness I am aware that cultivating qualities of playfulness and light- heartedness is important for being able to create and maintain a joyful container when practicing nature connection experiences with the elderly population.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

THE EXPERIENCE – SOUTH QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Skill facilitating the experience I am confident in the flow of the nature connection experience and in my ability to facilitate each stage of it.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Choice of appropriate location for the experience I feel confident that I know how to choose a location that will be comfortable for the participants – a location that is easily accessible, with comfortable terrain and flat open spaces, so that those with mobility issues can move safely.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Use of appropriate language I feel confident that I can use language that supports the elderly population to engage with the experience and to foster their own relationship with nature.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
An attitude of serenity I am confident that I can embody and convey an attitude of serenity, both for myself and for the group, and that this attitude is necessary to facilitate this type of nature connection experience.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
A positive attitude I am confident that I can embody and convey a positive attitude that supports participants to engage with the experience. I am aware that my positive attitude can help participants overcome any resistance they might feel during the experience, and encourage them to embrace it.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Hospitality needs I am confident that I can offer both tangible (blankets, seating) and intangible tools (grounding exercises) to meet participants' needs during the experience.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

NATURE – WEST QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Naturalist knowledge I feel confident about my knowledge of the biome in which I intend to facilitate the nature connection experiences. I am familiar with the fauna and flora of the location and am aware of any dangers they might pose to the participants.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Cultivating respect for nature I cultivate respect for the natural world in my day-to-day life. I strive to inspire others to do the same through my own example.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

NATURE – WEST QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Cultivating trust in nature I hold a regular practice of cultivating trust in the natural world and its ability to offer participants what they need.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Sensory intimacy with nature I allow myself time to explore sensory connection to the natural environment.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Cultivating playfulness I feel confident that I can bring a light-hearted and playful attitude to my facilitation of the nature connection experience	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Cultivating environmental awareness I am aware of the environmental policies and attitudes in the location where I guide. I am confident in being able to share and inspire participants to adopt an environmentally friendly attitude in their day-to-day lives.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

THE GROUP – SOUTH QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Knowledge about the population I am confident that I am aware of the needs of the elderly population and that I can respond to their needs in a way that feels empowering and supportive to them.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Knowledge of Emergency First Aid I am confident in my ability to address any acute emergency situations that might arise with this population and that I know how to seek medical intervention when managing the situation is beyond my scope of competence.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Cultivating an attitude of respect for the group I am confident that I am able to cultivate an attitude of respect for the elderly population. I can take the time that they need and meet them where they are on a physical, emotional and spiritual level.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Cultivating an attitude of empathy I am able to be empathic with the experience participants. I am able to hold a space of non-judgemental listening.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

THE GROUP – SOUTH QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assesment scale 1 to 10
Cultivating an attitude of respect I am able to stay present and aware of what is going on with the group, sensitive to any needs (physical, emotional and spiritual) that might surface for the group as a whole or for individuals within it.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Cultivating an attitude of flexibility I cultivate an attitude of flexibility, being able to adapt to the needs of the group at a physical, emotional and spiritual level. In each moment I allow the needs of the group to guide the flow of the experience.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



Now that you have a clearer understanding of the competences required to facilitate a meaningful nature connection experience for the elderly population and, through self-evaluation, you are aware where you stand in relation to each, consider making a list of the competences that you would like to deepen your experience and knowledge of.

Please refer to the Learner's Journey and the variety of learning materials available to help you with this.



DESCRIPTION OF THE TARGET GROUP

The specific target group were men and women aged between 75 and 86 years old, living in Lisbon in the neighbourhood of Belém, and involved with the Alegria de Viver Foundation. In working to build community, foster personal development, and fight against social isolation, the Foundation offers individual and collective activities that promote wellbeing and belonging. It recognises all that its members have done for their communities over the course of their lives, giving back to them by providing them with moments of pleasure, joy, and social engagement.

There participants were:

- 16 in all: 12 women and 4 men.
- Aged between 75 and 86.
- Not all able to sit on the floor, but they were all mobile.
- In terms of schooling, all had up to 4th grade Portuguese.
- All were cognitively alert, mentally capable and intellectually curious, and were all able to communicate clearly.

A WINTER WALK IN NATURE FOR THE ELDERLY POPULATION

We might typically consider warmer weather as a better time to be outdoors, while winter may seem like an unlikely season to go outside and connect with nature. However, being outside at this time of year can – especially on a sunny day – be surprisingly pleasant, and offer increased opportunities for connection and community-building at a time of the year when this population tends to isolate itself even more than usual.

Winter Walk - Jardim Botânico de Belém (Long-Term Group)

Our first walk took place with the long-term group of elderly people who committed to taking part in all four walks (one in each season). All are retired, on a very low income, and reside in the neighbourhood of Belém in Lisbon. They are all connected with Alegria de Viver, a foundation that dedicates itself to creating experiences for this population in order to combat social isolation and depression.

This first walk took place in the Jardim Botânico de Belém, the local public park. All members of the group had lived in this area all of their lives, so there were many shared childhood memories in this place. Although many changes had taken place in this neighbourhood over time, the trees in the park were the same that they had played among as small children. This created a sense of safety

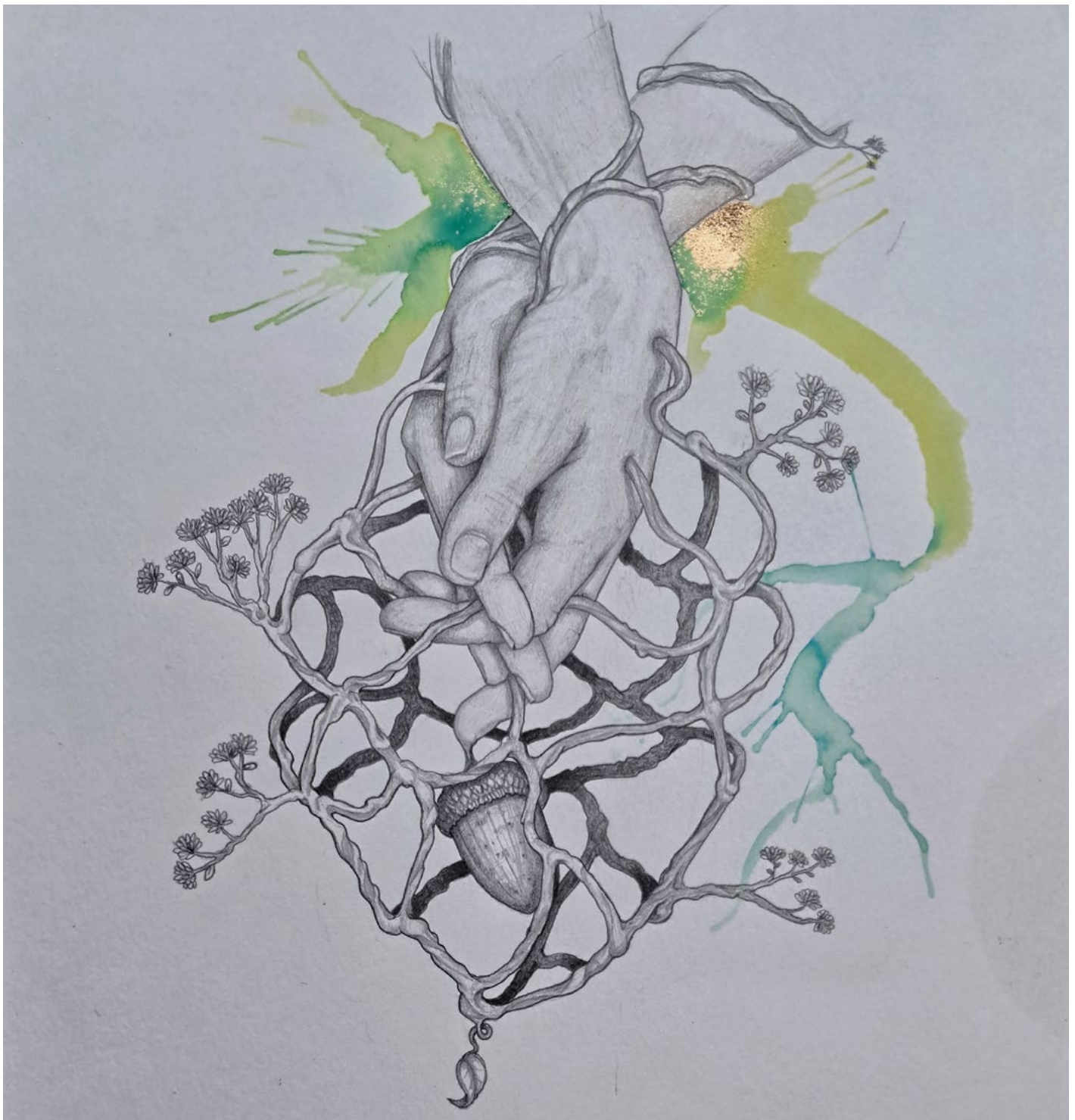
and recollections of playful and carefree times in their childhood.

1. Connection Phase. The group had arranged to meet outside the park gates. As the participants arrived one after the other, we had the opportunity to welcome each and get to know them a little better. When the group had all arrived, the guide offered an introduction to the Accessible Forest project and handed out the evaluation forms (the nature relatedness scale & the POMS scale). The guide explained the forms and the team helped the participants fill them out. After all the forms were completed, we made our way through the gates and purchased the access tickets. Anyone who needed to use the toilet facilities did so before setting out on the experience.



2. Sensory Exploration Phase. We made our way to a wide opening on a lawn surrounded by large old trees. It was a big group and we tried to form a circle. This was challenging, so the guide decided to invite everyone to hold hands to facilitate the process. As this was greatly appreciated by the group, the method was used a few more times throughout the experience. The guide offered an introduction to what was going to happen during the experience, including some of the ground rules and explaining the sharing moments,

and then we started with the activities. The first connection experience was the Pleasures of Presence invitation, where the AF Practitioner offered a guided exploration of each of the five external senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste) as well as the heart sense. There was deep silence within the group as they allowed themselves to be guided through each of the senses. After the sensory exploration there was an opportunity for sharing with the prompt “What are you noticing?” We used a leaf to symbolise our



turn to share; the leaf was passed around the circle as each spoke. Every participant responded with a sense of surprise and awe about what they had just experienced, and there was an overall sense of calm in the group.

We then moved in silence to another area of the park where there were some benches, providing the group with more comfort. As we moved along the path the participants were invited to notice “What Is in Motion?” and to slow down and hold a moment of silence.

3. Relationship Building Phase. In this part of the experience we introduced an exercise called Texture Gathering. Participants were invited to form groups of two and to explore the surroundings using the sense of touch. The guide chose this invitation because the park offered such a great variety of shapes, colours and textures. The decision to carry out this activity in pairs was taken to create a sense of community building and social proximity, and to offer an alternative to the isolation that the participants often already experienced in their day-to-day lives. After about 20 minutes, the participants were invited to return to the circle and share among the group the textures that they had brought back. After sharing they were invited to build a centre piece together. It was very moving to witness how each brought back different textures that related to different stories in their lives and also memories from their childhood in this park. There was also a sense of shared memories in this place, as well as shared activities they had all enjoyed in youth, even if they did not know each other at the time.

4. Solo Walk Phase. In this part of the experience, participants were invited to find a tree and sit with that tree as if they were sitting with a friend. Each participant made their way to trees that were mostly in the sun so as to gather warmth. Because there were park benches in this area, some participants ended up sitting together with the same trees



and inevitably fell into conversation. Some participants even hugged their tree, grateful for their silent, present and grounded friend.

5. Integration Phase. Participants returned from the solo wander phase to encounter a tea ceremony set up in the place where they had together created an installation using the textures gathered in the previous invitation. There was tea made from rosemary from the guide’s garden and snacks that included fruit, home-baked biscuits and nuts. This was very well received by all the participants, who were surprised and touched by the possibility of having tea in the park this way. A final round of sharing took place in which all the participants expressed their gratitude. They were moved by the simplicity of the practice, the opportunity to share the experience with their friends, and especially to be in nature, accompanied, in a way that supported them to slow down and to feel so peaceful.

THE PHASES OF THE WALK AND THE SEASONAL WALKS

Below you will find the explorations and exercises that were offered in the different stages of the walks across the seasons in which the walks were offered. Please refer to the universal walk flow for a clearer understanding of the four phases of the walk.

With the elderly population of the Alegria de Viver Foundation we opted to hold each walk in a different location. This provided an opportunity to explore how varying natural environments impacted this population's experience of the nature connection practice. It also gave them the opportunity to visit places that they had never visited before or to revisit places they'd experienced when they were young and to restore memories of those times.

With this population, the intention was that they explore the different senses more deeply in each walk. As we progressed through the seasons and the walks, the accessibility expert, the group experts and the guide noticed the richness of the stories the participants shared. These stories affirmed cultural relevance, provided emotional support, and demonstrated the resilience of the participants. It was a kind of validation of the old ways, and the qualities and emotions of the remembered past returned to them now.



Connection Stage

Winter - Jardim Botânico de Belém

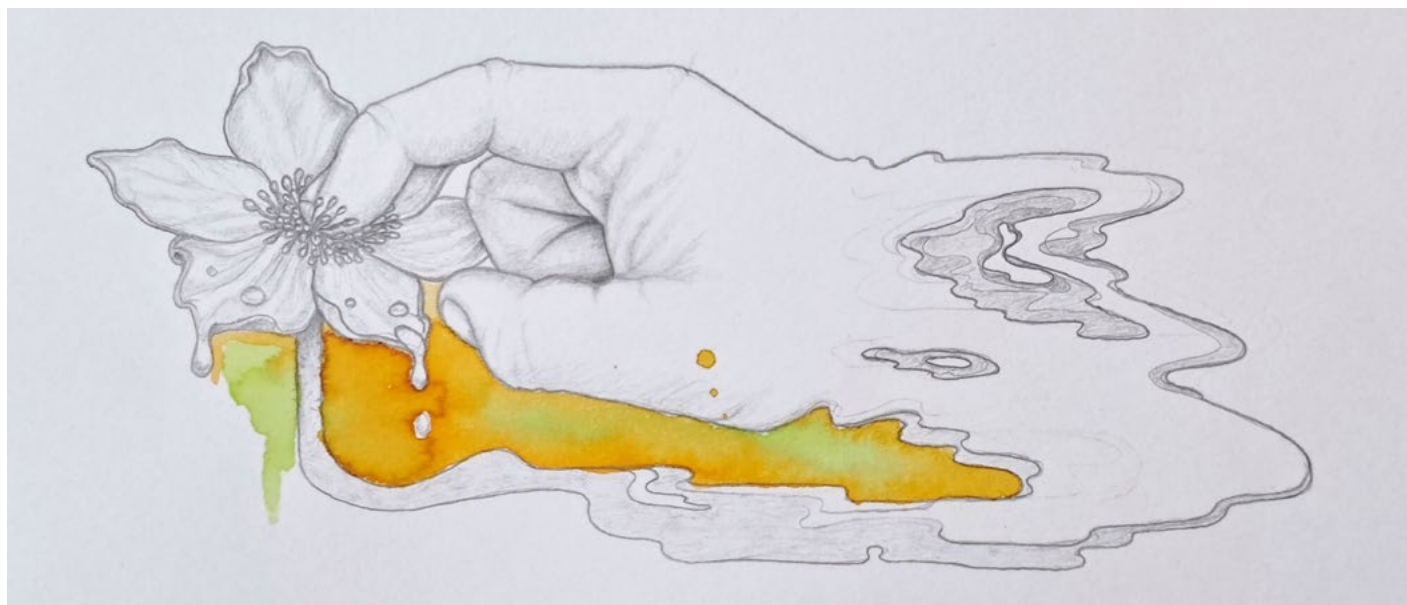
- General introduction to the experience. In order to form the circle the guide invited everyone to hold hands. It was a very beautiful moment of community building and remembering what it was like to hold hands in a circle as a child.
- Participants stood in a big circle on the main lawn of the botanical garden under two large trees for a guided exploration of the senses. Few words were used. The guide took care to raise her voice so that everyone could

hear her well. Sharing circle using a leaf as a sharing piece.

- Slow wander through the botanical garden paths to a location that was more secluded, and where there were park benches where the participants could sit together.

Spring - Mata dos Medos

- A welcome and a reminder of the different elements of the experience. This being the long-term group, they had all participated in the Winter experience and simply needed a little reminder of the flow of the experience. Information was offered about the history of the location and its cultural and environmental relevance.





- Walking from the parking lot to a location on the trail where we were all shaded by a big old pine tree.
- On arrival at this location participants were invited to form a circle, where the guide then offered a guided exploration of the senses. There was particular emphasis on the sense of sight.

Summer - Santuário da Peninha

- A welcome and a reminder of the different elements of the experience. Again, as this was the long-term group it was more about reminding them and also letting them know a little bit about the story of the place, including the legend of the Peninha Sanctuary. That story was well received. By this third walk with the group, it had become clear that the inclusion of storytelling offered a greater opportunity for engagement with the experience.
- Together we moved to where the connection experience was to take place. This was a flat

location with granite rocks covered in moss and tall cedar trees. Everyone found a spot where they felt comfortable to open their sitting bench and experience the journey through each sense. This time the focus was on the sense of touch, especially feeling the breeze that was flowing through the forest and smelling and touching its earth.

- After the sensory exploration, participants were invited to share what they were noticing. There was an overall sense of awe with the place, as well as the smells of the earth and the moss and the freshness of the forest.
- We then moved in pairs to another location, attentive to the surrounding environment along the way. The exploration involved slowing down and noticing the small details.

Autumn- Parque da Pena

- A welcome and a reminder of the different elements of the experience. Some context about the location was given, including the

Romantic-style gardens of the Parque da Pena and how they were created with the intention of stimulating the senses.

- Together we walked to a flat and comfortable area of the park in which the whole experience would be based. The guide offered a guided exploration of the senses and invited everyone to share their responses to that experience.
- After the sharing circle, we walked slowly around the immediate area looking for different shapes and colours.



Meaningful Nature Connection Stage:

Winter - Jardim Botânico do Belém

- Exploration of the sense of touch. Participants were invited to find a partner and together explore the textures in the garden and then bring back at least one texture with them. The group experts and accessibility experts accompanied some of the participants on this very rich and engaging experience. Upon return the pairs were invited to share their textures in a “show and tell” session, and then to create a joint expression in the centre on the ground, with everyone’s textures together.

Spring - Mata dos Medos

- For this part of the experience the guide again invited the participants to pair up and

to explore the location, a dense and extensive forest of pine trees. They were invited to find a sense room and imagine that this place might be their home, and think about what features this sense room might offer them. This was a very rich and fun experience as the participants then visited each other’s “sense room,” with each host explaining what their house was like and the features it offered – these ranged from gardens to large spacious rooms with sea views, and even roofs with wide open windows offering light and views of the night sky.

Summer- Santuário da Peninha

- Participants were paired up and invited to explore the forest looking for examples of where different elements were supporting each other, like for example moss growing on



a rock, ivy trailing up the trunk of a tree, or a broken branch resting on the trunk of another tree.

- As a group, we then visited the different connections and support systems that each pair had discovered.

Autumn- Parque da Pena

- Participants were invited to form pairs and to venture into the park looking for a treasure to bring back to the group. All of them found different treasures, each with different sensory connections and experiences. One of the participants found a pebble with a heart painted on it. Participants were invited to share about the treasures they had found and what each meant for them. It was a very touching moment, each person sharing in this way, as it felt like the ongoing and deepening experience of nature connection was somehow being revealed to them through the treasures they'd found.





Solo Time Stage

Winter - Jardim Botânico do Belém

- Participants were invited to choose a different partner and together find a tree and sit with that tree as if they were sitting with a friend. This brought a lot of playfulness and kindness, with some participants touching the trees and others spontaneously hugging them.

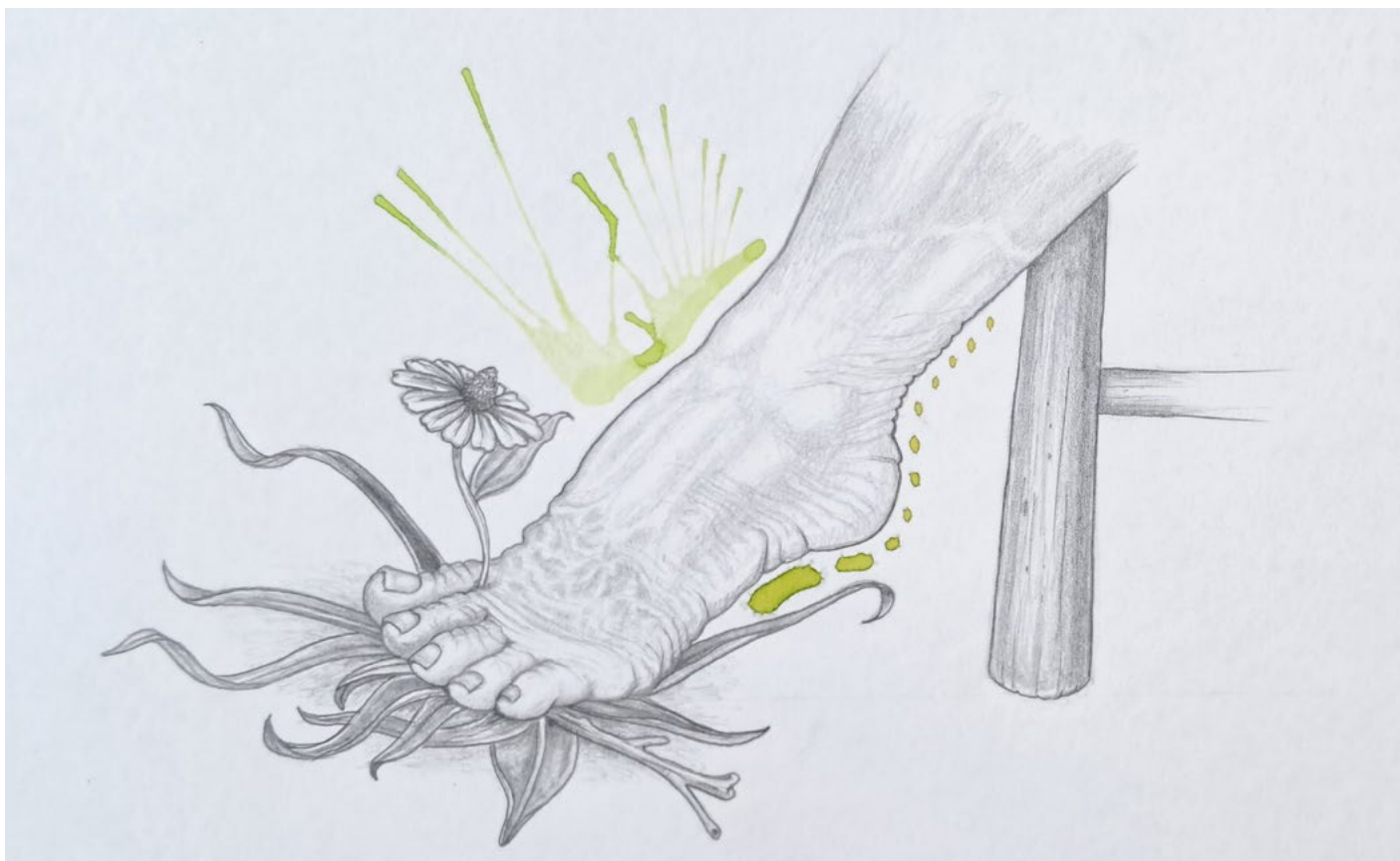


Spring - Mata dos Medos

- Remaining within the extensive area of pine forest that was our home base for the walk, participants were invited to find a new partner and to go and rest by leaning on a tree for comfort and friendship. This activity was intended to deepen the invitation that had been offered in the previous (winter) walk of also spending time with a tree as if they were spending time with a friend. Some participants brought treasures, including wild flowers, back with them, which then generated the sharing of stories in the final sharing circle.

Summer- Santuário da Peninha

- Individually participants were invited to find a



rock and to spend some time with that rock as if they were spending time with a friend. The location was perfect for this purpose, as it contained clusters of rocks ready to be experienced by the participants, who naturally began to gravitate towards them.

Autumn- Parque da Pena

- For the solo time we invited participants to find a non-human friend in that place and to sit with it for a while. One group of participants made their way through the park to find a giant tree with a trunk that had been shaped by time and offered an incredible “sofa” for everyone to sit on. The feeling was that, with such gifts, this place was a happy one.



Closing Stage

Winter - Jardim Botânico do Belém

- Tea and snacks were shared and there was a final sharing circle focusing on what the participants were taking away from the experience. Everyone took part in the sharing and there was an overall sense of gratitude and joy. Many told stories about how as children they often came to this park, but

back then it was a public swimming pool. They all remembered the same swimming teacher. It was very moving to witness them recall those times, and also to find new comfort in the park on that day and appreciate the community-building aspect of the experience.

Spring - Mata dos Medos

- It was a very hot day so the guide decided to offer fresh lemonade as an alternative to hot tea. Strawberries and biscuits were also served and enjoyed. (This group loved a good snack; they all seemed to have a sweet tooth.) During this refreshment time, the participants were invited to share what they were taking away with them, and there was an overall sense of joy and contentment with the experience. Again, the sharing of stories brought up old customs and cultural practices. This time the group talked about the milk thistle flower. They reminisced about how, in their youth, this plant was used for making cheese because it curdles the milk. Stories were shared of how they lived off the land and, because they had very little means, it was important to harvest what the land offered in the different seasons.

Stories were also told about how, as tradition has it, water from the early morning dew on Saint John's Day is believed to have exceptional powers of purification, regeneration and protection, ensuring happy love and an early marriage, as well as providing strength to the elderly and beauty to the young. The power of water could also be observed in the mystical powers of certain plants, such as leeks, basil, artichokes, thistles and lemon balm. The artichoke, for instance, was said to predict the possibility of marriage. It should be burned or singed in the bonfire of Saint John on the eve of the 24th, at midnight – “In praise of Saint John, to see if so-and-so loves me or not” – and then left buried in a vase outside. The marriage is guaranteed if the plant blooms again the following day. The tradition of Saint John's Day bonfires is related to the ancient cult of the Sun, in which fire represents purifying and fertilising powers, while jumping over the bonfire is closely linked to health, mating and fertilisation.

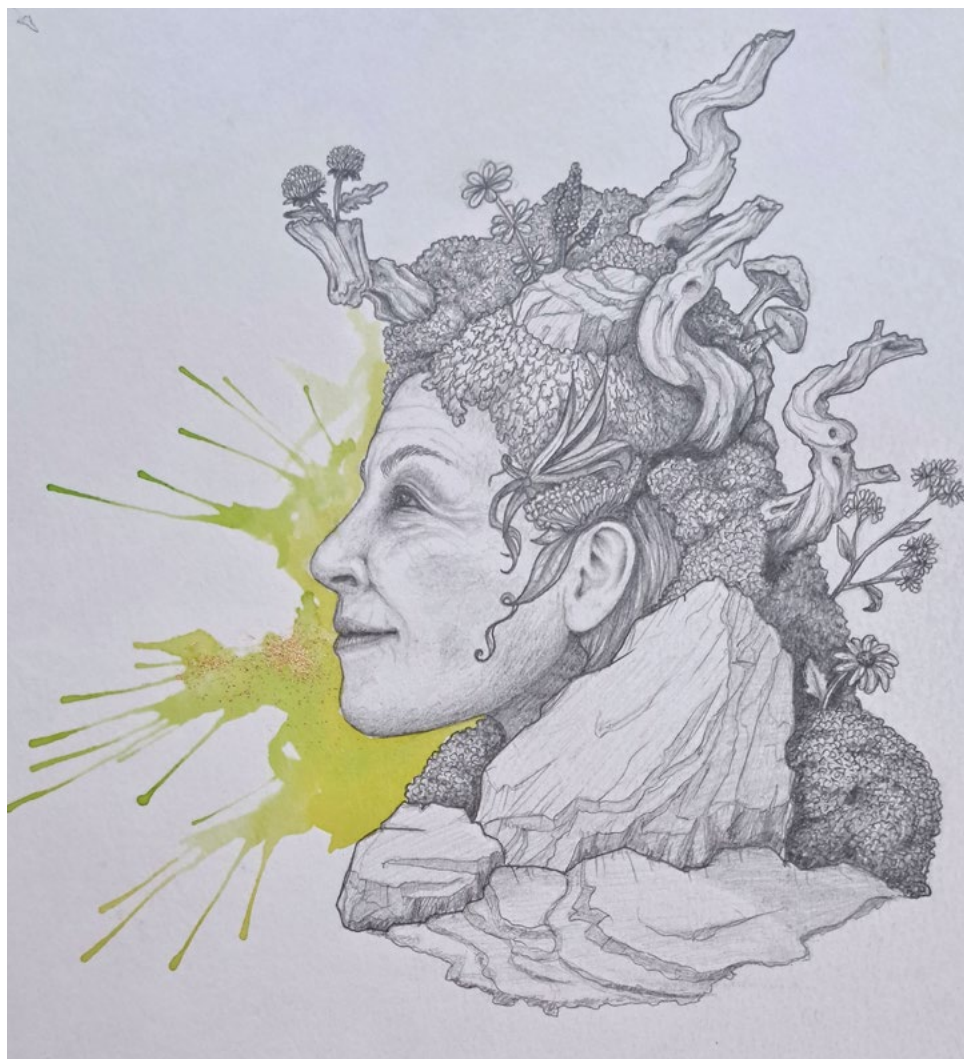
- The experience was completed that day by everyone singing together.

Summer- Santuário da Peninha

- A tea was made from wild blackberry leaves and the medicinal properties of the plant were explained. One of the participants also brought with her a plant that reminded her of Easter traditions in the village where she was born. Families would put this plant out in front of their house as an invitation for the local priest to come into their home and

bless it. Again, this part of the walk brought back memories of the past and old traditions, and allowed the participants to feel those comforts again.

- As this walk included a picnic lunch, no snacks were served.
- We all walked together to the picnic lunch area and there enjoyed a nourishing meal



that included fresh gazpacho, a quinoa and black bean casserole with a green salad, and chocolate mousse with raspberries for dessert.

- Everyone enjoyed the picnic which again reminded them of the old times.
- After lunch some of the participants, those that were more physically able, walked up the hill to the Santuário da Peninha to see the stunning view of Portugal's western coastline. This was a very special moment for them because none of them had ever seen that view before. It was very touching to witness.

Autumn - Parque da Pena

- For the closing, a tea was made with nettle harvested in that place and local snacks (queijadas) and blueberries were served. In the final sharing circle, participants were invited to reflect on what they had experienced over the four walks and how this had impacted their wellbeing.
- All the offerings reflected the participants' joy and willingness to continue to participate in this type of experience. Each reflected on how their relationship with nature had somehow shifted.



THE PHASES OF THE WALK AND THE SEASONAL WALKS

Winter - Jardim Botânico de Belém

We chose this botanical garden nestled within the neighbourhood of Belém for several reasons:

- Proximity the participants' homes
- Mobility accessibility of the trails (flat and well-maintained)
- Presence of restrooms
- Familiar environment for the participants' first experience with Forest Therapy nature connection.

Spring - Mata dos Medos

This is a natural reserve that exists on the south coast of the district of Lisbon (beyond the Tagus River bridge). It is a pine forest with soft sandy ground and flat and well-maintained trails offering plenty of shaded spaces.

- A new natural environment to explore
- A shaded and cool area for what turned out to be a very hot spring day
- Well-maintained and flat and accessible trails

Summer - Santuário da Peninha

This location is set within the Sintra-Cascais natural park and it is an old-growth cedar forest that is well maintained and offers spaces with

picnic tables and seating. We wanted to extend the experience to include a picnic lunch and this seemed like the perfect location.

- A new natural environment to explore
- A sense of majestic beauty of an old-growth forest
- Availability of picnic tables and seating

Autumn - Parque da Pena

This is located within the Parques de Sintra – Palácio da Pena area. It is a very old-growth natural park with historic value and, very importantly for this season, a place where the autumn foliage of deciduous trees could be experienced.

- A new natural environment to explore
- A deciduous forest to experience the autumn foliage
- Well-maintained and flat and accessible trails



PRACTICAL TIPS FOR ACCESSIBLE FOREST WALKS WITH AN ELDERLY POPULATION

When working with an elderly population, it is important to keep the following in mind:

Plan Multiple Walks:

Why it matters: One-time experiences can be impactful, but a series of walks allows participants to build a sustained relationship with nature and each other. This is especially the case for elderly people who live on their own and/or in isolation, and can seldom muster the courage to go outside. These repeated experiences create a sense of continuity and belonging that can significantly enhance their wellbeing.

How to implement: Organise walks every month. Encourage participants to commit to attending multiple sessions by letting them know that each experience will be unique and different to the previous one. Encourage them to prepare for the walk by coming up with a story to share about a time in nature that was meaningful to them. This approach helps establish a deeper connection to the environment and fosters stronger community bonds.

A Consistent and Reliable Experience:

Why it matters: Consistency provides structure and comfort and so a foundation for a sense of psychological safety. Participants who know what to expect will allow themselves to relax more fully into the experience.

How to implement: Begin each walk with a sensory connection phase, followed by relationship-building with nature, a solo exploration, and a group integration ceremony. Consistency in these rituals helps participants to know what to expect, making them feel safer and more engaged.

Choose the Right Location:

Why it matters: The location of the walk can greatly influence participants' comfort, sense of safety, integrity, and engagement. Urban parks offer accessibility and familiarity and are often more suitable to the physical ability of the elderly population. Natural parks outside the city provide a more immersive experience and also

the opportunity for a real outing for participants who rarely leave their homes.

How to implement: Start with walks in local parks to build trust in the experience itself and support the community-building aspect. Once the relationship amongst participants is established, the invitation can be extended to bringing the group to a more remote location. The sense of shared experience and adventure will act as a support to taking a “risk” outside their comfort zone.

Offer Comfort:

Why it matters: Elderly people have different levels of physical ability so it is important that you cater to everyone’s needs. Make sure that you create a welcoming and comfortable experience for your participants.

How to implement: Make sure you are aware of the physical abilities of your participants before the experience. This will allow you to choose the right location and also anticipate supplies you might need, like foldable and portable benches.

Build Community:

Why it matters: In our society, elderly people often face isolation yet have a longing for connection. Creating opportunities for social interaction within the nature walk context can help alleviate feelings of isolation, providing a different kind of lived experience and the desire

to foster further connections.

How to implement: Engage with each individual prior to the walk, either through a phone call or a home visit, clearly letting them know what to expect from the experience. Having some photos and a brochure at hand can also be helpful. Encourage participants to share who they are and their story to support community building.

Embrace Slow Pace:

Why it matters: A slow pace allows elderly participants to feel comfortable from the start and not worry about not being able to complete the activity.

How to implement: Avoid rushing through the experience. Allow participants to arrive at their own pace, and provide ample time for each phase of the walk. This approach fosters deeper connections and a more meaningful experience.

Speak Clearly:

Why it matters: Most elderly people have difficulties in hearing and will easily disengage from the activity if they cannot understand what you are saying.

How to implement: Make sure you speak clearly and loudly. When you are standing in a circle with participants, make sure that you engage with them visually and look out for body language that conveys that they understand what you are saying. Check in with participants to ensure they can hear you.



Also repeat two or three times to make sure everyone has understood what you have said.

Be Open with Invitations:

Why it matters: A nature walk is most powerful when participants feel free to explore and connect with nature in their own way. Overly structured activities can stifle this personal connection.

How to implement: Offer open-ended invitations rather than strict tasks. For example, invite participants to “explore what draws your attention” rather than “find a specific type of leaf.” This openness encourages self-directed exploration and a more personalised experience.

Listen to Yourself:

Why it matters: Leading a group of elderly people can be challenging because they may all have different physical abilities, for example different levels of hearing. Trusting your intuition and staying connected to your own sense of calm and presence can help guide the group effectively.

How to implement: Before the walk, take time to ground yourself in nature. Embrace any uncertainties as part of the process, and trust that your connection with nature will guide you in leading the group.

Accept the Unknown:

Why it matters: Nature walks are inherently





unpredictable – weather, group dynamics, and individual responses can all vary. Embracing this unpredictability allows for a more authentic and flexible experience.

How to implement: Be prepared for a range of possibilities, from weather changes to unexpected participant needs. Trust that the experience will unfold as it should, but be open to adjusting the plan as needed.

Simplicity and Accessibility:

Why it matters: Many people, regardless of their age group, may not immediately understand the value of slowing down and connecting with nature. Simplifying the experience and making it accessible helps participants overcome these barriers.

How to implement: Use simple, clear language and visuals when introducing the walk. For example, describe the event as a “Picnic in Nature” rather than a “Forest Immersion Experience.” This makes the activity more approachable and easier to explain.

Harvest Stories:

Why it matters: Storytelling is a powerful way of engaging community and creating an atmosphere of recognition and shared lived experience.

How to implement: During the sharing moments of the walk, if you notice that there is some kind of common thread in the stories being shared, encourage everyone to talk about that particular experience or event.

GEETA'S STORY WITH THE ELDERLY

Geeta was invited by Dagna to be part of the Accessible Forest project, both as the coordinator for Portugal and as the expert regarding the practice of Forest Therapy and in Portugal as the guide for the populations being worked with in Portugal. Dagna is the Executive Coordinator for the Accessible Forest Project.

Since she was a small child, Geeta has felt a strong affinity with the elderly. Her nanny used to tell the story of how, when walking together on the street, if Geeta saw an elderly person she would break free of her nanny's hand to run to that person and help them to cross the street.

Preparation for working with this population was developed out of meetings and conversations with the executive director of the Alegria de Viver foundation, Mariana Carreira, about the possible scope of the Accessible Forest project. Mariana was delighted that we could bring this practice of meaningful nature connections to the elderly population connected with her foundation.

Before the first walk, a meeting with the group experts took place to discuss the context of the project and the logistic requirements when working with this population. Dates for the four walks across the four different seasons were also scheduled.

I was very excited about guiding this population and was only really afraid of what the weather might be like on that day and whether the participants would be comfortable. I felt totally comfortable with every participant who arrived for that first Winter walk.

I was super excited about sharing this practice with them and to listen to their stories. Since I was a small girl I have always been inspired by listening to the stories of the older people in the room. I am a good listener.

The walk unfolded beautifully, imbued with love and care and kindness and gentleness. There were moments of fun and laughter and I was deeply touched by each and every story that was shared.

I feel the participants of the walk left feeling recharged, more at peace and full of joy. The accessibility experts Mariana and Filipa noted this too, and were pleasantly surprised by the value of this practice (which they had not previously been familiar with) for this population.





CARD 1: STRUCTURING SEASONAL WALKS

LOCATION CONSIDERATIONS

- Begin with familiar locations (local parks, botanical gardens)
- Progress to more immersive environments as trust builds
- Ensure availability of restrooms and seating
- Consider flat, well-maintained trails
- Select locations with cultural or historical significance
- Adapt to seasonal conditions (shade in summer, sun in winter)

SEASONAL ADAPTATIONS

- Winter: Focus on sunny spots, shorter duration, warm beverages
- Spring: Highlight sensory experiences, e.g.

with blossoms

- Summer: Choose shaded areas, provide extra hydration, do shorter walks
- Autumn: Focus on fall colours, seasonal changes, harvest themes

WALK STRUCTURE

- Connection Stage: Gentle introduction, sensory awareness activities
- Meaningful Connection: Partner-based explorations, texture gathering
- Solo/Paired Time: Tree friendship, sitting with natural elements
- Closing Integration: Tea ceremony, shared food, story circle



CARD 2: PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

ESSENTIAL PREPARATIONS

- Provide portable seating options (folding chairs/benches)
- Speak clearly and loudly with simple instructions
- Prepare for varied physical abilities
- Allow extra time for movement between locations
- Arrange transportation for less accessible sites
- Consider bathroom accessibility and visit frequency

COMMUNITY BUILDING APPROACHES

- Create partner activities to foster connection
- Encourage sharing of memories and stories
- Use physical touch appropriately (holding hands in circle)

- Share each other's discoveries during explorations
- Create shared installations with found objects
- Incorporate cultural traditions and celebrations

FACILITATION TIPS

- Maintain consistent structure across sessions
- Embrace a slow pace and frequent rest periods
- Plan multiple walks to build continuity
- Create a hospitable atmosphere with food and drink
- Use clear, non-metaphorical language
- Honor and harvest personal stories
- Validate cultural knowledge and traditions
- Build sensory engagement gradually
- Offer flexible invitations rather than rigid tasks





SECTION 4: BENEFITS FOR THE GROUP

Benefits – based on research

Several scientific studies encourage nature connection activities as relevant life-affirming interventions for the elderly population. A few are listed below. Full citations and links to the research can be found in the 'Further Reading' section of this e-book.

In a survey of existing studies, Catissi et al (2024) found evidence for 'the positive impact of nature-based interventions on the health of the elderly.' This broad-ranging study 'provides insights across various domains, fostering the development of programs and policies in management to promote healthy aging.'

Kim and Lee (2017), investigate the beneficial effects on Korean nursing home residents of a nature-centric program encompassing 'forest

healing, horticultural therapy, and play,' with a focus on alleviating depression and anxiety and improving self-esteem. The study is based on earlier research on the effects of forest healing and plant-mediated horticultural therapy.

Nadja Kabisch et al (2017) provide an overview of current evidence for the health benefits of nature for children and the elderly in the context of urbanisation. While they 'cannot conclude on a universal protective health effect of urban green and blue spaces for children and the elderly,' they do identify many broader benefits of urban vegetation and suggest that 'urban green and blue spaces...may be considered as cultural ecosystem services,' and advocate for further research in the area.

Benefits – based on our experiences

The choice of this particular population arose out of the converging interests of the forest therapy guide / coordinator of the Portugal team and the executive director of the Alegria de Viver foundation. The guide had a pre-existing affinity and interest in working with the elderly, and the foundation offered the stability for long-term group entry into the project.

To promote an active aging lifestyle and combat isolation in this specific population, meaningful nature connection experiences offer useful

strategies that might be easily adapted from this project's methodology.

Taking into consideration the characteristics of this population as described above, we created a flexible and open experience that could offer comfort as well as the possibility of quality time outdoors.

These were the benefits for the participants that emerged:

Direct benefits:

- direct physiological and psychological benefits of being outside their habitual closed environment and also literally being outside – walking in and experiencing the forest.
- sharing quality time together, stimulating the senses and conversation.
- being offered an experience that none of them had had before created feelings of self-importance and increased self-esteem. The sense that someone cared about them and was offering a pleasurable experience was also beneficial.
- relaxation and stress relief.
- reviving memories of times spent outdoors and of livelihoods connected with the land.
- shared experience within the group.
- providing the group experts with more strategies to promote healthy and active aging also created benefits for a population that had already given their communities so much.

Longer-term benefits:

Identifying the long-term benefits in this group was challenging because every time we went to the forest (once per season) there was a different group of patients, with only two of the participants being present in three of the four walks.

- During the participant sharing sessions we noticed that many had a recollection of times spent in nature and remembered how

they felt good in a natural environment. We believe that repetition can create new habits that are healthy and beneficial in this population.

- A renewed relationship with nature and positive impact on their wellbeing.
- A real recreational option in addition to or instead of indoor space activities and dependency on digital devices.

Benefits – based on the participant feedback

By measuring the effects of each walk using questionnaires filled out by participants and feedback forms by group experts, we were able to identify and can now share the benefits for our target groups.

The **group experts** reported the following benefits:

- Ability to enjoy the moment
- Stress reduction and worrying less
- Improved mood; feeling happier
- Better interpersonal relationships
- Having time and being accompanied in their experience and enjoyment of nature

- Feeling calmer and more serene
- Greater sense of connection to others and having fun together as a group
- A sense of connection with the natural environment

The (elderly) **participants** reflected on the impact of the experience of the walk during the sharing moments and also through the adapted POMS scale evaluation that was reviewed before and after the walks. They reported:

- Improved mood
- Decreased stress levels
- Improved mood associations



Direct benefits:

1. Theory and Practice

Reflect on the material covered in this chapter:

- Did any concepts or ideas seem problematic, or is there anything with which you partially or fully disagree? If so, how would you articulate and support your position?
- Were there elements that surprised you or, conversely, felt very familiar?

2. Competences

Consider your personal development:

- Did you gain any new insights into Accessible Forest Practice (AFP) or the benefits of nature immersion?

- Has this chapter inspired you to consider becoming an Accessible Forest Practitioner yourself?

3. Achieved Goals

Evaluate your progress and satisfaction:

- Have you achieved the objectives you set for yourself at this stage?
- On a scale between 1 (no satisfaction) and 10 (complete satisfaction), how would you rate your overall satisfaction?
- Have you any remaining questions or areas of curiosity you would like to explore further?





QUICK REFERENCE CARDS:



CARD 1: RESEARCH-SUPPORTED BENEFITS

SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE

- Proven contribution to healthy aging beyond disease prevention
- Forest bathing, hiking, and therapeutic gardens result in positive health outcomes
- Improved self-esteem and reduced depression in nursing home residents
- Urban green and blue spaces facilitate physical activity, stress relief, and social interaction

KEY RESEARCH INSIGHTS

- Programs with playful, nature-friendly components increase participation rates
- Integration of forest healing and horticultural therapy are particularly beneficial
- Nature experiences especially valuable for vulnerable populations like the elderly
- Provides opportunities for healthcare professionals to integrate nature-based practices
- Research suggests a positive association with health outcomes
- Positive contribution to healthcare discourse about equitable care approaches



CARD 2: OBSERVED PROGRAM BENEFITS

PSYCHOLOGICAL & PHYSIOLOGICAL EFFECTS

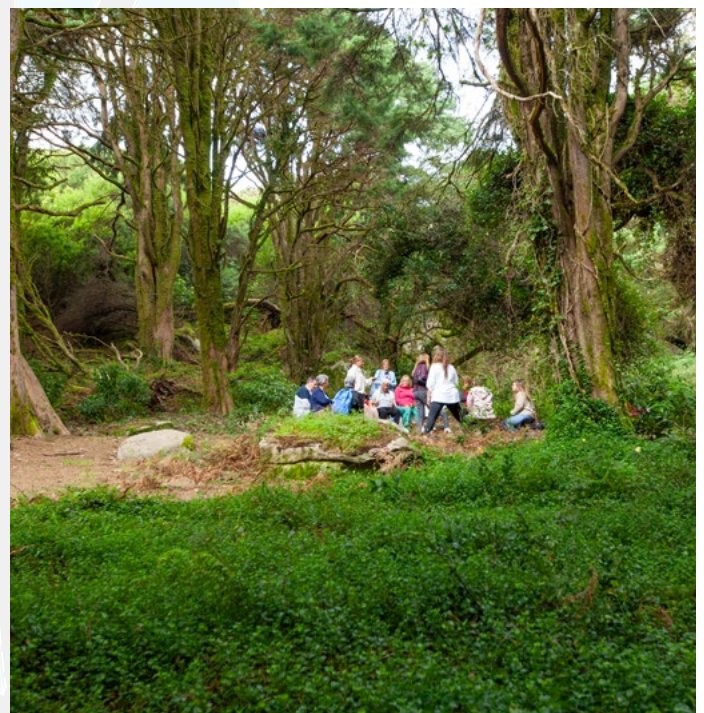
- Measurable mood improvement (documented on POMS scale)
- Decreased stress levels and anxiety
- Increased relaxation and sense of peace
- Opportunity to disconnect from daily worries
- Improved happiness and serenity
- Enhanced present-moment awareness

SOCIAL & IDENTITY BENEFITS

- Enhanced quality time together
- Improved interpersonal relationships
- Sense of being valued and cared for
- Feeling of belonging to community
- Reviving memories of times spent outdoors
- Reconnection with land-based heritage
- Enhanced self-importance and self-esteem
- Renewed relationship with the natural world

PRACTICAL PROGRAM OUTCOMES

- Promotes an active aging lifestyle
- Combats social isolation
- Offers recreational alternatives to indoor activities
- Provides structure for regular nature engagement
- Offers shared enjoyment and group fun
- Creates opportunities for the elderly to connect through stories
- Supports the foundation's goals of promoting wellbeing and belonging



A photograph of a forest path lined with large, moss-covered trees. The path is made of gravel and leads into the distance. The trees have thick trunks and green foliage, with some leaves showing signs of autumn. The scene is peaceful and natural.

CHAPTER 7

ACCESSIBLE FOREST
PRACTICE FOR INDIVIDUALS
STRUGGLING WITH EXCESSIVE
DIGITAL DEVICE USE



CHAPTER 7. ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTICE FOR INDIVIDUALS STRUGGLING WITH EXCESSIVE DIGITAL DEVICE USE

This chapter introduces our work with two separate target groups, children / adolescents and vulnerable mothers. While both groups are characterised by the excessive use of digital devices, they are quite different in many ways. Our main question is how to design meaningful nature connection experiences for such groups to help them alleviate their stress and tension, while also providing an alternative to escaping into the digital world.

The chapter is therefore divided into two parts – one for each target group. In both parts we share our knowledge and experience around accessibility issues, namely how to approach these groups and what to consider when designing nature connection activities for them. These parts are preceded by a general introduction on accessibility issues broadly faced by people who excessively use digital tools, as well as some of the scientific literature about the underlying causes and effects of digital overuse.

Each part covers the relevant competencies using our Compass Model. Next we introduce our practical design strategies, which outline how we planned and delivered our walks for each group, and what activities might be appropriate for each group in each season. We also share some practical tips for specific nature connection work with each group. Finally, we look at the complex benefits of mindful forest walks on each specific population, consider some relevant scientific studies, and assess our own experiences and the participants' feedback.

What You Will Learn in this Chapter:

Theoretical insights into the following, in connection with our target groups: excessive use of digital devices, children and adolescents and vulnerable mothers.

- Basic overview about accessibility aspects of these target groups.
- List of the most important competencies to be developed when working with these groups.
- Specific benefits of mindful forest walks for these groups.
- 2. Practical applications:
 - Description of the specific target groups of our walks.
 - Stories about our walks and the professionals involved.
 - Activities listed according to the sequence of the walks and the seasons.
 - Tips for practitioners – how to work with these specific target groups.
 - Benefits of the walks – based on scientific studies and our experiences.

Reflective Consideration:

Take a moment to reflect on your objectives at this stage of your work.

- How much time do you spend in front of the screen? Can you say “no” to your electronic devices? How does it feel to be in nature without any digital noise? How could you

introduce changes into your everyday life to reduce screen time and increase “green” time, meaning nature connection time?

- How do you relate to spending time with children and teenagers? What is your habitual response to the energy and volume of groups of children? What inspires and motivates you to deliver meaningful nature connection activities for them?
- How can you support groups of children and adolescents to slow down and stay silent in the forest? How might they benefit from this? What kind of challenging situations do you envision arising with this work?
- What is your motivation for working with vulnerable groups and/or mothers? What do you find rewarding / appealing / challenging in this work?
- What is your emotional response to meeting people facing multiple difficulties, including coming from a socially disadvantaged background? How would you support vulnerable women to feel safe and relaxed in nature? What kind of challenges do you envision in this kind of process?

Time Allocation: Dedicate approximately one hour to fully engage with the material and activities presented.



UNDERSTANDING THE TARGET GROUPS: GENERAL ACCESSIBILITY ISSUES

Digital devices are widely overused in our global society. The quick stimulus and information load provided by the Internet and smartphones often replaces real-life connections: contact with friends, family members, neighbourhoods and communities, and with our natural habitats. The Hungarian Accessible Forest walks included participants from various age groups who shared the common issue of excessive digital use. In this project, 'excessive use' is defined as spending a minimum of 2-3 hours per day on digital devices for purposes unrelated to work or education. Scientists across many fields have pointed out the multiple dangers of digital device overuse to our wellbeing, our health and social connections. Exceeding a certain amount of time engaged with these devices, especially with the high level of distraction they cause, also affects our productivity. There has been plenty of international research on problematic internet use, internet or smartphone addiction, and excessive use of social media. Researchers have even suggested that we need to acquire special coping skills in order to mitigate the negative

effects of digital devices.

According to psychological research, there are two types of fascination. So-called "hard fascination" grabs and holds one's attention, causing fatigue; this typically occurs when taking in information through digital devices. "Soft fascination," on the other hand, allows our attention to roam without settling to focus on any one thing in particular; this typically occurs in natural environments that capture our attention in an effortless way. Spending time in nature improves our concentration and lowers our stress levels. These following four aspects of natural environments are key elements in contributing to the alleviation of mental fatigue:

1. Extent (the depth of feeling immersed in the environment)
2. Being away (providing an escape from habitual activities)
3. Soft fascination (aspects of the environment that capture attention effortlessly)
4. Compatibility (individuals must want to be exposed to and appreciate the natural environment)





In this project we worked with diverse groups around the topic of digital overuse. Our walk with the teenagers revealed perhaps the clearest reasons why the issue of digital overuse should be considered when looking for target groups for whom to lead nature connection activities.

A mini-survey we conducted with parents of fourteen-year-old students at a primary school in Etyek, a town in Hungary where our organisation is based, revealed some of the most common symptoms of digital overuse. Parents were surveyed before the walk about their teenage children's digital habits.

These are the findings:

1. Pros and cons of using digital devices: On average, young people from this group spend 6 hours a day in front of a screen (and in some cases up to 10 hours), on mainly smartphones, computers, TV, and computer games (PS or Xbox). In the questionnaire, parents reported more disadvantages than advantages of these digital tools. Among the advantages, they mentioned informal learning of the English language, acquiring information, keeping in touch with friends and relatives, reading e-books, developing specific digital competences and scientific knowledge. One of the parents remarked that digital skills

were indispensable and would be even more in the future. In terms of the disadvantages, parents explained that kids lacked personal encounters with peers and missed out on things happening in real life. They also mentioned the lack of other activities: spending time outdoors in nature, playing and socialising with friends, spending time with parents and family, reading books, not getting enough oxygen, indifference, lack of sleep and resting, and attention deficit disorder.

2. Excitement and nervous breakdown: We also asked the teens before the walk what digital tools meant to them. They expressed this in the following terms: excitement, information, communication, entertainment, resting, calming, sometimes stressful, and nervous breakdown.



3. Missing out on being a real child: One parent commented that because of the amount of time her kid spent with digital tools, they “missed out on being a real child.” Moreover, digital devices are addictive; the user can spend entire days or nights playing, computer games cause aggressive behaviour, and the child doesn’t learn how to make friends.
4. A growing sense of indifference and inactivity: The students’ head teacher had been with the class for four years. Chatting informally on the walk to the forest, she reported a growing sense of indifference among the teens, which she explained partly as an age-specific phenomenon. She mentioned that at age eleven, students were often up for being involved in activities such as decorating the classroom or organising events, but year by year it had become increasingly difficult for her to mobilise them or to involve them in any activities, including proactive participation during classes.
5. Wider smiles after the walk: Before the walk, while still in their classroom, 11 out of the 15 teens reported a neutral mood state, 3 marked a smiling face, and 1 person a wildly smiling one. After the walk their scores went up to 9 smileys, 2 wide smiles, and 2 neutral faces (one person had to leave earlier, and one didn’t give their score at the end).



Reflect and experiment

Now it is time to reflect on your own usage of mobile phones and digital devices. How long do you spend online on a daily basis? What platforms do you use? What is your main purpose of using digital devices? Is it for entertainment, information, work or leisure?

If you feel like experimenting with hard and soft fascination, we invite you to try a half-hour activity. It is important to do this experiment in two locations: one indoor and one outdoor, and they should be very close to each other. If you have a garden at home, or an urban park just outside your office, that’s super. If not, find a café that is very close to a park, or park your car by the forest, and start inside one of them.

First choose an item from your daily “to do” list that involves 15 minutes of online work. Focus on your job and try to finish it within the allocated time. Then, after precisely 15 minutes, close your device, turn it off or put it in airplane mode, stand up and go out to spend an equal amount of time in the natural environment. Let yourself be led by your curiosity, take time investigating details, and leave yourself time to wander aimlessly, not following a certain path or trail.

What do you experience?

How can time spent in nature help?

We humans intuitively understand the relaxing, soothing and awe-inspiring effects of time spent cultivating mindful activities in the forest and natural woodlands. A wide range of studies show the physiological and psychological benefits of slow and mindful forest walks, such as a reduction in heart rate and blood pressure, a sense of safety and calmness, and overall general wellbeing. These benefits extend to positive effects on addiction and depression (3). Some of these scientific studies also include medical investigations, such as research conducted with twelve adults in southern Hungary, where participants took part in slow forest walks with a few periods stopping at viewpoints. The researchers identified a blood pressure-lowering and immune function-enhancing effect of the forest walks (2), in line with findings of many other international researchers. We asked participants to fill out a questionnaire consisting mainly of pictograms before and after the walks. Both teens and mothers who took part in our forest walks reported a greater sense of joy and happiness as a result.

How can you “leave your smartphone behind”?

Having got this far, with the understanding that digital overuse is a hazard to our mental and physical health and time spent in nature is potentially healing, we are still left with a big



question: how do we lure digitally overloaded people into forest walks? What do we offer and how can we create a sense of safety for people feeling overly dependent on their devices?

During the Accessible Forest walks we encouraged our participants to leave their devices with the guides or turn them off during the period of the walk. We wanted to see whether time in nature can usefully offer us a healthier alternative for relaxation, relieving stress, and comfort in our everyday lives.

We found that leaving smartphones and other gadgets behind when entering the forest helps participants to engage with their surroundings





and emerge into the present moment – to use all of their senses to take in the natural world. We also found that being asked to be away from the online world even for a few hours may be scary and provoke feelings of insecurity for most participants.

There are however several methods of helping them to engage in the walks without their phones:

1. Provide participants with detailed information about the walk to come. Explain in particular how and where they can leave their devices and why it is good for them. To create a sense of safety explain where you are going to walk with them and that there is no risk of getting lost. Also indicate the expected length of the walk.
2. At the beginning of the walk make a verbal contract with all the participants explaining the reasons they are asked to leave their mobile devices behind, and seek their clear verbal consent. You may agree on exceptional cases in which they are allowed to use their devices, such as making emergency calls, or taking photos if you include activities which include photo taking.
3. You may wish to make yourself available to receive calls on your mobile and provide participants with your number in case of emergency calls. This might be especially useful for participants who leave their infants behind and feel more comfortable if they are available in case their baby needs them.
4. Make sure that you bring a wristwatch to

Think outside the box

After reviewing how leaving the phone behind can support participants to genuinely connect with nature during the forest walks, we invite you to think outside the box!

In what ways could mobile phones be intelligently introduced into nature connection activities? Try out the suggested activity using our “take a photo” example and investigate ways in which mobiles and specially their cameras could support learners’ creativity at the end of the walk. Be attentive to how you introduce mobiles back into the group, and ask participants to keep theirs on airplane mode so as not to be distracted by incoming messages and calls.

check the time and avoid using your own mobile for this, even in airplane mode. You are the role model.

5. If someone is strongly resistant to embarking on the walk without a mobile phone, he or she can switch it off or put it in airplane mode.
6. With an especially resistant group, time dedicated to talking about devices and coming to an agreement may be necessary. Ask participants: Why is it hard to leave devices behind? Other questions might be: What does it mean to you to have your phone within your grasp? In what ways is it harder or easier if it isn't? What could help you to leave it behind?
7. During the walk participants may be encouraged to pick up a natural object, such as a pine cone, wooden stick, piece of tree bark or moth, that can give their fingers and hands something to hold onto.
8. At the end of the walk reflection is important: what did they feel, and what was it like to be free from the online world? How much did they miss it and what was the added value of it, if any?

We found that slow, conscious walks with structured activities in natural environments provide a surprisingly refreshing alternative to time spent in the digital space. Our task as

facilitators is to make participants feel safe and secure, to create trust and to support device-free outdoor time.

Questions to think about:

We invite you – readers, practitioners – to think about the following questions to help digitally overloaded people find their way back to nature:

1. On average, how much time do the participants in your target group spend with their various digital devices?
2. What advantages and disadvantages do they perceive about the presence of digital media?
3. What does the digital world offer them personally?
4. What does a three-hour walk in the forest without their devices mean to them?
5. What does the forest mean to them in general and what does a nature connection experience give them?
6. How does the experience of walking affect their mood and their relationship with nature in the short- and long-term?

The participants of the walks in Hungary were very diverse in terms of their age and circumstances, but all had limited access to opportunities to engage in nature-based activities. They also provided a wide range of responses to questions about digital use, which are described below.





PART A. ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTICE FOR INDIVIDUALS STRUGGLING WITH EXCESSIVE DIGITAL DEVICE USE – CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

In this part we introduce Accessible Forest Practice with children and teenagers whose behaviour is characterised by overuse of digital devices. After a closer look at this age group and issues related to digital engagement, we share the experiences and practical strategies that we used during our walks with this target group. These stories, nature connection activities and strategies could further help experts to design and deliver meaningful nature connection experiences for children's groups.

Knowledge and understanding about:

- The age characteristics of child participants on our walks
- Why children are using digital devices and how to assess this topic
- Accessibility: how to support children and teenagers to connect with nature

- Ethical and practical guidelines for creating nature walks with meaningful nature connection elements
- Benefits of nature connection activities for children

Skills in:

- motivating children and communicating clearly and comprehensibly with them
- engaging children, keeping their attention and holding space in nature
- ensuring nature walks stay safe and meaningful

Attitudes:

- curiosity, openness, flexibility and patience to help foster connections with children and nature
- ability to reflect on your own childhood to better understand young participants





SECTION 1. THE TARGET GROUP – CHILDREN AND TEENS

This section introduces our first target group and asks: How to plan and process nature experience programs with children and teens, as a very specific and also vulnerable group? How to reach them, and how to make a nature walk meaningful and accessible for them?

We then have a look at digital device problems among children, in order to understand and support them better. At the end of the section we describe the more detailed developmental psychological characteristics of our chosen age group, 9-10 years old. We invite you to think about children as a very valuable target group, since they are the adults of the future.

Importance of flexible planning and communication

Working with groups of children can be a wonderful, inspiring and happy experience, but it also requires constant vigilance, flexibility, patience and humour. Children's need for movement, their temperament and impulsiveness are very different from a typical adult group, so it is important to start the walk with this in mind, with as much openness as possible and without excessive expectations that may lead to disappointment. We may need to incorporate more movement exercises, more short invitations

or story-telling, or redesign or modify our programme more than once.

Communication with parents

Parental consent is required for all walks and special care must be taken when taking and using photographs. Parents should be informed about the purpose of the walk, the route, the equipment and clothing required. As disadvantaged people have less experience of this type of programme, any possible reservations might be overcome by providing more information and a personal meeting.

Responsibility and vulnerability

Children participating in the walk are not responsible for themselves. Groups of children always need an adult to assume responsibility for them. It is recommended to have an assistant with the group who also knows the children. It is also a good idea to have several other adults on the walk so that, if necessary, individual attention can be given to problematic participants or those having difficulty keeping up with the group.

Clear framing

While the young participants may need special attention to follow the rules, this should not be done in a strict, qualifying, or angry tone, as this would go against the positive, accepting, gentle tone that is the default on our walks in the forest. Therefore, it may be useful to discuss the most important rules at the beginning of the walk and to make a verbal agreement with the children to respect them.

Rules to be discussed with the children might for example include:

1. Don't leave the group, and only go as far as the agreed distance – it is important to clarify for each exercise how far they can go to explore.
2. Do not harm any living creatures – this applies to all living creatures in the forest and of course to each other.
3. Respect the silence, both of the forest and of your companions – it may be practical to choose periods of complete silence that are manageable for them, so that these periods are not too long.

Physical and psychological safety

During our Accessible Forest walks with children the attending group expert modelled the patient, safe, and calm yet inspiring tone of voice that was used during the programme. An enthusiastic tone and positive communication are very important to create motivation in children, and if they are





motivated, they are more likely to participate in invitations to connect with nature. Safety is just as important, as it is only in a safe environment that a stress-free walk can be enjoyed. ‘Safety’ can mean physical safety (familiarity with the terrain and wildlife, first aid kit, basic first aid skills) as well as emotional safety (acceptance of negative feelings, reassurance and the provision of the accepting atmosphere mentioned above).

As aspiring AF practitioners our communication should also always be clear and simple. Invitations should be straightforward and easy to comprehend, without confusing the group with complicated tasks.

With children it is therefore very important to have a clear, understandable framework, to provide constant attention and flexibility, and to offer gentle but enthusiastic encouragement to participate and not to be too passive.

Paying attention to different abilities

General ethical and safety rules should be enforced first and foremost, but it is also worth paying close attention to the mobility and intellectual variables among the participants. When working with

children of varying abilities or physical conditions, such as in our group, care should be taken in the choice of exercises and invitations and the overall level of physical challenge they pose, so that they do not discriminate or emphasise differences in ability between the children. Positive feedback, even praise, is also important and empowering for them.

What about teenagers?

It is worth noting that a different approach should be taken with adolescent groups, since adolescents’ motivation, their age-specific resistance and other typical behaviours require the use of particular modes of language, as well as flexibility and adaptation. The adolescent age group is also more affected by the overuse of digital devices; they can exhibit vulnerability and mental disturbances caused by digital influences, and detachment from nature. Therefore, as important and regenerating as a walk might be for them, it can still be difficult to bring them back to conscious presence, to a quiet moment of inactivity. Connecting with each other as a group can in fact be a resource and help them to affirm their own identity. A walk in the woods provides a good opportunity for this, especially when there are both group exercises and individual

time for personal reflection about their own lives and self-image. We worked with adolescents on one occasion during the programme, and will share our experiences from this walk. However, this part of the chapter is generally aimed at younger age groups (6-12 years old) who are also very connected with digital devices.

most important motivators are achievement (the constant reward and feedback that games and apps specialise in) and belonging (social networking sites and online social networks make people feel like they belong). They are fast-paced, rewarding, peer-following, and can become accustomed to very quickly.



Children in the digital world

A common theme among adults today is children's use of digital devices. Families' values and children's habits range from unrestricted use to complete bans. When thinking about this, the most important thing is to understand children and some of the characteristics of how the virtual world works. Why are children interested in gadgets, games, movies, social networking sites, video sharing, etc.? What can they learn from using them in the short- and long-term? What are their dangerous impacts? How can we help them minimise the harm and maximise the benefits?

And why do children like "gadgets"? The two

It is important to see the advantages and disadvantages of digital media use and to be able to think critically about both.

Potential positive effects and benefits: learning tools, incredibly rich knowledge resources, quickly accessible, lots of useful information and apps, creativity development opportunities, language learning, digital competences; also openness to ideas, curiosity, autonomy, possibility to learn more freely, confident movement in the virtual world.

Some typical risks are: loss of real relationships, loss of sources of pleasure, feeling that the real

world is bleak, lack of exercise and becoming overweight, cyberbullying, inappropriate content, fake news and misinformation, online scams and, as a result: mood disorders, sleep problems, attention and learning problems, isolation.

How can group experts help and support them?

Here are some initial ideas for teachers, caregivers, and other supporting professionals to encourage analogue functioning in children. Add to the list with your own ideas and experiences:

- Employing empathy, curiosity, interactivity, and humour instead of prejudice and complacency
- Getting hands-on experience with the tools from an adult perspective
- Integrating digital (educational) tools into the processes to encourage more conscious usage
- Facilitating instead of frontal teaching, which activates more participatory learning
- Allowing differentiation in schools with digital learning – those who go faster can give themselves more and more difficult tasks, while those who go slower can practice more.
- Using children's curiosity and enthusiasm as a resource – the strongest wind in the sail of learning.

Reflective questions for discussing the topics with kids and teens:

- What can children teach adults today?
- What do you think are the biggest benefits of TV/computer games/social media and what are the most serious dangers? What do they give you and what do they take away?
- Who has read or experienced something interesting about digital media recently (in the last 1 day, 1 week, 1 month)? What has been your most interesting experience in real life? Can the two be linked?
- If you could only have 3 apps left on your smartphone, what would they be? Why? And if you could only take 3 things with you to a desert island, what would you choose?

“The digital 5 points” – assessing digital safety and digital consciousness among kids



The following 5 questions (or sets of questions) will help you assess how aware and safe you are as an internet user. Each person should think about the questions in their own way, and then decide which set they would more likely answer with ‘YES’ to most of the questions and, as a result, how they would rate themselves on a 5-point scale. What could you improve on, and what would you need? It’s a good idea to phrase the questions according to the age group, but assess yourself first.

1. Can you use the internet safely?
Many people never read the long, boring user policies – do you know the security policies of the sites you use? Do you know how to share data and images safely? Do you know how to manage your finances online? Do you know what to do when a stranger writes to you? Do you know how to avoid being harassed online?
2. Do you use digital media for learning?
You probably have a favourite app, game, or community website. And you’ve noticed that it’s easy to use your phone and surf on the internet monotonously. Think about it: do you use digital media for learning, creating, navigating, or developing, whether at school or at home? Do you use it diversely, like for programming, language learning, graphics, film making, music making, or knowledge gaining?
3. Can you say “no”?
Are there minutes, hours, days when you hang up the phone? When you are faced with the choice of whether to hang up, who is in

charge: you or your phone? Is there a family meal or time when everyone says no to their phone? Can you control your time in the digital, virtual space?

4. Are there real adventures and relationships in your life?

Do you have activities where you can forget your virtual life? These could be social gatherings with friends, hobbies, everyday activities such as hiking, football, art, family time, or adventurous activities where you face real challenges that are joyful to complete.

5. Are there adults you know who you can talk to when you are affected by something you need to share?

They could be a relative, teacher, coach, or friend, but it is important that it is someone you know personally. If you come across something that is strange, scary,

anxiety-provoking, or you feel you are too young for it, whether it's something you really like, something that's funny, or something you want to try: talk to an adult!

Reflective questions for you:

Remember your childhood... Did you play on computers, did you have a phone? How do you recall the nature experiences from your childhood? Can you imagine what your favourite activity would be if you were a child today? How do you imagine yourself now, as a practitioner in the forest with kids? What is your communication style like, and how do you relate to the children? How can you adapt to the children's paces and interests? If you are already working with children: how do you feel about taking them out, and letting them discover nature freely?



Invitation to Empathy:

How Might it Feel to be a Vulnerable Individual Struggling with Excessive Digital Device Use?

Imagine being a child growing up in today's digital world. All the adults around you are on their phones, doing all sorts of things on them, and when they're bored, they just grab their devices, work on them, communicate on them, have fun with them. In your life there are also devices on which all the world's fairy tales and video games are available – exciting, fast games in virtual reality, where the anxieties of real life fade away and only you remain, and the opportunity to be different, to perform, to be a hero... However, often the adults around you don't understand you, scold you, don't let you play, don't even know what you play with, have no idea about what you are best at...

If you don't get help and learn to navigate in this virtual world, you can easily get carried away, and suddenly you want to spend time there more than in reality. But you already spend a few hours a day on these devices, and you miss out on a lot of important things in your life: the ample exercise you need as a child, quality time spent with your family and friends, time spent in nature, everyday contemplation, the pleasure of idleness or of creative work. You don't even understand why you are tense, why it's hard to find your place, why school hours go so slowly, why things don't work as easily as they do in the virtual world...

We adults already know that without conscious parental mentoring this danger threatens all children, and it is the task of today's parents and educators to navigate this process without really having had a similar experience when they were young. Although many of us already encountered computers in our childhood, the amount of digital interaction imposed on children today is unimaginably different. During the Accessible Forest walks, we chose a special group of children to better understand the issue of their digital overuse and how to bring them back to nature.

Children aged 9-10

The participants of our long-term AF walks were children aged 9–10, while our professional target group included the teachers, educators, and professionals working with them. Forest education and forest therapy with children is especially important at this age, as they are open to meaningful nature experiences and to the guidance of adults. They are not yet adolescents and remain receptive to adult invitations and shared exploration.

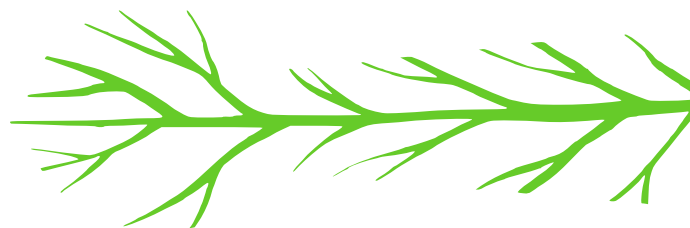
At this stage, children's main developmental task is learning – gaining knowledge and refining thinking skills. According to Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development and its four stages, 9- and 10-year-olds are in the concrete operational stage, capable of logical thinking, understanding rules, and beginning to apply abstract reasoning in concrete contexts. Their ability to concentrate is growing, along with their working memory and mental flexibility. This means they are increasingly able to organise thoughts, plan ahead, solve problems step-by-step, and reflect on their own learning processes. These capacities can be strengthened through nature-based tasks and challenges that invite exploration and decision-making.

Children at this age also show marked progress in language development. They enjoy expressing their ideas clearly, engaging in conversations, telling stories, and even debating. Their vocabulary expands rapidly, and they begin to understand and use more complex grammar structures. This makes reflective dialogues during forest walks especially valuable, as the children learn to articulate feelings, describe observations, and discuss their thoughts about nature and themselves.

While cognitively advancing, they remain active and playful, making experiential, movement-based learning – like forest walks – particularly effective. The natural environment stimulates all the senses, supports curiosity, and allows knowledge to be embedded in direct, lived experiences.

Social and emotional development is also key in this period. Friendships become deeper and more emotionally significant, with an increasing awareness of fairness, inclusion, and cooperation. According to Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory and the eight developmental stages, they are navigating the industry vs. inferiority stage, where competence and self-worth grow through successful experiences. The forest environment, with its calm and affirming atmosphere, supports emotional security, belonging, and self-confidence.

It is important to recognise that many children at this age are already experiencing digital overload. Time spent in nature thus provides a restorative alternative – offering sensory grounding, reducing overstimulation, and reconnecting children with real-world experiences. Their growing ability to understand different perspectives allows for deeper reflection, and helps them begin forming sustainable, values-based attitudes towards nature and care.



Benefits for everyone

For teachers working with children, it is a great opportunity to learn this mode of recreational, discovery learning, where they can engage with children in a different environmental and social context, free from the pressures of performance and judgement. In addition to the health-promoting, stress-relieving effects of forest walks, such a programme or series of programmes can also be an experience of community bonding. For children, it can be a key element in introducing a stress-relieving, calming method to develop their emotional intelligence through the recognition, naming and awareness of their feelings, emotions and moods in the forest.

With these considerations in mind, we chose this age group among school students in the village of Etyek, where our organisation, Szatyor Association, is located.



QUICK REFERENCE CARDS



CARD 1: DIGITAL OVERUSE IMPACT

DEFINITION & SCOPE:

- Excessive use: 2-3+ hours daily on devices for non-work/education purposes
- Average teen use: 6 hours (up to 10 hours for some)
- Creates “hard fascination” that exhausts attention and causes fatigue

REPORTED EFFECTS:

- Reduced personal encounters and social connections
- Limited time outdoors and in nature
- Attention deficit and sleep disruption

- Increased indifference and reduced participation
- Potential for addiction-like behaviours

PARENT PERSPECTIVES:

- “Missed out on being a real child”
- Causes aggressive behaviour in some children
- Interferes with friendship development
- Creates a growing sense of indifference

BALANCED VIEW: Digital tools also provide language learning, information access, and necessary future skills



CARD 2: NATURE AS DIGITAL ANTIDOTE

SCIENTIFIC BASIS:

- Nature provides “soft fascination” allowing attention to roam effortlessly
- Reduces blood pressure and enhances immune function
- Improves concentration and lowers stress levels

KEY RESTORATIVE ELEMENTS:

- Extent: Immersion in environment
- Being away: Escape from habitual activities
- Soft fascination: Effortless attention capture

- Compatibility: Appreciation of natural environment

OBSERVED BENEFITS:

- Improved mood (participants showed “wider smiles after walks”)
- Reduced stress and anxiety
- Increased sensory awareness
- Enhanced social connection

PHYSIOLOGICAL EFFECTS:

- Documented reduction in heart rate, blood pressure, and improved immune response



CARD 3: DEVICE-FREE FOREST WALKS

PREPARATION STRATEGIES:

- Provide detailed information about walk logistics beforehand
- Create verbal contracts with participants about device use
- Offer your contact number for emergency calls
- Ensure you model appropriate behaviour (no device use)

SUPPORTING PARTICIPANTS:

- Acknowledge separation anxiety from devices
- Provide natural objects to handle (pine cones, sticks) for tactile engagement
- Allow airplane mode if complete separation creates strong resistance

- Create a safe environment that reduces the need for a digital security blanket

FACILITATING REFLECTION:

- Discuss the experience of being device-free at walk conclusion
- Explore what participants missed (or didn't miss)
- Identify added value of disconnection
- Consider creative ways to reintroduce devices mindfully

KEY INSIGHT: “Slow, conscious walks with structured activities in natural environments provide a surprisingly refreshing alternative to time spent in the digital space”



CARD 4: WORKING WITH CHILDREN & TEENS

AGE-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS:

- Ages 9-10: Concrete operational stage with growing cognitive and language abilities
- Need for movement, flexibility, and shorter invitations
- Capacity for reflection and awareness developing
- Unique vulnerability to digital influences

PRACTICAL GUIDELINES:

- Secure parental consent and provide detailed information
- Establish clear, simple rules through verbal agreements
- Ensure physical and psychological safety
- Adapt to different abilities and developmental

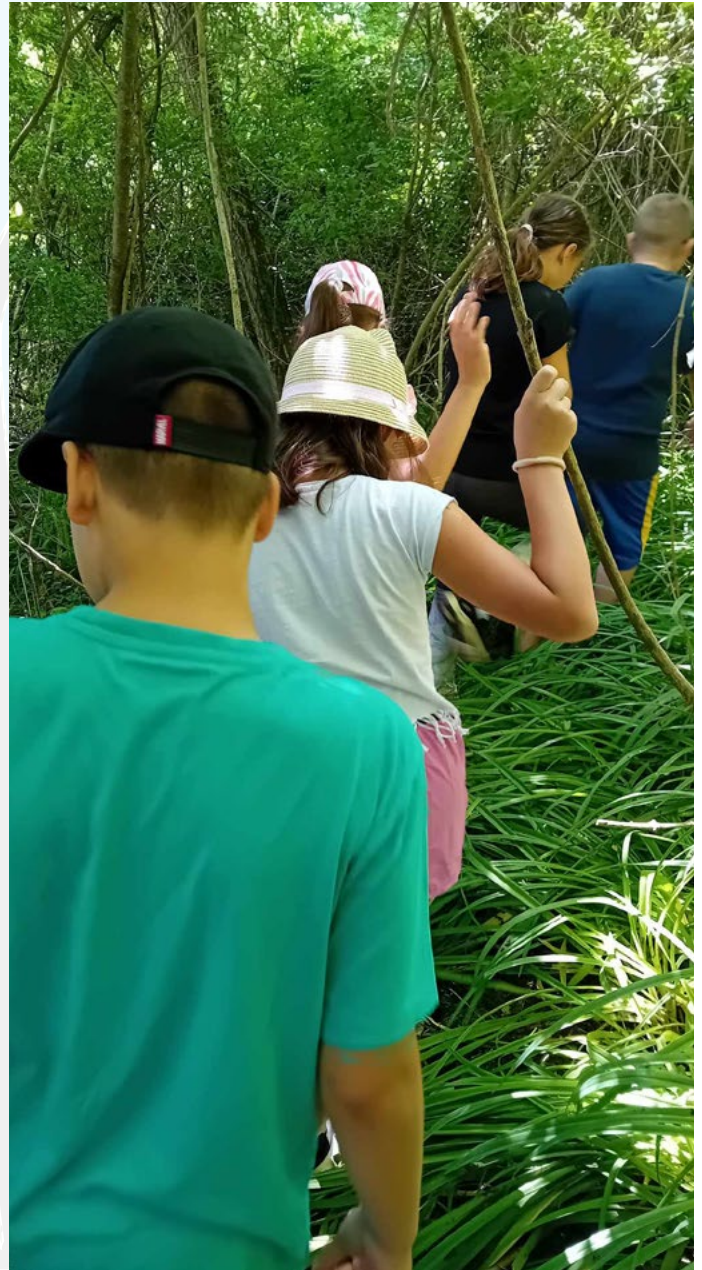
needs

- Use an enthusiastic, patient tone to maintain engagement

DIGITAL AWARENESS ASSESSMENT:

- Internet safety knowledge
- Learning-focused usage
- Ability to disconnect
- Balance with real adventures and relationships
- Access to trusted adults for guidance

DEVELOPMENTAL OPPORTUNITY: Forest experiences offer a “restorative alternative – providing sensory grounding, reducing overstimulation, and reconnecting children with real-world experiences”





SECTION 2. ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTITIONER COMPETENCIES

INTRO

In this section you can reflect on the most important skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to work with digitally overloaded children in nature. Our compass model helps you navigate the learner's path, noticing what competencies you possess, what you lack, what needs improvement, and how you feel about it. Read through the section and try to assess yourself: What would be your superpower to fulfil this very important mission of our time: taking kids away from the screen into the woods? And how do you see yourself – what would you need to improve yourself to be able to facilitate such experiences?





SELF-AWARENESS ('I') – NORTH QUADRANT

Self-awareness forms the foundation of an Accessible Forest Practitioner's ability to work with vulnerable individuals. Practitioners must possess the capacity to reflect on their own emotional states, biases, and professional boundaries to provide safe and empathetic support for each target group. Working with different target groups may require specific competencies; for kids these are competencies which help them feel accepted, relaxed, and motivated.

Key competencies include:

- Patience
- Flexibility
- Enthusiasm



PRACTICES EXPERIENCES – SOUTH QUADRANT

This domain encompasses the practical and procedural competencies required to design, prepare, and facilitate forest-based experiences with a high degree of intentionality and adaptability. It reflects the practitioner's ability to transform insight and inclusive values into concrete action, ensuring both the physical and emotional accessibility of nature experiences.

Key competencies include:

- Simple speaking, short sentences, but not emotionless
- Being aware of what NOT to expect from this process (therapy, nature science, etc)
- Route specifics and actual circumstances – all the knowledge for safe walks



NATURE CONNECTION – WEST QUADRANT

Practitioners working in this quadrant focus on guiding participants to engage with the natural world in ways that promote grounding, embodiment and emotional regulation. To support kids' nature connection it is very important to be both a role model and a sensitive facilitator, maintaining constant attention to their connectedness based on natural curiosity.

Key competencies include:

- Adoring nature
- Knowing the local environment / local ecosystem / nature / forest
- Curiosity



THE GROUP – EAST QUADRANT

The East quadrant addresses the competencies required to facilitate group dynamics effectively, ensuring inclusivity and emotional safety for all participants. Kids' groups may need special attention paid to their needs and dynamics, and especially to their diverse skills and abilities, as well as a few tips and tricks to keep them engaged.

Key competencies include:

- Pedagogical skills
- Knowledge about participants
- Listening

After reading this section, how do you feel?

Make a drawing of an imaginary person or magic creature who is able to invite kids to leave the screen for the green. Try to represent the competences as well, in any creative way you like. How much do you feel similar or connected to this fantastical action figure?



SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

Below you will find a self-assessment tool for each one of the competences listed above. On a scale of 1 (very unfamiliar) to 10 (very familiar) evaluate how you position yourself in relation to each of the competences. This will give you an overview of the competences you should dedicate your time and energy to in order to deepen your understanding of them. Create a strategy for yourself for deepening your understanding of each of the competences, establishing the priorities that you feel are most adequate to your own unique learning journey.

SELF-REFLECTION ON THE COMPETENCES

Question for competences	Self-assesment scale 1 to 10
Patience I am able to remain calm and present, even when things take longer than planned or when participants need extra time and support.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Flexibility I am able to adapt the plan, pace, or activity based on the needs of the group or unexpected changes in the environment.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



SELF-REFLECTION ON THE COMPETENCES

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Enthusiasm I bring genuine interest and energy to the experience and can share my joy with the group in a natural and supportive way.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Simple speaking, short sentences, but not emotionless I am able to express myself clearly using simple, accessible language, while still speaking with warmth and emotion.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Being aware of what NOT to expect from this process I am clear about the purpose and limits of the experience, I do not present it as therapy, a scientific lesson, or entertainment. I understand that children may not connect with nature in the same way or depth as adults, and I adjust my expectations accordingly.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Route specifics and actual circumstances I feel confident in preparing and adapting the walk according to the route, weather, terrain, and the group's needs to ensure safety and comfort.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Adoring nature I cultivate a personal, heartfelt connection with nature, and I allow this love to be felt by the participants without needing to explain it.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Knowing the local environment I am familiar with the local ecosystem, its rhythms and features, and I can offer simple, respectful insights when appropriate.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Curiosity I nurture my own sense of curiosity and stay open to discovering new things in nature together with the group.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Pedagogical skills I know how to guide and support children's learning and experiences in age-appropriate and engaging ways.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Knowledge about participants I take time to understand the needs, backgrounds, and possible challenges of the children I guide, and I prepare accordingly.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Listening I am able to listen deeply to what participants say, and also to what is left unspoken, with full attention and care.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



SECTION 3. PRACTICAL STRATEGIE

In this section we share all the strategies, stories, and activities we applied to our Accessible Forest walks with children. We invite you to come with us, meet the children, understand where they come from and how they were affected by the walks – by our invitations and all the stimuli nature provided. We also share some practical tips to support meaningful nature connection with kids.

DESCRIPTION OF THE TARGET GROUP

The Etyek German Nationality Primary School is the only school in the municipality of Etyek, Hungary (population 4,700), that also accommodates students with special educational needs. Sometimes there are several children with learning difficulties in one class, and in class 3.b there are 8 pupils with special needs out of 13 students, a ratio which is exceptional for the school. One teacher and one teaching assistant work with them.

This class was chosen for the project because, being at a receptive age, as well as having so many special educational needs, nature walks could be especially very beneficial for them, and we thought that our experience could set a useful example for many other teachers. In addition, while village life brings the children closer to nature – they can follow the changing seasons, and wait for the storks to return in spring – the village is mostly surrounded by agricultural land and families do not always get into the real, wild forests. The reasons for this could be either a lack of resources or a lack of interest, as well as having stressful lifestyles. Forest bathing or similar programmes are not organised in the area in general. Furthermore, there are fewer opportunities for development or talent nurturing programmes for children living in villages than for those children living in big cities.

Before the walk we met with the parents and introduced the project and the methodology. They signed a consent form and filled in a digital usage questionnaire about their children's average screen time.

Who are the children?

Over the years, the students of class 3b have developed into a close, gentle and friendly community. Their teacher, who accompanied them on the walks, teaches them with great love and patience. At the same time, they form a diverse group in terms of ability and temperament.

There are 14 in the class – 5 girls and 9 boys. The class is very mixed, with many children with special needs. 6 have special educational needs and 3 have difficulties with integration, learning or behaviour.

The group with special educational needs

includes students with mild intellectual disability and visual impairment (1), autism (1), mixed developmental disability (4), and speech impairment (1).

The learning problems of two children are linked to their difficult family and social situations: poor financial circumstances; an alcoholic father; a mother raising her child alone and still living with her parents. There are also students with typical development and artistic excellence.

Our chosen group is therefore homogeneous in age, but heterogeneous in ability and development.



A Journey Outside the School

We set off on our first winter walk with 13 bright-eyed and enthusiastic students. They seemed very happy and excited about the special opportunity, and eager to share their nature experiences and stories on the way to the forest. Our chosen location was a small planted pine forest on the outskirts of the village, 1.5 kilometres from the school. It is a narrow, yet wild and very beautiful strip of forest with relatively diverse vegetation, wildlife and a magical atmosphere. The forest is home to pheasants, rabbits, deer, owls and of course many other birds and insects. Rarely entered by humans, few people use it for walking. At the edge of the forest is a small meadow of thick, soft grass, with views beyond the bordering bushes towards the wider fields.

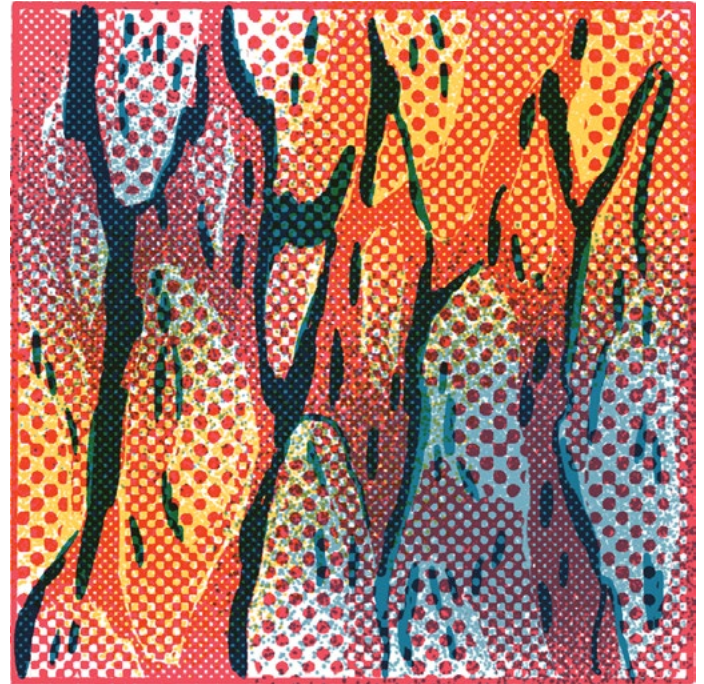
- 1. Introductory stage.** After some warm-up movement, energising and concentration exercises, the children were able to calm down slowly, helped by holding a forest object to remind them where they were. These objects were treasured, but were left at the edge of the forest for the duration of the walk. At the end, many took them home as a souvenir of the place. During the first part of the walk, when they walked quietly along the forest path to see if there was any movement in the forest, a pheasant flew up beside us. This gave them an understanding of the role that silence can play in encountering animals.
- 2. Meaningful nature connection stage.** To increase the students' interest and involvement, we introduced them to meeting animals in the forest – imitating their movements, sounds, gait, perception and senses – even on the path. Through these



exercises we also awakened sensory connections, which continued by touching and smelling the forest soil. We felt this to be a threshold for connection; many of the children were reluctant to touch the soil at first, but later they happily remarked on how delicious it smelled. Continuing our journey, we passed under a half-fallen tree, which we called the “Gate of Silence,” and from there we entered a deeper silence.

- 3. Solo time.** Arriving at a brilliant meadow, we were in a truly different mood. A breathing exercise deepened our connection. This was followed by a silent retreat into the woods, off



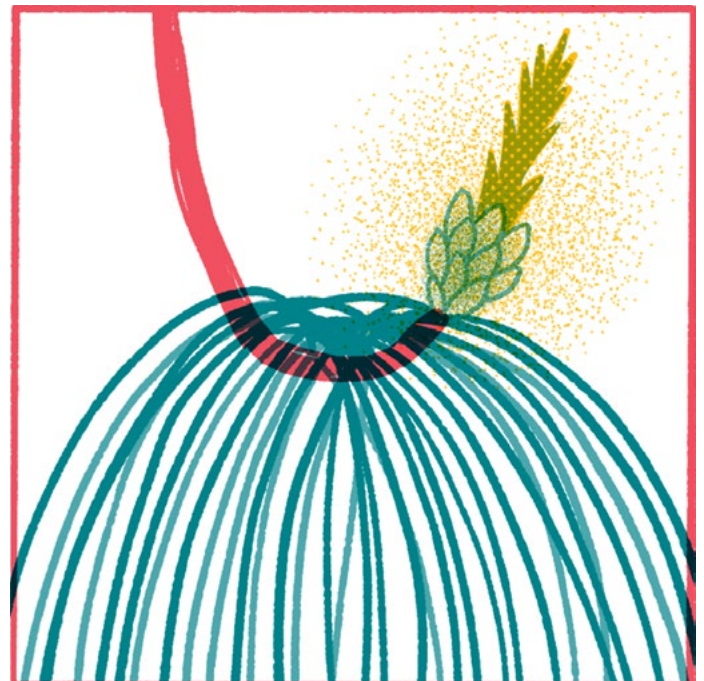
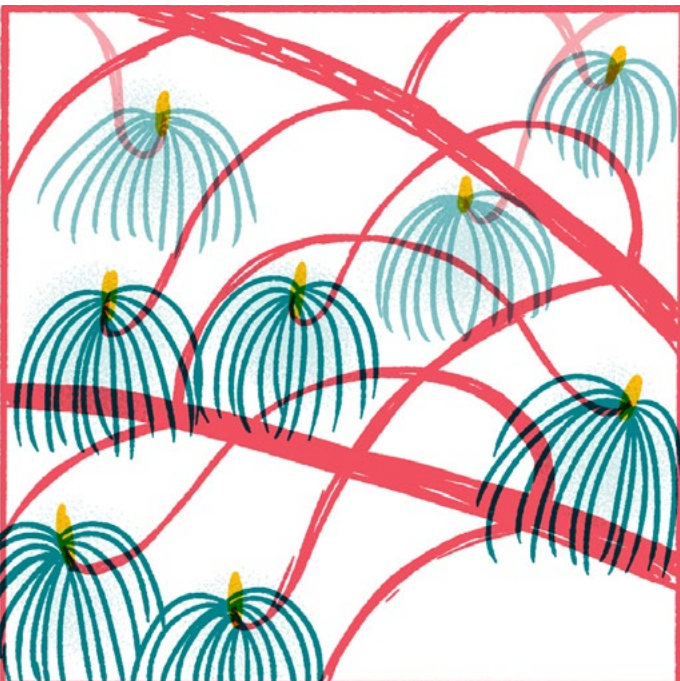


the path, with the freedom to explore by themselves. Not all the children were able to maintain the solo time alone; the liberating feeling of being able to wander freely in the woods in fact led many to connect with friends and move on together. Some walked all the way, some sat alone and others found shelter under trees and bushes.

4. **Closing stage.** At the end of the walk, we sat in a circle and had a picnic, and the children poured out their feelings and experiences. Most of them felt relaxed and at home in the quiet, beautiful forest. A few planned to come

back and bring their parents with them. Some liked the “caveman” feeling, others liked the silence. Together, based on the children’s ideas, we named the forest the “Forest of Tranquillity.” To say goodbye, we breathed together, put our hands on the ground and thanked the forest for what it had given us.

The journey from the forest to the school was filled with similar enthusiasm, as the students were eager to continue the programme in the spring. In the days after the walk, in the drawing class, we recalled the experience of the Gate of Silence, the pine trees and the forest animals.



THE PHASES OF THE WALK AND THE SEASONAL WALKS

We designed each walk according to the season, but always followed our basic AF sequence. The walk with teens was shorter and more difficult, as they behaved with indifference and resistance; nevertheless, the invitations we used with them are outlined below. These are invitations we applied in a more structured way, according to the sequence of an AF Walk, and adapted to the seasons.



Introductory stage (introduction, sensory connection, slowing down)

We began each time by telling the children information about the route and the purpose of the walk. Our starting ritual was a little 'rain-making' with our hands, which helped them to arrive and focus their attention, while also giving the group a tactile and acoustic stimulus. This is always a key moment for catching their attention and building motivation and also talking about the rules of the walk. From the second walk on we were reunited with the long-term group, which was now familiar, so there was also the opportunity to ask follow-up questions about their changing experience of nature, beyond what was evident.

Our connection practices, which varied from season to season, were as follows:

Winter walk – Small pine forest in Etyek

- Simple stretching and movement exercises for the whole body, intended to draw attention to the contrast between stretching and relaxing
- Conscious, slow walk to the entrance of the forest, focusing on the sensation in the feet
- Collecting two non-living natural objects during the walk, experiencing their shape and touch
- 'Making rain' with small objects as a rite of passage into the forest world
- Sensory warm-up – guided sensory practice, with special attention to winter stimuli, cool air, seasonal colours
- Discussion: What do you leave outside, what will you not need during the walk?



Spring walk – Small pine forest in Etyek

- Observing nature season by season: What has changed since last time?
- Reflective question: Have you changed or



renewed something recently? What has spring given you?

- Breathing exercise: Practice slow conscious breathing, sitting or lying in a circle
- Sensory games when entering the forest – eagle eye, fox walk, deer's ear – to focus attention on sensations and stimuli
- Silence game: walk for a long time with silent footsteps
- "Where is spring? What do you see springtime in?" Children walk around then return to the circle, gesturing to show what they have experienced

Summer Walk – Etyek Fishing Lake

- Free exploration of the site to admire the inviting waterfront and run around before the start of the rain ritual and walk
- Movement invitations with water. Each child came up with a verb that water does, and for a moment together we freely reflected on it (e.g.: ripples, splashes, waves, flows, etc.)
- Talking about where we can find water and discovering liquid in our bodies, finding the pulse

- Sitting down in a circle, asking "how are you?" talking about the wildlife on the lakeshore, slowing down with a breathing exercise

Autumn Walk – Göböl lakeside

- Dynamic walk to the starting point, which was a small meadow by a lake under a huge tree
- Seasonal tuning: "What does autumn remind you of?" Each child showed their idea with a movement and the others repeated it
- Four seasons breathing exercise
- Searching for autumnal things in the clearing, building a threshold from the objects (fallen leaves, branches, crops) on the path, then entering the magical world of the forest over that threshold

Winter walk with teenagers – Small pine forest in Etyek

- Making a verbal contract for the walk. With teens we found it important to gain their attention and cooperation, and treated them more like partners and individuals so as not to make them feel uncomfortable.
- A little conversation, asking how they feel, what they think about nature
- Stretching exercises to relax their bodies, experiencing the difference of tension and release
- Fox walk, Eagle eye, Deer's ear activities to foster deeper consciousness of senses
- Awakening senses with a sitting meditation





Meaningful nature connection stage (sensory exploration)

We began this stage by inviting the children to come closer to the forest so they could experience this natural environment directly. In this phase, there was always more emphasis on the season, through seasonal impulses, and again we used small rituals to maintain their focus and playfulness. The following invitations were used during the walks and stops:

Winter walk

- Observing the habitat: What kind of animals live here? Playfully imitating the movements and impressions of animals, walking slowly and mindfully
- Collecting sensations while moving along (smelling the ground, touching moss, experiencing raindrops on a rose hip bush)
- Crossing beneath the Gate of Silence tree, and from there walking quietly, listening to the sounds of the woods



Spring walk

- Crossing under the Gate of Silence, touching and stroking the tall grass on the way
- Walking slowly in pairs around the meadow,



taking turns to close eyes and be led by the other, listening to the buzzing of insects, the rustling of the wind, the sounds of spring

- Encountering spring flowers – experiencing sight, touch, smell

Summer Walk

- Approaching water with a few buckets, due to difficult access to the shore. Sensory games: touching the surface of the water, listening to drips, observing shadows and sparkles by swirling the water, its rippling surface
- Experiencing the temperature and smell of the water
- Confidence walks in pairs, alternately with closed eyes, being guided by the other



- Photography game by the water's edge, in pairs
- Another long run around together. Depending on the children's energy and needs, this might be need to prepare for slowing down



Autumn Walk

- Playful searching game in small groups, with sharing at the end. All groups get a small piece of paper. Find something that is: silly, scented, multi-coloured, old, ready for winter, moving in the wind, invisible at first sight, very far away from you, looks like you
- Scent swap: Searching for scented things, collecting an item and "scent swapping" in pairs, continually forming new pairs and smelling the scents collected by the others
- Tactile group game: Picking up objects with interesting tactile qualities that can be hidden in the hand, and then standing in a circle while passing them around behind their backs, without looking at them, only touching them
- Listening to and counting surrounding sounds with eyes closed

Winter walk with teenagers – Small pine forest in Etyek

- Exploring a single fallen leaf carefully and slowly, using all the senses, making a connection
- What is in motion? Exploring and focusing on movement around them





Solo time

Individual walks are usually prepared and begin with a slightly different invitation. In the colder seasons it is more of a walk, while in the warmer seasons it is more of a seated experience. The kids really enjoyed the free solo time in the woods, something they don't get to do very often, although it was difficult for some to stay alone or silent. We kept the solo time shorter than with adults and always offered them the possibility to stay close and feel safe around the group experts if needed.



Winter walk

- Breathing exercise to experience abdominal and chest breathing, slowing down, preparing for the solo time
- Solo time for individual exploration, wandering, optional sitting or walking, individually or not

Spring walk

- Breathing exercise, focusing on the scents of the season
- Invitation: Find a tree – this will be your tree. Lean on it, feel it hold you, spend some time with it, get to know it, gaze around

Summer Walk

- In order to attune to place, a sensory exercise focused on the scent of the lake and the rustling of reeds in the wind
- Invitation to the retreat: Each child looked for 3 smells, 3 sounds, 3 touches, 3 sights
- Individual retreat into the dense, bushy woodland near the lake or at the lakeside, gazing at the water

Autumn Walk

- Individual retreat in the woodland by the lake – find a tree, sit at its base, rest. There was also the option of lying on the bridge over the lake in closer proximity to the water





- Optional time sitting beside the teacher, just gazing at the water together

Winter walk with teenagers – Small pine forest in Etyek

- Sit spot invitation: find a tree, create your safe place and stay there for a little while



Closing stage (final reflection, picnic, tea, integration)

At the end of each walk, we had a picnic where some snacks, seasonal fruits, hot and cold drinks were offered to the children. We thought it was important that the picnic suited the children's tastes, so we flavoured the tea with honey and always brought some treats (biscuits, scones, etc., which they all mostly like). The picnic always provided a great atmosphere for final discussions, reflections and sharing. At the end of the picnic a closing invitation helped to integrate the experience and say goodbye to the forest.



Winter walk

- Questions: What have you experienced? What have you felt? Where in your body do you feel it?
- Later, when you leave the forest, what will you take home? What message would you send to the forest? What would you thank the forest for?
- Communal breathing exercise, with palms on the ground for one last connection with the sleeping forest in winter
- A special follow up: 3 days after the walk, in drawing class at school, recalling it together and listening to tree.fm, and drawing a little picture of the forest experience



Spring walk

- Spring picnic (strawberries, elderberry syrup, etc.)
- Questions: What have you noticed, what did you experience, how did you feel? How is your mood now?
- Take a picture with you – forming a picture frame with their hands, the children ‘took pictures’ while returning from the walk, which they could then take back with them in their memories

Summer Walk

- Sharing solo time experiences
- Painting with watercolours and lake water on postcard-like cardboard
- Summer picnic with cherries, sharing painted pictures, making associations: what comes to mind as you look at all the paintings?
- Closing, saying goodbye

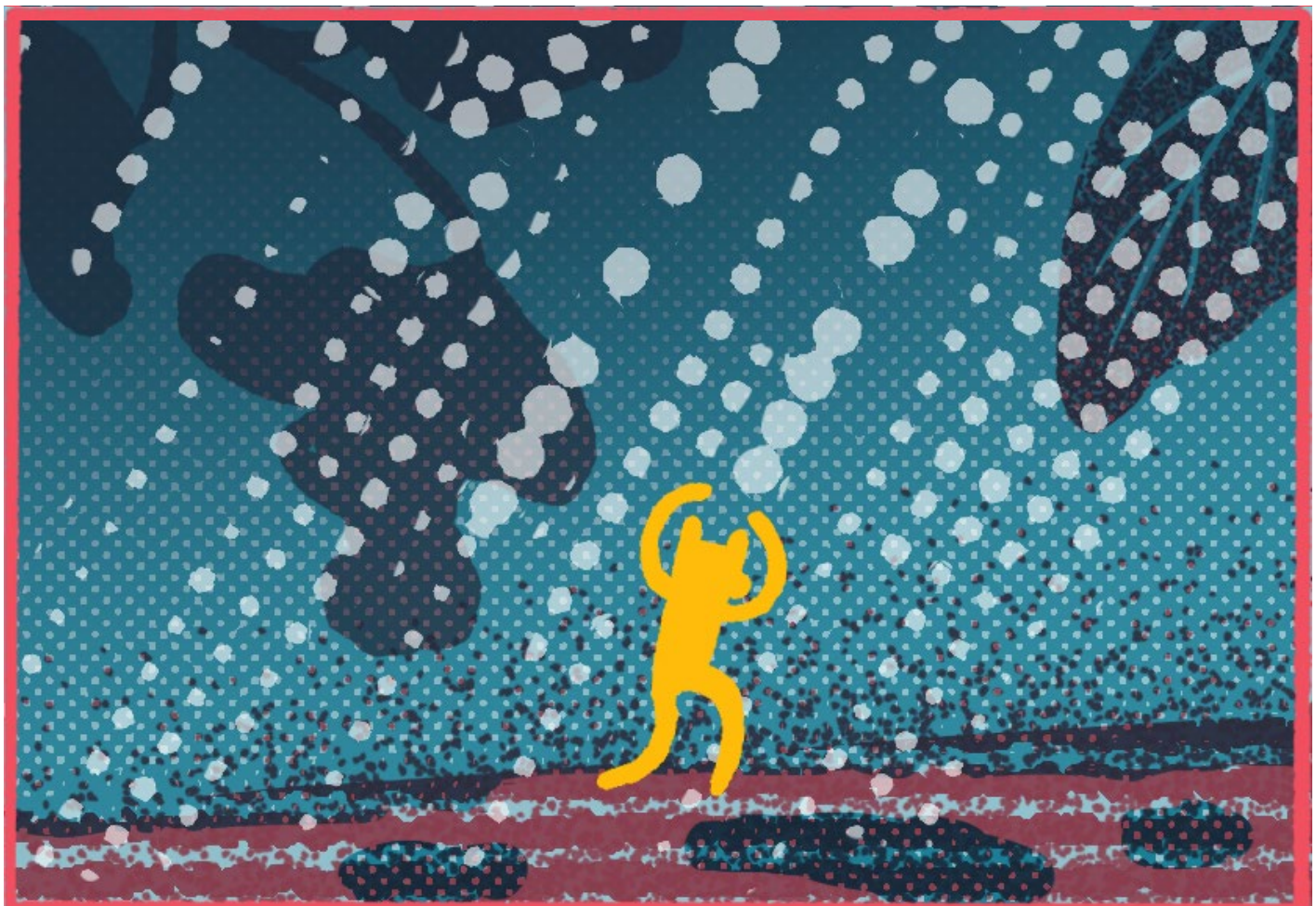
Autumn Walk

- Painter’s palette – collecting tiny treasures, colours, shapes, discovering tiny things, creating their own pieces of art, made double-sided with glue on palm-sized coloured cardboard

- Autumn picnic on the pier over the water, sharing their palettes with the group
- Final round-up of the autumn session: How was your experience and what was your favourite part?
- Closing circle and deeper reflection on the 4 sessions. What were the most important experiences? What would be the most important memory for you? How did the walks affect you? Who would you recommend this programme to?

Winter walk with teenagers – Small pine forest in Etyek

- Seasonal picnic
- Free sharing time
- Targeted questions about their experience during the walk: “1. How is your mood now, how do you feel? 2. How much did you miss your devices while being here? Using their hands to indicate their response – showing answers nonverbally
- Choosing and leaving a natural object at a safe place in the forest, representing themselves.



PRACTICAL TIPS FOR ACCESSIBLE FOREST WALKS WITH CHILDREN

Based on the above, the following tips and practices are particularly important for forest walks with groups of children (approx. 6-12 years old).

Pay greater attention to safety:

Why it matters: The adults are always responsible for the safety of the children, so it is important to think about and assess the risks and dangers of any walk. Children's behaviour is more impulsive, their movements more intense and their sense of responsibility less matured, so constant attention is required.

How to implement: Know the area and possible safety aspects thoroughly. Be clear and specific in communicating with the children about the rules. Keep an eye on them at all times, following where they go and what they do. You will be less immersed yourself with children because you have more responsibility.

Make a contract:

Why it matters: Creating clear structures is important so that children can move freely and feel safe within them. It also helps cooperation if they agree to the rules at the beginning. This is also how you can initiate a consensual 'not have your phone' agreement.

How to implement: Justify why each rule is needed and what benefit it will bring to the group. Call it a contract, because then they feel you are treating them as a partner. Keep the rules simple and don't apply too many at a time – you might perhaps use your fingers to indicate how many rules there will be and what each one contains. Examples can be found above in the "General Accessibility" section.

Communicate simply:

Why it matters: Children aren't dumb, but their vocabulary and their view of the world are very different from those of adults. It's important to speak to them in their language, but not be patronising. To make your programme accessible, tailor your communication to the youngest or



most disabled participant so that everyone understands what you are saying.

How to implement: Use shorter sentences and plain language. Use non-verbal communication, intonation and hand signals to make your message as clear as possible. Use language that is easy to understand, with clear words.

Let yourself go into the world of fairy tales:

Why it matters: Younger age groups are more easily engaged if you present invitations in a playful, fairy-tale mode. For children this will be more familiar language and a more imagination-based way of processing the information. While you can also do nature walks for preschoolers like this, younger school children are certainly receptive to this approach.

How to implement: Invite them to engage in age-appropriate role play (e.g. walk as quietly as a fox or as softly and gently as a prince/woman), invite them to story time (e.g. build a shelter for the forest creatures). Basically, use the language of games and play, which could include adventures, challenges, treasures, fairies, magical creatures, etc.

Prepare more activities than you anticipate fitting in:

Why it matters: You can't always predict the pace, interest and impulsiveness of the group in advance, because these can vary greatly from age group to age group. Sometimes one exercise won't work, and sometimes the group will need something else. It is therefore good to have a variety of invitations to choose from. Have in mind several movement games, active invitations and other more exciting challenges.

How to implement: Carry a list in your pocket so you don't get caught running out of ideas. Feel free

to be transparent with the kids – tell them you are looking for a good game for them. Monitor their interest and keep track of their motivation.

Do not label, do not judge, do not expect performance:

Why it matters: Children face a lot of expectations, competition and strictness during their school years, and in the Hungarian school system being overly active and imaginative is often punished. In the forest, however, everyone is equal and there are no right or wrong answers. This programme can offer release and support for more anxious children.



How to implement: Use open questions, ask not for knowledge but for experience and opinion. Listen to the children, compliment them, and include those who wander off without criticising. Only be very vocal or forceful in times of danger – otherwise remain as gentle as possible.

For teachers, it can be useful to “swap classes” for the programme, so that the familiar labels and dynamics of working together can be abandoned.

Be inspiring & be a model of connecting with nature:

Why it matters: Motivation is a much more effective resource than force, and children are easy to motivate because they are naturally curious, courageous and flexible. What you show matters more than what you say, so it's important how you connect with nature.

How to implement: Use words with positive content (e.g. invite, opportunity, explore, curiosity, seek, etc.) to encourage activity rather than pressuring terms (e.g. task, must, don't). Demonstrate each activity, close your eyes, play with them, get a little muddy, be a bit like a curious child yourself. To facilitate walks without digital devices, put your phone away too. Carry a watch, paper, pencil or even a separate camera, but to model real natural offline fun you should keep your phone out of sight (though you can have it with you in case of emergency).

Cooperate with parents:

Why it matters: It's important to inform parents about the nature of the programme and relevant practical information. It will be up to them to make sure that the children come appropriately dressed. Many parents don't like their children to get “dirty” or don't understand what this kind of forest walk is all about.

How to implement: Meet with parents or write them a short, clear letter containing what they need to know, for example about equipment and what the children should bring, and of course introduce yourself if they don't know you. It is important that parents let their children join in with an open heart and they don't discourage them if they come home a little muddy. Many

children worry about this during the programme excursions; you can tell them that you have discussed this with their parents and now your rules apply in this regard.

You might also want to talk to the parents about how they can also take the children out to reduce the time spent in front of screens. There are lots of playful ideas from this book that they can apply.



Accept that today's children are growing up with digital devices:

Why it matters: It is more important to understand than to judge the use of digital devices by children today. It is not their responsibility to monitor how much screen time they get, nor how their parents mentor them in the digital world. With the biggest tech companies competing for their attention, kids should be helped to choose the right activities and, if possible, to switch off their devices and on to reality more often. A great way is for them to experience and learn about nature connection.

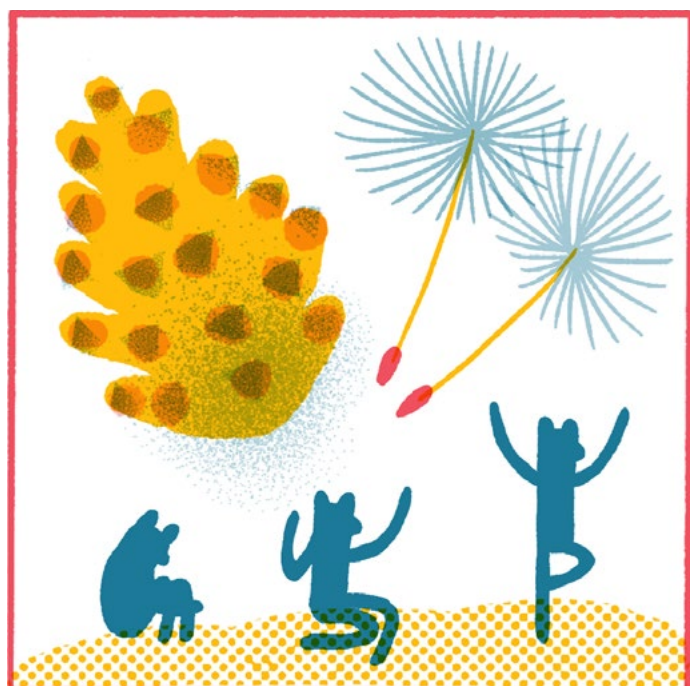
How to implement: Don't judge, be curious, stay positive when addressing this topic. Talk about using the phone without a phone being present, and help them understand why control is important (this can vary widely depending on age). At the end of the walk, ask them to reflect on what it was like for them to be without their

phone, and how this experience was different from a game or a story.

Plan how you can spend time in the forest on other occasions:

Why it matters: To make the positive experience last longer, encourage children to return to the forest with their families (or if they are older, with friends), or practice similar games or activities in the garden or park.

How to implement: Make a specific plan that, when discussed, will increase the likelihood of its realisation.



Use a variety of reflection methods:

Why it matters: Many children find it difficult to articulate their feelings. They feel their feelings, but many cannot identify them or name them as they lack the cultural training or vocabulary to do so. Equally important however are their

awareness and integration, which allow the experience to resonate deeper and for longer.

How to implement: Use simple questions. If you get a simple answer, ask back and request an example, clarification, explanation etc. so you can encourage their response. You can also employ non-verbal reflection: movement (show with a gesture), music and rhythm (with musical instruments, forest objects), and visual arts (land art, drawing, painting, clay) can all be great tools for reflection. You may not understand “verbally” what they are saying, but you will certainly feel something and there will be sharing and awareness on everybody’s part.

Get ready to enjoy the changing seasons:

Why it matters: In our experience, children are less worried about the weather and are often more open to outdoor activities in colder, rainier conditions. They are more likely to enjoy the change of seasons and less likely to complain. They are great at experiencing the seasonal characteristics, playing with colours and connecting with symbols. Nevertheless, it is important to always set off in the right clothes and equipment, and this may require more responsibility on your part.

How to implement: Check the weather forecast and be prepared with the necessary equipment, also informing parents and chaperones. If it’s muddy, arrange waterproof seating for the picnic so everybody can sit down. If the sun gets too strong, stay in the shade and have sunscreen and plenty of spare drinking water on hand. If it is really cold you can prepare extra blankets and scarves (though the children are less likely to freeze than you because they’re moving so much).



ERA'S STORY

Era has been working with different ways of connecting with nature for decades. Though an experienced facilitator, this project is the first time she has connected deeply with groups of children. During the walks she took on a facilitating role, co-leading the process.

Her initial motivation for working with children was to get them interested in and enthusiastic about connecting with nature. This became both a personal and a professional goal.

During the preparation stage, one of the most exciting questions revolved around how to transform the existing popular exercises to fit in with children's interests and pace. In addition, part of the preparation involved looking into the characteristics of that specific group, e.g. SNI (special needs and inclusion) issues, and form background knowledge that would help in understanding the children.

A number of questions were raised at this stage, such as:

What can we expect; how will they react to the elements of the programme?

Will the planned location be appropriate and safe?

How easy to manage will they be?

What unexpected situations might arise? What will be the best way to deal with these?

How will the programme and style be adapted, and what competences will be needed?

Aside from the many questions, it was reassuring that the teachers who knew the children very well would be present to help in unexpected situations.

When Era met the group for the first time, she felt a great sense of joy and curiosity, looking forward to exploring with them and she set off on her first walk.

The walks resulted in many surprises. It was fantastic to see how the standard sequence of the Accessible Forest programme provided a safe framework, how freely the exercises could be varied, and how much creativity the method allowed while also achieving a very concrete goal. As working with children is very different from working with adults, a lot of new knowledge and attitudes emerged.

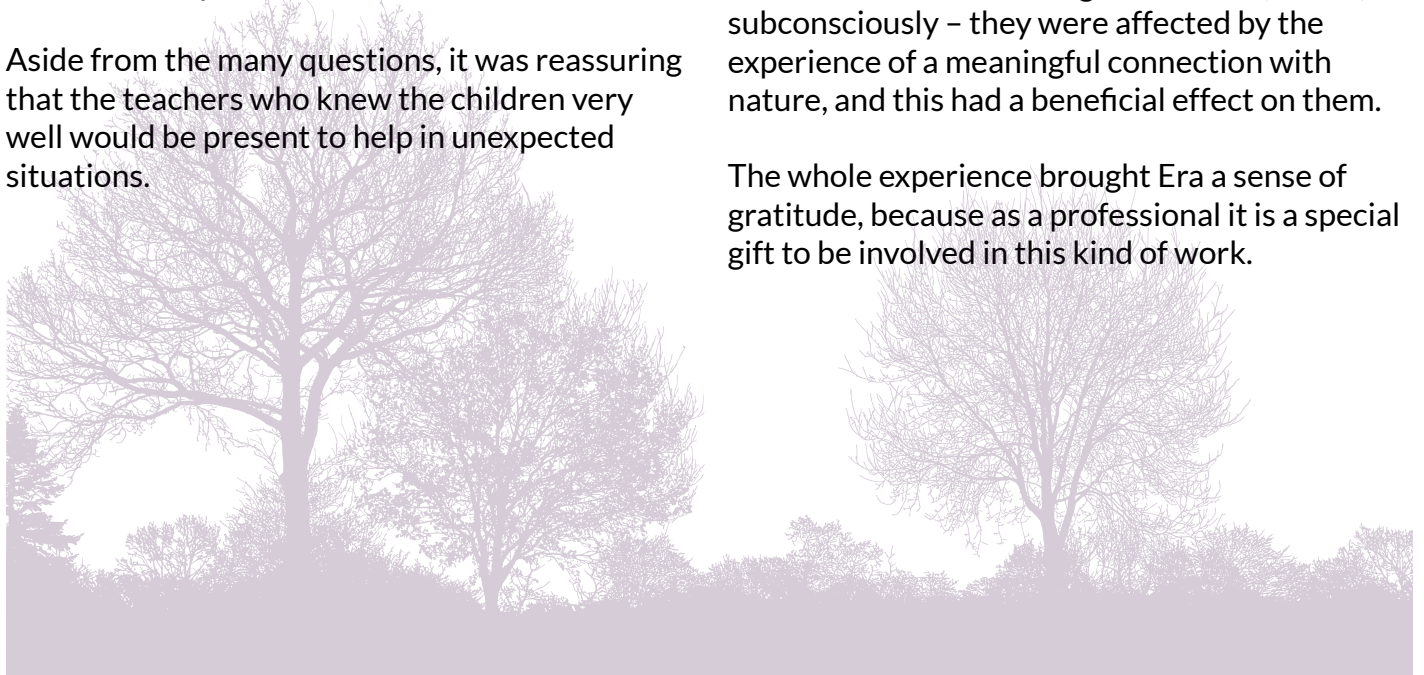
- The children need to engage in dynamic, intense movement to be able to slow down later on. It is worth shaping the programme in this way.

- Silent retreat (solo time) is less emphasised, as many of them found it difficult to be alone or quiet, and were less able to engage deeply. It is worth planning for shorter solo times.

- Flexibility is incredibly important. At times it will be necessary to skip a planned exercise when you realise that it is not going to work out the way you wanted. You have to constantly monitor which exercises take you deeper, and which ones you need to let go of.

Over the course of the four walks, Era had many different responses. She reinforced her feeling that even if children cannot necessarily express themselves well through speech, behind the words – through the senses, inside, subconsciously – they were affected by the experience of a meaningful connection with nature, and this had a beneficial effect on them.

The whole experience brought Era a sense of gratitude, because as a professional it is a special gift to be involved in this kind of work.





QUICK REFERENCE CARDS:



CARD 1: ACCESSIBLE FOREST WALK SEQUENCE FOR CHILDREN

INTRODUCTORY STAGE:

- Begin with movement warm-ups and energy exercises
- Create arrival rituals (e.g., “rain making” with hands)
- Use sensory warm-ups adapted to the season
- Establish verbal contracts and simple rules
- Include reflective questions about the season and feelings

MEANINGFUL CONNECTION STAGE:

- Imitate animal movements and perspectives
- Explore sensory experiences (touch soil, smell plants)
- Use playful searching games and scent swaps
- Use ceremonies or rituals, e.g. cross the threshold: (“Gate of Silence”)
- Gradually deepen silence and sensory awareness

SOLO TIME:

- Keep shorter periods than for adult sessions (5-15 minutes)
- Allow proximity options for those uncomfortable alone
- Offer specific focus points (find a tree, collect sensations)
- Provide a choice between sitting, walking, or exploring

- Create safe boundaries for independent exploration

CLOSING STAGE:

- Share a seasonal picnic with treats children enjoy
- Create a reflection space for sharing experiences
- Use artwork or creative expression for integration
- Include gratitude practices towards nature
- Create a closing ritual for transition back to school



CARD 2: SEASONAL ADAPTATIONS FOR CHILDREN'S FOREST WALKS

WINTER:

- Prepare with warm clothing and hot tea
- Focus on animal tracks and quiet movement
- Contrast exercise between tension and relaxation
- Experience “Gate of Silence” for deeper quiet
- Collect non-living objects for touch connection
- Use breathing exercises to prepare for solo (walking) time

SPRING:

- Compare changes since previous visits
- Use pair activities (being led with eyes closed)
- Focus on emerging flowers and new growth (outside and inside the body)
- Incorporate more movement and exploration
- Focus on bird sounds, flower smells and the touch of newly grown plants

SUMMER:

- Prepare sun protection and water supply
- Include water elements when possible
- Create movement activities mimicking water
- Use watercolour painting for reflection
- Extend running/movement opportunities for high-energy participants

AUTUMN:

- Create seasonal threshold from fallen leaves and sticks
- Use “palette” activities with colourful elements
- Design scavenger hunts for seasonal items
- Create art with collected natural materials
- Reflect on cycles and preparation for winter



CARD 3: PRACTITIONER TIPS FOR CHILDREN'S FOREST WALKS

SAFETY & STRUCTURE:

- Maintain continuous supervision
- Create clear and simple verbal contracts
- Communicate in age-appropriate language
- Prepare alternative activities for flexibility
- Collaborate with teachers/parents on logistics

ENGAGEMENT APPROACHES:

- Incorporate fairytale elements and playful language
- Model curiosity and nature connection
- Use inspiring rather than directive language
- Accept and work with children's digital realities
- Avoid judgement, competition, or performance pressure

REFLECTION TECHNIQUES:

- Offer multiple expression methods beyond verbal
- Use movement, art, and music for processing
- Ask simple, open questions about experiences
- Support articulation of feelings with prompts
- Plan for future nature connection opportunities

PRACTICAL PREPARATION:

- Adapt to weather with appropriate equipment
- Bring seasonal snacks and drinks for picnic
- Create comfortable seating arrangements
- Allow for unpredictable energy levels
- Familiarise with the area thoroughly for safety



CARD 4: WORKING WITH DIGITAL NATIVES IN NATURE

UNDERSTANDING CONTEXT:

- Recognise that children are growing up immersed in digital environments
- Acknowledge that tech companies actively compete for children's attention
- Understand that parents have varying approaches to technology
- Accept that digital boundaries are not children's responsibility
- Recognise nature as a powerful counterbalance to digital overstimulation

DEVICE-FREE APPROACHES:

- Create forest "souvenirs" for alternative tactile focus
- Establish clear expectations before the walk
- Model non-digital engagement (leave your own phone behind)
- Use a watch instead of phone for timekeeping
- Create physical activities that engage the senses fully

FACILITATING REFLECTION:

- Ask specifically about the experience of being device-free
- Compare digital and natural experiences without judgement
- Discuss differences in attention and awareness
- Note mood shifts before and after nature immersion
- Help articulate how nature engages senses differently to screens

PRACTITIONER INSIGHTS:

- "Children need dynamic, intense movement to slow down later"
- "Solo time should be shorter than with adults"
- "Flexibility is incredibly important"
- "Even when children can't express it verbally, nature connection affects them beneficially"
- "The standard sequence provides a safe framework while allowing creative adaptation"



SECTION 4: BENEFITS FOR THE GROUP

Benefits based on scientific research

Recent research suggests that being in a natural environment has broadly restorative effects on young people. In a review of 30 relevant studies, Moll et al (2022) concluded that ‘nature exposure helps restore cognitive, social and behavioural resources [in children and adolescents].’

Certainly, spending time in nature offers powerful benefits for children, particularly in balancing the effects of heavy digital device use. Natural environments help recharge mental energy, improve concentration, and reduce restlessness – making it easier for kids to focus, learn, and stay calm. Time in green spaces also supports emotional regulation, helping children feel more relaxed, less anxious, and better equipped to handle stress.

Nature-rich experiences tend to boost social skills too. Children often become more

cooperative, empathetic, and engaged with others during outdoor play or nature-based learning. These settings promote creativity, encourage curiosity, and allow for the kind of unstructured play that is essential for healthy development.

Importantly, nature helps counter the sensory overload that screens often produce. It creates a slower, more grounded experience that helps the brain recover from constant stimulation. This makes outdoor time especially valuable for kids who are easily overstimulated or show signs of digital fatigue.

Even short, regular exposure – like walks in the park, time in a school garden, or forest play – can have noticeably positive effects. Nature doesn’t need to be exotic or far away to make a difference.

Benefits based on our experiences

In choosing the children’s group, we thought it could be very beneficial for this class to participate in the walks. Not only because of their age and vulnerable characteristics, but also because of the other qualities of the group. Village life, learning difficulties, and educational workloads all suggested that as well as digital overuse, other social factors were also relevant. Considering these issues, we created a very accepting, flexible, mobile

and playful environment that allowed them to experience safe and free exploration as well as meaningful nature interaction. It was a source of pride for the class to be involved in such a project; therefore, as well as boosting their mood and health, it also supported the positive development of their self-image as a class. Reflecting on the above and summarising the experience of the walks, the following benefits emerged:

Direct benefits:

- Positive physiological and psychological effects of walking in the forest
- Relief from digital overuse and its overloading of attentional functions
- Manual, analogue, sensory, and spatial experience as opposed to the uni-dimensional nature of digital experiences
- Stress relief during a typical school day
- Exploring a new place, a forest easily accessible for children
- Group cohesion effect – an unusual shared activity providing a pleasant group experience
- Equal treatment – as there are no right or wrong answers on the programme, all participants feel equally competent
- Removing the class from everyday life, where they often experience their group self-image as problematic
- Providing a special experience for children from disadvantaged backgrounds who would otherwise find such programmes difficult to access
- Expanding the methodological resource base for teachers
- Introducing a way of relaxing for children and teachers alike

Longer-term benefits:

- A new habit, walking in the woods, is established at individual and class level
- A better relationship with nature through regular contact
- Offering a real recreational option in addition to, or instead of, virtual connection
- Children, as informal 'facilitators of nature contact,' take the ideas back to family and friends

Benefits based on the participant feedback

Measuring the effects of each walk at the end, with participant questionnaires and group expert feedback forms, we were able to identify and now share the benefits experienced by our target groups.

The **group experts** reported the following benefits:

- Being outside school, being outdoors, being freer, learning new things
- The students listened to each other more carefully, while sharing and also during paired activities. Trust and attention developed
- They opened up and shared their thoughts more easily than at school
- Courage and a sense of liberation were evident
- Kids and also teens got to know a new nature spot in the village; they planned to return later.

The **participants** (kids and teens) reflected on the experience in three ways:

1. Having a reflective conversation during the Closing Stage of the walk
2. Evaluating their moods and stress levels before and after the walk on a short mood questionnaire
3. Writing down in their own words how they felt before and after the walks

These three methods revealed the following benefits:

- Relaxing, calming down and spending time outdoors made them feel very good
- The kids were delighted to see animals and discover the treasures of the woods
- They would recommend these programmes to stressed-out friends and relatives
- Teenagers did not miss their mobile phones during the walk at all – the nonverbal

responses suggested no qualms about leaving them behind

- Teenagers reflected on their mood: "I am in a super mood," "Good, calm," "I am glad we had this time together and that we took part in this programme," "It was good by the lake," "I feel happy." Therefore despite their resistant behaviour they actually had a very meaningful and relaxing time in the forest
- The average stress level scores for the teenagers (comparing their stress levels from before and after the walk) decreased from 6.2 to 4.5.



Even though many of our group members had difficulty expressing what they experienced on the walk in words, our overall impression was that it gave them an incredibly rich experience for which they were especially grateful. The accepting, neutral, inspiring and humorous environment, in which all their observations and ideas were listened to, seemed to gratify them as much as noticing, hearing, smelling, touching, and fully experiencing the wonders of nature in that moment. In addition, they were introduced to a small forest that was accessible to them and a method they could recall and rediscover either at school or with their families.

OUTRO

Reading through this chapter you might have come up with some inspiration or ideas about working with children or how to implement Accessible Forest Practice with your own working groups or kids. Take a pencil and piece of paper and write down any thoughts that come to your mind. Reflect for a moment on your own childhood memories and on the stories presented here, or just attend to your new ideas and let them flow.

Maybe, after writing down everything that comes to mind, go on a nature walk and let yourself be a child again – let your curiosity and free mobility lead you to explore all that surrounds you. This will help you get inspired, shift your perspective and help you design an Accessible Forest walk for children. Your own detailed sequence can be built from any invitations in this previous chapter; feel free to combine them according to your own pace and taste.

We hope that all this will inspire you to repeat or renew some of the activities described above, and live with the enthusiasm, honesty, freedom and openness of children, while also relishing your meaningful nature connection experience with them.





QUICK REFERENCE CARDS:



CARD 1: RESEARCH-BACKED BENEFITS OF NATURE FOR CHILDREN

COGNITIVE BENEFITS:

- Recharges mental energy depleted by digital device use
- Improves concentration and attention span
- Reduces restlessness and enhances focus
- Supports learning capabilities
- Counters sensory overload from screens

EMOTIONAL BENEFITS:

- Enhances emotional regulation
- Reduces anxiety and stress levels
- Creates calm and relaxation
- Improves overall mood
- Offers relief from digital fatigue

SOCIAL BENEFITS:

- Increases cooperative behaviour
- Develops empathy and social awareness
- Encourages positive engagement with others
- Promotes equal participation regardless of academic ability
- Strengthens group cohesion

DEVELOPMENTAL BENEFITS:

- Promotes creativity and curiosity
- Provides essential unstructured play opportunities
- Creates slower, more grounded experiences
- Offers multi-sensory engagement versus “uni-dimensional” digital experiences
- Accessible even through brief but regular nature exposure



CARD 2: OBSERVED OUTCOMES FROM FOREST WALKS

IMMEDIATE BENEFITS:

- Average stress reduction in teenagers: 6.2 -> 4.5 after walks
- Improved mood reported across all participant groups
- Decreased reliance on digital devices (teens reported not missing phones)
- Enhanced sensory awareness and exploration
- Joy in discovering “treasures” and wildlife

SOCIAL IMPROVEMENTS (REPORTED BY EDUCATORS):

- “Students listened to each other more carefully”
- “Trust and attention developed”
- “They opened up and shared thoughts more easily than at school”
- “Liberation and courage were evident”
- Enhanced class self-image and cohesion

PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS:

- “I am in a super mood”
- “Good, calm”
- “I am glad we had time together”
- “I feel happy”
- Would recommend to “stressed-out friends and relatives”

LONG-TERM POTENTIAL:

- Establishing new forest walking habits
- Developing a deeper relationship with nature

- Creating real recreational alternatives to digital activities
- Children becoming “informal facilitators of nature contact” with family
- Expanding pedagogical resources for teachers





PART B. ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTICE FOR INDIVIDUALS STRUGGLING WITH EXCESSIVE DIGITAL DEVICE USE – SINGLE MOTHERS

In this part we introduce Accessible Forest Practice with a group of vulnerable single mothers and mothers living in refugees who are characterised by their excessive use of digital devices. Although these people are of different ages and social backgrounds, they can greatly benefit from nature immersion activities.

Knowledge and understanding about:

- what to consider when working with vulnerable groups
- cooperating with social workers and women's refuge staff to attract residents' participation
- how to accommodate the needs of mothers with small babies

Skills in:

- clear and friendly communication
- engaging hard-to-reach participants

Attitudes:

- ability to create a safe space where vulnerable women can feel secure and relax
- flexibility and patience to help establish connections with vulnerable mothers

Reflective Consideration:

Take a moment to reflect on your objectives at this stage of your work. Are you focused on expanding your knowledge, enhancing your skills, or both?

Time Allocation:

Dedicate approximately one hour to fully engage with the material and activities presented.





SECTION 1. THE TARGET GROUP – VULNERABLE MOTHERS

During our walks we also worked with groups of economically and socially disadvantaged women, residents of women's refuges, and women experiencing various financial and social hardships. These women live in temporary care homes run by charity organisations, and the walks were offered to them as a voluntary leisure time activity. The three groups consisted of mothers of young babies and residents of temporary care homes for families.

These women face various kinds of severe life challenges and difficulties, such as homelessness, financial pressures, abusive relationships, complex economic and social disadvantages resulting from their ethnic background (Roma minority group). Moreover, most of them have no family or partner support. Some also live in the economically most disadvantaged rural areas of Hungary. This group is also characterised by excessive digital use, with the average time spent in front of a screen of some kind is between 1.5 - 15 hours daily – an average of 6 hours a day. Mobile phones and TV are their preferred online devices; these mainly provide a source of relaxation and the possibility of keeping up connections with family and friends. The participants were accompanied and supported by their care workers on the walks.

Key Considerations

1. **Vulnerability:** These women belong to a vulnerable part of society – from socially, financially, and ethnically marginalised backgrounds, and living in economically underdeveloped rural areas. These challenges are also often coupled with abusive relationships and the lack of a supportive family background; the women work in low-paid jobs and have only a basic education. Almost all of them are smokers, and their cigarette breaks are often the only 'me-time' they get during the day. Furthermore, being mothers of young children and babies with little or no family support, they have very limited time for self-care, and the idea of spending time alone for recreation is alien to them. Their care workers describe them as a highly vulnerable group, people whose everyday realities cannot accommodate the idea of slow walks in nature. These women live their lives between childcare and family provider duties, and the easiest – or maybe only possible – way to reach them is through their social workers. It is therefore important that these workers acquire the necessary skills to lead walks and offer this group nature-based wellbeing activities.
2. **Group bonding:** Safety and security is a key issue for these women, and belonging to a

peer group means a secure environment to them. Providing group activities, including trust-building games, can thus be highly effective for them, and much less risky than solo time in nature.

3. Supportive social workers: Women who have grown up in harsh conditions without a supportive family highly appreciate trustworthy adults. Building trust might take longer, but once it is established, it can be key to gaining access to working with these women. We therefore recommend approaching women from vulnerable groups through their trusted social workers, and making sure they know why forest walks will benefit them.

Obstacles to Connecting with Nature

- Lack of perceived safety in nature: Residents of women's refuges spend most of their time in urban environments, and have few chances to go out and visit natural ones. Women living in rural areas also spend most of their time indoors or in the village, and rarely in nature. Therefore, their sense of safety is linked to inhabited areas. Outdoor environments, even urban parks, may provoke feelings of

insecurity in them.

- Feeling guilty about child-free self-care time: Vulnerable single mothers form an inseparable unit with their young children. Most female participants who were mothers felt uncomfortable being away from their children and found it difficult to relax at first. It is recommended to reach out to them through their trusted care workers, explaining that a little time on their own and being in nature will help them to feel less tired and be more patient with their kids.
- Survival mode: As the women's social workers reminded us, socially vulnerable groups struggle with everyday survival. Growing up in an unsupportive environment and experiencing exclusion from mainstream society, along with domestic violence, keep these women in constant survival mode. The idea that nature might be a source of wellbeing, or that they might walk aimlessly in the woods, or sit and gaze at trees, is new and sometimes scary to them. Relaxation is an unknown territory. Coming together with their trusted peer-mum circles may offer a compelling reason to join in.





Invitation to Empathy:

How Might it Feel to be a Single Mum From a Vulnerable Group?

Imagine you grow up in a family where appreciation and positive messages and reinforcement are a rare treat. You have no personal experience of what a supportive family means. You grow up hearing that you are “just a girl” and “only a woman,” in a culture where females face a very low probability rate of finishing primary school, studying further or having a career, and you do not even think about what you are living for and what inspires you. Your life’s purpose is to become a good wife and a good mother and you try to live up to that expectation. Your wildest dream is to live in relative wealth, owning a house with your man and your children.

Domestic violence, especially against women, is an unspoken everyday reality, both in terms of verbal and physical violence. Imagine having given birth and become a mother while continuously experiencing severe domestic abuse, and not having anyone or anything to protect you. Your mum went through the same, your older female siblings face similar difficulties, and everyone in your community treats physical violence as a social norm. You had no positive parenting role models but try to love your child to the best of your abilities. You have learned not to trust anybody, and your closest relatives cannot provide you with support or shelter. You are told that if the state welfare office learns about your situation they might take your children away from you. Your only option to escape these pressures is to move into a refuge for at-risk mothers, however, you can only stay for a year and you face a long waitlist even once you have decided to go for it and found someone to help you to apply. You know that when the year ends, you might be back in the same old situation, back with your abusive partner who is now even angrier at you, and with your young children who need you every single day, and you are unable to make a living for yourself and for your kids.

Still, moving to a care home is the only option that can give you respite from the daily abuse, your only hope for a better life. You move in and there you meet other women with similar backgrounds. You instantly form a protective community and you learn to trust the workers. They find suitable work for you where no skills and competencies are needed, doing repetitive tasks, but at least you don’t need to think about anything and your modest monthly income is secure. Your job leaves you only a few hours a day to be with your children. You spend your days and weeks commuting in between your work and the home, and you divide your time between motherly chores and work shifts. Self-care is unknown territory for you; it is limited to the cigarette breaks allowed in your shift, when you can chat with your colleagues. You spend each weekend with your child and prefer not to think about the future. You cherish your friendships with your fellow mothers and feel connected and safe with the other women in the refuge. Temporarily they become your family. During the day, when you are not with them, you use your smartphone to feel connected to anyone who represents a safe harbour to you. When you have spare time, you scroll through social media or chat online with friends or family members. You work diligently, but you can’t cover your costs and put enough money aside to be able to afford your own rent within a year.

You have little free/leisure time and no self-care time. You have no connection to nature and you are not interested. You would never dare to walk alone in a woodland or sit silently in a park surrounded by trees.



QUICK REFERENCE CARDS:



CARD 1: UNDERSTANDING VULNERABLE MOTHERS

PROFILE & CONTEXT

- Living in temporary care homes run by charity organisations
- Facing homelessness, financial difficulties, domestic abuse and abusive relationships
- Often from economically disadvantaged areas and minority groups
- Lacking supportive family networks or partners
- High digital use (averaging 6 hours daily) primarily on phones and TV
- Basic education and typically employed in low-paid jobs
- Limited self-care time or sense of the concept (smoking often represents the only “me-time”)

BARRIERS TO NATURE CONNECTION

- Limited experience in natural environments; greater comfort indoors
- Perception of natural areas as potentially threatening
- Guilt about taking time away from children
- “Survival mode” mentality prioritises immediate needs
- Unfamiliarity with relaxation as a concept
- May come from backgrounds where female autonomy is limited
- Limited exposure to positive self-care models



CARD 2: EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

BUILDING TRUST & SAFETY

- Work through trusted social workers who have already established relationships
- Focus on group activities that promote safety and security
- Implement trust-building exercises before individual nature activities
- Recognise that trust-building may take longer but is essential
- Begin in managed, accessible natural spaces
- Provide clear structure and explain purpose from the very beginning

ADDRESSING PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS

- Frame nature time as improving parenting capacity
- Explain how self-care leads to more patience with children
- Start with short sessions and gradually increase duration
- Emphasise peer support and community bonding
- Incorporate familiar social elements
- Acknowledge and validate concerns about leaving children for a while
- Connect nature activities to practical benefits they can relate to

EMPATHY PERSPECTIVE

Remember these women may have experienced:

- Growing up without positive reinforcement
- Limited opportunities based on gender
- Normalised domestic violence
- Parenthood without positive role models
- Fear of authorities and services
- Constant uncertainty about housing
- Complete absence of self-care practices



INTRO

When working with vulnerable groups we really need to focus on the quality of the connection we make with the people, putting empathy and compassion first. Be approachable to your participants. Engage in friendly connection against all the odds. Be there with your full humanity. Be a friendly person first and foremost, and bring your professional knowledge and skills only secondarily. Having said that, maintaining personal boundaries and being friendly go hand in hand. In this section we will look at the most important competences for Accessible Forest Practitioners leading groups of vulnerable women and mothers.

Before we go on, read the “Invitation to Empathy: How Might it Feel to be a Single Mum from a Vulnerable Group?” in the previous section. Take a few minutes to reflect on how it would feel to you to be working with such a group.

- What qualities do you feel you would have to acquire?
- What would make you feel confident to do this work?
- What do you envision your main learning points to be?

Read the personal story below of Ági, one of the Accessible Forest team members, sharing her reflection of working with mothers from a wide range of social backgrounds.





SELF-AWARENESS ('I') – NORTH QUADRANT

Emotional awareness is a key quality when working with vulnerable groups, especially female participants. Adults lacking a basic sense of emotional and physical security and safety might be extremely hard to approach to begin with and seem remote and indifferent. They need to establish a genuine human connection and to feel that they can trust you before you can invite them for a nature connection activity. Don't take participants' indifference and resistance personally, but do see them as signs of justifiable self-defence mechanisms learnt over a lifetime. Friendliness in a very down-to-earth way is a good start for making a connection, especially when accompanied by an open, non-judgemental, reassuring tone of voice and a genuine interest in the actual state and wellbeing of the walk's participants.

Key competencies include:

- Emotional awareness
- Holding space
- Being free of judgements



PERSONAL EXPERIENCES – SOUTH QUADRANT

Using sophisticated language and sharing abstract theories won't engage participants whose primary contact with the outside world is not through cognition but more through emotional and sensory connection. Apply simple expressions instead, use "I" language, and share anecdotes to bring the topics closer to your participants. Searching for verbal symbols the mothers could relate to, we introduced the concept of the fox walk (a way of walking silently in the forest) as if "you finally got your baby fast asleep and don't want to wake him up." Accept the emotions and feelings of participants and show them yours – mainly your interest, enthusiasm, and openness. Speak using simple language, and use short personal stories rather than theoretical explanations. Stay focused on your participants, stay connected to them and do the activities alongside them.

Key competencies include:

- Simple speaking, short sentences, but not emotionless
- Little tricks to engage participants
- Trust the process

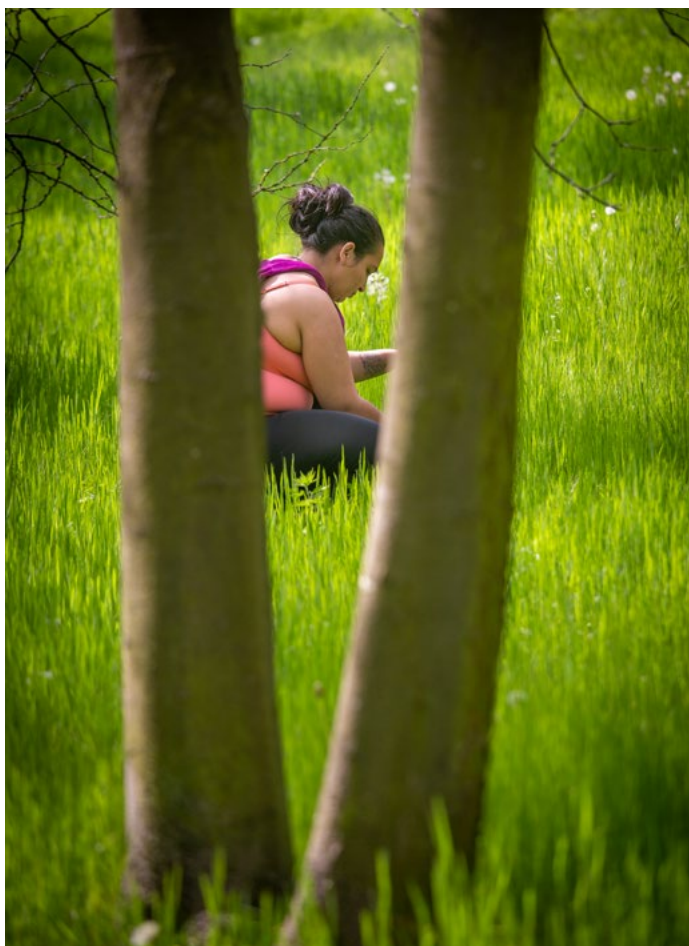


NATURE – WEST QUADRANT

Curiosity is a childlike energy. The best way to awaken participants' curiosity towards nature is by staying curious yourself. Curiosity can be fuelled by letting yourself be enchanted by all kinds of natural beauty, keeping your senses open, feeling the wind, smelling its fragrances, touching tree bark, and moving with momentum. Occupy the role of guide and enjoy being outdoors at the same time. Show your enthusiasm to the others, and give them permission to also act with curiosity. When you let yourself be captivated by nature, mirror neurons will kick in and awaken the childlike nature of everyone around you. Ask questions with curiosity, letting go of your deep-seated and sometimes self-doubting assumptions about why participants behave the way they do. When you see participants sticking together during solo time, inquire with curiosity as to why they stayed together. Be aware of any potential hazards of the trail and keep participants safe, especially mothers who may be carrying babies during the walk.

Key competencies include:

- A love of nature
- Knowing the specifics of the walk / trail location
- Knowing that you provide the process, but the forest makes the miracle



THE GROUP – EAST QUADRANT

Empathy is the ability to feel and understand the other person. To practice empathy, you need to really let go of your focus on yourself and your planned way of leading and truly listen to and focus on the people in your group. Once they sense that they are accepted the way they are, they will feel safer and will open up to your invitations. Stay open yourself to perspectives and viewpoints different to yours – these perspectives come from very different life circumstances and realities. Working with people with traumatic past experiences necessitates trauma aware facilitation. This includes an awareness of the high level of a need for safety, avoiding situations in which participants might feel at risk, and not insisting they spend time alone in nature.

Key competencies include:

- Consideration of the cultural specifics of participants
- Awareness of previous nature-related experiences of the group, especially around potential hazards
- Trauma awareness





SECTION 3. PRACTICAL STRATEGIE

This section details two three-hour-long walks with three groups of vulnerable women in two venues: an urban forest park area on the outskirts of Budapest, and a botanical garden in the north-eastern region of the country. In the urban forest we led a walk of approximately 1,6 kilometres, exploring most of the area, among vegetation of relatively young urban trees. The park is like a rare treasure, a quiet area that offers sanctuary in the middle of the city, welcoming runners, dog walkers and families.

The botanical garden occupies an area of three hectares and hosts beautiful ornamental trees, ornamental shrubs, evergreens, perennials, aquatic plants and ground covers, and a lake with a small island in the middle, approachable by a wooden bridge.

The participants were women, mostly young mothers, the majority of them are single mums. They were partly unemployed, and partly residents of the state care home, a temporary home for mothers and families from vulnerable backgrounds facing all kinds of challenging life situations, including social and financial difficulties. The women were accompanied by group experts, who were mainly social workers from the care homes and charity organisations. There were also a few babies being carried by their mums. For the urban walk the group arrived late as some of the mothers couldn't leave their sick children and had to cancel. In the case of the rural walk, the participants arrived with the social workers by car.

To prepare for the walks, the guides greatly needed the support of the group experts working with the target groups. These women are characterised by having low levels of trust, and would hardly have come to the walks without their trusted workers. Social workers also helped to inform them about the programme: they promoted the walk on the advertisement board of the care home by describing it as voluntary self-care time, explained to them the benefits, and transported them to the locations. Their

continued presence provided the women with a sense of security throughout the new situation. They also provided the walk guides with basic information about the age, family status, and general characteristics of those attending. Upon arriving at the venue, before the walk, participants filled out a written questionnaire about their present mood, and we also asked them about their typical digital use habits. The guides prepared food for a picnic, with hot tea, water and mugs, waterproof pillows for sitting, and a windchime to signal it was time to regroup after solo time.



These women, who rarely took part in any activities outside their everyday environment, were at first hesitant, but became surprisingly receptive and open to the guides' invitations. Accepting the invitations helped them to be present, to listen inwardly, to slow down and tune in to the atmosphere of the forest, to be comfortable with silence, to touch the plants and experience nature with their senses. During the "opening the senses" activity they were able to let go of their everyday troubles, and during the picnic they experienced being treated as a guest – being well fed and lovingly hosted – which they seemed to enjoy as a rare treat. As their life circumstances are challenging and involve a great amount of responsibility as mothers and family providers, with little or no opportunities to loosen up and recharge, the slow walk in the forest really helped them to relax. One interesting issue was smoking. Participants smoked right after arriving by car and also after finishing the walk and leaving the garden. In the end it was not an obstacle as they did not smoke during the programme, nevertheless, it felt a little out-of-sync in the context of our nature-based activities.



Questions for you as a guide to prepare activities for vulnerable groups:

- How would you “break the ice” with adults who show signs of insecurity and low levels of trust?
- How would you prepare to guide a vulnerable group – people with a high need for safety – to experience meaningful nature connection activities within their comfort zone?
- What alternative invitations can you offer to your participants for solo time if they do not want to let go of each other and go out alone?

THE PHASES OF THE WALK AND THE SEASONAL WALKS

Here is a list of activities we did with groups of vulnerable women over the year’s programme cycle.



Introductory stage (introduction, sensory connection, slowing down)

Connection activities were adapted to the special target group by designing a series of physical activities to reduce stress. We guides introduced the walk and explained to the women what to expect. We told them we would walk slowly and enjoy the forest, doing activities that would help us to connect to nature. We gave safety information regarding for example animals we might potentially encounter in the forest. For the first initial invitations we remained standing, walking slowly and pausing for the activities. We used very simple invitations and used simple language. Having noticed at the beginning that participants were embarrassed, we were exceptionally patient and gentle. They seemed eager to behave in a way that would fulfil our

expectations, however, by the end of the walk they were able to let go of this concern and enjoy the experience.



“They walked to the entrance with the care workers and met the guides there. It was a bright spring day with sunshine and the trees in full blossom. Lilacs bloomed as a sign that we were approaching Mother’s Day. They looked resistant at first, and somewhat embarrassed, but slowly related to the activities we offered.”
(an Accessible Forest guide)





Take a natural object – Ask participants to find a natural object near them – a branch, a pine cone, a stone. Standing in a circle, each with their object, instruct them to connect with all their senses. Upon observing the object, in a circle, each says what is disturbing them at the moment. Then they put down the object, along with the disturbing thing, and leave it behind.

Making rain – This is an invitation to the group to make the sounds of rain. It involves stretching, tensing and loosening the muscles, making rain sounds while gently tapping our bodies.

Reaching high into the sky – Invite the group for a stretching exercise, to shake off the road dust and arrive in the forest. We strengthen the spine while raising our arms upwards, really stretching up, reaching high into the sky, then dropping our arms down, shaking our bodies, feeling relaxed. This should be repeated a few times, trying to reach up as high as possible. Afterwards, while still standing, bend down and swing your arms a few times right and left.

Tense and release – Invite the group to tense the muscles of the hands and the arms, clenching fists hard, hold like that and clench as tightly as they can... and now, release. Repeat the move, clenching and tensing, releasing, softening. And then once more.

Body tapping – a great way to release tension is to move through the body with the fists of the hands, gently tapping different parts of the body, all the way up and down the arms, legs, chest, shoulders, back and head.

Cannonball breath – an efficient way to release stress by taking a huge breath, holding it in and then releasing it as forcefully as a cannonball shot. Repeat a few times.

Silence game – Invite the group to close their eyes and to listen to the sounds of a wind chime. Move the chime and ask them to keep their eyes closed until they can no longer hear the sound.

Winter considerations: Keep people warm, warn them in advance to wear enough layers, and provide them with extra hot tea for the first stages.

Spring considerations: Make use of the bird song, introduce various listening activities.

Summer considerations: Arrange activity stops in shady areas, make sure participants bring tick repellent and plenty of water. Offer additional water supplies if needed.

Autumn considerations: In rainy weather warn participants to bring waterproof gear or umbrellas. Make use of the autumn colours, invite participants for activities that contemplate them.





Meaningful nature connection stage (sensory exploration)

The second stage was an easy-going part of the walks, as the women were very open to the beauty and other sensory characteristics of the park. They were happy to explore, although closing their eyes and touching different textures was not always easy for them. They wore clean clothes, their outfits sporty but pretty, and make-up, some of them with false eyelashes and manicured nails. During most of the walks the participants were chatting during the initial parts of the walk, they needed time to tune in to the silent walk. At a crossroads in the forest trails, a guided sensory awakening activity was introduced, where participants could sit on mats and be comfortable. The group experts reported this activity as one of the highlights of the mother's group walk. For at least those few mindful minutes, listening to the sounds and sensory impressions of the forest, the women could clearly let go of their everyday struggles. They were then invited to pair up for a silent trust walk, which they really enjoyed.

“When trying out the fox walk, one of the guides said it is like walking out of the bedroom silently once your baby finally gets to sleep. The women started to giggle and the ice started to break. They all got very much involved in the sensory awakening activity and enjoyed the trust walk, leading each other blindfolded in pairs for a few hundred meters.” [A team member's testimony]

Walk like a fox – While slowly making their way, the group was asked to pause for a moment at an indicated point and listen out for any sounds they could hear. One of the most obvious noises for those walking is the sound of their footsteps. At that point we introduced fox walking, a silent way of walking that enables us to open the senses using our feet as eyes. To do this walk you carefully touch the ground with the outside ball part of your feet, then roll your foot laterally until both the outside and inside parts of your foot are touching the ground. When walking, the feet are placed in line with each other for an optimal balance. This creates a lean, silent and flexible walking style, one that is best practiced barefoot. The group walked this way for a few metres to get to the first sitting point.

Sensory exploration – This activity works well after already slowing down, walking a bit and

tuning into the forest. Its purpose is to open up our senses, to perceive the forest through our sensory system. Invite participants to find a comfortable and safe seated position, to look at what and who is around them, and then, if they feel comfortable with it, to close their eyes. Lead participants through a series of sensory stimuli with their eyes closed, engaging their hearing, touch, sense of warmth, smell, and even taste.

Invite them to slowly open their eyes and come back to focus, then stand and move around, finding something they enjoy smelling or/and tasting, something they can bring with them. Invite participants to come back to sit in a circle and pass around the thing they enjoyed exploring. This can also be done in pairs.

Trust walk – Ask any pairs from the previous activity to remain together and distribute





blindfolds to the group. Then invite all the women to pair up and walk slowly and silently with their partner, one person leading the other, who is blindfolded or has their eyes closed. This is a slow, silent walk, where the leading person needs to be very careful. Indicate when the pairs will swap roles, and follow them on their walk. You may want to lead the walk while another guide stays behind, making sure everybody stays on the right track and keeps silent.

Winter considerations: Prepare warm blankets for each participant in the sensory exploration. If sitting down is too cold, you may lead this activity standing. Invite participants to reflect

upon the miracles of nature's retreat in winter.

Spring considerations: Call participants' attention to the sounds of birds, insects, and bees.

Summer considerations: If possible, choose a venue with a lake, river or pond and integrate freshwater habitats into the walk.

Autumn considerations: In rainy weather, warn participants to bring waterproof gear or umbrellas. Make use of the autumn colours, and invite participants to activities that help to contemplate them.



Solo time

To warm up for the solo time we introduced an activity where participants went out to find a natural object symbolising their strength. Our group of women found beautiful symbols, mostly flowers and leaves that represented their children – those who meant the most to them, and who kept them on their life track and filled them with strength. During the suggested solo time on one of the walks, we discovered that participants would not go out alone; instead they flocked together, walking arm in arm and enjoying the blooming lilac bushes. Community and togetherness were so important for them that, without saying anything or refusing to take part, they stuck together and collected flowers, enjoying the walk. After everyone returned and we reflected on the activity, we discovered that these women simply did not want to let go of each other and be alone in the woods. It was out of their comfort zone.

Walking aimlessly, silently, while holding each other in the fully blooming and blossoming springtime nature was probably the most relaxing activity any had done for a long time. In the botanical garden we offered two options: either to sit on a bench or mattress on the little island in the middle of the lake, or to have a slow and silent walk around the lake. The women hugely enjoyed this part; one participant even revealed that she imagined herself as a princess who owned the entire park, and it made her feel very good, walking mindfully through all the beauty. Also in the botanical garden, a large, very special swampy habitat was available for us to explore. Here we created a “fairy trail” and asked participants to go along it one by one, imagining themselves as fairytale characters, and observing what the forest showed them. A guide set them up for the walk at the entrance and another awaited them at the end of the trail.

“The grass was inviting, but I did not want to go in, also because of the ticks. Then I saw the lilacs, with many dry branches, but also fresh, green parts. This is the power of renewal, also, the power of surprise. Sometimes I give myself this power.”

“As I leaned against the tree, I noticed that it was all overgrown with ivy. As I looked at the leaf, I saw a heart in the middle. It felt like this love would take me around.... I have ivy at home too, but I never stopped to notice the heart. It feels really good.”

[Testimony of participants]

Symbol of my strength – Ask participants to go out and find something – an object, a tree, a plant – that represents what strength means to them, something that reminds them of their own strength and of what makes them go on in their lives and feel strong. Upon their return, invite each to share about the object or the place they found.

Fairy Trail – In a romantic, wild, jungle-like forest, designate an area and indicate a trail (with a thin red thread or otherwise). Invite the participants to go along it slowly, one by one, having already chosen a fairytale character they can imagine themselves to be. Then as they follow the trail they should do so as that character. As they slowly walk along they observe the forest and try to read its messages, what the forest has to tell them.



Solo time invitation – Simply invite the participants to be alone, either wandering aimlessly, sitting, or (in warm weather) lying down, and to give themselves over to the many sensory effects of the forest / park. Prepare blankets or mats for them, but also invite them to make direct contact with the surface of the ground. Stress that mobiles stay off; encourage them to take photographs with their eyes instead.

Find your tree – Invite participants to find a place that feels safe for them and to spend time there. You can introduce this as a “lean on a tree” exercise, where they lean against a tree and just let the tree give them whatever it has to offer.

Winter considerations: Prepare warm blankets for each participant, offering them the option

to walk and stay moving instead of standing or sitting.

Spring considerations: Be aware of ticks and potential allergens, get to know the location ahead of time, and try to choose periods when the trees are blooming.

Summer considerations: If possible, choose a place with plenty of shade and ideally also a lake, river or pond, and avoid the hottest hours of the day. Invite participants to go barefoot even if only for a short while.

Autumn considerations: In rainy weather warn participants to bring waterproof gear or umbrellas. Know your site, and time the walk to catch the most spectacular autumn colours.





Closing stage (final reflection, picnic, tea, integration)

Women were most comfortable with this stage of the walks, which was the least structured one. We invited them for a picnic with tea, fruits, snacks, dried fruits and nuts, and talked about their experiences during the walk. The participants enjoyed sitting in a circle in a grassy area where they had previously felt uncomfortable because of insects, but now with everyone sitting together they settled and felt at ease. This was the most enjoyable part of the walks for the groups. They were evidently comfortable in a relaxed picnic feeling. What they appreciated most was being invited as a guest and being cared for.

“I am feeling charged, it is a good feeling. It is unusual to be without the constant noise of kids”
[Participant testimony]

Winter considerations: Prepare warm blankets for each participant, and bring plenty of hot tea and snacks.

Spring considerations: Be aware of ticks and potential allergens.

Summer considerations: For the picnic, choose a shady place. Try to avoid a spot with too many

mosquitoes or provide a natural mosquito repellent, such as a spray or candle. Prepare plenty of water, natural iced-tea or lemonade, keeping them cold if possible.

Autumn considerations: In rainy weather warn participants to bring waterproof gear or umbrellas.

Questions to consider:

1. How would you build trust with a group of individuals with challenging life experiences?
2. How would you describe a forest immersion walk for individuals from a disadvantaged background who have never heard of anything like it?
3. How do you frame the idea of recreation, wellbeing or self-care time to a group of vulnerable individuals who are new to these ideas?
4. What kind of solo time activities would you design if unsure whether participants feel safe being alone?





Tips for working with vulnerable women/mothers

Put feeling safe first: If you work with highly vulnerable participants, always consider their feeling of security, be prepared to make many amendments, be open and sensitive to their feelings, meet them where they are and go from there. More time spent at the beginning getting to know each other and building trust will make the group feel more comfortable. Be very friendly and clear on boundaries about mobiles, smoking, etc. If the framework is clear, everyone feels safer.

Arrange childcare: The main challenge with this group is the difficulty in arranging childcare and convincing them that they are allowed to spend all this time on their own wellbeing, doing nothing but taking a relaxing walk in the forest. Ideally, a separate activity for their children can also be organised, beyond someone just looking after them. If their kids are a bit older and can enjoy playtime alone, the mothers will feel freer to attend a walk. Decide if you can handle the presence of small children or infants and, if it is possible for a few to be brought along, let the participants know.

Emphasise preparation: Provide plenty of information to all the other facilitators, preferably by talking with them. Emphasise how this programme will benefit the mothers and how they can inspire them to join in. Encourage your team to have personal conversations with the women, explaining what the programme is about and focusing on the possible benefits to them. Also emphasise the community aspect, suggesting that the mothers might have more energy and patience to engage with their children after this exercise in self-care. Organisation can be challenging, so be persistent and flexible in case obstacles arise.

Involve care workers: Invite co-workers to join in as if they are ordinary participants. This may even improve the relationship between the residents and workers, as well as giving the latter a nice relaxing experience too.

Lead a physical activity to release tension: We found that incorporating various physical activities in the first phase of the walk helped the mothers to get rid of some of their tension, allow them time to arrive, make connections with the guides, and relax them generally.

Remain accessible and friendly: Your most important focus is building trust; instructions are secondary. You might want to say a few words about being a mum yourself, if that's the case – that you know how it feels to be away from your kids, and how much you yourself have in the past benefited from activities like this.

Provide alternatives for solo time: The participants might not be open to spending even a short time alone, and that's fine. Solo time activities might be facilitated with a little extra introduction as well as making sure they feel secure being alone, or, you could provide an alternative to being alone. Also, assure them that immediately after the solo time they will be able to regroup and share what they have experienced with each other. Possibly, with longer-term group cooperation, trust will build and they will feel more comfortable engaging in solo walks.

Be clear on asking participants to keep their mobiles off for the entire duration of the walk. Explain the reasons for this and ask for their cooperation.

ÁGI'S STORY AS A GUIDE, MOTHER OF TWO CHILDREN, AND INITIATOR OF A EUROPEAN SUPPORT NETWORK FOR MOTHERS

A few years after becoming a mother myself I initiated and, with colleagues, set up the Mother Nature community, which is a European project, a supportive network for mothers, focusing on motherhood and nature connection, and understanding motherhood as personal growth. In the last eight years I have been working with various diverse groups of women, including single mothers. I have led training, workshops, mother circles, nature connection activities and so much more. Being a single mum for a few years now I always had a high sense of empathy towards mothers living with special issues. Becoming a mother is a normative crisis anyway, and adding any exceptional difficulties to that can be really life-challenging.

Going out to lead mindful forest walks was the first time I had worked with vulnerable groups of women, mostly from a Roma background, facing multiple challenges such as financial difficulties, lack of support, domestic violence, coming from ethnic minority groups, and geographically disadvantaged regions. Prior to that I could not imagine the scale of the hardships these women were facing every single day of their lives. Talking to and reading the reflection of the social workers accompanying them was really eye-opening to me.

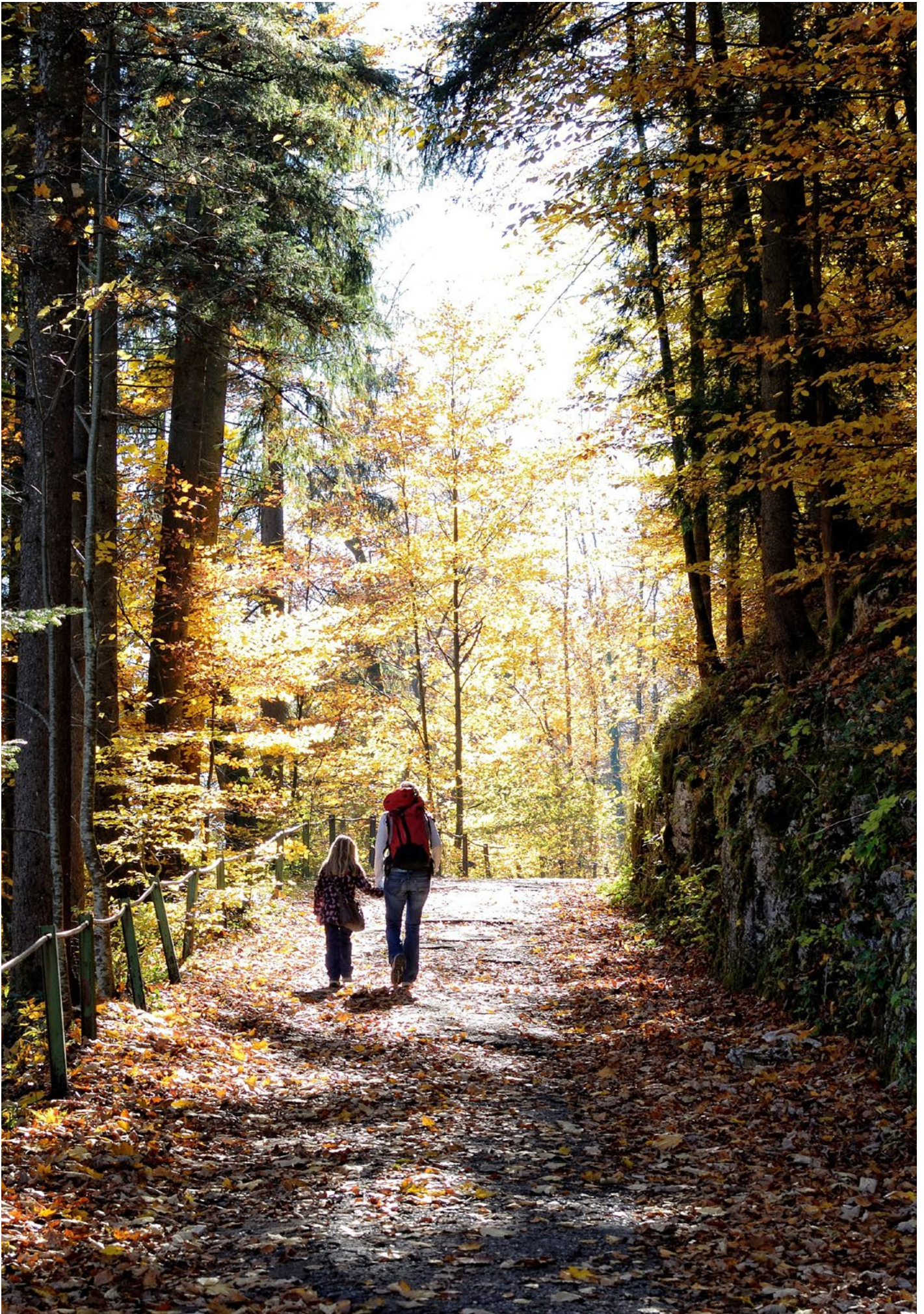
I realised that living in a care home is only available for them for a temporary period within one year, and then they need to go back to their original communities which they so desperately tried to escape from. I imagined what I would do if I was at such a difficult turning point in my life – being a mother of a young baby or young

children, facing violence from my partner and my family, and trying to get myself out of this situation, knowing that this is only a temporary solution and that things might go back to that and get even worse when the year is over. How would I face challenges of living in a care home which does not feel like home, in a city that is new and strange to me, having to travel to work during the day, working in meaningless jobs in several shifts and doing my motherly duties during the evening and weekends.

Yes, becoming a mother is a pathway to personal development, and we look at self-care as a cornerstone of being a mother. As we say, “if mummy feels well the baby feels well”. But how can really vulnerable women imagine the idea of self-care? For them, having a few hours just for themselves is a luxury. How can they find a meaningful alternative to scrolling social media on their mobile phones when being alone in the woods is totally out of their comfort zone and fills them with dread?

Working with these vulnerable groups is really a complex issue, where state support, social work, financial solutions and psychological aid should go hand in hand. I envision a society where all women regardless of their social and financial status and upbringing receive all the support they need to become an emotionally stable and caring mother and where regular time spent in nature is part of everyone's basic self-care. And for now I am humbled and grateful for all the support I receive as a divorced mum raising two kids, be it from friends, neighbours or my peer parents from the school.







QUICK REFERENCE CARDS:



CARD 1: PREPARATION & BUILDING TRUST

PREPARATION ESSENTIALS

- Coordinate closely with social workers/care staff who have established relationships
- Provide detailed information about the walk's purpose and benefits
- Address practical concerns (childcare arrangements, transportation)
- Choose accessible locations (urban parks, botanical gardens)
- Prepare comfort items (blankets, pillows, refreshments)
- Plan for weather conditions and seasonal considerations

TRUST-BUILDING APPROACH

- Use simple, clear language and gentle guidance
- Focus on creating safety before activities
- Be patient with initial hesitation and embarrassment
- Acknowledge the rarity of "self-care time" in their lives
- Allow participants to remain in groups if solo time causes anxiety
- Be clear about mobile phone usage and smoking breaks



CARD 2: WALK STRUCTURE & ACTIVITIES

PHASE 1: INTRODUCTORY STAGE

Simple physical activities to reduce stress:

- "Take a natural object" (find object, connect with senses)
- "Making rain" (creating rain sounds with gentle body tapping)
- "Reaching the sky high" (stretching exercises)
- "Tense and soften" (muscle tension release)
- "Body tapping" (gentle percussion on body parts)
- "Cannonball breath" (stress release breathing)
- "Silence game" (listening to wind chime sounds)

PHASE 2: SENSORY CONNECTION

- "Fox walk" (silent, mindful walking technique)
- "Sensory exploration" (guided awareness of senses)
- "Trust walk" (walking in pairs, one blindfolded)

PHASE 3: SOLO/SHARED TIME

- "Symbol of my strength" (finding a natural object representing personal strength)
- "Fairy Trail" (imaginative walking through a designated path)
- "Find your tree" (connecting with a tree that feels safe)
- Alternative: group walking if solo time feels uncomfortable

PHASE 4: CLOSING & INTEGRATION

- Picnic with tea and snacks
- Circle sharing of experiences
- Gentle reflection without pressure





CARD 3: SEASONAL ADAPTATIONS

WINTER CONSIDERATIONS

- Provide extra warm layers and blankets
- Offer hot tea throughout the walk
- Allow standing instead of sitting for activities
- Focus on nature's winter withdrawal themes
- Keep movement continuous if needed for warmth

SPRING CONSIDERATIONS

- Use abundant bird songs for listening activities
- Be aware of ticks and potential allergens
- Time walks to coincide with the tree blossoming periods
- Utilise themes of renewal and growth

SUMMER CONSIDERATIONS

- Choose shaded areas for activities
- Provide tick repellent and extra water
- Schedule walks during cooler hours
- Incorporate water features if available
- Invite barefoot contact with the earth when appropriate

AUTUMN CONSIDERATIONS

- Ensure waterproof gear for rainy conditions
- Focus on autumn colours for contemplation
- Choose locations with spectacular foliage
- Prepare for variable weather conditions



CARD 4: SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR VULNERABLE GROUPS

UNDERSTANDING BARRIERS

- Safety concerns in unfamiliar natural settings
- Guilt about taking time away from children
- "Survival mode" mentality limits openness to relaxation
- Limited experience with self-care concepts
- Strong need for group bonding and security
- High digital dependency (average 6 hours daily)

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

- Frame nature time as improving parenting capacity
- Emphasise group bonding over individual experiences

- Start with structured activities before unstructured time
- Create a "guest experience" with thoughtful hospitality
- Offer alternatives for those uncomfortable with solo time
- Connect activities to their daily reality ("walking silently like when baby sleeps")
- Build community through shared experience
- Accept when participants prefer to stay together rather than separately
- Treat them with dignity and respect and without condescension





SECTION 4: BENEFITS FOR THE GROUP

Scientific studies bring attention to the multiple stress factors of vulnerable mothers. These constant stress factors result in harmful mental and physical health effects as well as instability in mothering roles. In addition, women who have experienced stress in early childhood are more likely to pass multiple stress factors on to their children. As qualitative research suggests, these

well-organised and well-supported outdoor activities available to these women.

An abundance of scientific evidence confirms the beneficial effects of exposure to nature and nature connectedness on mental and physical health (Mihók et al, 2021). More time in nature means more physical activity, a decrease in obesity and



stress factors have multiple origins (Condon et al, 2018). Some of them belong to the individual, such as inherited personality traits, traumatic personal experiences, physical circumstances, or persistent stress in early childhood. Mothers also face stress factors in their microsystems, their immediate families, such as an absent or violent and/or abusive partner, unreliable relationships and family conflicts. Other stress factors derive from the larger environment, such as financial difficulties, housing issues, isolation, or poor nutrition. Some stress factors typically belong to macrosystem levels, such as the lack of reliable source of income or employment opportunities in a given geographical area. We identified all of these stress factors while working with the vulnerable mother groups, and gained an understanding of their backgrounds in consultation with their care workers.

Research suggests the resources that can help tackle these issues. On the individual level, these resources are increased optimism and a sense of spirituality. On the microsystem level, supportive social networks may be the most valuable resource in helping mothers tackle stress. We believe many of the resources and strengths to tackle these issues could be reinforced by making

cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, improved ability to focus, a reduced level of stress and a positive shift in people's sense of wellbeing.

The support workers who accompanied the women on the walks reflected on the beneficial effects which were immediately apparent to them. Our experiences, both as group experts and guides, support the scientific evidence. Women facing multiple challenges may be hard to approach first. We worked with inhabitants of some of the poorest regions and settlements of the country as well as residents of care homes, people with multiple mental and physical health issues who were also characterised by their excessive use of mobile phones. While it was more challenging for the groups to be complete and on time at the start of the walks, and it required a huge effort on the part of the social workers, it was extremely rewarding to work with these groups. They turned up with curiosity and were surprised by the fact that they were the group to be entertained, and that they didn't need to do anything, no special tasks. They had a huge need for community, for spending time together, and for sharing within the group. They were therefore present as a community, not as individuals, and paid great attention to the invitations. Their level



of engagement with nature surprised the co-workers who had known them for a while. Within a few minutes of starting the walk, the positive effect was obvious. They slowed down, became attentive to the beauty of nature, and responded to the activities with a high level of emotional sensitivity. Being invited for the closure and having a picnic brought a palpable sense of calmness and ease – even their physical appearance changed, as their faces became bright and they smiled. Mothers who brought their babies with them to the walks reported that the little ones also became relaxed.

One of the things the guides found most surprising was the high level of emotional sensitivity and creativity with which the mothers chose the symbols of their strength during one of the walks. When thinking about their personal resources, most of them named their children and found beautiful natural symbols to represent them. One of the participants expressed it wonderfully: “I have found a flower. My child is my inner resource.”

They found it relaxing to be out and unusual to spend a few hours without their kids. “I’ve been up the whole night because of my sick kids. Still, I had a good time. I know I needed this me-time.” After the walks, participants experienced a lower level of stress and more positive feelings. Their average mood score on a scale of 1-5 (with 1 being the least smiley and 5 being the most smiley) before the walk was 3.2 while after the walk it increased to 4.4.



To conclude this chapter, we can affirm that working with groups of vulnerable women requires extra care, empathy and practical arrangements from the guides. A key point is to count on and cooperate with the care workers and social workers who they already trust. Invite these workers to take part in the walk and ask for support to effectively reach your target group. During the walk (and before if possible) put a lot of emphasis on building connections to the group, helping participants build up trust, providing simple physical activities to release tension, and staying friendly and approachable. Use simple language, explain what is going to happen, and be patient. While this group may feel hesitant and anxious at first, even distant or uneasy about activity invitations, they are, once they've let go of these tensions, a really rewarding group to work with. People who haven't experienced much trust in their lives may need to unlearn to constantly stay alert, and also learn to release and let go, giving themselves time really just to be present and not have to do anything. As one of the group experts reported, the walk "gave everyone a fantastic experience and the feeling still lasts! We are recharged and relaxed." As nature connection is an antidote to stress and mental fatigue, it can effectively offer an alternative to digital tools once trust is established and people feel comfortable outdoors.

LEARNING CHECKPOINTS: PROGRESS TRACKING TOOL

Theory and Practice. Reflect on the material covered in this chapter:

- Did any concepts or ideas seem problematic, or is there anything with which you partially or fully disagree? If so, how would you articulate and support your position?
- Were there elements that surprised you or, conversely, felt very familiar?

Competences. Consider your personal development:

- Did you gain any new insights into Accessible Forest Practice (AFP) or the benefits of nature immersion?

- Has this chapter inspired you to consider becoming an Accessible Forest Practitioner yourself?

Achieved Goals. Evaluate your progress and satisfaction:

- Have you achieved the objectives you set for yourself at this stage?
- On a scale between 1 (no satisfaction) to 10 (complete satisfaction), how would you rate your overall satisfaction?
- Are there any remaining questions or areas of curiosity you would like to explore further?



QUICK REFERENCE CARDS:



CARD 1: STRESS FACTORS & HEALTH IMPACTS

MULTI-LEVEL STRESS FACTORS

Individual Level

- Inherited personality traits
- Traumatic personal experiences
- Physical health circumstances
- Persistent early childhood stress

Microsystem Level (Immediate Family)

- Absent, violent, or abusive partners
- Unreliable relationships
- Family conflicts

Environmental Level

- Financial difficulties
- Housing insecurity

- Social isolation

- Poor nutrition

Macrosystem Level

- Lack of reliable income sources
- Limited employment opportunities in the geographical area

HEALTH IMPACTS

- Harmful mental health effects
- Negative physical health outcomes
- Instability in mothering roles
- Intergenerational transmission of stress factors
- Excessive digital device usage (averaging 6 hours daily)



CARD 2: BENEFICIAL OUTCOMES & EVIDENCE

NATURE CONNECTION BENEFITS

Physical Health Improvements Average stress reduction in teenagers:

- Increased physical activity
- Decreased obesity risk
- Reduced cardiovascular and respiratory issue

Mental Health Benefits

- Reduced stress levels
- Improved focus and attention
- Enhanced overall sense of wellbeing

OBSERVED OUTCOMES FROM FOREST WALKS

- Immediate positive effects visible to support workers
- High emotional sensitivity and engagement with nature
- Strong community bonding and group sharing
- Marked calming effect (visible physical relaxation)

- Creative expression of personal resources
- Babies brought along also showed relaxation

MEASURABLE RESULTS

- Average mood score increased from 3.2 to 4.4 (on 1-5 scale)
- Lower stress levels after walks reported
- More positive feelings overall
- Appreciation of rare “me-time” opportunity

RESOURCES FOR RESILIENCE

Individual Level

- Increased optimism
- Sense of spirituality
- Connection to children as strength source

Community Level

- Supportive social networks
- Structured nature-based activities
- Professional support from trusted workers



CHAPTER 8

ACCESSIBLE FOREST
PRACTICE FOR MIGRANTS



CHAPTER 8: ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTICE FOR MIGRANTS

What you will learn in this section:

Theoretical insights: understanding the complexity of migration as a global phenomenon, its drivers, and the diverse legal statuses of migrants

Reflective Consideration: Take a moment to reflect on your objectives at this stage of your work. What is your personal experience with migration? What is your understanding of its impact on your local environment?

Key Competences: This chapter will delve into the following relevant competencies:

- Understanding legal frameworks around migration
- Recognition of migration's socioeconomic impacts

Time Allocation: Dedicate approximately 20 minutes to this activity.

Introduction

Migration has long been a defining element of human history, its narrative rich with stories of courage, longing, and the pursuit of new horizons. The phenomenon has touched nearly every society across the globe. Today around 260 million people live outside their country of birth, underscoring migration's global scale. Most likely you know a migrant or are one yourself. Although a common phenomenon, however, it is often politically used and abused.

We would like to emphasise how important it is to appreciate the complexity and individuality of every person's experience, and not label or generalise. Each migrant's journey is shaped by various factors, which include the reasons for leaving their homeland, the duration of their migration, and the cultural differences between their country of origin and their new place of living.

Why do some people migrate, and why do some stay in their countries?

People migrate for many reasons. While most move internationally for work, family, or education, others are driven by urgent circumstances – conflict, persecution, or natural disasters.

Among those who migrate, there is a wide range of legal statuses, from those with permanent residency to those with temporary permission, and those seeking asylum under refugee protection protocols. It is important to remember that definitions and legal terms can vary between countries.

We would like to highlight that migration is a powerful driver of sustainable economic and social development, as described in the IOM's (International Organization for Migration) 2030

Agenda. Migrants bring valuable skills, enhance workforces, contribute to investments, and enrich cultural diversity. They also positively impact their countries of origin through the transfer of skills and financial resources. This is especially important to bear in mind considering the prevalence of narratives blaming migrants for the economic crisis. It is also true that without proper management, migration can pose risks to both migrants and host communities.

The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration emphasises the need for a global strategy that safeguards the rights, education, and health of migrants. There is still a huge gap in the conditions of migrants and residents of the country they live in. Discrimination is still a very serious and important issue. This underscores the importance of integrating migrants into new societies and recognising their contributions both to their new homes and their countries of origin. Our main motivation was to introduce Accessible Forest Practice to people with this experience.

The perspective from Germany:

In 2022 alone, about 7 million people immigrated to European Union (EU) countries, with the largest numbers recorded in Germany.

In this part of the e-book we focus on two main subgroups as defined by the IOM: regular migrants in Chapter 8: Part A, and vulnerable migrants (with refugee experience) in Chapter 8: Part B.

Our goal is to provide insights and tools that will help you engage effectively with these groups while ensuring that your practices are both safe and supportive.



CHECK POINTS:

- Can you identify the different legal statuses migrants may hold?
- Are you familiar with how migration contributes to sustainable development?
- Have you considered the specific approaches needed for different migrant subgroups?



CRITICAL QUESTIONS:

- How might your own perceptions about migration influence your work with migrant communities?



QUICK REFERENCE CARDS:



CARD 1: MIGRATION BASICS

DEFINITION: Migration is the movement of people away from their usual place of residence, either across an international border or within a country.

SCALE: Approximately 260 million people currently live outside their country of birth.

PRIMARY DRIVERS:

- Work opportunities

- Family reunification
- Education
- Conflict and persecution
- Natural disasters

LEGAL STATUS: Ranges from permanent residency to temporary permissions and sought or granted asylum.



CARD 2: IMPACTS OF MIGRATION

POSITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS:

- Skills and workforce enhancement
- Economic investment
- Cultural diversity
- Knowledge transfer
- Financial remittances to countries of origin

- Discrimination
- Legal barriers
- Health and education access inequality

CHALLENGES:

- Integration difficulties

GLOBAL FRAMEWORK: The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration emphasises protecting migrants' rights while recognising their contributions.







What You Will Learn in this Chapter:

1. Theoretical insights: Understanding the definition, legal frameworks, and psychological experiences of migrants in regular situations, particularly in the German context
2. Practical applications: Recognising and addressing specific barriers that prevent migrants from connecting with nature irrespective of their legal status

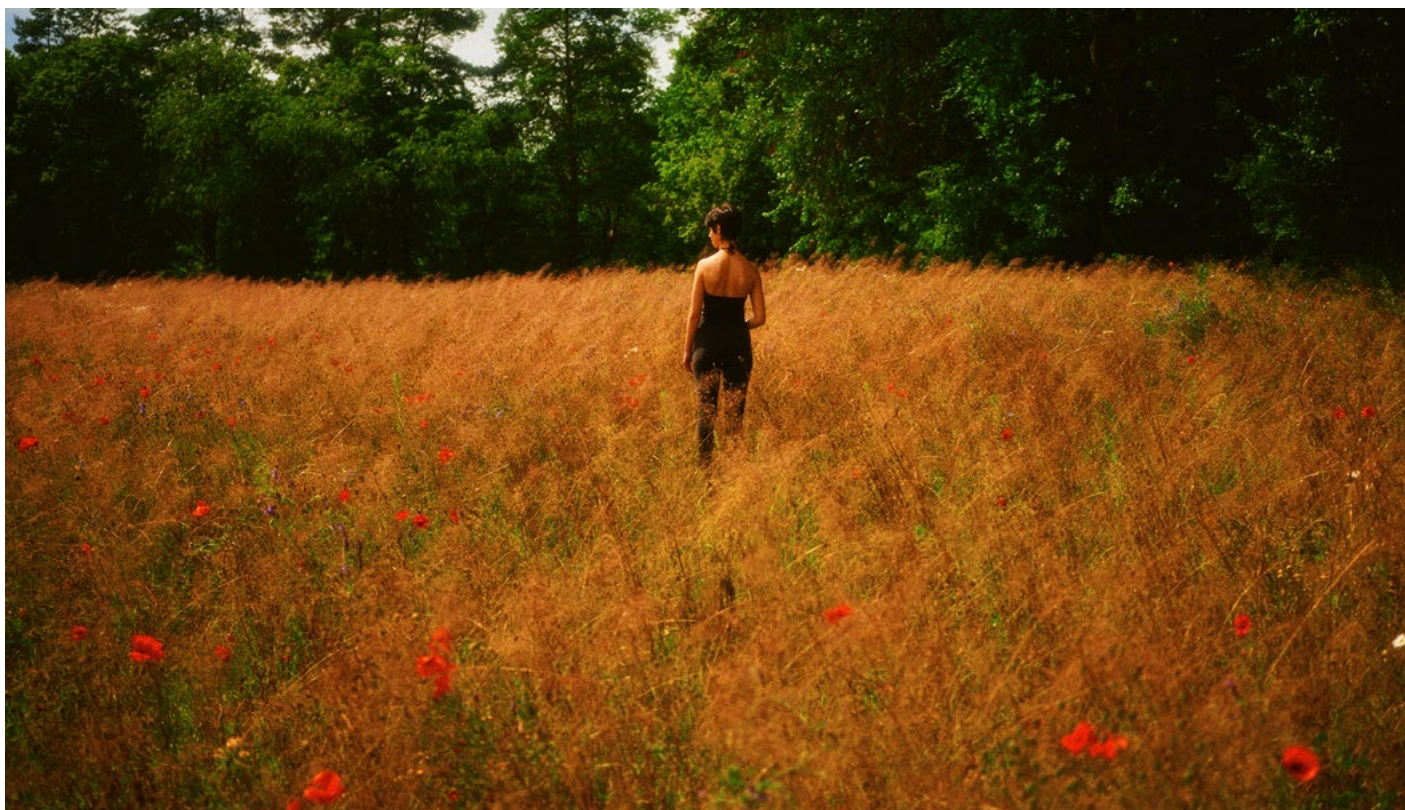
Reflective Consideration: Take a moment to reflect on your objectives at this stage of your work. Are you focused on expanding your empathetic understanding of migrants' daily realities, enhancing your skills in overcoming barriers to nature connection, or both?

Key Competences: This chapter will delve into the following relevant competencies:

- Empathetic perspective-taking for regular migrants
- Cultural adaptation awareness
- Recognition of systemic and psychological barriers to access to nature
- Skills for supporting migrants through acculturation phases

Time Allocation: Dedicate approximately one hour to fully engage with the material and activities presented.





SECTION 1. UNDERSTANDING THE TARGET GROUP – REGULAR MIGRANTS

Who is a regular migrant?

Regular migrants are individuals who have crossed international borders and are legally authorised to enter or stay in a country. This status, whether temporary or permanent, allows them to reside in their new country with a degree of legal security, theoretically enabling participation in the workforce, education, and social life. Migrants granted temporary status are however challenged by the insecurity and uncertainties that result from their provisional yet sometimes prolonged status.

In Germany, this is the case for almost all non-European nationalities.

Germany has a complex system of residence permits that affects migrants from non-EU countries. According to official data, Germany hosted approximately 13.4 million people with a migration background as of 2023, which represents about 16% of the total population. The German immigration system differentiates between several types of regular migration:

1. **EU Citizens:** Enjoy freedom of movement rights and can settle in Germany with minimal restrictions.
2. **Skilled Worker Immigration:** Germany has actively recruited skilled workers from non-EU countries through various schemes, including the EU Blue Card program, which provides a pathway to permanent residence after 33 months (or 21 months with sufficient German language skills).
3. **Family Reunification:** Accounts for a significant portion of regular migration, allowing family members to join relatives already legally residing in Germany. Please note, regulations around subsidiary protection status for refugees' families are currently under review (as of June 2025).
4. **Education:** International students can stay for up to 18 months after graduation to seek employment.
5. **Temporary Labour Migration:** Various programs exist for seasonal workers and specific industries.

The temporary nature of many residence permits creates obstacles to integration and long-term planning. Non-EU nationals typically begin with limited-duration permits (1-3 years) that must be regularly renewed. Achieving a permanent settlement permit (Niederlassungserlaubnis) generally requires at least five years of residence, along with language proficiency, integration course completion, and financial stability.

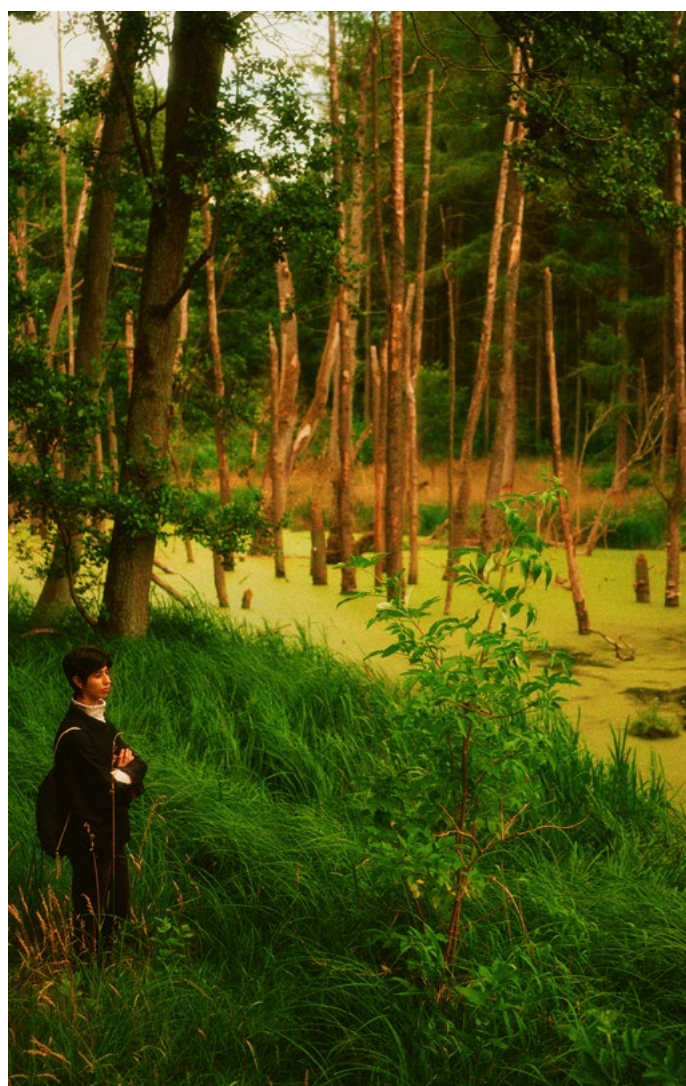


This system of graduated rights creates a layered migration experience where legal security increases over time but may initially inhibit full participation in society. Integration policies have been expanded in recent years, but the psychological impact of temporary status remains a challenge for many migrants, affecting their sense of belonging and willingness to invest in their life in Germany.

Being a migrant in Germany, even from another EU country, often means facing bureaucratic

challenges and misunderstandings – both legal and in personal relationships. This situation naturally leads to integration with other migrants rather than with Germans themselves. Therefore, the feeling of not completely belonging is quite common. Even for people legally residing in Germany, the question of whether this is their final destination remains open, with many migrants evaluating different possibilities each year.

Most migrants maintain family connections in their homelands, which creates a perpetual existence between two countries. There are also digital nomads who rarely integrate deeply with local communities, instead seeking out similarly mobile individuals who aren't rooted in one place. This diversity within the migrant population highlights the many invisible challenges they face daily – challenges that range from practical administrative hurdles to deeper questions of identity and belonging that persist even years after relocation.





Invitation to Empathy:

How Might it Look from a Migrant's Perspective?

Imagine, for a moment, that you feel an overwhelming urge to leave your homeland. Something pulls you forward. Whatever the reason, you make that life-changing decision to go. You pack your life into a suitcase, say difficult goodbyes, and step onto the plane, train, bus or boat that carries you away from everything familiar. Maybe you leave alone, maybe you take a child, or you leave someone important behind.

When you arrive in your new country, the differences hit you immediately. The language surrounds you like an impenetrable wall. Simple tasks become complicated puzzles – ordering coffee, asking for directions, understanding announcements. The words feel strange in your mouth, and you struggle to express even basic thoughts. Street signs make no sense. Even the cycles of daily life feel out of sync with your internal rhythm. At first it's exciting – you're busy learning phrases, trying unusual foods, and figuring out how the transportation system works. Those first weeks are a blur of paperwork, applications, and searching for housing. You feel a sense of accomplishment with each small victory – opening a bank account, finding a good grocery store, making your first local friend.

But then something shifts. The excitement fades, and you notice how often you misunderstand things. You laugh at jokes a beat too late. You miss references everyone else seems to get. Despite your best efforts, you remain visibly, obviously foreign.

On some days, homesickness hits hard. You find yourself craving specific foods from home or longing to hear your native language spoken around you. You wonder if leaving was a mistake. Yet slowly, almost imperceptibly, things begin to change. You develop routines. You make friends – often other migrants who understand this in-between feeling.

Years pass. You visit your homeland and realise you've changed – you no longer fit in perfectly there either. You've become something new: a blend of both worlds, carrying multiple perspectives within. Your accent in both languages reveals your dual identity.

One day, you realise that your concept of "home" has become complicated. It's not just one place anymore. You've built a life that spans borders, cultures, and languages. The journey wasn't easy, but it's now an essential part of who you are – someone who knows what it means to leave, to arrive, and to create belonging from scratch.

- How would you feel if you took a radical decision, placed all your bets on one card, and then doubt kicked in?
- How would you feel when, after months of effort, you again hit the invisible wall of culture, not being understood?
- How would you feel seeing a crying child, approaching to help, but finding yourself unable to comfort them because you lack the right words or ways?
- How would you feel if you had to justify your existence at every step – at work, in shops, even walking with a dog?



This metaphorical journey reflects the process of migration and cultural adaptation, highlighting the emotional and psychological complexities involved. According to the ‘culture shock’ theory developed by Kalervo Oberg and further refined by Peter Adler, migrants go through different phases of acculturation: initial euphoria, alienation, crisis, accommodation, and finally integration.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

When working with migrants, it’s important to keep the following in mind:

Diversity of Experiences: Every migrant’s journey is unique, and is influenced by personal experiences, varying reasons for migration, and individual resources. A tailored, sensitive approach is essential.

Recognition of Acculturation Phases: Understanding which phase of cultural adaptation a person is in – whether it be euphoria, alienation, crisis, accommodation, or integration – can better help you to empathise with them.

Research shows that migrants often experience higher levels of psychological distress compared to non-migrants. For those with only temporary permission to stay, the uncertainty surrounding their status can add to their stress, leading to feelings of being unwelcome or out of place. Based on interviews and simplified questionnaires, we have defined the following obstacles to reaching a meaningful connection with nature for migrants in the big city:

Time Constraints: Many migrants are focused on adapting to a new culture and securing financial stability, leaving little time for leisure activities in nature.



Economic Challenges: Green spaces may be far from urban centres or difficult to reach, with transportation costs that are prohibitive for some.

Parenting Responsibilities: Often, migrant parents are raising their children without the support of their extended family. This lack of familial assistance can make it difficult for them to find time to spend alone in nature, as their parenting duties consume most of their energy and attention. The absence of support networks that might normally provide childcare or share out responsibilities further limits their opportunities to engage with nature on their own.

Unfamiliarity with Local Laws: Not knowing the laws of the country can be a significant barrier. Migrants may be uncertain about where it is legal to go in nature and what the rules are about accessing certain areas. This lack of clarity can create hesitation in exploring natural spaces, as they may fear inadvertently breaking the law.

Uncertainty in Handling Situations: Migrants might also be unsure about how to handle various situations that could arise in nature. They may worry about what to do in cases of theft or robbery and how to protect themselves in unfamiliar environments. This uncertainty can create anxiety about venturing into natural spaces, further limiting their ability to explore and enjoy these areas confidently.

- **Lack of Knowledge About the Surrounding Nature:** Migrants may not be familiar with the local wildlife, insects, and plants in their new environment. The fear of encountering wild animals, poisonous plants, or harmful insects can be a significant deterrent. Without knowledge of what is safe and what poses a risk, the idea of spending time in nature can feel intimidating and potentially dangerous.

Not Adapted to Weather Conditions: Migrants often find the weather in their destination country to be too cold or too warm compared to what they are accustomed to. Their bodies may not have fully adapted to the new climate, making outdoor activities uncomfortable or even hazardous. This lack of adaptation can discourage them from spending time in nature, particularly



during extreme weather conditions.

- **Lack of Awareness:** Some migrants may simply not know where to find natural spaces or how to access them.
- **The absence of companions presents a significant challenge.** Migrants, especially those who have recently arrived in a new country, may not know enough people with whom they can venture into far out natural places. Very few individuals would find the motivation and courage to explore unfamiliar natural environments alone.





CHECK POINTS:

- Can you identify the various types of residence permits in your country and how they affect migrants' sense of security?
- Do you understand the psychological phases of cultural adaptation that migrants experience?
- Are you familiar with the specific barriers that prevent migrants from connecting with nature?
- Have you considered how temporary status impacts long-term integration and sense of belonging?



CRITICAL QUESTIONS:

1. How might your forest practice be adapted to address the specific time constraints and economic challenges faced by migrants?
2. In what ways could nature connection activities help migrants through different phases of cultural adaptation?
3. How might you create inclusive natural experiences that acknowledge and accommodate the uncertainty and unfamiliarity many migrants feel?



QUICK REFERENCE CARDS:



CARD 1: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL JOURNEY OF MIGRATION

PHASES OF CULTURAL ADAPTATION:

1. Initial euphoria (excitement, discovery)
2. Alienation (culture shock, disorientation)
3. Crisis (homesickness, doubt, identity questioning)
4. Accommodation (developing routines, adaptation)
5. Integration (blending cultures, dual identity)

EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES:

- Language barriers create communication walls
- Constant outsider status despite efforts to assimilate
- Homesickness and longing for familiarity
- Identity transformation ("in-between" feeling)
- Belonging becomes a complex, multi-location concept

IMPACT: Higher psychological distress compared to non-migrants



CARD 2: BARRIERS TO NATURE CONNECTION

PRACTICAL BARRIERS:

- Time constraints due to adaptation priorities
- Economic challenges (transportation costs)
- Parenting without extended family support
- Limited social networks to find companions for nature excursions

KNOWLEDGE BARRIERS:

- Unfamiliarity with local laws governing natural spaces
- Uncertainty about handling emergencies

- Lack of knowledge about local wildlife, plants, and insects
- Unfamiliarity with weather conditions and lack of appropriate preparation

PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS:

- Fear of breaking unknown rules
- Anxiety about potential dangers
- Physical discomfort in an unfamiliar climate
- Hesitation to explore alone in unfamiliar environments



SECTION 2. ACCESSIBLE FOREST PRACTITIONER COMPETENCIES

INTRO

Now that we have explored some of the important characteristics of migrants, with respect to the challenges they face in general and also with respect to nature connection activities, we are going to take a closer look at the competences that Accessible Forest Practitioners can develop to meet these challenges and develop effective practical strategies that will allow them to deliver meaningful nature connection experiences to this population.

Let's start by taking a look at the competences Accessible Forest Practitioners who wish to work with migrants should develop, by taking yourself on a self-assessment journey based on these competences.





SELF-AWARENESS ('I') – NORTH QUADRANT

Self-awareness forms the foundation of an Accessible Forest Practitioner's ability to work with migrants.

Key competencies include:

- Tolerance
- Honest / Authentic
- Able to alleviate fears
- Balanced
- Able to Improvise
- Passionate
- Humorous



THE EXPERIENCE – SOUTH QUADRANT

This quarter describes the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will help AF Practitioners to prepare their own walk.

Key competencies include:

- Session planning with sensitivity
- Adaptability
- Creating clear instructions
- Being attentive to each participant
- Organisational skills
- Safety-oriented
- Feeling the atmosphere
- Creating space for community



NATURE - WEST QUADRANT

Fostering a connection with nature is central to improving feelings of belonging. Practitioners working in this quadrant focus on their own connection to nature to support and guide participants to engage with the natural world in ways that promote grounding, embodiment and emotional regulation.

Key competencies include:

- Ecological literacy
- Familiarity with the local environment / local ecosystem/nature/forest
- Love for nature
- Include nature as a co-facilitator



THE GROUP – EAST QUADRANT

The East quadrant addresses the competencies required to facilitate group dynamics effectively, ensuring inclusivity and emotional safety for all participants.

Key competencies include:

- Empathy
- Inclusive communication
- Understanding the cultural specifics of participants
- Understanding the cultural shock phases

Now let's take a closer look at each one of the competences and what that means for you as a possible future Accessible Forest Practitioner.





SELF-REFLECTION ON THE ABOVE COMPETENCES

Below you will find a self-assessment tool for each one of the competences listed above

On a scale of 1 to 10, evaluate how you position yourself in relation to each of the competences. This will give you an overview of the competences you might dedicate your time and energy to deepening your understanding of. Create a strategy for yourself to better understand each of the competences, establishing the priorities that you feel are most appropriate to your own unique learning journey.

SELF-AWARENESS ('I') – NORTH QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assesment scale 1 to 10
Tolerance / Judgement-free How consistently do you suspend cultural assumptions and approach migrants' unfamiliar behaviours or perspectives with genuine curiosity rather than judgement? (1 = I frequently make quick judgements based on my cultural norms; 10 = I consistently approach differences with curiosity and withhold judgement)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Honesty / Authenticity How comfortable are you being your authentic self with migrants, showing your true personality while maintaining professional boundaries? (1 = I often hide behind a professional persona; 10 = I confidently express my genuine self while maintaining appropriate boundaries)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Able to Alleviate Fears How effectively do you manage your own anxieties or uncertainties when working with migrants from unfamiliar cultural backgrounds? (1 = My own fears often limit my effectiveness; 10 = I consistently recognise and manage my internal fears to create confident guidance)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Balance How well do you maintain your personal emotional equilibrium when facing communication challenges or unexpected situations with migrant participants? (1 = I easily become overwhelmed or frustrated; 10 = I consistently maintain my centre and emotional balance regardless of circumstances)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Improvisation How comfortable are you stepping outside your own cultural comfort zone and improvising new approaches when your planned activities aren't resonating? (1 = I feel anxious when forced to abandon my plans; 10 = I embrace uncertainty and find creative joy in spontaneous adjustments)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

SELF-AWARENESS ('I') – NORTH QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Passion How consistently do you nurture and renew your own passion for sharing nature with migrants, even when faced with challenges or setbacks? (1 = My passion fluctuates significantly based on external factors; 10 = I have established practices that consistently renew my enthusiasm and commitment)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Humour How willing are you to laugh at your own mistakes and model the joy of imperfection when navigating cross-cultural forest experiences? (1 = I try to hide my errors and maintain an impression of expertise; 10 = I openly embrace my missteps as learning opportunities and sources of shared laughter)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

THE EXPERIENCE – SOUTH QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Session Planning with Sensitivity How thoroughly do you research and incorporate cultural considerations into your nature walk planning for migrant participants? (1 = I use the same approach for all groups; 10 = I systematically adapt plans to address specific cultural needs, language levels, and potential unfamiliarity with local environments)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Adaptability How flexibly can you modify activities on the spot when faced with unexpected challenges like weather changes, feeling uncomfortable, or miscommunications due to language barriers? (1 = I struggle to deviate from my vision; 10 = I seamlessly adjust activities while maintaining intentions and participant engagement)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Creating Clear Instructions How effectively do you communicate instructions to participants with limited local language proficiency by using visual demonstrations, simplified language, and culturally appropriate gestures? (1 = Participants often misunderstand my directions; 10 = I consistently convey instructions clearly across language barriers)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Attention to Each Participant How skilled are you at noticing and addressing individual needs without singling participants out, particularly regarding physical comfort in unfamiliar climate conditions? (1 = I focus primarily on group management; 10 = I attentively monitor individual wellbeing while maintaining group cohesion)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

THE EXPERIENCE – SOUTH QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assesment scale 1 to 10
Organisational Skills How thoroughly do you prepare practical logistics specific to migrant groups (appropriate meeting points, transportation options, additional clothes, culturally appropriate refreshments, translated materials)? (1 = I often overlook migrant-specific logistics; 10 = I systematically address all practical aspects that enable full participation)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Safety How thoroughly do you prepare migrants for potential environmental hazards, including unfamiliar allergens, wild plants/animals, and appropriate safety behaviours in nature? (1 = I provide only basic safety information; 10 = I comprehensively educate participants about local environmental risks and create culturally accessible safety arrangements)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Interpreting the Atmosphere/Mood How skilled are you at sensing the collective energy and emotional state of your migrant group during nature experiences, allowing you to adjust pacing and activities accordingly? (1 = I follow my planned schedule regardless of group mood; 10 = I intuitively perceive group energy shifts and dynamically respond to create optimal experiences)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Creating Space for Community How intentionally do you allocate time, physical spaces, ongoing support, and rituals (such as shared meals, post-walk gatherings, digital communication channels) that allow migrants to form meaningful connections beyond the nature experience itself? (1 = I conclude the experience when the walk ends; 10 = I thoughtfully create sustained community-building opportunities that address the isolation many migrants face)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



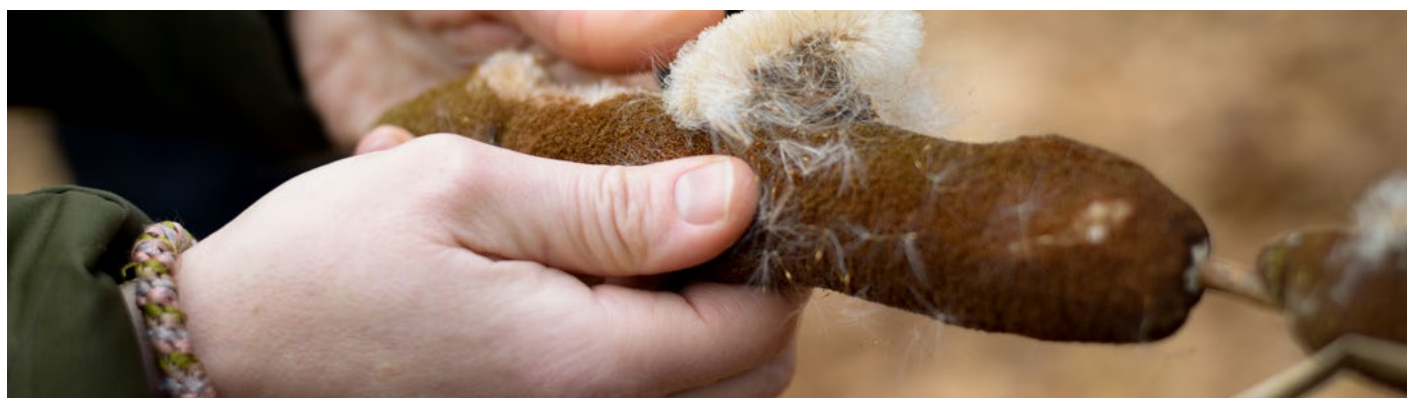
NATURE – WEST QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Ecological Literacy How confident are you in your ability to share knowledge about environmental awareness and natural processes in ways that resonate with migrants' diverse cultural understandings of nature? (1 = I possess no ecological knowledge; 10 = I can fluidly explain complex ecological concepts using culturally relevant metaphors and references)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Knowing the Local Environment How familiar are you with the specific natural areas where you guide migrants, including seasonal changes, wildlife patterns, and points of cultural or ecological significance? (1 = I have no knowledge of the area; 10 = I possess intimate knowledge of the landscape through all seasons and I am aware of connections between local and migrants' home environments)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Love for Nature How effectively do you convey your personal connection and reverence for nature in ways that inspire migrants to develop their own meaningful relationships with the natural world? (1 = I focus primarily on information about nature; 10 = I authentically share my personal connection to nature in ways that invite participants to discover their own profound relationships)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Nature as Co-facilitator How skilfully do you create conditions for direct nature connection and then step back, allowing the natural environment itself to become the guide for migrant participants? (1 = I maintain control over the entire experience; 10 = I thoughtfully prepare experiences, but during the experience, I know when to become invisible, trusting in nature's capacity to create transformative moments)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



THE GROUP – EAST QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Empathy How deeply do you research and understand the specific migration journeys and current challenges faced by your participant groups before designing nature experiences? (1 = I apply a general approach to all migrant groups; 10 = I thoroughly investigate the unique circumstances of each group's migration experience to inform my approach)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Inclusive Communication How effectively do you adapt your communication style and methods to accommodate diverse cultural communication patterns, varying language proficiencies, and different comfort levels with nature? (1 = I rely on a single communication approach; 10 = I skilfully employ multiple communication techniques tailored to each group's specific needs and backgrounds)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Cultural Specifics of Participants How comprehensively do you research and incorporate understanding of participants' cultural relationships with nature, including traditional ecological knowledge, cultural taboos, and nature-based practices from their home regions? (1 = I have minimal awareness of participants' cultural connections to nature; 10 = I actively learn about and meaningfully integrate participants' cultural nature relationships into experiences)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Cultural Shock Phases How skilfully do you recognise and respond to different phases of cultural adaptation among participants, adjusting nature activities to address their current emotional and psychological needs? (1 = I treat all migrants the same regardless of their adaptation phase; 10 = I carefully observe where each participant is in their cultural adaptation journey and tailor experiences accordingly)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10







INTRO

What you will learn in this section:

1. Theoretical insights: Understanding the practical application of forest immersion experiences with migrant groups across the seasons, as well as a structured approach to organising meaningful nature connections
2. Practical applications: Implementing effective forest walks for migrants, adapting experiences seasonally, and addressing the specific needs of multicultural groups in natural environments

Reflective Consideration: Take a moment to reflect on your objectives at this stage of your work. Are you focused on expanding your knowledge to facilitate migrants' experiences

in nature, on expanding your knowledge of Accessible Forest Practice generally, looking for inspiration, or all of these?

Key Competences: This section will delve into the following relevant competencies:

- Designing and facilitating seasonal nature immersion experiences accessible to migrants
- Establishing rituals and frameworks that support meaningful nature connection
- Adapting nature experiences to different seasons

Time Allocation: Dedicate approximately one and half hours to fully engage with the material and activities presented.

In 2024, a series of forest walks brought together a diverse group of participants who were migrants in Germany. We had people from India, Romania, the United Kingdom, California, Italy, Belarus,

Turkey, Serbia, Ukraine, Greece, Czechia, Mexico, Chile, and others. With one group, we formed a “four seasons” cohort, which meant returning to the same place during each season of the year.



The preparations for the seasonal walking cycle were quite extensive. The walk was preceded by a registration survey that included questions about participants' backgrounds, motivations for joining the walks, and consent for data processing. In the confirmation email, participants received a link to an informational page on how to prepare for a winter walk, along with an Accessible Forest Liability Waiver serving as a health declaration.

We received more interest than expected, which demonstrated the significant need for such activities.



Participants received information about what the forest walk entails as well as its benefits, and were invited to start a journal, with the first prompt being the “web of interbeing.”

All migrants spoke English, eliminating any translating or interpreting issues. However, it is worth noting that when there are individuals entirely new to a particular climate zone within the group, which was our case, it is crucial to ensure their adequate preparation, especially

when commencing a walk in winter. These individuals may lack prior experience with the four seasons in their new country and may not be able to properly judge what clothing is adequate for the weather conditions. That is why it is important to bring additional warm clothes, scarves, gloves, and caps available for use. In warm seasons, sun protection, extra water, and sprays against insects are highly necessary. We wanted everyone to experience this moment in nature safely.

Each of our adventures commenced in a parking area in Berlin, where on each occasion all the participants completed surveys and were then divided into two groups allocated to separate cars. Rail transport was not feasible due to the absence of local public transport in the Biesenthal region that was our destination.

The drive took approximately 30 minutes, during which participants engaged in informal conversation, fostering camaraderie and integration among the group. Prior to entering the forest, we always made a stop at a local bakery in Biesenthal, where participants could purchase sandwiches and hot beverages. Importantly, restroom facilities were also available at the bakery. Each time we visited the

same bakery, which we would notify an hour before the group's arrival. These bakery visits gradually became an integral part of the entire experience. Our final walk concluded with a heartfelt farewell to the bakery staff; it became apparent that we had become a part of their landscape, while the group had adopted the bakery as their own safe haven.

Upon reaching the parking area adjacent to the forest entrance, we routinely equipped

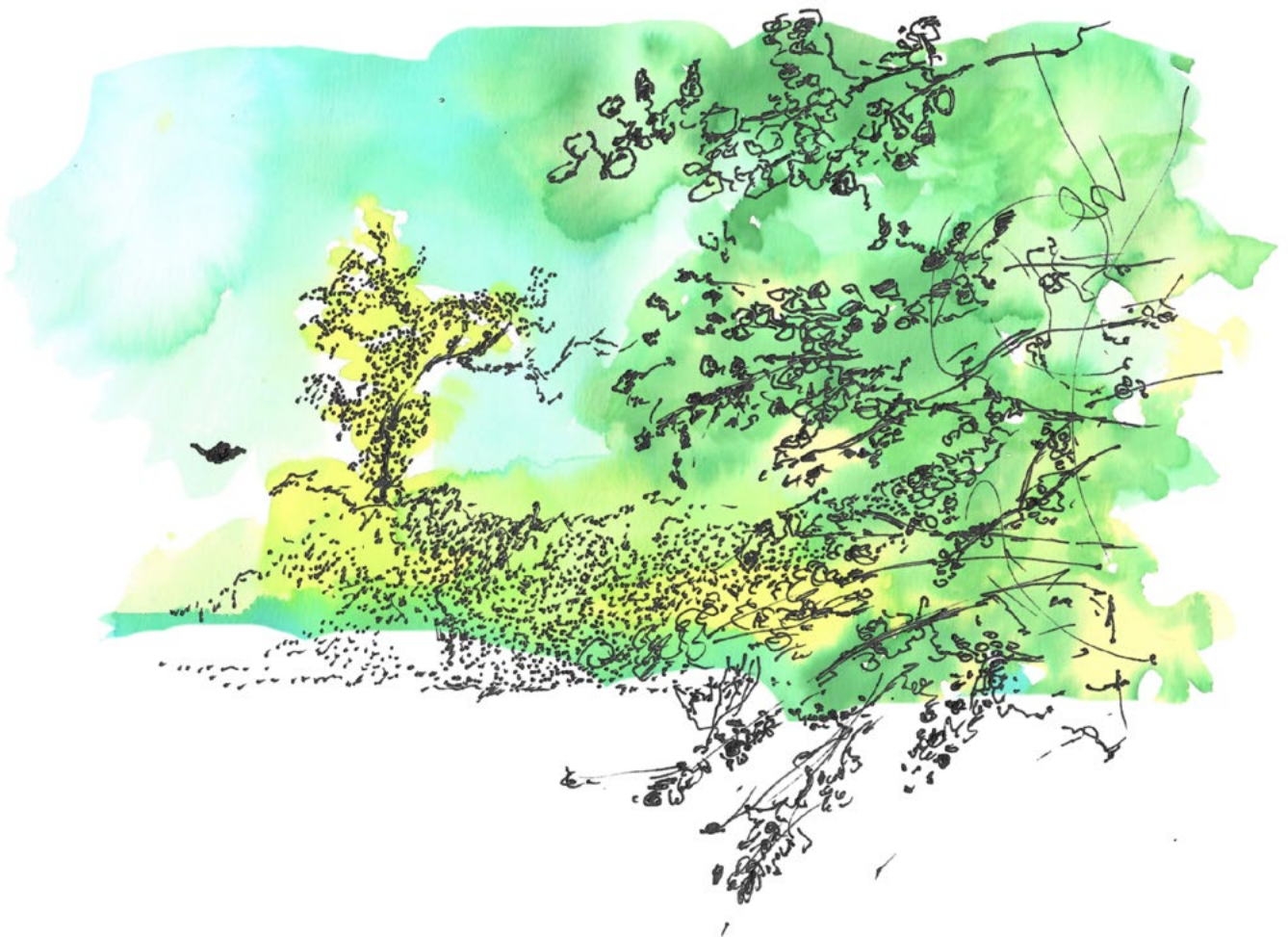
participants with seat cushions for ground seating, provided whistles for safety, ensured appropriate attire, and distributed bags as needed.

The route traversed through the Biesenthal Nature Park, which is characterised by wooded, post-glacial terrain and renowned for its hiking trails, rendering the journey exceptionally picturesque. The trail, prepared in advance, comprised a loop encompassing forests, meadows, and riverbanks. Its purpose was to instil a sense of reverence for nature while affording participants the freedom to explore at their own pace. Each designated station along the route provided ample space for resting and conducting debriefing circles. While the trail meandered through undulating terrain, none of the participants had reported mobility issues, allowing for the selection of this route. Two walking pace options were available to accommodate varying levels of physical exertion and participant stamina: 3 km and 6 km.

Why this route? Our goal was to offer two types of walks: ones in urban spaces, which are easily accessible, and others in a natural landscape park,

allowing people to experience a longer immersion in a forest environment far from the city noise usually not accessible to them. Of course, the time required for experiencing both types of spaces differed significantly. People travelling with us outside the city needed to plan for a full day. That was why our walks always took place on Saturdays. It is also worth mentioning that after the excursions, participants often needed quiet time to peacefully integrate their experience.

It is important to note that despite having some consistent components, each experience was different due to the changing seasons and the evolution of group dynamics. With each meeting, the bonds between participants grew stronger, group roles became more defined, and each forest bathing experience gained deeper meaning through communion with nature. As the participants became familiar with what to expect, they developed personal connections with the surrounding forest, and the guided invitations became longer as everyone grew more independent and confident in nature.





We warmly recommend participating in forest walks across all four seasons, especially in a Central European climate. Experiencing such distinct seasonal changes creates a profound journey, and the relationship with nature significantly enriches as participants discover its many dimensions and cycles. This is especially meaningful for people from different climate zones. During our second walk in spring, participants eagerly looked for specific spots to see how they had transformed over the months. For some participants, the experience was so profound that they couldn't recognise places from the previous walk – they were amazed by nature's capacity for change.

Varying weather conditions also play a significant role. Our third summer walk began during heavy rainfall. After waiting briefly in the bakery, the group collectively decided they were ready to immerse themselves in the rainy forest. This wasn't the first walk together, so the process and surroundings were already familiar. Walking in pouring rain while wearing protective ponchos turned out to be an incredible experience. There was a noticeable change in how we perceived the rain – the space between raindrops seemed to

grow larger, and the rain became integrated into our experience. This walk concluded with beautiful sunshine in a meadow full of poppies, where we held a tea ceremony.

I want to emphasise that connecting with nature in all its phases and weather conditions can be a deep and positive experience for participants, while of course maintaining all safety guidelines and having proper equipment for everyone in the group.

These cyclical walks also create a special kind of understanding where the need for verbal communication gradually decreases. At the beginning of our walks, we used stories and guided meditations when inviting participants to awaken their senses, but by the third outing, as we stood in the rain, we needed only the sound of a bell to signal shifting attention between the different senses.

Below we share the story of our first forest immersion experience – a winter walk that was part of a series of four seasonal nature immersion experiences. This walk followed the universal sequence described in the first chapter.

THE PHASES OF THE WINTER WALK

Winter may seem like an unlikely time to connect with nature, especially in our climate when the days are short and the temperature can dip below freezing. Yet these conditions offer a unique opportunity for deeper reflection, connection, and growth. The following story illustrates how immersing oneself in nature during winter can transform perceptions and foster a profound sense of community.

A Journey:

Our group consisted of participants who had committed to experiencing all four seasons. This group was composed of migrants from different cultures and different climate zones. The walk took place in the ancient Biesenthal Forest, a location rich in symbolic meaning. The stones scattered across the forest floor were carried by glaciers from Scandinavia thousands of years ago, making them “migrants” like our participants. This symbolic connection between them and the landscape set the tone for the entire experience.

We began by gathering in a parking lot in Berlin, where the participants, most of whom were strangers to each other, met for the first time. The process had begun earlier with their applying through an online questionnaire, and then preparing themselves for the walk by

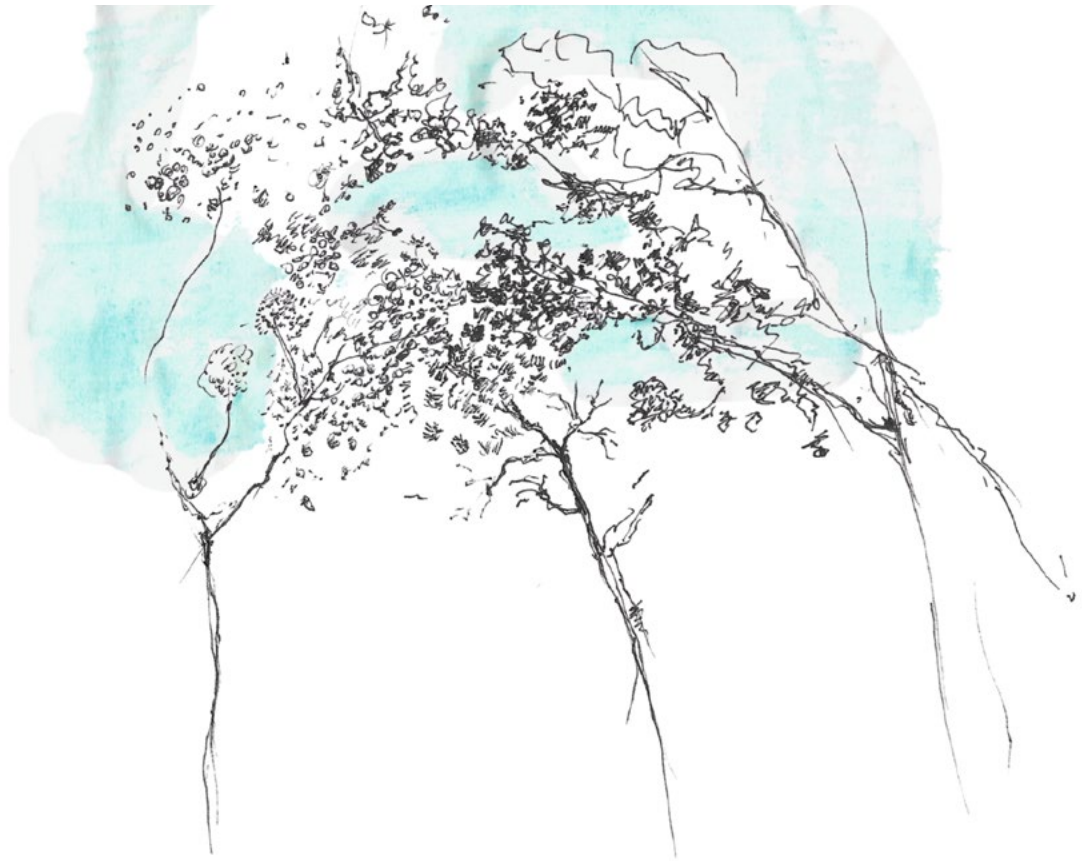
bringing a notebook and reflecting on what nature meant to them. During the half-hour car journey, participants had the opportunity to get to know each other better. This journey helped them relax and feel more comfortable in this new group. Before entering the forest, we stopped at a village bakery, where people could purchase extra food, enjoy hot drinks and use the toilet. Upon arrival at the parking lot the necessary equipment and materials were distributed, and a practical introduction that covered how to dress appropriately and what the experience was about took place. Some people brought extra jackets, scarves, and caps from the car, especially those who were not well-prepared for the cold as they didn't have any experience of being in nature in sub-zero temperatures.





Introductory Stage:

At the forest entrance, a path beside the village, we introduced Accessible Forest Practice. The air was refreshing and the rays of sunshine provided comfort, and the participants were quite excited. We shared some tips on what to do if it became colder, how to move and how to stay warm. We emphasised that it was perfectly fine to sip tea from a thermos and eat sweet snacks, as sugar helps the body maintain an appropriate temperature. We invited everyone to pay attention to each other. There weren't many questions from the



participants. One thing that was evident was that people were very curious about themselves. They were eager to talk about their own connections with nature, and building relationships within the group was also very important.

The sensory connection began after a fairly lengthy walk deep into the forest, so the participants were already warmed up and relaxed. This distance helped still the emotions and fulfil the need to get to know each other, and by the time we reached the first spot they were somewhat calmer. There they were invited to find a place to sit and write down their intentions for the walk in their sketchbooks. The guided meditation, “Pleasure of Presence,” involved going through and activating the senses – touch, smell, taste, hearing, heart, and orientation – with profound concentration. It seemed as though the participants had been eagerly awaiting this moment and its sense of arrival and relief, making this phase longer than usual and requiring time for journal notes afterwards. The sharing of insights and “What are you noticing?” took longer than expected. One participant commented,

“I know the smell of the soil, it is familiar to me. And yet, smelling it now, it is a WOW experience, it is healing.” Another shared, “I look at the nature around me, and at my hands. They are so clean! Like they do not fit with the environment.”

Still in that location we introduced another invitation from the Universal Walk sequence called “What is in motion?” We asked: “I wonder what would happen if you walked around at a slower pace, much slower than usual, and noticed what is in motion?” At that stage, I suggested that participants could leave their bags where they were and walk freely around the space. I would then call them back with the sound of a nose flute. The participants didn’t know the

place beforehand, and for some, this biotope was significantly different from what they were used to. This is why it was important to guide them and inform them about how to walk on the forest soil, what to expect, and how to behave around plants.

Though slowed-down the pace of the walk varied significantly, as different individuals had different paces. We gathered again after 15 minutes and formed a sharing circle, where the question “What are you noticing?” evoked silence and a calm atmosphere. “Motion is the only thing I can see” was one participant’s comment in the sharing circle.



We continued walking along the peat bogs and rivers with trees marked by beaver teeth until we reached the next space – a depression between tree roots on a slight hill. The sun was still shining, and the silence of the winter forest provided space for contemplation and being in the here and now. Along the way we passed other people who, in contrast to our participants, were moving very quickly. Someone commented, “It’s a bit like we’re in different worlds now – we’re in our slowed-down world of deep connection with nature, while other tourists are in a world of hurry, running, and purpose.” It is good to acknowledge that passersby are also part of nature, and we should remain open to their presence.

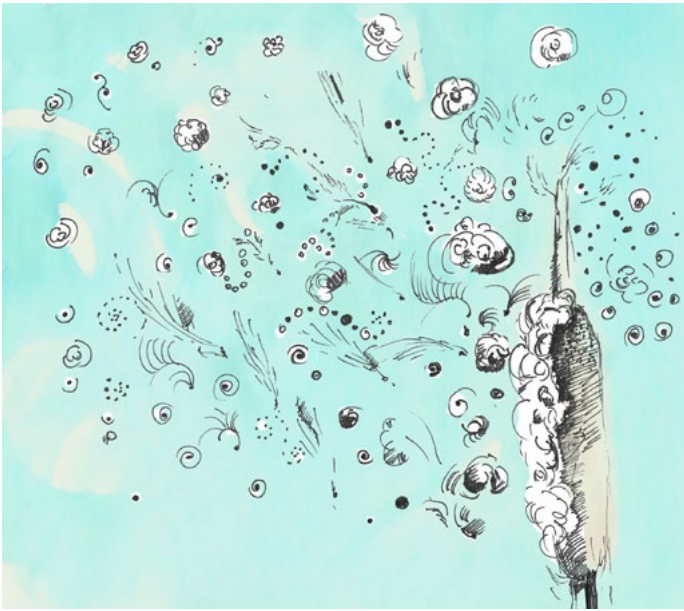


Meaningful nature connection stage

Now was a good moment to meet with the surrounding nature. The invitation was: “I wonder what would happen if you followed your sense of orientation, the direction that calls you most, and then take time to meet some being. This being can be anything from a tiny insect to the sky. And I wonder what would happen if you spent some time with this being... I wonder what you would notice.” It is essential to remind participants, particularly those entirely new to the climate, about proper forest navigation to ensure their warmth and prevent them from straying too far. It’s also important to remind them that it is good to eat snacks from time to time to replenish the body’s sugar, so it can heat up. This time, people ventured somewhat farther, feeling more confident in the process and with the group. At the sound of the flute, participants emerged to return from different parts of the forest. Those who wanted to share could do so in

the circle when asked, “What are you noticing?” “A rook landed on the tree above me. It started tweeting ‘dream dream dream dream dream dream dream!’” ... “And I felt aware of all the trees around me, and I felt their curiosity towards me.” “We do stand out from this landscape, as humans. And yet we do belong here.”

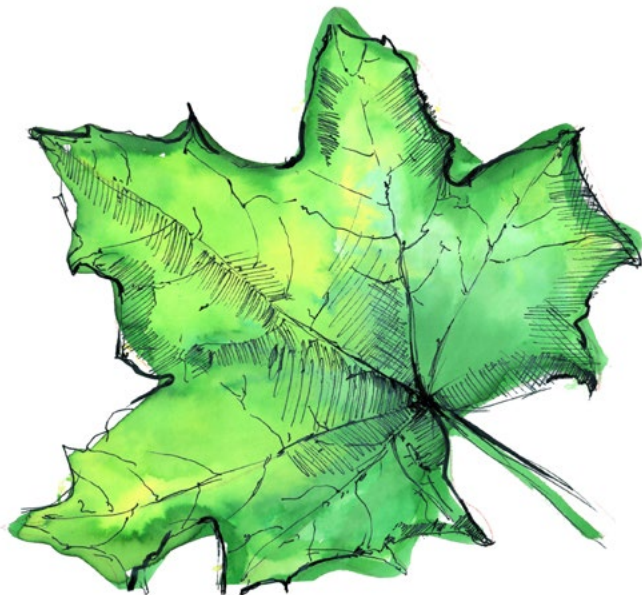
We continued onward, speaking far less now. Within this immersion, not only in nature but also in themselves, we reached the edge of the forest and a view of a peaceful winter meadow with cattails. Some members of the group approached them and blew on them, dispersing their seeds like snowflakes all around. The snowfall of the cattails seeds became a silent form of sharing, eliciting immense joy and satisfaction within the group, whose energy transformed into childlike playfulness. I hadn’t expected such an interaction



with nature, nor had I anticipated that the group needed precisely this kind of extraordinary lightness and joy. Everyone took a handful of fluff in their palms, and simultaneously we blew them into the centre of our circle. This image was incredible, as if the forest had begun to co-create this experience with us.

We then climbed up a carpet of dry leaves to the top of a small hill. Reaching this summit seemed a symbolic achievement of something, but also perhaps a surrender, a letting go, allowing oneself to be.

The following invitation was not planned, but emerged naturally: “I wonder what would happen if you listened to your body, and connected with nature in the way that was most natural for you? I wonder what you would do, what you would notice?” This invitation encouraged individuals to



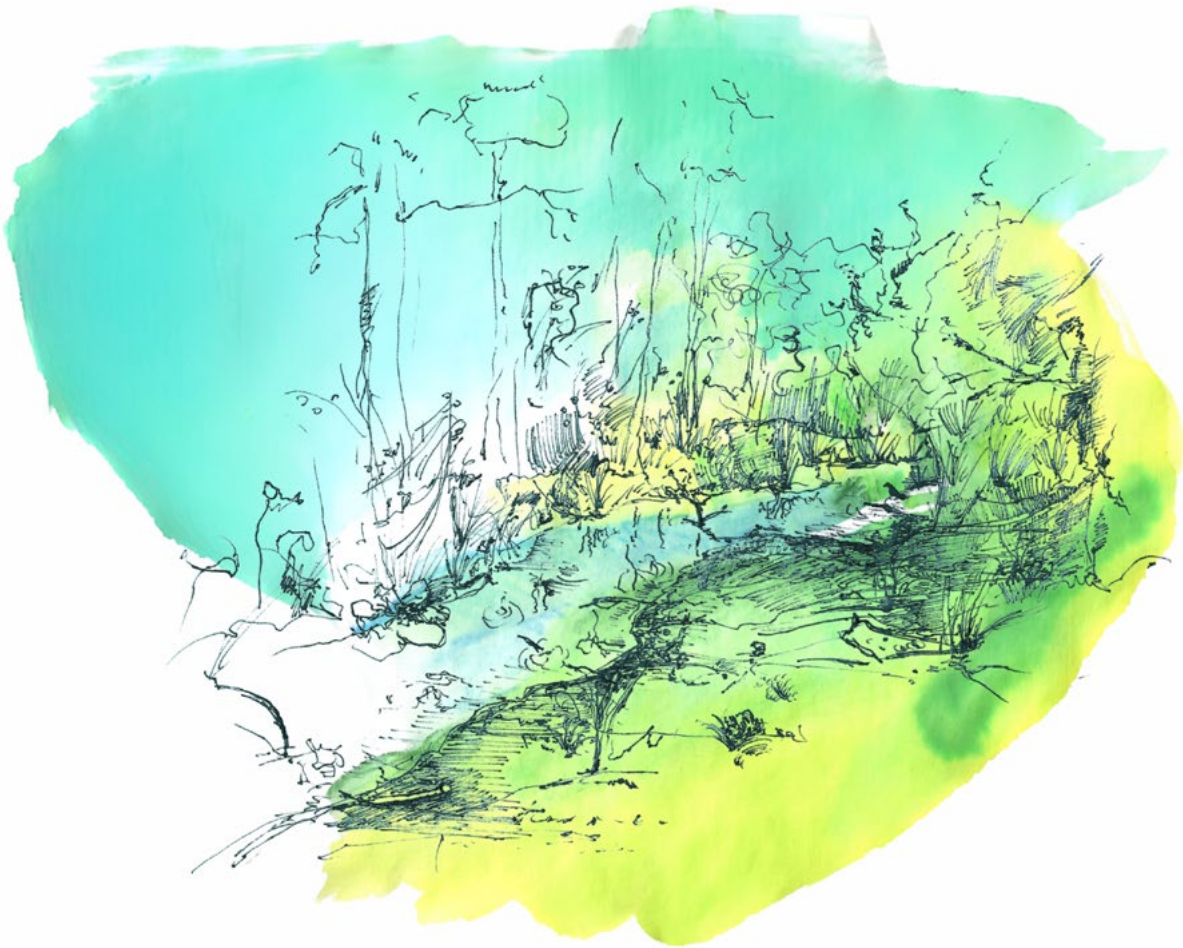
connect with nature in whatever way they felt inclined, based on how their bodies felt. This invitation prompted some participants to lie down on the ground, climb trees, hug the moss on trees, or bury themselves almost completely in leaves, literally embracing the natural world. It was a profoundly moving invitation in this hilltop place. At the sound of the flute we regrouped once again, but instead of sharing stories as usual we stood in a tight circle, embraced each other by the shoulders, and stood in silence, experiencing closeness among ourselves as well, in connection with the forest and the world. Now, no words were needed.



Solo time

Coming down from the hill, we arrived at a mill by the river. The sense of community was so strong that the invitation to embark on solo time felt somewhat unnatural, even contradictory to what I sensed from the group. I had never experienced such a strong and natural bond between participants on any previous walk. Fortunately, however, the final phase of the walk included a stretch alongside

the small river through a ravine. The path was narrow enough to prevent walking side by side, making a solo walk, upstream along the river, our natural mode of progression. The landscape was so beautiful, with the rhythms of the trees and the reflections of the sun upon the water so dynamic, that each person naturally immersed themselves in their solo journey in their own unique way.



Closing stage

I went a little ahead of the group to prepare the closing ceremony for their arrival. In a bend of the river, near a small wooden bridge, I laid out velvet cloths on which I arranged biscuits, sandwiches, nuts, cups, and thermoses filled with pre-prepared nettle tea. Some of the tea was with honey and some without, so participants could choose the drink that was right for them. Slowly they arrived at our winter forest picnic, happy for the warm tea that awaited. It is a good

idea to use metal cups, as they quickly transfer the tea's warmth to the hands. Some people, to our surprise, had also brought cakes and other treats, which they added to our concluding picnic.

Before we began drinking the nettle infusion, we had our final sharing circle: "Is there anything you would like to share to feel complete?" A small leaf served as our "talking stick" – whoever held the leaf had time to share what they wanted, and

silence was also okay. It was strongly emphasised how important it was that we were going to have three more walks with the same group of people and that this was just the beginning.

One of the participants said:

“We are all migrants, like this soil, like these rocks which travelled 20,000 years ago from the Scandinavian region, and now are called German land. After how many days, months, years, thousands of years does a being stop being a ‘migrant’ and become ‘local’?”



Seasonal Adaptations:

WINTER

Practical Considerations: Warm equipment: thermoses, extra scarves, hats, gloves, and hand warmers. Waterproof, inflatable cushions for sitting on snow, and snacks containing sugar. A route requiring movement is recommended, preferably going uphill and downhill and sheltered from the wind.

Sensory Invitations:

Water States Invitation: When encountering frozen water or snow, observe water in its different states. “I’m curious what you notice about water in these different forms. Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Temperature Exploration: “I wonder what would happen if you touched different surfaces – tree trunks, branches, or the ground beneath snow. What temperature differences do you notice compared to the air around you? Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Bare Tree Stories: Looking at deciduous trees without leaves. “If this leafless winter tree could

tell a story, what would it be about? What do you notice in the winter forest that you haven’t noticed before? Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Track Following: In snowy conditions, follow existing tracks and create your own. “I’m wondering what story these tracks tell and what story you might create with your own path. Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.” **Finding Your Room:** “I wonder what would happen if you look for your place, the place where you could feel like it might be your room. Which place would it be? Stay there for a moment. Be nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Session Closing: Stand in a circle, very close to each other, like penguins, and warm each other with your bodies. Share what you need to feel complete. Hot tea in metal cups, sweets, and small candles. If possible, gather around a small fireplace.



SPRING

Practical Considerations: It is essential to provide water and head coverings for participants, and to pay special attention to allergies. Some may experience previously unknown allergic reactions. Repellent against ticks and other insects is necessary. Knowledge about protected plants and animals is crucial, as well as breeding areas where entry should be avoided.

Sensory Invitations:

Single Sense Following: “I wonder what would happen if you followed just one sense today – sight, hearing, touch, smell, or what your heart tells you. What do you discover? Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Balance and Imbalance: “I’m curious about finding balance and imbalance around you – through building small structures, observing nature, or balancing with your body. What do you notice? Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Shared Perspective Drawing: Arrange papers in a circle and something with which to draw.

Invite everyone to draw what they see in front of them, then move to the next paper to add to the drawing. “What happens when we see nature through one another’s eyes?”

Cloud Stories: “I wonder what would happen if you found a place where you could see the sky, if there were clouds and tree branches. I wonder if this could be a story, and what the story would be about. Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Session Closing: First fruits of the season: young apples, strawberries, or local honey from nearby flowers. Share what you need to feel complete.

You may also share a poem by Kahlil Gibran, a Lebanese-born writer and artist who immigrated to the United States with his family in 1895, ‘Song Of The Rain VII’:

“... So with love –

Sighs from the deep sea of affection;
Laughter from the colourful field of the spirit;
Tears from the endless heaven of memories.”

SUMMER

Practical Considerations: Long pants and closed shoes, despite warm temperatures, to avoid mosquito or tick bites. Water for each participant and sun protection are essential. Participants should have mats or scarves for comfortable ground contact.

Sensory Invitations:

Harvest Discovery: “Summer is harvest time. I’m wondering what fruits and seeds you notice here. Walk around and follow your curiosity. Observe the fruits, just don’t taste them, leave them where they are. Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Light and Shadow Play: The high summer sun creates distinctive shadows. “I’m curious what you notice about light and shadow, north and south directions, or the solar cycle around you. Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the

call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

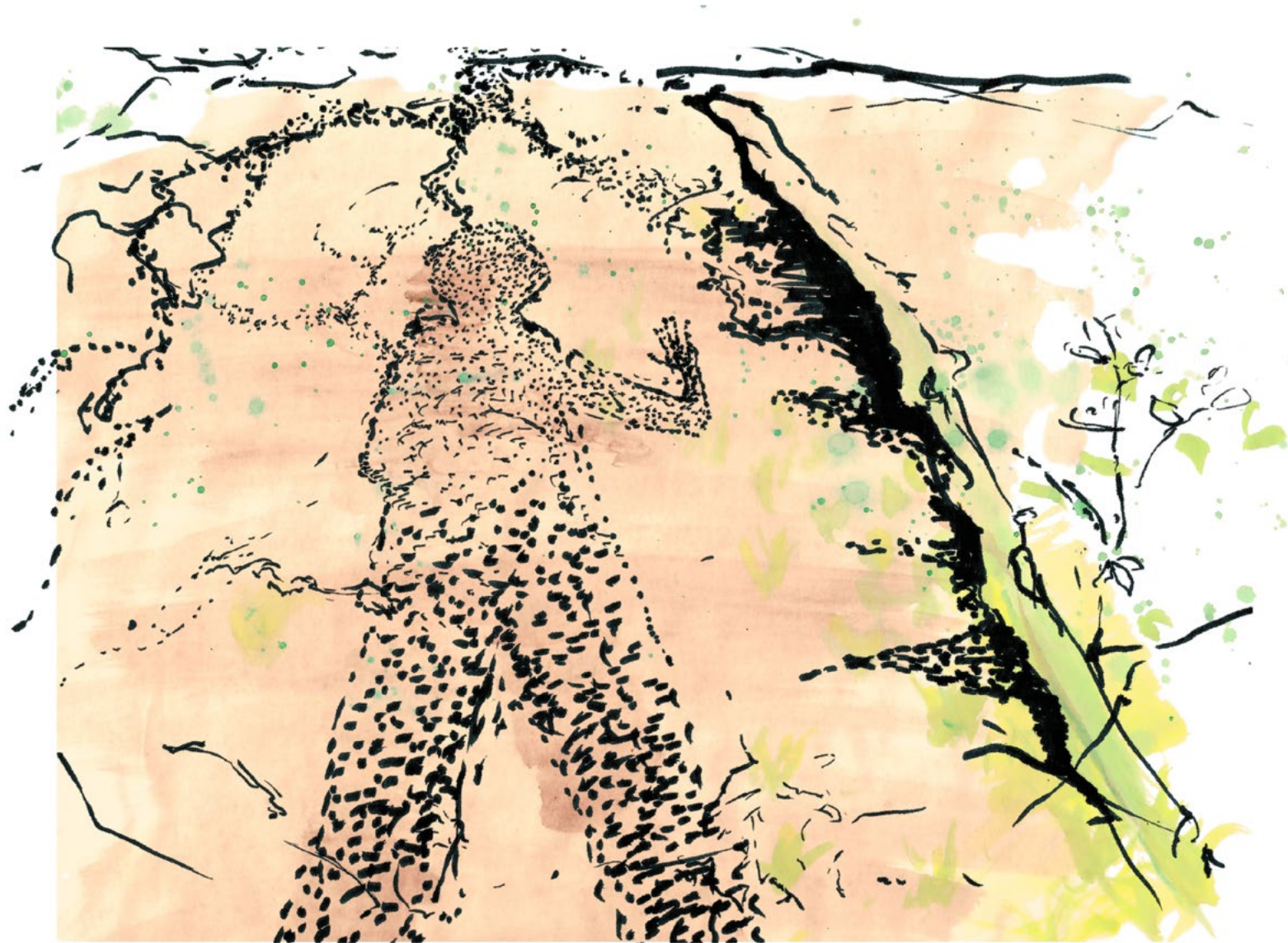
Rain Rhythm: If rain occurs, focus on its rhythm, the space between droplets, shelter under trees, or circles created by drops on water surfaces. “What do you notice about the rain’s patterns and rhythms? Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Being with Life: “I wonder what would happen if you find a being, and stay with it a little while, if you would see it and let yourself be seen. What would you notice? Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Session Closing: Local fruits, lemonade made from local herbs, or bread baked with regional grain. Share what you need to feel complete.

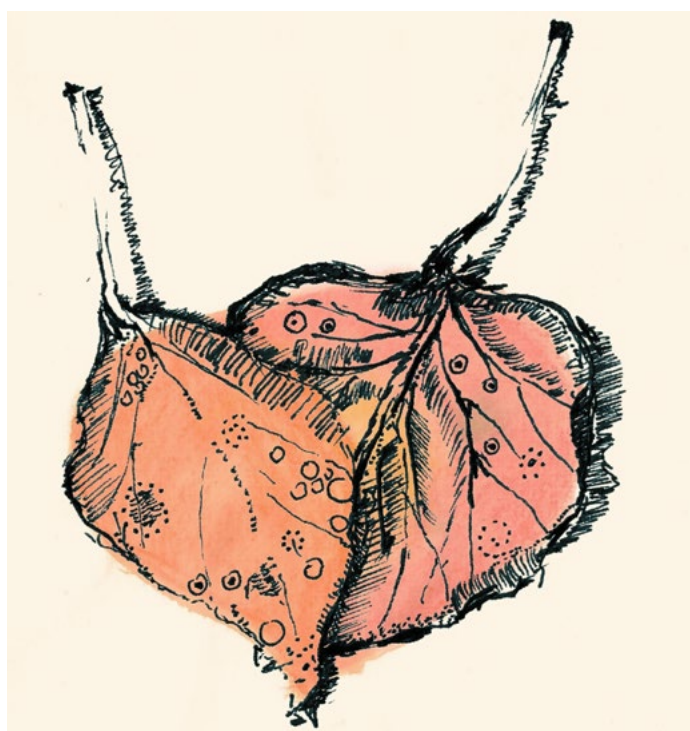
You may share a poem.





AUTUMN

Practical Considerations: Pay attention to rain and weather conditions and prepare accordingly.



Sensory Invitations:

Leaf Maps: “Leaves resemble maps. I wonder what these maps describe and what they might resemble to you. Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Hand Comparison: Some leaves have the shape of hands. “I’m curious what happens when you compare leaves to your own hands and place them together. What do you notice in this comparison? Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

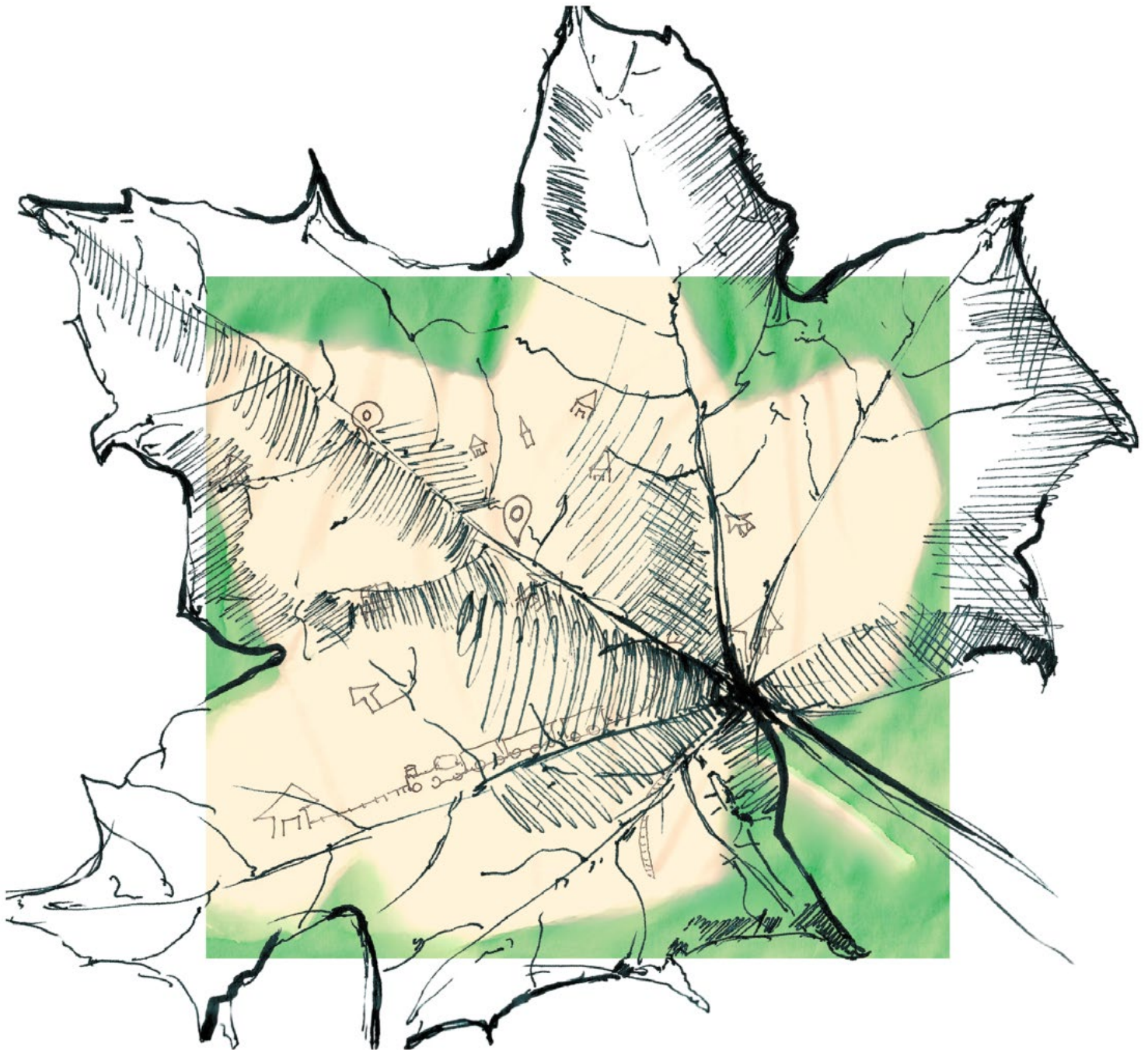
Leaf Body Contact: “I wonder what might happen if you placed a leaf against your body – on your forehead, neck, hand, or heart. Remaining with this contact, what do you perceive? Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Body Wisdom: “I wonder what would happen if you allowed your body to do whatever it needed at this moment – to lie down, roll, stay or sit, or dance. What would it be? How would it feel to follow your body? Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Closing Activity: Create a beautiful pattern with fruits, which will become a shared treat. Before

the picnic, the participants share what they need to feel complete.

Universal Note: Regardless of the season, invitations related to the senses, finding one’s place in nature, and meditation connected to roots are especially important and necessary each time.



Plan Multiple Walks:

Why it matters: One-time experiences can be impactful, but a series of walks allows participants to build a sustained relationship with nature and each other. Especially for migrant communities, who may feel isolated, these repeated experiences create a sense of continuity and belonging that can significantly enhance their wellbeing.

How to implement: Organise walks seasonally or monthly. Encourage participants to commit to attending multiple sessions, emphasising that each walk will build upon the last. This approach helps establish a deeper connection to the environment and fosters stronger community bonds.

If only one walk is possible, then:

Why does it matter? A single nature experience can be so impactful and different from people's daily lives that participants may experience a sense of longing or even anxiety when it ends. Without the possibility of continued guided walks, it's essential to provide closure while opening doors to independent continuation.

How to implement:

- Inspire nature practices – take time to share practical ways participants can maintain their connection with nature independently. Introduce practices like “sit spot” (regularly visiting the same natural location to observe changes and deepen awareness) or sensory walks where they mindfully engage their senses. Provide simple written guides they can take home.
- Facilitate community building – ensure participants have opportunities to exchange contact information if they wish. The social connections formed during the experience are valuable, and satisfying this need for community allows participants to potentially organise their own nature experiences together.

Ritualise the Experience:

Why it matters: Rituals provide structure and comfort, helping participants transition into a mindset that is open to connection and reflection. They create a universal language that transcends cultural and linguistic barriers, making the experience more accessible and meaningful. Rituals function as “techniques of transformation” that work via cognitive pathways, encoding social messages through symbolic enactment that can profoundly reshape participants' perceptions of themselves and their relationship to the natural world. Through repetitive symbolic actions, rituals create cognitive stability by making the natural world's complexity seem ordered and comprehensible, allowing participants to find deeper meaning in their experience. The simple act of gathering in a circle, held with an inner feeling of importance, the rhythm of returning to share after individual experiences, and the intentional closing of the





walk all constitute a small yet powerful ritual that anchors the experience in participants' memories and gives it deeper significance.

How to implement: Begin each walk in the same place. Then keep to the sequence of the walk, with a sensory connection phase, followed by relationship-building with nature, a solo exploration, and a group integration ceremony. Consistency in these small sequence rituals helps participants know what to expect, making them feel safer and more engaged. Maintain rhythm in the walk, just as nature does the cycles of the seasons.

Choose the Right Location:

Why it matters: The location of the walk can greatly influence participants' comfort and engagement. Urban parks offer accessibility and familiarity, while natural forests outside the city provide a more immersive experience. Both

settings are valuable, depending on the group's needs and familiarity with the environment. It is important to be focused on the participants' profiles; for some people, if going into a winter forest is too challenging, an urban park might be enough. Remember, nature is everywhere, and a meaningful experience could happen even in a small garden beside a house.

How to implement: The location has to be familiar to you. If it's a park, you need to visit it often beforehand to see how many people are there and where to find intimate spaces. When you go to the forest, you need to explore it before you bring people there, and possibly arrange special transport to ensure accessibility. It is important to have a comfortable space to start and finish the walk, because people may arrive much later than expected, which is quite typical for people new to the country. Ensure there is somewhere to sit, ideally a warm and sheltered

space with access to toilets. This starting point serves as both a practical gathering location and a psychological safety net, allowing participants to orient themselves before venturing into nature, and providing shelter upon return for reflection and connection.

Building Community Among Migrants During Nature Walks:

Why it matters: Being a person living in your home country, it is easy to forget what it's like to live somewhere without your own support network, family, and childhood friends. The need to belong to a community is natural and fundamental. It is therefore particularly important to ensure there is adequate time for everyone to get acquainted before the walk begins. A simple "hello" is not enough. It is valuable for participants to have the opportunity to talk with each other, understand where they come from, what ecosystems they originate from, and how their current environment differs from what they knew in their home countries. This context creates deeper connections and shared understanding. It is important to build a sense of being together and supporting each other throughout the walk. When people understand each other's backgrounds, they can help bridge the gap between familiar and unfamiliar environments, making the nature experience more meaningful and accessible for all.

How to implement: Begin in a place that is relatively familiar, such as a café, bakery, or other public space accessible to all. It is important that this meeting place not be culturally challenging (like a monastery or cemetery). Look for neutral spaces that encourage conversation – avoid noisy locations or places where people can't hear each other or stand comfortably together. Plan for extended hospitality time and extended closing time, allowing participants to bond before and after the walk. It is sometimes a good idea to have a longer walk before reaching the first location where you do sensory awakening activities. This might for example include walking the distance from the parking lot or bus stop. This transitional time allows participants to gradually shift from their daily mindset into a more present,

nature-connected state while continuing to build social connections.

Embrace Slow Pace:

Why it matters: Many participants may be new to the concept of nature immersion. A slow pace allows them to acclimate, both physically and mentally, and to fully engage with the environment and each other. The slow tempo applies not only to the character of the walk itself, but also to allowing yourself the understanding that some elements of the experience may take longer than usual. There might be many reasons for this, from the need for translation or interpretation to cultural differences in the perception of time. Being flexible with timing creates a more inclusive and relaxed atmosphere where everyone can participate fully without feeling hurried.

How to implement: Avoid rushing through the experience. Allow participants to arrive at their own pace, and provide ample time for each phase of the walk. This approach fosters deeper connections and a more meaningful experience. One aspect of the slow pace is also being able to endure silence. I often slowly count 5 beats in my mind, allowing that much time for silence before moving on.

Be Open with Invitations:

Why it matters: A nature walk is most powerful when participants feel free to explore and connect with nature in their own way. Overly structured activities can stifle this personal connection and even introduce discomfort. Remember that we are dealing with people who may be experiencing a completely new climate zone, and for them, building relationships with nature might look entirely different. Their senses might react differently to textures, scents, colours, they may awaken different responses, memories, associations.

How to implement: Offer open-ended invitations rather than strict tasks. For example, invite participants to "explore what draws your attention" rather than "find a specific type of leaf." This openness encourages self-directed

exploration and a more personalised experience. To ensure this you can finish your invitations with a sentence such as: "Or in any other way that feels right for you at this moment."

circumstances of your participants. And honestly, you don't need to know them, if you prepare an experience in nature in an open way so that everyone can find their place. Openness requires

inner strength to maintain the process as a whole. With experience, therefore, you will see how faith in yourself and in nature, and the synchronisation of these two worlds, create unity and cooperation.

How to implement: Start with your own walks, seeing how your plans change and how you respond to what is happening in your surroundings. Above all, feel yourself in nature and trust that part. This of course requires experience and taking your preparations for nature immersion seriously. Before each walk, allow time to ground yourself in nature. Embrace any uncertainties as part of the process, and trust that your connection with nature will guide you in hosting the group.

Accept the Unknown:

Why it matters: Nature walks are inherently unpredictable – weather, group dynamics, and individual responses can all vary. Embracing this unpredictability allows for a more authentic and flexible

experience.

How to implement: The better you prepare, the more you can improvise when you let go. Be ready for a range of possibilities, from weather changes to unexpected participant needs. Trust that the experience will unfold as it should, and be open to adjusting the plan as needed.

Listen to Yourself:

Why it matters: Leading a diverse group can be challenging, especially when participants come from different cultural backgrounds. Trusting your intuition and staying connected to your own sense of calm and presence can help guide the group effectively. It is completely fine if you don't know all the cultures, contexts and



DAGNA'S STORY – HER JOURNEY FROM VISION TO COMPLETED CYCLE

It was the middle of the night when I woke up with the phrase “Accessible Forest” in my mind. My dream of creating practices that connect people with nature in a deeper way culminated in this project with a wonderful consortium of experts. I immersed myself fully in this experience.

As a forest therapy guide and myself a migrant to Germany, we focused on working with migrants and people with refugee experiences. Our four-season walks took place with a group of migrants from vastly different cultural backgrounds. Each time, before the walk, I felt a bit of nervousness mixed with excitement, but also faith that everything would unfold well. For me, this faith was always based on partnership with nature.

We travelled each time to a beautiful spot near Berlin, a Nature Park filled with the magical beauty of peat bogs and mysterious post-glacial hills. It was a summer walk, the third in a series. And just then, a storm began.

Since the participants already knew the place, we decided to try immersing ourselves in the downpour. I didn't entirely know where the forest would lead us or what invitations it would offer, but I knew one thing – this would be an extraordinary walk.

The sensory scanning invitations happened without words, with the help of a Tibetan singing bowl. In rain ponchos we stood under tree boughs in incredible calm, and the raindrops seemed to avoid us. The walk circled around a lake, so water was naturally the theme of our invitations – we were surrounded by it.

As we walked around the lake, moving counterclockwise, the rain gradually subsided, clouds dispersed, and the sun discreetly appeared. I still remember us sitting among wildflowers in a meadow at the end of the walk, in full summer sunshine. People spoke of magic, elevation, and something much greater than myself, us, or nature.

In the end, it didn't matter where we came from or what past we carried. That moment was shared, unique, and accessible to each of us in a profound way. During that walk, we somehow completed a cycle that remains in our hearts to this day. Certainly in mine.





CHECK POINTS:

- Can you identify the key phases of a forest immersion walk and how they build upon each other?
- Do you understand how to adapt nature experiences for different seasons of the year?
- Are you familiar with the specific practical considerations needed when working with migrant groups in nature?
- Have you considered how creating continuity through multiple walks enhances the experience?



CRITICAL QUESTIONS:

1. How might the experience of cyclical, seasonal walks address some of the specific barriers to nature connection identified for migrants?
2. In what ways could the ritualised structure of forest walks help create a sense of belonging for participants from diverse cultural backgrounds?
3. How would you adapt these approaches for your specific context and participant group?



QUICK REFERENCE CARDS:



CARD 1: FOREST IMMERSION STRUCTURE

PREPARATION:

- Registration survey to understand backgrounds and motivations
- Information sharing (clothing, safety, expectations)
- Transportation arrangements (consider accessibility)
- Equipment preparation (cushions, whistles, weather-appropriate clothing, insect repellent)

UNIVERSAL SEQUENCE:

1. Introductory stage (orientation, safety, intentions, sensory connection)
2. Meaningful nature connection stage (invitations according to nature and group)
3. Solo walk stage (individual exploration)
4. Closing stage (sharing circle, refreshments, integration)

KEY INSIGHT: As participants become more familiar with the process over multiple walks, the need for verbal guidance decreases while the depth of connection increases



CARD 2: SEASONAL ADAPTATIONS

WINTER:

- Extra warm equipment (thermoses, scarves, hand warmers)
- Focus on movement, temperature differences, and the leafless tree canopy
- Hot tea ceremony

SPRING:

- Allergy considerations, insect repellent, and protection awareness
- Focus on abundance, finding specific details, and exploring balance
- Sharing perspective activities, seasonal first fruits

SUMMER:

- Long pants despite the heat, water, and sun protection
- Harvest focus, extended solo time, light/shadow work
- Rain-based invitations, when applicable

AUTUMN:

- Colour focus, leaf patterns and comparisons
- Body-nature contact meditations
- Shared pattern creation from natural materials

CONSTANT: Sensory invitations, finding place in nature, and root meditation valuable in all seasons



QUICK REFERENCE CARDS:



CARD 3: PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

EQUIPMENT CHECKLIST:

- Rain ponchos and weather protection
- Cushions for ground sitting
- Safety items (whistles, first aid kit)
- Refreshments suited to the season
- Extra clothing layers
- Signalling tools (flute)

LOCATION FACTORS:

- Accessibility via transport
- Restroom availability

- Indoor gathering space before & after
- Terrain considerations for diverse participants
- Alternative distance options

GROUP DYNAMICS:

- Car ride conversations foster camaraderie
- Bakery visits create a ritual and a safe haven
- Community bonds strengthen over multiple walks
- Natural reduction in need for verbal guidance over time



CARD 4: PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESS

EIGHT KEY PRINCIPLES:

1. Plan multiple walks (series creates continuity and deeper connection)
2. Ritualise the experience (consistent structure creates safety)
3. Choose appropriate locations (balance accessibility & immersion)
4. Foster community (create social bonds through shared experience)
5. Embrace slow pace (allow time for acclimation and deepening)
6. Offer open invitations (encourage self-directed exploration)
7. Trust your intuition (stay grounded as a

facilitator)

8. Accept unpredictability (remain flexible to conditions and needs)

MIGRANT-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS:

- Language accessibility (common language or interpretation needed)
- Climate adaptation support (extra clothing, guidance)
- Creating physical and emotional safety through consistency
- Building belonging through shared and repeated experiences
- Acknowledging diverse perspectives and prior experiences with nature







SECTION 4. BENEFITS FOR THE GROUP

INTRO

What you will learn in this section:

1. Theoretical insights: Understanding the emotional and psychological transformations experienced by migrants participating in seasonal forest walks, and the quantifiable changes in nature-relatedness
2. Practical applications: Recognising the measurable impacts of consistent nature immersion on stress reduction and ecological connection for urban migrants

Reflective Consideration: Take a moment to reflect on your objectives at this stage of your work. Are you focused on understanding the evidence for nature's impact on wellbeing, developing methods to measure transformation,

or integrating these insights into your own forest practice?

Key Competences: This section will delve into the following relevant competencies:

- Evaluating the effectiveness of nature-based interventions
- Understanding stress-reduction mechanisms in natural environments
- Recognising patterns of transformation across seasonal experiences
- Measuring shifts in nature-relatedness and ecological identity

Time Allocation: Dedicate approximately 20 mins to fully engage with the material and activities presented.

It is worth noting that the situation of regular migrants is rarely analysed in terms of mental health and wellbeing. Thanks to this project, we were able not only to support this target group, but also to focus on their needs and specificity.

Studies have shown that immersion experiences have significant potential to address the mental health challenges faced by immigrant populations, who experience elevated rates of depression and anxiety disorders related to acculturative stress and social isolation. The physiological benefits of being in nature directly address chronic stress responses documented in immigrants experiencing discrimination, language barriers, and pressures to adapt to the new culture. Nature-based interventions offer culturally neutral healing environments in which immigrants can develop positive new memories and social connections while maintaining their cultural identity, thus addressing a fundamental need for both integration support and heritage preservation. Community gardens and urban parks are particularly effective settings for immigrant populations, facilitating embodied experiences that promote adaptation, social interaction, and a sense of belonging to the host community.

The therapeutic outcomes of nature immersion – stress hormone regulation, immune enhancement, and improved mood – are consistent with evidence-based approaches to supporting immigrant mental health resilience and facilitating successful cultural adaptation. These findings support the importance of integrating nature immersion programs into immigrant health services as accessible, nonpharmacological interventions that address both individual healing and community integration needs.



In our project:

Mood and stress levels:

Over the course of a year, a group of participants – migrants living in the city – joined together to take part in what we called **Accessible Forest Practice**: four guided forest walks, one in each season. Each walk was preceded by a simplified survey of mood and stress levels, and the same survey was completed after the walk.

Each walk brought its own mood and medicine. Let's see how they developed across the seasons:

The Winter walk (our first) began with curiosity and emotional fatigue. Some felt excitement, while others were anxious about group dynamics or simply the cold weather. Even then, however, the forest “welcomed” them.

One participant wrote:

“Tired, exhausted, emotionally and spiritually damaged.”

And afterward:

“Much more relaxed, very keen to love my job, grateful.”

By **Spring**, themes of renewal emerged. People described confusion, transformation, and anticipation – like sprouts pushing through cold soil.

“I feel overwhelmed like a baby, like a small little plant waiting for summer.”

Later, they reflected:

“Energised, it's a wonderful experience where all the stress was relieved.”

Summer brought brightness and a palpable shift. Participants began noticing more in their surroundings and within themselves. One wrote:





“The forest was not just ‘there’ – it was alive and I was part of it.”

And finally, **Autumn**, the most emotionally mature of the walks. Stress levels were highest at the start, but the deepest releases happened here.

“Refreshed and released.”

“Centred and grounded.”

As the cycle of walks ended, participants shared some final thoughts. Many expressed gratitude, clarity, and a strong emotional shift. Some even said their senses were changed – they saw more, felt more, and related to trees as companions.

One said:

“Sometimes, in the forest, I can finally hear my own voice again.”

Another:

“Even now, I think of the trees differently. Like friends. Like guardians. Like family.”

The data supports this transformation. On average, stress levels dropped **more than 75%** after each walk.

Most participants began the walks with **high stress levels**, averaging 7.8 out of 13 before the final (autumn) walk. Common words used to describe their emotional state included “tired,” “overwhelmed,” “mentally overloaded,” and

“disconnected.” City life – full of concrete, noise, and fast-paced demands – had clearly taken its toll.

But consistently, after just a few hours in the forest, something shifted. Their stress levels dropped – in some cases down to **1 or 2 on the scale** – and their emotional vocabulary changed.

Participants spoke of feeling “refreshed,” “grounded,” “at peace,” and “clear-minded.” One person put it simply:

“I feel fulfilled and my head is quiet.”

Participants showed a **progressive emotional shift** away from stress, disconnection, and fatigue towards **clarity, calm, and fulfilment**.

- The emotional vocabulary evolved from “overwhelmed” and “exhausted” to “grounded,” “clear,” and “balanced.”

That shift repeated itself with each seasonal walk, and by the end of the year, it wasn’t just a moment of relief – it had become a **remembered rhythm**.

- **The strongest stress relief** occurred in the **last two walks**, suggesting that **regular engagement with nature strengthens its benefits over time**.

This suggests a deepening emotional attunement and responsiveness to nature immersion over time.

It is too early to say how this practice will shape these individuals' futures. Will they continue walking in nature on their own? Will the peace and presence they found ripple into their families, workplaces, communities?

The Accessible Forest Practice gave a group of migrants something both simple and profound: a way back to their natural selves. Through trees, silence, breath, and four seasonal cycles, they remembered something they had always carried. "I remain deeply curious – and hopeful – about what this will grow into."

Nature-Relatedness Outcomes:

Beyond the emotional benefits and reduction of stress observed across the four seasonal walks, we also explored the **longer-term shifts in participants' attitudes and emotional connection to nature**. To do this, we implemented a visual and simplified nature-relatedness questionnaire, administered before the first and after the last walk in the annual cycle.

The questionnaire assessed **four key dimensions** of the human-nature relationship:

1. **Human-Nature Relationship**
(From "I am more important than nature" to "Nature and I are equal")
2. **Comfort Outdoors**
(From "I prefer to stay indoors" to "I love to be outdoors even in uncomfortable weather" – scale reversed)
3. **Comfort in Wild Nature**
(From "I am afraid of wild nature" to "I feel comfortable in the wild")
4. **Environmental Awareness**
(From "I don't care about the environment or eco-practices" to "I care about the environment and am aware of eco-practices")

This tool, made more accessible through drawings and intuitive scales, enabled participants from diverse backgrounds and language levels to reflect on their relationship with the natural world in a meaningful and non-verbal way.



Key Findings

1. Human-Nature Relationship

Participants entered the program already with a relatively strong sense of kinship with nature, averaging **4.6 out of 5**. However, by the final walk, **all responses reached the maximum score of 5.0 – indicating a complete alignment with the idea of mutual belonging and equality** between humans and the natural world. This suggests a strengthening of ecological identity and a deep internalisation of interconnectedness.

2. Comfort Outdoors

The average score increased from **4.0 to 4.4**, revealing a modest but meaningful shift. Participants became more **willing to engage with the outdoors regardless of discomfort**, which may reflect growing **resilience, appreciation of natural rhythms**, and comfort in “uncontrolled” environments – including rain, cold, or wind.

3. Comfort in Wild Nature

Scores remained consistently high at **4.6**, indicating that participants either already felt comfortable in wild spaces or that the format of the forest walks – guided, slow, and intentionally non-threatening – nurtured and sustained that comfort from the start.



4. Environmental Awareness

This category revealed the most **pronounced transformation**, with an initial average of **3.0** rising to **4.8** by the final walk. Participants appeared to develop not only **greater awareness of ecological issues**, but also a **personal investment** in caring for the environment. This shift reflects more than theoretical knowledge – it points to a **felt sense of responsibility and engagement**.



Conclusion:

These outcomes reinforce what the lived experience of the walks already suggested: **repeated, reflective immersion in nature changes people**. Not only did stress drop and emotional clarity increase, but **participants began to see themselves as part of nature – not separate from it**. They grew **more comfortable in nature**, more attuned to its nuances, and more invested in its protection.

This holds especially true for individuals living in urban settings, such as the migrants who participated in this project. Many described the walks as a “remembering” – a reconnection with something ancient and intrinsic.

“Nature is in us and we are nature
– not separate.”

“The forest was not just ‘there’
– it was alive and I was part of it.”

These are not just poetic statements. They reflect **a cognitive and emotional realignment** that is essential if we are to collectively face ecological crises with awareness and care.





CHECK POINTS:

- Can you identify the consistent patterns of stress reduction observed across the seasonal walks?
- Can you explain how contact with the natural environment can influence different dimensions of human life?
- Have you considered how these findings might apply to other migrant populations?



CRITICAL QUESTIONS:

1. What specific elements of the forest experience might have contributed most significantly to stress reduction?
2. How might these documented benefits address the unique challenges faced by migrants in urban settings?
3. What long-term social and ecological benefits might emerge if such practices were made widely accessible to migrant communities?



QUICK REFERENCE CARDS:



CARD 1: STRESS REDUCTION PATTERNS

INITIAL STATE:

- Average stress level: 7.8/13 before final walk
- Common descriptors: “tired,” “overwhelmed,” “mentally overloaded,” “disconnected”
- Urban environment impact: concrete, noise, fast pace, creating disconnection

TRANSFORMATION:

- Immediate effect: Stress levels drop to 1-2 on the scale
- Overall reduction: 75% average decrease after each walk

- Progressive impact: Greatest relief in Summer and Autumn (end of cycle)

EMOTIONAL SHIFT:

- Before: “exhausted,” “damaged,” “overwhelmed,” “confused”
- After: “refreshed,” “grounded,” “at peace,” “clear-minded,” “fulfilled”

KEY INSIGHT: “I feel fulfilled and my head is quiet” – consistent shift repeated with each seasonal walk, becoming a “remembered rhythm”.



CARD 2: NATURE-RELATEDNESS OUTCOMES

MEASUREMENT METHOD:

- Visual, simplified questionnaire
- Administered before the first walk and after the last walk
- Accessible design for diverse language backgrounds

FOUR DIMENSIONS MEASURED:

Human-Nature Relation

- Initial: 4.6/5
- Final: 5.0/5
- Complete alignment with equality between humans and nature

Comfort Outdoors

- Initial: 4.0/5

- Final: 4.4/5
- Increased willingness to engage regardless of weather conditions

Comfort in Wild Nature

- Consistent: 4.6/5
- Already high comfort maintained throughout the program

Environmental Awareness

- Initial: 3.0/5
- Final: 4.8/5
- Most significant transformation
- Development of personal investment in ecological care



CARD 3: MIGRANT-SPECIFIC IMPACTS

UNIQUE CONTEXT:

- Migration often severs connection to land and natural rhythms
- Urban settings further disconnect from nature
- Cultural adjustments create additional stressors

TRANSFORMATION ELEMENTS:

- Restoration of land connection: “There is something very deep and ancient in walking slowly, with intention, with others, in the forest. It is a kind of remembering.”
- Increased nature confidence: “This situation also created in me another comfort – to admit to myself I’m not afraid to explore it.”

- Sensory expansion: Participants reported seeing more, feeling more, relating differently to natural elements

RELATIONSHIP SHIFT:

- Personification of nature: “Even now, I think of the trees differently. Like friends. Like guardians. Like family.”
- Self-reconnection: “Sometimes, in the forest, I can finally hear my voice again.”
- Ecological identity: “Nature is in us and we are nature – not separate”

LONG-TERM POTENTIAL: Creating “a way back to their natural selves” with possible ripple effects into families, workplaces, and communities





PART B. UNDERSTANDING THE TARGET GROUP – VULNERABLE MIGRANTS (REFUGEES)

What You Will Learn in this Chapter:

1. Theoretical insights: Understanding the unique challenges, psychological experiences, and daily realities of refugees – vulnerable migrants
2. Practical applications: Recognising specific barriers to nature connection for refugee populations and approaches to create supportive environments

Reflective Consideration: Take a moment to reflect on your objectives at this stage of your work. Are you focused on developing deeper empathy around refugees' experiences,

enhancing your ability to create safe nature experiences for them, or both?

Key Competences: This chapter will delve into the following relevant competencies:

- Empathetic understanding of refugee experiences
- Cultural sensitivity in nature-based work
- Recognition of unique barriers faced by vulnerable migrants

Time Allocation: Dedicate approximately one hour to fully engage with the material and activities presented.



SECTION 1. UNDERSTANDING THE TARGET GROUP – VULNERABLE MIGRANTS (REFUGEES)

Migrants in vulnerable situations are those who have been forced to leave their homes due to conflict, persecution, or disaster. These individuals are often unable to fully enjoy their human rights and are at increased risk of violations and abuse. As such, they require special care and protection.





Invitation to Empathy:

What Would Happen if You Took the Perspective of a Vulnerable Migrant?

Imagine being forced to leave your home, not by choice, but because staying meant danger or death. As a refugee, you arrive in a new country carrying both the weight of what you've lost and the hope for safety ahead. This journey changes you in ways you never expected. Everything around you feels strange – you don't understand the language, cultural norms confuse you, and even simple interactions become challenging. Each day, you try to make sense of your surroundings while memories of home follow you like shadows. The support network you once relied on is gone, and the isolation can feel crushing, especially when your legal status remains uncertain.

Questions haunt your daily life: Will I be allowed to stay or be sent back? I miss home terribly, but returning isn't possible. Where are my loved ones?

Before, you had an identity and a place in society. Now, you're primarily labelled as a "refugee" or "asylum seeker" – categories that don't capture who you really are. You exist in this in-between space – resilient yet vulnerable, alert yet exhausted.

Even small things feel unfamiliar: the water tastes different, the sun feels different on your skin, and everyday sounds jar your senses. You search for quiet moments where you can reconnect with yourself, but privacy is scarce. The person you were before is changing into someone new, someone you're still getting to know.

"I am a refugee, a stubborn survivor. You see, cruelty tried to break me, wars tried to erase me, bigotry tried to silence me, and politics tried to ban me; but still, like time, I stand; still like dust, I rise; and still like hope, I move; and still, like love I flourish. I am a refugee, and I heal humanity. I am a refugee, a wandering, colourful, restless, foreign, alien soul. Won't you just let me find my humanity, right here next to you?" (From 'I am a Refugee,' spoken word poem by Ifrah Mansour).

- How would it feel to have no place that is truly yours to rest?
- What is it like when everything you built before is suddenly gone?
- How does it affect you when people see only your refugee status, not who you really are?
- How would you feel accepting donated clothes you don't like because you have no choice?
- What's it like when even basic food tastes nothing like what you're used to?
- How do you cope with not knowing where you'll be next week or next month?
- What does it mean to live somewhere without having the right to be there?
- How would you feel living in a place with no connection to your history, where streets hold no memories for you?
- How does it feel to live in cramped quarters with other asylum seekers – strangers who share nothing but a label – eating in communal spaces rather than your own?
- What is it like to be grouped with people who are called the same as you – "refugee" – but whose language, culture, and experiences may be entirely different from yours?
- How does it feel knowing some citizens don't want you in their country, when you didn't want to be there either – when it was just where fate and geopolitics placed you?
- What does it do to your sense of dignity when you had no choice in your homeland becoming unsafe, no choice in which country accepted you, no choice about where you were born, yet you're treated as somehow less deserving of basic rights and respect?
- How would you feel if you could allow yourself a moment of joy, regardless of your circumstances, let all the weight disappear and permit yourself to simply be, in the here and now, trying to relax and exist in the present?

Key Considerations

- Diverse attitudes towards nature; for some, especially men, nature is seen more as an object than a place of relaxation and joy.
- Hectic days, low living standards, shared rooms, and a sense of instability, leading to an inability to commit long-term; decisions about participation are made shortly before the activity.
- If working only with adults, parallel arrangements for childcare are needed. However, mothers appreciated the time without children as a chance to breathe.
- Cultural differences – varying concepts and understanding of nature, communication, and authority.
- Language barrier – lack of a common language for communication.
- Low level of trust; it is best to be from an institution or to build personal contact beforehand.
- Weather – cold or rainy conditions do not favour participation.

When supporting migrants in vulnerable situations, it's crucial to:

- Acknowledge cultural differences: refugees come from diverse backgrounds with different ways of relating to the world, including how they interact with nature.
- Focus on human rights: migrants in vulnerable situations may struggle to access their basic rights. Providing a safe, supportive environment is vital.
- Recognise the need for time: refugees need time to adjust to their new surroundings and should not be rushed into quick integration.

Obstacles to Connecting with Nature

For migrants in vulnerable situations, accessing nature presents its own set of challenges:

- **Fear of the Unknown:** For many vulnerable migrants, the idea of venturing into nature can be overwhelming. They might think, “It’s too much to do by myself; I want to stay where it feels safe.” This fear of the unknown, combined with the traumatic experiences that led them to migrate, can make them





reluctant to explore unfamiliar environments.

- **Responsibility for Children:** Many vulnerable migrants are parents, often with multiple children. The idea of taking their children into nature, especially when they are unfamiliar with the environment, can seem daunting. Without support, they may find it too risky to engage in outdoor activities, particularly in a new and unknown setting.
- **Concentration on Survival Mode:** Vulnerable migrants often live in survival mode, where their primary focus is on meeting basic needs such as food, shelter, and safety. This constant focus on survival leaves little room for considering wellbeing and higher needs. Even though nature might unconsciously provide relief and relaxation, the idea of using it for these purposes may not even cross their minds due to their pressing day-to-day concerns.
- **Lack of Cultural Understanding About**

Nature's Benefits: In many cultures, the idea that nature can bring relief and serve as a space for relaxation may not be well understood or appreciated. Vulnerable migrants, particularly those from urban or conflict-ridden areas, may not have had the opportunity to experience nature in this way. This lack of cultural background or understanding can prevent them from seeing nature as a resource for wellbeing.

- **Unpredictable Schedules:** Vulnerable migrants often do not own their time, as they are frequently challenged by a range of appointments, legal meetings, consultations, or events in the places where they live. These obligations, which can arise unexpectedly and be difficult to predict day-to-day, make it challenging to plan or find time for activities in nature. Constant pressure to meet these demands can leave them with little energy or a fear that they might miss something.





CHECK POINTS:

- Can you identify the key differences between the experiences of regular migrants and those in vulnerable situations?
- Do you understand the specific obstacles that prevent refugees from connecting with nature?
- Are you familiar with the psychological dimensions of the refugee experience?
- Have you considered how survival priorities affect refugees' ability to engage with nature?



CRITICAL QUESTIONS:

1. How might nature experiences be adapted to accommodate the unpredictable schedules and survival priorities of refugees?
2. In what ways might forest practices address the deeper psychological needs for safety, belonging, and identity that refugees have?
3. How can you balance respect for diverse cultural understandings of nature with introducing its potential benefits for wellbeing?



QUICK REFERENCE CARDS:



CARD 1: UNDERSTANDING THE REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

DEFINITION: Migrants in vulnerable situations who have been forced to leave their homes due to conflict, persecution, or disaster.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS:

- Loss of identity beyond "refugee" label
- Existing in an "in-between" state
- Sensory disorientation in new environment
- Constant uncertainty about the future
- Simultaneous resilience and vulnerability

DAILY REALITIES:

- Language barriers creating isolation
- Cultural disorientation and confusion
- Loss of support networks
- Limited privacy in shared accommodation
- Lack of choice in basic aspects of life
- Unfamiliar food, sounds, and surroundings

KEY INSIGHT: "I am a refugee, a stubborn survivor... won't you just let me find my humanity, right here next to you?" (Ibrahim Mansour)



CARD 2: NATURE-RELATEDNESS OUTCOMES

FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN:

- Unfamiliar environments create anxiety
- Reluctance to explore outside "safe" zones
- Traumatic experiences amplify caution
- "It's too much to do by myself"

SURVIVAL PRIORITIES:

- Focus on meeting basic needs (food, shelter, safety)
- Limited mental space for wellbeing activities
- Nature benefits are not consciously recognised
- Higher-level needs deprioritised

PRACTICAL CONSTRAINTS:

- Unpredictable schedules with mandatory appointments

- Responsibility for children without support systems
- Weather sensitivities (especially in unfamiliar climates)
- Limited transportation options
- Shared living arrangements limit personal time

CULTURAL FACTORS:

- Varying cultural understandings of nature
- Different conceptions of authority and communication
- Nature is seen as utilitarian rather than restorative (especially among some men)
- Limited prior access to natural spaces in home countries



CARD 3: SUPPORT APPROACHES

ESSENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS:

- Acknowledge diverse cultural backgrounds
- Focus on human rights and dignity
- Recognise need for adjustment time
- Build trust before expecting participation

PRACTICAL SUPPORTS:

- Provide childcare options during nature activities
- Work through trusted institutions
- Build personal relationships before nature invitations
- Consider weather conditions carefully

- Address language barriers with visual communication

ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES:

- Create safe, predictable experiences
- Respect last-minute decision-making
- Recognise reduced ability to commit long-term
- Provide mother-specific activities as respite
- Consider gender-specific cultural differences

KEY INSIGHT: For those in survival mode, nature connection requires addressing basic needs and safety concerns first



CARD 4: COMPARATIVE NEEDS. REGULAR MIGRANTS VS. VULNERABLE MIGRANTS

REGULAR MIGRANTS:

- Enjoy legal security that provides stability
- Can plan and commit to activities
- Often have private living spaces
- May face cultural adjustment but with more resources
- Have more agency in daily decisions

VULNERABLE MIGRANTS:

- Suffer constant stress from legal uncertainty
- Have a limited ability to plan ahead
- Often live in shared accommodation
- May carry trauma requiring specialised

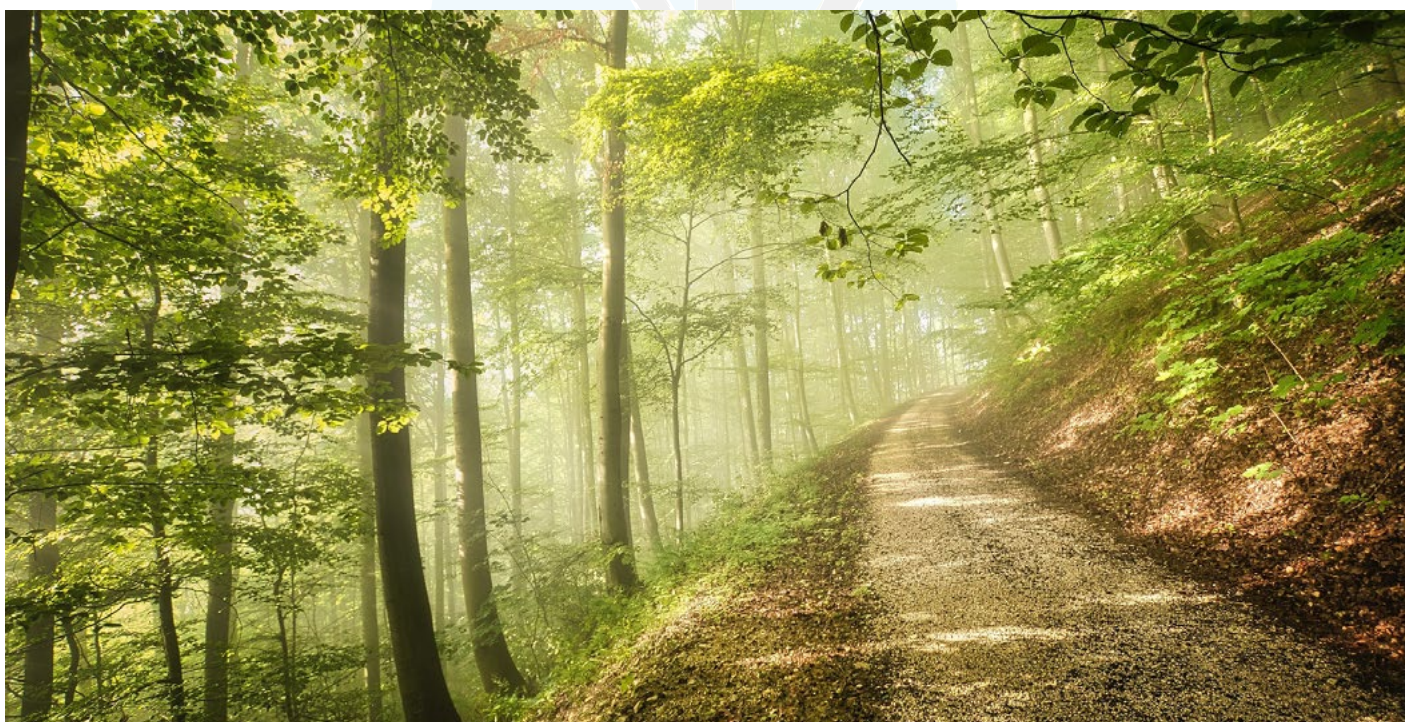
support

- Have limited agency in daily life

UNIVERSAL NEEDS:

- Sense of belonging and acceptance
- Opportunity to maintain cultural identity
- Freedom from discrimination
- Connection to meaningful experiences
- Rest and restoration

KEY INSIGHT: While all migrants face challenges, those in vulnerable situations require additional layers of support, safety, and sensitivity when engaging in nature-based practices



INTRO

Now that we have explored some of the important characteristics of migrants with respect to the challenges they face in general, and also with respect to nature connection activities, we are going to take a closer look at the competencies that Accessible Forest Practitioners can develop to meet these challenges and develop effective practical strategies to deliver meaningful nature connection experiences to this population.

Let's start by taking a look at the competencies that should be developed by Accessible Forest Practitioners who wish to work with migrants, and by going on a self-assessment journey based on these competencies.





SELF-AWARENESS ('I') – NORTH QUADRANT

Self-awareness forms the foundation of an Accessible Forest Practitioner's ability to work with migrants.

Key competencies include:

- Tolerance without judgement
- Sensitivity
- Holding space for emotions
- Not having high expectations of oneself
- Loving



THE EXPERIENCE – SOUTH QUADRANT

This quarter describes the knowledge, skills and attitudes that can assist AF Practitioners prepare their particular walk.

Key competencies include:

- Focusing on what arises naturally, beyond trauma narratives
- Designing inclusive, multi-audience, developmentally-responsive processes
- Guiding communication without a shared language
- Providing safety



NATURE - WEST QUADRANT

Fostering your own connection with nature is central to hosting a walk for people who are not aware of the environment. Practitioners working in this quadrant focus on their connection to nature to support and guide participants to engage with the natural world in ways that promote grounding, embodiment and emotional regulation.

Key competencies include:

- Environmental awareness
- Familiarity with local nature and weather patterns
- Facilitating natural connection in urban, populated settings



THE GROUP – EAST QUADRANT

The East quadrant addresses the competencies required to effectively facilitate group dynamics, ensuring the inclusivity and emotional safety of all participants.

Key competencies include:

- Awareness of participants' cultural and environmental histories
- Inclusive and accessible communication across ages and literacy levels
- Cultivating a human-to-human, respectful presence

Now let's take a closer look at each one of the competences and what that means for you as a possible future Accessible Forest Practitioner.





SELF-REFLECTION ON THE ABOVE COMPETENCES

Below you will find a self-assessment tool for each one of the competences listed above

On a scale of 1 to 10, evaluate how you position yourself in relation to each of the competences. This will give you an overview of the competences you might dedicate more time and energy to. Create a strategy for deepening your understanding of each of the competences, establishing the priorities that you feel are most appropriate to your own unique learning journey.

SELF-AWARENESS ('I') – NORTH QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assesment scale 1 to 10
Tolerance Without Judgement How open are you to the unexpected ways refugees might engage with nature (constant phone use, loud talking, different norms of interaction), welcoming these differences with genuine curiosity rather than imposing your own expectations? (1 = Privately I wish participants would conform to my idea of “proper” nature connection; 10 = I approach unexpected behaviours with humble curiosity, recognising that they represent valid cultural expressions of nature engagement)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Sensitivity How developed is your “soft skin” – your ability to remain emotionally open and receptive to the group’s energy, allowing refugees to sense your authenticity and therefore feel safe enough to connect? (1 = I maintain a professional distance to protect myself; 10 = I cultivate an emotional presence that allows refugees to sense my genuine humanity and mirror my openness)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Holding Space for Emotions How skilfully do you create open invitations that impose no expectations, allowing participants to engage through sensory exploration at whatever depth feels safe for them? (1 = My activities subtly direct participants toward specific emotional outcomes; 10 = I offer truly open embodied experiences that participants can interpret and engage with in entirely personal ways)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Loving How intentionally do you cultivate a state of loving presence before each session, awakening your capacity to approach participants with a genuine love and care that extends equally to them and to nature? (1 = I focus primarily on professional competence rather than heart connection; 10 = I consciously prepare my heart to meet participants with the same loving attention I give to cherished natural spaces)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

THE EXPERIENCE – SOUTH QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Focus on what Arises Naturally, Beyond Trauma Narratives How skilled are you at designing nature experiences that invite people with refugee experiences to engage with the present moment rather than their past struggles, creating space for new narratives to emerge organically? (1 = My activities often inadvertently invite focus on difficulties or past experiences; 10 = I craft experiences that gently anchor participants in sensory presence, allowing natural moments of joy, wonder, and connection to emerge)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Designing Inclusive, Multi-Audience, Developmentally-Responsive Processes How effectively do you create nature activities that simultaneously engage different ages, particularly when working with mothers and children together? (1 = My activities work well for some participants but leave others disengaged; 10 = I design layered experiences with multiple entry points that meaningfully engage diverse participants, and adults and children simultaneously)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Guiding Communication Without a Shared Language How resourceful are you in facilitating meaningful nature connection using non-verbal communication, universal symbols, embodied demonstrations, and visual cues when working with people who speak different languages and languages you don't know? (1 = I rely heavily on translation or simple verbal instructions; 10 = I fluently communicate through body language, demonstration, visual aids, digital support and gestures that transcend language barriers)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Safety How thoughtfully do you select and prepare accessible natural settings that provide both physical safety and psychological security for vulnerable refugees, including clear orientation points and easy exit routes? (1 = I choose locations primarily for their natural features; 10 = I meticulously assess locations for gentle terrain, clear wayfinding, multiple rest areas, and easy return paths that create both physical and emotional safety)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

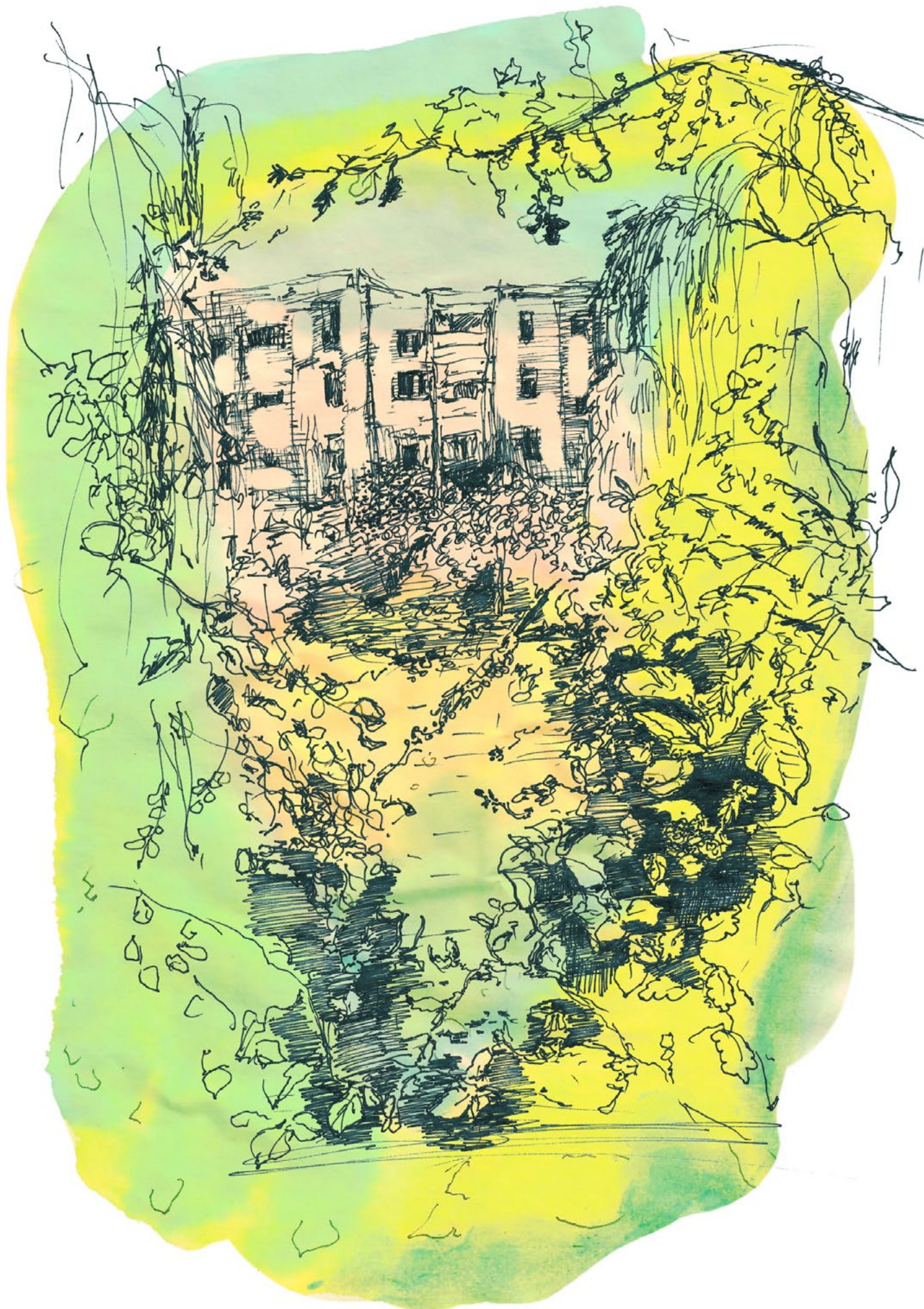
NATURE – WEST QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Environmental Awareness How deeply do you observe and understand the specific natural environment where you plan to guide vulnerable migrants, noticing subtle elements that might trigger fear, be dangerous or offer opportunities for healing connection? (1 = I have a general knowledge of the environment's features; 10 = I perceive nuanced details of the environment through multiple senses, anticipating challenges as well as healing opportunities for participants)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Familiarity with Local Nature and Weather Patterns How thoroughly do you understand local weather patterns, seasonal changes, and their potential impacts on vulnerable migrants who may have limited experience with this climate or environment? (1 = I have no awareness of weather forecasts; 10 = I possess detailed knowledge of local microclimates and seasonal shifts, and can anticipate how these might affect participants physically and emotionally)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Facilitating Natural Connection in Urban, Populated Settings How open are you to creating meaningful nature experiences in accessible urban green spaces? (1 = I struggle to facilitate deep nature connection in urban settings; 10 = I can reveal rich ecological relationships and facilitate profound nature experiences even in small urban parks or gardens)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



THE GROUP – EAST QUADRANT

Question for competences	Self-assessment scale 1 to 10
Awareness of Participants’ Cultural and Environmental Histories How attuned are you to the diverse environmental backgrounds and cultural relationships with nature that your participants bring to urban green spaces? (1 = I apply a one-size-fits-all approach without considering participants’ unique histories with nature; 10 = I skilfully integrate knowledge of participants’ homelands’ ecologies and cultural nature practices to create resonant experiences while being sensitive to potential trauma associated with natural settings)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Inclusive and Accessible Communication Across Ages and Literacy Levels How well do you understand the specific communication needs of your target group, and how effectively can you communicate nature concepts and facilitate experiences for refugees with varying language abilities, ages, and literacy levels? (1 = I rely heavily on complex verbal instructions without understanding my audience’s specific communication challenges; 10 = I seamlessly blend universal sensory experiences, simple vocabulary, visual demonstrations, and body language based on deep knowledge of my target group’s literacy levels, language backgrounds, and learning styles to create inclusive environments where everyone can meaningfully participate regardless of barriers)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Cultivating a Human-to-Human, Respectful Presence How skilled are you at establishing genuine, respectful connections with vulnerable migrant participants that acknowledge their full humanity beyond their refugee status? (1 = I unconsciously position myself as an expert or helper, creating power imbalances that hinder authentic connection; 10 = I consistently create spaces where mutual learning flourishes, where participants’ expertise on their own experiences is valued, and where dignity and agency are central to all interactions)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10





INTRO

What you will learn in this section:

1. Theoretical insights: Understanding the practical implementation of forest walks specifically designed for refugees, including preparation processes, challenges, and adaptations
2. Practical applications: Implementing effective communication strategies, location selection, and activity design for vulnerable populations in nature settings

Reflective Consideration: Take a moment to reflect on your objectives at this stage of your work. Are you focused on developing practical skills for facilitating nature experiences with refugee groups, understanding the nuances of

cross-cultural nature connection, or both?

Key Competences: This section will delve into the following relevant competencies:

- Planning and preparation for nature experiences with refugee populations
- Cross-cultural and multilingual communication in settings in natural urban environments
- Creating accessible and meaningful nature rituals
- Adapting forest practices to diverse participant needs

Time Allocation: Dedicate approximately an hour and a half to fully engage with the material and activities presented.

In 2024, a series of forest walks brought together a diverse group of participants. As part of the Accessible Forest Practice initiative, we invited participants, many of whom were refugees and their family members, to join a series of short, guided forest walks. These walks were intentionally simple: just a few hours of slow walking, supported by gentle invitations to pause, notice, and connect with the natural world.

Preparation Process

The preparations for these walks were quite extensive. Our first important step was establishing close cooperation with a facility working with people who have refugee experience – AWO in Berlin. This facility welcomes people who have just arrived in Germany. It occupies a multi-story high-rise building and is accessed via a security desk. The facility is monitored. Sometimes entire families live in the small apartments across its many floors.

To prepare for such a walk, we held consultations with the facility manager, the psychologist working at the facility, and finally with the person coordinating volunteers. Additionally, an expert



in working with refugees accompanied us on the walks and supervised the process alongside the forest therapy guide.

During evaluation meetings, our colleague from the refugee centre emphasised that these walks had created a wonderful experience of deeper community connection, providing calm and allowing participants a sense of respite.

Overcoming Challenges

During the preparatory meetings, we paid particular attention to several obstacles that might significantly affect our ability to conduct the walk. The first was how to simply invite people to participate in such an experience. We concluded that just describing it as a “walk in nature” was not sufficient to illustrate what we would be doing. However, adding the word “picnic” simplified the message and made it more relatable, as the concept of a picnic is familiar and easy to explain briefly without creating misunderstandings.

But how to describe a picnic without creating the illusion of a typical picnic? We added the phrase “picnic in nature” for the end of a nature walk combined with contemplation. We included illustrations of a person meditating in nature to help convey the concept.

Another challenge was the language we would use to communicate. Given the nature of the facility, most residents didn’t yet speak German or English; moreover it housed groups of people without a single common language. We decided that informational posters about the event would be printed in six languages: Russian, Arabic, Turkish, Georgian, German, and English. Additionally, one person at the facility served as a contact who could explain exactly what the experience would entail.

Our invitation read: “Come to our Picnic in Nature. You are warmly invited to our special Picnic in Nature, where we slow down, relax, and take time for ourselves in connection with nature. The picnic is for adults only.”



Adapting to Needs

The experience was planned for adults for two reasons: first, there were legal considerations – if children were to participate, we would need more educators since we were leaving the facility grounds; second, there was an existing lack of organised activities specifically for adults. Proportionally the facility had many more offerings for children than for adults.

While the assumption that the experience would be for adults only was sound, it was expanded to include mothers with young children. Each time, mothers with infants and preschool-aged children participated in the walk. People in advanced stages of pregnancy also took part.

Interest in the nature walks among the residents was high. However, due to the dynamic nature of their lives – unpredictable appointments, challenges with family members, and many other aspects – not all who were interested could participate in the forest immersion experience. I suspect that if nature picnics were made a regular feature in the facility's program, perhaps for example every Thursday afternoon, people could plan their participation more easily.

Thoughtful Location Selection

Another important aspect was the location of

the walk. We chose Herzberge Landscape Park, which is close to the refugee facility. This decision was made for two reasons: first, people with refugee backgrounds may feel uncertain about venturing away from their place of residence, especially into forests; second, it was an attempt to expand individuals' scope of familiar places in their immediate vicinity, to help them become more accustomed to the area. The park is just a 15-minute walk from the institution.

The walk was carefully planned within the park. We selected locations where people could sit on inflatable cushions in a circle in larger groups, where nature was diverse and where open spaces – with views of meadows or rivers – were possible, ensuring the experience didn't take place in densely wooded areas. It was important that the location in the park be accessible and provide a sense of respite and beauty. At the same time, the less frequented by passersby the better, to ensure the intimacy of the experience.

We planned two alternative routes: one adapted for rainy weather with a covered pavilion, and another for warmer weather where we could set up a picnic under a shady tree. We tried both routes, and both outings provided deep experiences that brought much peace, joy, and connection with nature.

THE PHASES OF THE WALKS

This was already our second consecutive walk, so the educators had a better understanding of the process, and the residents could explain the experience to each other.

It was afternoon on a weekday, and the sun was shining beautifully. Since we had planned a small picnic for the end of the walk, I brought a large wheeled bag to transport all the necessary items more easily. That day we planned to go directly to the open meadow section of the park, as during our last visit one person had felt discomfort among the trees due to allergies.

We waited at the entrance to the main building. Gathering the group together took about an hour, but the time needed no longer surprised

me; we waited calmly by the doors, establishing connections with the people as they emerged – mothers and their children. Even though the walk was already a recurring event at the facility, the people participating in it were there for the first time. We didn't know each other, and likewise, the participants didn't know each other's names.

The time it took to assemble everyone was already an important starting point for the experience. I had prepared a large A3 drawing pad where both children and adults could draw plants they knew and loved most. These were most often roses. Exchanging names and attempting to introduce ourselves in different languages also created good initial connections. This time, I used a translating app on my phone

from the very start, typing longer phrases in English and translating them sequentially into Arabic, Turkish, and Russian. Thanks to the read-aloud feature, people could hear the translation and respond to me in a similar way. This is how we formed a kind of communication.

We then began a collective walk to the park. This took about 20 minutes, as we were quite a diverse group of adults and small children. I must admit that I grew fond of this moment of walking to the park; it was for me a kind of transition from one world into another. We walked between buildings, among cars and the hustle of the city, and then entered the green park, where gradually the world of nature embraced us – peacefulness, bird songs, and the beauty of colours. We were lucky enough that on our way we also encountered sheep, which were an attraction not only for children but for all of us. The feeling of

being in a secret adventure was starting to form.

Eventually we stopped at the end of the park, under a tree on a low hill with a view of the meadow. It was an ideal place to rest, with the landscape stretching towards the horizon and the closeness of trees and shrubs. When we reached this spot we began to “unpack” together. We distributed inflatable cushions to both the adult and child participants. We spread a large round tablecloth out on the ground and laid out our food: fruits, strawberries, grapes, nuts, cookies, and cold water flavoured with mint, nettle, and honey. The ceremony of setting up our picnic in nature was also a significant action that built a sense of community and mutual understanding. Everyone helped prepare the picnic; it was a kind of ritualisation for this little community. In a way, regardless of culture, the picnic seemed a natural thing; everyone knew what to do.



Introductory Stage:

The walk and picnic preparation calmed everyone, including the children, and brought us all together. The next step, quite naturally, was to sit on the ground on the inflatable cushions around the picnic spread laid on the grass with

products arranged on it.

I had a small bell with me, which I now took out, and with only gestures and sound I invited everyone to look at me and quieten down. I also





had a small wooden model of a pair of doors, with which I symbolically opened the doors to nature. This little performance drew the attention of all the participants, the children especially.

With the first ring of the bell, I indicated everyone sit on the ground comfortably and take a deep breath. I looked at each person individually, and everyone, adults and children, followed along. Silence and focus ensued.

Another bell sounded, and I pointed to my ears, a gesture of listening, thus redirecting attention to sounds. Suddenly, the voices of the wind, birds, and the rustle of trees became present.

After a moment I sounded the bell again, and directed attention by pointing to my nose – scent. We focused on smell. It was midsummer, and the drying grass smelled beautiful.

Another bell, and I held out my hand and began stroking the grass and twigs, evoking the sense of touch. The grass was slightly cool, while the earth was warmed by the sun. Rough twigs, remnants of dried leaves and small pebbles further focused the group's attention on touch.

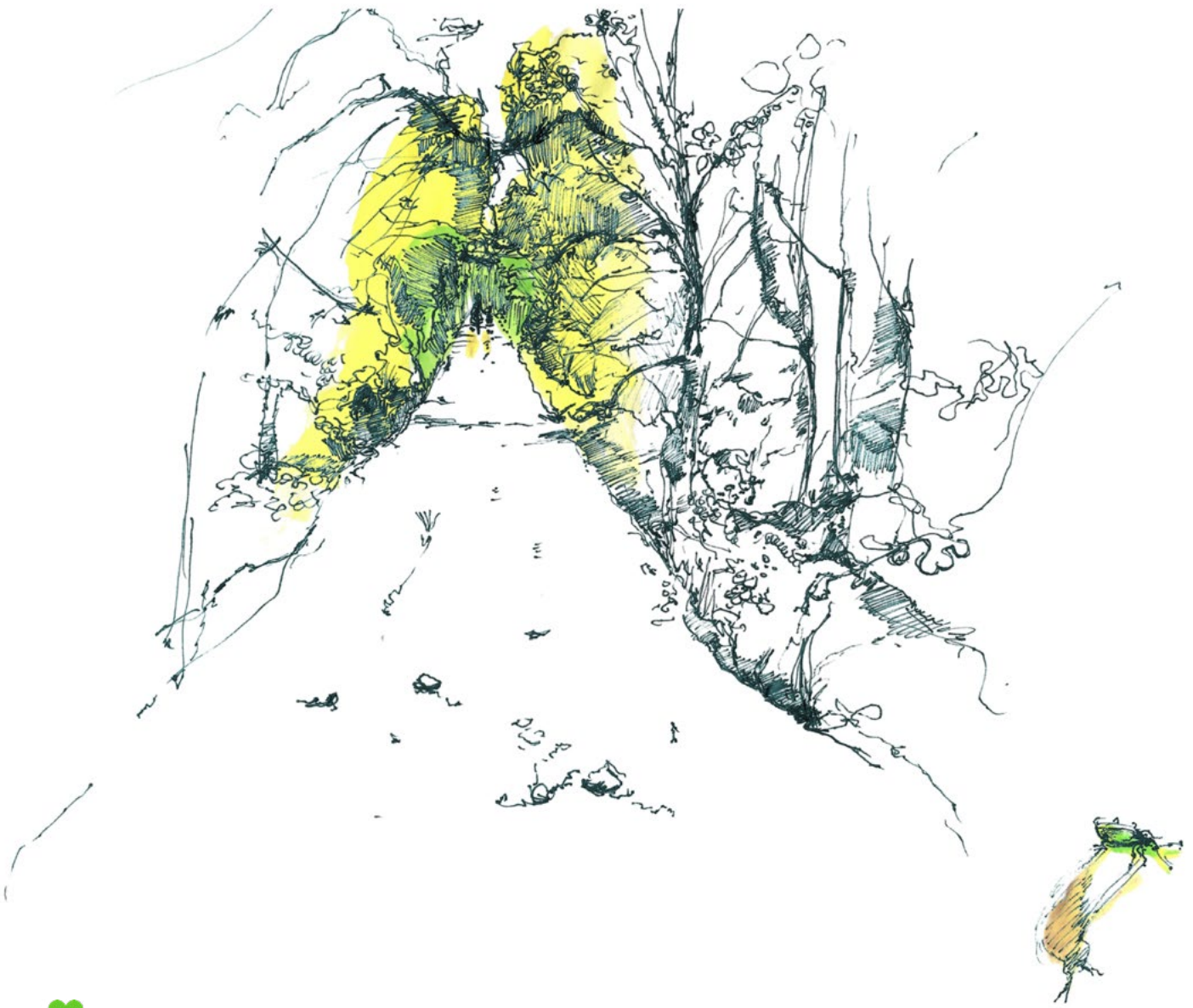
I rang the bell once more to draw attention to the sense of the heart, placing one hand on my heart and the other on the earth. As I looked around, everyone in the circle, both children and women,

did the same, in contemplation, serious and silent.

The next bell sound invited smiles and an invitation to share what was now present within them. None of us spoke much; instead there were smiles and deep gazing into one another's eyes.

With their focus established, I could invite our group to the next experience, which involved walking at a slower pace. I then added a colour-seeking experience to this slow walk. Earlier we had prepared small canvases (3x3 cm) with double-sided tape already attached. After peeling off the protective layer, one could freely stick small elements from nature onto the canvas surface – fragments of leaves, grass, specks of earth. Everyone had their own small canvas, and everyone was involved, regardless of age. I invited them to collect colours. They all started to wander around and collect different items from nature. The landscapes of colours emerged on canvases in a natural way. Those completing this task were slowing down, looking at nature, and following their own pace and interest. Therefore there wasn't much to explain.

With the bell I called everyone back to our picnic, where miniature easels awaited. We placed each work on the easels and for a moment observed them in silence. This was our way of sharing the experience.



Meaningful nature connection stage

Now that everyone had gained an understanding of what the experience was about, I could invite them to a deeper phase. The sun was still warming us, and the wind quietly invited contemplation. Following this feeling, I invited the women, the adults, to find a place somewhere nearby and focus on a chosen sense – to stay with one sense for about 20 minutes and see what they noticed. I distributed cards with illustrated senses, so they could choose one and spend time with it. Or even with several chosen senses, if they wished.

At the same time, the children became more familiar with the place and with me. They trusted me more and allowed themselves to be invited into a different activity. The children received notebooks and coloured pencils and began tracing shapes from nature.

This was a moment in which children worked, focusing on tactile activities during our picnic, while the mothers quietly moved away, each in their own direction, but still within sight, so as to have time for themselves in nature.

After 20 minutes, I called everyone back with the sound of the bell. Slowly, we regrouped. The children showed their mothers their artistic efforts, while the mothers gratefully shared impressions of their time spent alone with themselves and nature.

I didn't introduce another invitation as it would have been too much. With what we had managed to achieve and build, the encounter was sufficient. Nature continued to support us with the delicacy of its air. The sun was slowly sinking toward the west.



Closing stage

Now, with a welcoming gesture, I officially opened the part sharing the picnic food together. We poured the herbal water into cups, and treated each other to the cake and fruits.

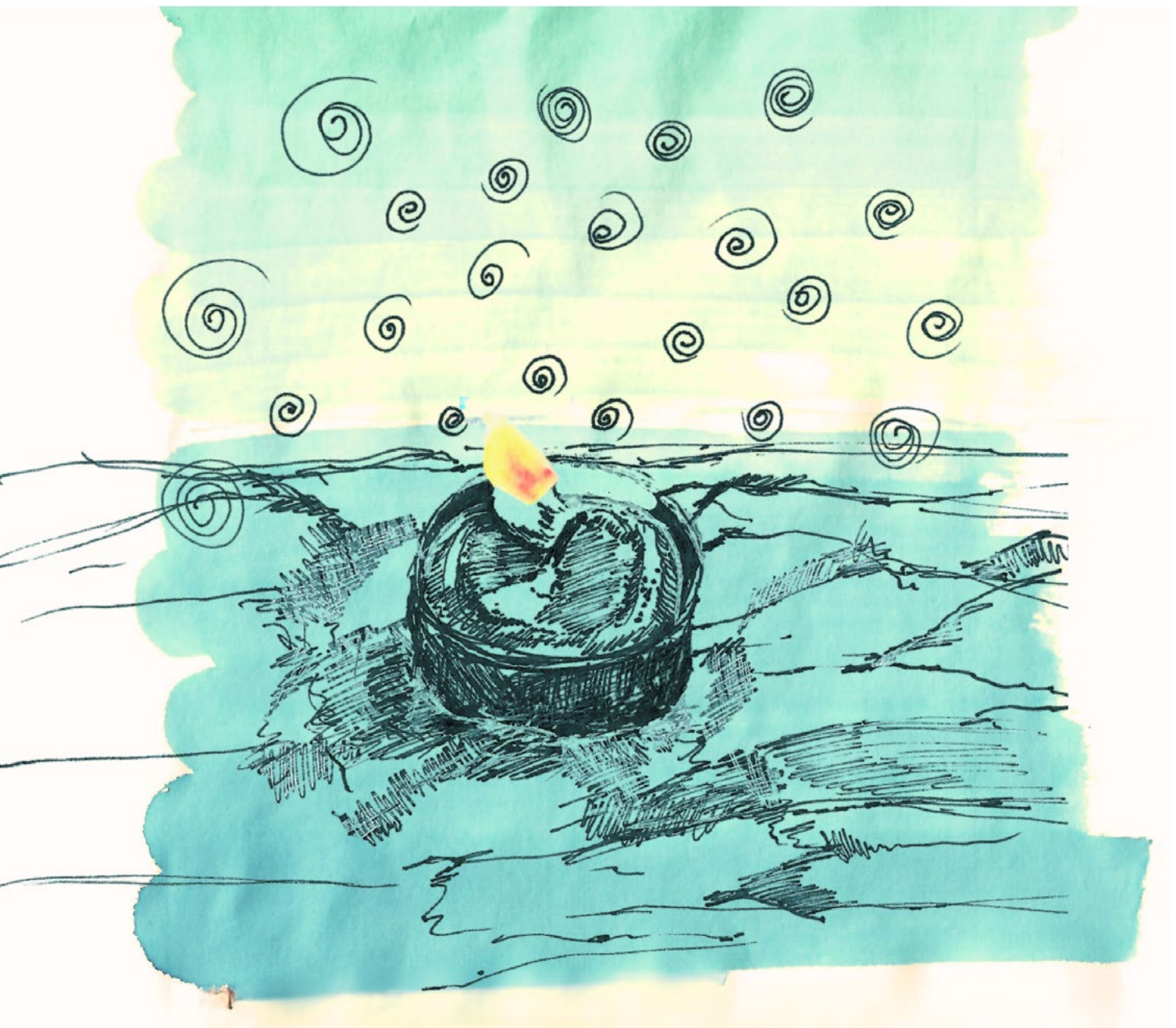
I then passed around our notebook, which contained earlier invitations translated into five languages, as well as our drawings from when we were waiting for everyone in front of the building. One page had a written invitation: "Write what is present in you now."

One after another, the women wrote, deep in concentration.

At the end, we typed simple sequences into the translation app to hear those concluding thoughts.

Packing the picnic into the bag was also a good ending, as was the walk back to the centre.

Now, in closeness, we returned in a different mood. The women had told me about themselves, as much as I could understand. We took turns pulling the large wheeled bag back. In this brief moment we had created a mini-community, transgenerational and transcultural, through this shared experience of immersion in nature.



Seasonal Adaptations:

Foundational Approach: Walks with people who might experience difficult reactions should be predominantly concentrated on senses, grounding, and being together as a community.

WINTER

Practical Considerations: Ensure proper equipment and warm beverages are available. Keep sessions short, around one hour, bearing in mind the significantly shorter daylight hours. Have extra hats, scarves, gloves, and hand warmers available, as participants may not have adequate cold-weather clothing.

Sensory Invitations: Body scanning and slow walking are essential – ensure participants are warmed up beforehand, perhaps with a brisk walk to the location.

Snow Invitation: If there is snow, invite participants to sit on inflatable cushions placed on the snowy ground. “I’m curious what you

notice when you’re close to the snow like this. Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Tracks and Patterns: “I wonder what would happen if the snow were your canvas and you were the artist. What would happen if you created patterns following what you see in nature, or whatever feels right for you now? Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Building Invitation: “I’m wondering how you might find elements you could use to build a small installation – something made from these natural materials that might bring you pleasure.



What would it be? Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Rhythm Invitation: “If these trees were musical notes, what rhythm would they create? What would happen if you clapped out that rhythm, or tapped it with a stick? I wonder what would occur? Stay nearby in the area, and when you

hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Session Closing: End by gathering around a small fire for hot tea. Sometimes small candles arranged in a circle create a sense of warmth. Encourage stepping from foot to foot to stay warm.



SPRING

Practical Considerations: Spring often brings alternating rain and sunshine. Provide ponchos for all participants and plan routes with nearby shelter options, like gazebos. Umbrellas are also useful.

Sensory Invitations: Detail Exploration: Provide magnifying glasses. “I’m wondering what new things you’ll notice when you pay attention to the details. Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Wind Invitation: “I wonder what would happen if

you sat or walked against the wind, and then with the wind. What would you notice? Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Sound Invitation: “I’m wondering what would happen if you chose one sound and focused on it. What do you notice? You can choose several sounds. Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

SUMMER

Practical Considerations: Ensure sun protection equipment: sunscreen, sunglasses, and plenty of water.

Sensory Invitations: Texture Exploration:

“I wonder what would happen if you explored different textures – bark, leaves, earth. What do you notice? Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Scent Focus: “I’m curious about what would happen if you focused on your sense of smell.”

How does nature smell here? Is there any scent that surprises you? What do you notice? Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Ground Connection: “Here’s a blanket – I invite you to lie down among the grasses. The earth is warm enough to lie on. Find your spot, lie down, and allow yourself to rest while engaging your different senses. When you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

AUTUMN

Practical Considerations: Spring often brings alternating rain and sunshine. Provide ponchos for all participants and plan routes with nearby shelter options, like gazebos. Umbrellas are also useful.

Sensory Invitations: Detail Exploration: Provide magnifying glasses. “I’m wondering what new things you’ll notice when you pay attention to the details. Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Wind Invitation: “I wonder what would happen if you sat or walked against the wind, and then with the wind. What would you notice? Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

Sound Invitation: “I’m wondering what would happen if you chose one sound and focused on it. What do you notice? You can choose several sounds. Stay nearby in the area, and when you hear the call to return, please come back to us slowly.”

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR ACCESSIBLE FOREST WALKS WITH MIGRANTS

Plan Multiple Walks:

Why it matters: In institutions where there is high turnover of residents, no common communication path, and each person is in a different phase of organising their stay in a country, it is important for activities to be regular and predictable.

How to implement: Such a culture is built slowly. Start with the first walk. See how the nearby natural environment works for you, and what kind of connection you have with people. Evaluate after each walk. Invite other educators to experience it with you so they can learn alongside you. Thanks to this approach, the facility will be able to establish a regular program offering nature walks, without requiring your presence every time.

Ritualise the Experience:

Why does it matter? Rituals provide structure and comfort, helping participants transition into a mindset that is open to connection and reflection. They create a universal language that transcends cultural and linguistic barriers, making the experience more accessible and meaningful.

How to implement: The components of rituals include how you describe the experience, what visual elements you use, where you meet, where you go, and the sequence of the walk. Maintain a repeatable and distinctive rhythm, yet enriched with small surprises and changes, which the dynamically changing nature will certainly provide.

Choose the Right Location:

Why it matters: The location of the walk can greatly influence participants' comfort and engagement. Urban parks offer accessibility and familiarity. From our experience it became clear that people living in refugee centres, as well as those working there, are often unaware of green spaces such as parks in the vicinity. Therefore, a good description of the place should be prepared; a small map might also be a good idea.

How to implement: For a place to support the immersion process, we recommend carefully selecting an appropriate location and time for the park walk. Of course you can't predict everything, but the better prepared you are, and the better you understand the natural environment and its dynamics, the better the process you lead will be. I suggest that you always – especially when leading walks in urbanised spaces – visit the place alone before the walk. Parks are quite dynamic environments. For example, in one of the parks where we led walks, tents with homeless people suddenly appeared, or there were sites with large amounts of rubbish. Adapting the route to the given weather and practical conditions is necessary each time. This is especially important as we aim to ensure intimacy. We work with people in specific life situations – there is no room for adventure here. The better prepared the route, with love and care, the better the effect of the experience.

Embrace a Slow Pace

Why it matters: The life of a person seeking refuge has many variables, much anxiety, and constant movement. Not only is the body in a rush, but also the thoughts. Changing the tempo needs to be done gradually through various rituals.

How to implement: Avoid rushing through the experience. Allow participants to arrive at their own pace, and provide ample time for each phase of the walk. Above all, don't be in a hurry yourself. Every element matters – the manner in which you welcome people coming out of the building, calmly waiting for everyone, even for an hour. Getting to the park also takes longer; don't rush the walk there, on the contrary, focus on it and on getting to know the participants. Setting up the picnic, inflating cushions for sitting on the ground – all these small activities slow things down, allowing everyone to be attentive to the present moment. Don't rush with instructions. Calmly translate everything. Give time between tasks. This is not a race. This is not a task. This is a meeting with nature. Therefore, not only is the experience itself better when it is slowed down, but also the approach of the person leading it: leisurely, calm, grounded, and appreciative of whatever unfolds.





Invitation to the Senses

Why it matters: When the mind is in a state of stress, and particularly under persistent stress, activities that require imagination are impossible because stress blocks access to abstract thinking. Yet in high-stress situations, invitations connected to sensory exploration become especially important. Just this, nothing more – it is a simple approach that can be profound. Focusing on direct sensory experiences provides an accessible pathway to connect with nature when cognitive resources are limited by stress.

How to implement: From our experience, when the mind is burdened with difficult histories and is experiencing incompleteness in the present moment. There is no need to rely on the imagination – what matters is that the participants are in the here and now, exploring the senses in whatever way they are ready for. Once, during rainfall, two participants ran out and danced in the rain, while two others sat quietly under a wooden roof. Experiencing nature at one's own pace, with mindfulness, is an extraordinary gift. This is especially valuable when we do not share a common language for communication. Let's simply open the door to an encounter with nature.

Encourage Voluntary Participation

Why it matters: A personal connection to nature cannot be forced. Participants need to feel ready and willing to engage in the experience for it to be meaningful. From our experience, voluntary participation also means accepting that someone who committed to joining a walk might not show up. People living in refugee centres often have unexpected visits or additional obligations. Try to maintain openness within yourself. Follow the principle: whoever is present is exactly the person who should be there, regardless of the number of participants or who actually attends.

How to implement: Create an open and inviting atmosphere, without pressuring anyone to participate. Use clear, accessible language in promotional materials, and keep the tone welcoming. Regularly offer walks so participants can join when they feel ready. Make sure people know where you're meeting and where you're going by creating encouraging information in the form of small posters or leaflets. Give people a chance to understand what the experience will involve. This clarity helps build trust and makes participation more accessible.

Simplicity and Accessibility

Why it matters: Many people, regardless of culture, may not immediately understand the value of slowing down and connecting with nature. Simplifying the experience and making it accessible helps participants overcome these barriers. People living in centres often come from diverse cultural backgrounds, and life in these centres is multifaceted, with many things happening simultaneously. Misinformation spreads easily in such environments. Therefore, the simpler your information, the better it will be received and understood.

How to implement: Use simple, clear language and visuals when introducing the walk. For example, describe the event as a "Picnic in Nature" rather than a "Forest Immersion Experience." This makes the activity more approachable and easier to explain to others. From our experience, we learned how much we wanted to convey when inviting people to such experiences, and how much we needed to simplify it. Simplicity did not diminish the power

of the experience – perhaps the opposite. By reducing complexity, you actually enhance the potential for meaningful connection.

Use Universal Language

Why it matters: Language barriers can be a significant challenge, but nature connection transcends words. Using visual aids and translated materials ensures everyone can engage with the experience.

How to implement: Provide invitations and instructions in multiple languages using translated materials. Create posters, leaflets, or postcards translated into the languages most commonly spoken by participants, such as Arabic, Georgian, Armenian, Turkish, Chechen, Russian, Spanish, English, and French. Use a color-coded system in notebooks to help participants find their language quickly, displaying the translations in the same order every time.

Consider preparing a larger notebook or board with translated invitations for each phase of the walk. This approach creates a communal

focus and enhances the feeling of togetherness. If new invitations arise during the walk, use a smartphone with a translation app to quickly communicate with the group.

Also consider having a simultaneous interpreter if most participants share a common language, though keep in mind that this can be impacted by the interpreter's personal experience. Use visual boards or small whiteboards where participants can visually express their feelings and share impressions. Encourage non-verbal sharing during group reflections, through gestures, sounds, or even songs, allowing participants to express what is alive in them at that moment.

Consider Families

Why it matters: Including families in nature walks adds complexity but also offers a richer, more inclusive experience. It allows both adults and children to connect with nature in their own ways. In refugee centres, mothers often care for very young children without having any substitutes or support, yet are in especial need of dedicated support and offerings. Separating





mothers from their children would result in additional hardship, difficulty, and sadness. It is therefore crucial to provide this experience for them together, creating opportunities that serve both parents and children simultaneously.

How to implement: Have two group experts: one to lead the main process and another to focus on the children. Use visual cues, like a small door symbolising entry into a new world, to engage both adults and children. Provide separate activities when needed, so adults can have reflective time while children are supervised. Add interactive games like collecting colours, tracing shapes found in nature, or examining nature through magnifying glasses. You can invite sensory exploration in simple yet playful ways that will engage adults and children equally.

These activities create shared experiences that bridge generational gaps while allowing everyone to connect with nature at their level.

Respect Technology

Why it matters: For many participants, especially new arrivals, smartphones are a lifeline for communication. Understanding their importance can help integrate them into the experience rather than seeing them as a distraction. From our experience, we understand that the presence of phones in nature is not what we would typically expect or prefer. However, for these individuals their phones are their only reliable method of communication, particularly with language translation apps. On one occasion, while we were already on the walk, a participant informed us about their allergy. Without

translation we wouldn't have been able to understand such important information. This underscores how technology can be essential for safety and communication, and not just a distraction.

How to implement: Allow the use of smartphones for translation and communication, but set boundaries to retain focus on the nature experience. Encourage participants to use their phones for capturing moments rather than for calls or other diversions.

Be Mindful of Trauma

Why it matters: Some participants may have had traumatic experiences in nature or with relocation. A sensitive, open approach will allow them to reconnect with nature at their own pace.

How to implement: Offer a flexible structure with open invitations that allow participants to engage as much or as little as they feel comfortable with. Use sensory invitations to help ground participants in the present moment, asking them to notice what they feel, the textures around them, and the colours in their environment. These simple sensory explorations can be very grounding and help rebuild a sense of "here and now," which is crucial for those who may be processing trauma. Encourage them to choose how they participate, whether sitting, lying down, or staying close to the group.

Food and Drinks

Why it matters: Food is something commonplace that both engages the senses and creates community. That's why the idea of hosting a picnic is one of the best we came up with when trying to create a sense of closeness and hospitality in nature.

How to implement: It's a good idea to put the various fruits in small containers and different beverages in thermoses. The products you share with people should ideally also be in season or made from local products of the given country. Over time, you may notice that participants bring their own food to share with you as well.





Invitation to Empathy:

The Story of a Forest Therapy Guide

It was extremely hot outside the facility as we waited for all the participants to come out. We waited over an hour with the educator while others came and went. Eventually the women appeared, and they had also brought their children. I had no scenario prepared for children. My thoughts began racing in my head, frantically trying to manage thousands of different scenarios per second. It didn't help at all.

Yet as I looked into the participants' eyes I greeted them with both joy and focus. Meeting a child's gaze became the gateway to all the other glances I had seen before – as if in that one look, time connected. We calmly set off toward the park.

I didn't know how the walk would unfold, but I knew the journey had just begun. One of the women really wanted to help me pull the picnic cart. Thanks to openness, I allowed myself to flow with the moment.

When we sat on the ground in a circle, around a tablecloth, I felt strength. I began telling the story of the senses with gestures. We were as if in a dance of mindfulness. When I touched my heart with one hand and the earth with the other, I looked around the circle – the women and children were making similar gestures in deep attentiveness and profound silence.

It was as if we had touched each other's hearts. The walk developed wonderfully. And that feeling of heart connection has remained with me until now. A sacred moment.







CHECK POINTS:

- Can you identify the key preparation steps needed for organising forest walks with refugees?
- Do you understand the specific communication strategies needed to overcome language barriers?
- Are you familiar with the importance of location selection and how it affects participant comfort?
- Have you considered how to structure experiences that accommodate diverse needs within refugee groups?



CRITICAL QUESTIONS:

1. How might you adapt these approaches to work with refugee populations in your specific context?
2. In what ways could regular, predictable nature experiences address the specific psychological needs of refugees beyond immediate stress reduction?
3. How might you balance providing structure and ritual with remaining flexible and responsive to the changing needs of refugee participants?



QUICK REFERENCE CARDS:



CARD 1: PREPARATION ESSENTIALS

INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATION:

- Establish partnerships with refugee facilities
- Consult with facility management, psychologists, and volunteer coordinators
- Include supervision by experts who already work with refugees
- Build regular, predictable programming

COMMUNICATION STRATEGY:

- Use accessible terminology (“picnic in nature” rather than “forest immersion”)
- Provide materials in multiple languages (6+ including Arabic, Russian, Turkish)
- Use visual aids and illustrations to convey

concepts

- Establish a contact person at the facility who can explain the experience to residents

PRACTICAL ARRANGEMENTS:

- Plan for transportation needs
- Accommodate unpredictable participation
- Consider childcare needs or plan for including children
- Prepare for weather contingencies

KEY INSIGHT: “There exists a lack of organised activities specifically for adults – addressing adult wellbeing is a critical unmet need”



CARD 2: LOCATION SELECTION

PROXIMITY CONSIDERATIONS:

- Choose locations close to refugee facilities (15-minute walk ideal)
- Expand participants’ “safe circle” to include nearby natural areas
- Balance accessibility with immersion quality

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS:

- Select spaces with diverse natural elements
- Include open areas with views (avoid dense woods for newcomers)
- Ensure seating possibilities (inflatable cushions)
- Choose locations with minimal traffic by

passersby for privacy

PRACTICAL PLANNING:

- Scout locations personally before each walk
- Prepare alternative routes for different weather conditions
- Consider seasonal changes to the environment
- Check for potential disruptions (construction, events)

KEY INSIGHT: “People with refugee backgrounds may feel uncertain about venturing away from their place of residence” – proximity creates safety



CARD 3: WALK STRUCTURE

GATHERING PHASE:

- Allow ample time for initial participant assembly (up to an hour)
- Create pre-walk engagement activities (drawing plants, introductions)
- Use digital translation tools for communication
- Build community during transit to the location

UNIVERSAL SEQUENCE:

1. Set up ritual (circular arrangement, cushions, picnic preparation)
2. Sensory awakening (bell-guided attention to senses)
3. Interactive exploration (colour collecting, nature art)

4. Individual connection time (adults) with parallel activities (children)

5. Sharing ceremony (food, reflections)

CLOSING PROCESS:

- Communal food sharing
- Non-verbal reflection opportunities
- Collaborative packing and return
- Maintaining the formed “mini-community” feeling during return

KEY INSIGHT: “In this brief moment, we had created a mini-community, transgenerational and transcultural, through this shared experience of immersion in nature”



CARD 4: PRACTICAL PRINCIPLES

EIGHT KEY PRINCIPLES:

1. Plan multiple walks (create predictability in unpredictable lives)
2. Ritualise the experience (provide structure across language barriers)
3. Choose appropriate locations (prioritise safety and accessibility)
4. Embrace a slow pace (counter the constant rush of refugee life)
5. Offer open invitations (allow self-directed exploration)
6. Listen to your intuition (remain grounded as a facilitator)
7. Accept unpredictability (maintain flexibility)
8. Encourage voluntary participation (build trust gradually)

CROSS-CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS:

- Use universal language (visual aids, translated materials, colour-coding)
- Include families thoughtfully (separate

activities when needed)

- Respect technology (incorporate phones as translation tools)
- Be trauma-informed (offer choices, focus on sensory grounding)
- Share food meaningfully (create community through local, seasonal offerings)

ADAPTABILITY FACTORS:

- Simplify complex concepts into accessible terminology
- Create multilingual resources with consistent organisation
- Balance structure with openness to emerging needs
- Allow for different levels of participation and engagement

KEY INSIGHT: “For many participants, especially new arrivals, smartphones are a lifeline for communication” – integrating rather than excluding technology





INTRO

What you will learn in this section:

1. Theoretical insights: Understanding the measurable impact of even a single forest walk on migrants' stress levels and nature-relatedness
2. Practical applications: Recognising the effectiveness of brief nature immersion experiences for vulnerable populations and the specific dimensions of their transformation

Reflective Consideration: Take a moment to reflect on your objectives at this stage of your work. Are you focused on evaluating the evidence for immediate nature intervention

benefits, understanding the multi-dimensional impacts of forest walks, or adapting these insights to your specific context?

Key Competences: This section will delve into the following relevant competencies:

- Understanding shifts in nature-relatedness dimensions
- Recognising the transformative potential of brief nature experiences
- Adapting forest practices based on evidence for effectiveness

Time Allocation: Dedicate approximately 20 mins to fully engage with the material and activities presented.

How does nature immersion impact the mental state of refugees?

In this section, we explore how outdoor experiences can positively impact refugee mental health by combining insights from our own fieldwork with broader scientific research. Research consistently demonstrates that nature-based interventions significantly reduce depression and psychological distress among refugee populations who are at an elevated risk of mental health challenges, as shown in a comprehensive meta-analysis across multiple countries. In the U.K., structured outdoor activities created valuable opportunities for shared experiences and cultural learning, helping refugees develop meaningful connections to their new environments and communities. Evidence from northern European settings shows that even during winter months, outdoor programs deliver measurable mental health benefits, suggesting that these interventions can be effective year-round rather than limited to the warmer seasons. The implementation of accessible outdoor programs represents a cost-effective public health strategy that simultaneously addresses mental wellbeing,

social integration, and community building during the critical resettlement period, as demonstrated, for example, by ongoing work with refugee charities in Edinburgh, Scotland.

In our project, we conducted four walks in total – one in each session. Two of the walks included only refugees, while the other two were mixed groups of regular migrants and refugees.

Here we present the outcomes of a simplified analysis of mood and stress levels before and after the one-walk experience.



The following results are based on the combined data from all four short walks.

Each participant was invited to share how they felt before and after the walk. Their reflections revealed a clear pattern:

- **Average stress before the walk:** 6.08 (on a scale from 0 = no stress to 13 = extreme stress)
- **Average stress after the walk:** 1.83
- That's a **70% reduction in perceived stress** – achieved in just one walk.

This shift was not just numerical. The emotional tone of the reflections also changed significantly:

“Very stressed and overwhelmed with tasks.”

“I feel relaxed and peaceful.”

“Head is full, no space to breathe.”

“Nature gave me space to feel grounded again.”

“I feel disconnected and not calm.”

“More here, more me. Present.”

For people navigating the long and often uncertain process of migration – including family responsibilities, bureaucratic systems, cultural adaptation, and grief for what was left behind – these moments of **calm, presence, and connection** are deeply valuable.

What changed after just one walk?

Participants reported shifts that touched every layer of their experience:

- **Physically** more relaxed: tension eased, breath deepened
- **Emotionally** more balanced: less anxious, more joyful
- **Mentally** clearer: less overwhelmed, more focused
- **Socially** more connected: to others in the group and to themselves
- **Spiritually** more grounded: a return to inner presence and natural belonging



For people with refugee backgrounds, who may be living in transitional housing, urban environments, or uncertain legal and social conditions, this kind of embodied experience offers a remembered sense of being safe, welcomed, and whole.

A small practice with a big impact

This data is particularly meaningful because many participants were not nature-goers by habit. Some had never walked in a forest before. Others were living in city environments surrounded by noise, concrete, and unpredictability.

And yet, after just one walk, they reported feeling:

“More connected to myself.”
“Calm in my heart and quiet in my head.”
“Grateful for a place that doesn’t ask anything from me.”

These are no small things. For families trying to rebuild after displacement, and for individuals coping with trauma or uncertainty, these experiences can serve as anchors – moments of reconnection and quiet transformation.

Nature-relatedness after one walk in an urban setting

Even a single forest walk, if designed with care and intention, can shift the way people relate to the natural world.

To understand this impact, we invited participants to complete a brief, accessible questionnaire before and after their walk. The tool measured emotional and attitudinal changes in four key dimensions of human-nature connection using a visual scale, allowing participants from diverse backgrounds to reflect intuitively.

Dimensions of Nature-Relatedness Measured:

1. Human-Nature Relation
("I am more important than nature" <-> "Nature and I are equal")
2. Comfort Outdoors
("I love to be outdoors even in uncomfortable weather" <-> "I prefer to stay indoors")
3. Comfort in Wild Nature
("I am afraid of wild nature" <-> "I feel comfortable in the wild")
4. Environmental Awareness
("I don't care about the environment or eco-practices" <-> "I care and am aware of eco-practices")



What Changed?

The data reveals several significant positive shifts in participants' relationship with nature. Human-nature relations improved by 0.5 points, indicating that people began to see themselves as more equal to nature rather than separate from it. Comfort outdoors showed a substantial increase of 1.1 points, demonstrating that participants experienced considerably more enjoyment spending time in outdoor settings after their experience. Similarly, comfort in wild nature increased by 0.9 points, suggesting participants felt notably more at ease and confident in less managed natural environments. The most significant change occurred in environmental awareness, which jumped by 1.5 points, indicating that the walks particularly awakened participants' ecological consciousness and understanding of environmental issues.

These results are more than numbers; they reflect subtle but real internal shifts. One walk – a sensory, embodied experience in an urban park – led to higher resilience, a stronger sense of belonging, and a heightened awareness of ecological responsibility.



Key Insights

- Many participants began the walk with a respectful view of nature, yet still shifted towards a **deeper recognition of equality and interconnectedness**.
- The greatest leap was in **environmental awareness**, indicating that even a short immersion can move people from abstract appreciation to a more grounded sense of ecological care.
- Comfort in both outdoor and **wilder settings** increased almost universally, including among those who were initially hesitant or unfamiliar with such environments.
- The urban forest, in its quiet way, became a mirror – not only reflecting beauty, but drawing out strength, wonder, and care.



Conclusion

This data affirms the transformative power of nature, even in small doses. A single, guided forest walk can recalibrate the way people see themselves in relation to the living world. It nurtures not only personal wellbeing, but also the roots of **environmental stewardship**. In a world where ecological crises can feel abstract and overwhelming, these results are hopeful. They suggest that **change begins not just with knowledge, but with connection**.



CHECK POINTS:

- Can you identify the percentage of stress reduction achieved after a single forest walk?
- Have you considered why nature experiences are valuable for refugee populations?



CRITICAL QUESTIONS:

1. How might even brief forest experiences address the specific challenges faced by refugees that were identified in previous chapters?
2. In what ways might the universal language of nature overcome barriers of linguistic and cultural difference?
3. How might you implement similar “single-walk” experiences in your own context while maximising their transformative potential?



QUICK REFERENCE CARDS:



CARD 1: STRESS REDUCTION DATA

MEASURABLE IMPACT:

- Average stress before walk: 6.08 (scale 0-13)
- Average stress after walk: 1.83
- Overall reduction: 70%
- Achieved in a single walk experience

PARTICIPANT QUOTES:

- “Very stressed and overwhelmed with tasks” <-> “I feel relaxed and peaceful”
- “Head is full, no space to breathe” <-> “Nature gave me space to feel grounded again”
- “I feel disconnected and not calm” <-> “More

here, more me. Present”

STUDY CONTEXT:

- Four walks conducted
- Two walks with refugees only
- Two walks with mixed groups (refugees and regular migrants)
- Urban-based participants with limited nature experience

KEY INSIGHT: For people navigating uncertain migration processes, these moments of calm are “deeply valuable”



CARD 2: MULTI-DIMENSIONAL TRANSFORMATION

PHYSICAL CHANGES:

- Reduced body tension
- Deeper breathing
- Overall relaxation

EMOTIONAL SHIFTS:

- Decreased anxiety
- Increased joy
- Greater emotional balance

MENTAL CLARITY:

- Reduced overwhelm
- Improved focus
- Mental quietening

SOCIAL CONNECTION:

- Enhanced group bonding
- Reconnection to self
- Sense of belonging

SPIRITUAL GROUNDING:

- Return to inner presence
- Experience of natural belonging
- Sense of being welcomed

KEY INSIGHT: “For people with refugee backgrounds, who may be living in transitional housing, urban environments, or uncertain legal and social conditions, this kind of embodied experience offers a remembered sense of being safe, welcomed, and whole.”



CARD 3: NATURE-RELATEDNESS FINDINGS

METHODOLOGY:

- Visual questionnaire for accessibility across languages
- Pre- and post- measurements
- Four dimensions assessed

DIMENSIONS MEASURED & RESULTS:

Human-Nature Relation

- Shift toward recognising equality with nature
- Many already had respectful a view, but deepened their sense of interconnection

Comfort Outdoors

- Increased willingness to be outdoors regardless of conditions

- Greater resilience to weather-related discomfort

Comfort in Wild Nature

- Reduced fear of wild settings
- Enhanced feeling of belonging in natural spaces

Environmental Awareness

- Greatest improvement across all dimensions
- Movement from abstract appreciation to grounded ecological care

KEY INSIGHT: “Even a single forest walk can shift the way people relate to the natural world”



FURTHER READING

Below you will find references for texts cited in the e-book, as well as suggestions for further reading. Many of these publications are open access.

Catissi, G., Gouveia, G., Savieto, R. M., Silva, C. P. R., de Almeida, R. S., Borba, G. B., Rosario, K. A., Leão, E. R., 'Nature-Based Interventions Targeting Elderly People's Health and Well-Being: An Evidence Map,' *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 21 (1), 2024 p. 112. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph21010112>

Condon, E.M., Sadler, L.S., 'Toxic Stress and Vulnerable Mothers: A Multilevel Framework of Stressors and Strengths,' *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, vol. 41 (6), 2018, pp. 872-900. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193945918788>

Cuthbert S., Kellas, A., Page, L. A., 'Green care in psychiatry,' *British Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 218 (2), Feb 2021, pp. 73-74. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2020.166>

Erikson, Erik H., *Identity and the Life Cycle*, New York, NY: WW Norton, 1994 (1959).

Fromm, E., *The Heart of Man: its genius for good and evil*, New York: Harper & Row, 1964. Gibran, K., 'Song of the Rain VII,' <https://allpoetry.com/Song-Of-The-Rain-VII>

IOM (International Organization for Migration) 2030 Agenda, 2017. <https://publications.iom.int/books/migration-2030-agenda>

Joschko, L., Pálsdóttir A.M., Grahn, P., Hinse, M., 'Nature-Based Therapy in Individuals with Mental Health Disorders, with a Focus on Mental Well-Being and Connectedness to Nature – A Pilot Study,' *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 20 (3), 2023, 2167. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20032167>

Kabisch, N., Bosch, M. van den, Laforzezza, R., 'The health benefits of nature-based solutions to urbanization challenges for children and the elderly – A systematic review,' *Environmental Research*;

vol. 159, Nov. 2017, pp. 362-373. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envres.2017.08.004>

Keniger, L. E., Gaston, K. J., Irvine, K. N. & Fuller, R. A., 'What are the benefits of interacting with nature?' *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* vol. 10 (3), 2013, pp. 913-935. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph10030913>

Kim, C. M. and Lee, G. L., 'The Effect of a Nature-friendly Integration Program on Self-esteem and Depression of the Elderly in Nursing Home Residents,' *The Journal of Korean Society for People Plants Environment*, vol. 20 (3), 2017, pp. 239-245. <https://doi.org/10.11628/ksppe.2017.20.3.239>

Li, Q., *Forest Bathing: How Trees Can Help You Find Health and Happiness*, New York: Viking, 2018.

McNair, D.; Lorr, M.; Doppleman, L., *POMS Manual for the Profile of Mood States*, San Diego, CA: Educational and Industrial Testing Service, 1971.

Mihók, B., Fekete, M., Frankó, L., Martos, T., Pataki, Gy, Sallay, V., Báldi, A., 'Természet és lelki egészség,' ELKH Ökológiai Kutatóközpont, Vácrátót-Budapest, 2021.

Moll, A., Collado, S., Staats, H., Corraliza, J. A., 'Restorative effects of exposure to nature on children and adolescents: A systematic review,' *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, vol. 84, 2022, 101884. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2022.101884>

Park, B. J., Tsunetsugu, Y., Kasetani, T., Kagawa, T. & Miyazaki, Y., 'The physiological effects of Shinrin-yoku (taking in the forest atmosphere or forest bathing): evidence from field experiments in 24 forests across Japan,' *Environmental Health and Preventive Medicine*, vol. 15, 2010, pp. 18-26. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12199-009-0086-9>

Piaget, J., 'Cognitive Development in Children: Development and Learning,' Journal of Research in Science Teaching, vol. 2, 1964, pp. 176-186.<http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/tea.3660020306>

Sigelman, C. K. and Rider, E. A., Life-Span Human Development, 10th ed. Boston, 2021.

White, M. P., Alcock, I., Grellier, J. et al., 'Spending at least 120 minutes a week in nature is associated with good health and wellbeing,' Scientific Reports 9, Article number 7730, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-44097-3>

Wilson, E. O., Biophilia, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.

ABOUT THE "ACCESSIBLE FOREST PROJECT"



**Co-funded by
the European Union**

The "Accessible Forest Project" was co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

The organisations involved in the project were equal partners working collectively (as a consortium, but under the leadership of the "I Hear the Heart" Association) on the theoretical content of the e-book and other educational materials. However, each organisation was responsible for carrying out forest walks in their own countries and, as such, they are exclusively responsible for the content of their respective chapters in Part Two of this e-book. Below is a list of the contributing organisations.

I Hear the Heart

I Hear the Heart [Polish: Stowarzyszenie "Słyszę Serce"] is an association founded in 1993 in Łódź, Poland. The mission of the organisation is to support and protect the most disempowered and vulnerable members of the local community. To fulfill its mission the organisation runs, among other things, an independent integrational kindergarten, a health information centre, a sociotherapeutic integrational club, a club for the hearing impaired, and a rehabilitation centre for people with disabilities.

For the "Accessible Forest Project," the association "I Hear the Heart" organised forest walks for people with disabilities in Poland and, as a result, it is the principal author of Chapter 4 of this e-book.

Contact:

E-mail: poczta@slyszesperce.org.pl

Web page: <http://slyszesperce.org.pl>



List of contributors:

Authors of the e-book:

- A team of specialists from the "I Hear the Heart" Association, under the leadership of Marcin Urbaniak

Illustrators:

- Sebastian Zapart

Other contributors:

- Marcin Urbaniak
- Agnieszka Boruta
- Iwona Wyrwicka
- Joanna Konieczna Zapart
- Joanna Myszewska
- Honorta Szymkiewicz
- Iga Agnieszka Piotrowska
- Roksana Gontarek
- Krzysztof Kurowski
- Tomasz Ogrodowczyk

Culture Nest

Culture Nest [German: KulturNest e.V.] is a non-governmental association founded in Berlin, Germany. The mission of Culture Nest is to use the transformative potential of creativity to empower individuals and communities. To fulfill its mission, the association strives to promote creative practices related to human-nature connection, as well as bottom-up initiatives fostering social participation. Through its activities, Culture Nest also encourages cross-border cooperation as a catalyst for positive social change. Culture Nest is active mainly in the areas of non-formal education, workshop facilitation and various outdoor activities for local communities, which include people from migrant backgrounds.

For the “Accessible Forest Project,” Culture Nest organised forest walks for migrants in Germany and, as a result, it is the principal author of Chapter 8 of this e-book.

Renature

Mello Stilwell Lda is a company founded in 2018 in Portugal, operating under the commercial brand Renature. It focuses on creating and facilitating nature connection experiences for the general public and companies, offering team-building services and more specifically forest bathing and forest therapy walks. The sole owner and facilitator at Mello Stilwell is an experienced forest therapy guide who also trains guides with the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs. Over the past 5 years, Mello Stilwell Lda has facilitated over 400 forest therapy walks for almost 1500 people. During the pandemic – beginning on the 17th of March 2020 – Renature was the first company in the world to offer remotely guided forest therapy walks to alleviate people’s isolation. Since then, it has provided over 350 free remotely guided walks. With forest therapy accessible through a digital medium, this practice has been made available to a wider range of people and nowadays, many organisations worldwide offer this kind of remotely guided forest walk.

For the “Accessible Forest Project,” Renature organized the Forest walks in Portugal, and as a result, it is the principal author of Chapters 4 and 5 of this e-book.

Contact:

E-mail: office@kulturnest.org

Web page:

<https://www.kulturnest.org/>

List of contributors:

Authors of the e-book:

- Dagna Gmitrowicz
- Eva Randelzhofer

Illustrators:

- Dagna Gmitrowicz

Other contributors:

- Lorena Terzi
- Péter Bób
- Ndiabel Dieng
- Amelie Eckersley
- Joanna Mitchell
- Irit Mog
- John Londono
- Csaba Levente Vörös
- Luisa Orduño Cázares
- Christoph Braun
- Katarzyna Błasińska



Contact:

E-mail: info@renature.pt

Web page: <https://www.renature.pt/>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/renatureyourlife/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/renatureyourlife>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/renature-nature-connection-experiences/?viewAsMember=true>

List of contributors:

Authors of the e-book:

- Maria do Carmo Stilwell
- Filipa Paiva Couceiro
- Inês Bastos Macedo

Illustrators:

- Francisco Oliveira Bastos

Other contributors:

- Mariana Carreira
- Carlota Fragoso
- Teresa Firme
- Maria Abecasis
- Maria Palha
- Mariana Dias da Cunha
- Simone Coimbra
- Sandra Andrade
- Maria João Mendes
- Liliana Pires
- Ana Reis Batista



Szatyor [Hungarian: **Szatyor Egyesület**] is an association founded in 2011 in Budapest, Hungary. Its mission is to inspire an environmentally-conscious lifestyle and promote ecoliteracy. To achieve this, the association offers non-formal educational programs, community-based experiences, and outdoor experiential learning opportunities – all while connecting local initiatives to broader positive changes. Szatyor works to create meaningful local impact, particularly in areas of rural development, and actively fosters international partnerships across the EU. Its programs engage young adults, adults and educational professionals. For the “Accessible Forest Project,” Szatyor organised forest walks for individuals struggling with excessive digital device use (children and teenagers as well as single mothers) in Hungary and, as a result, it is the principal author of Chapter 7 of this e-book.

Contact:

E-mail: szatyorprojects@gmail.com

Web page: <https://www.szatyoregyesulet.hu/>

List of contributors:

Authors of the e-book:

- Kriszta Vásárhelyi
- Ágnes Berecz

Illustrators:

- Eszter Kiskovács

Other contributors:

- Ágota Horváth
- Ágnes Parlagh
- Alíz Ildikó Peto
- Andrea Edit Bodó
- Andrea Franta
- Andrea Papp-Szabó
- Anett Tóth-Dankó
- Csaba Levente Vörös
- Dávid Magyar
- Donát Lanszki
- Dorka Beke
- Erika Kármán
- Erika Kiss
- Eszter Bauer
- Helga Babusa
- Krisztina Eleod
- Krisztina Soczó
- Nikoletta Rendes
- Tímea Merényi
- Tímea Salamon
- Tímea Tóth
- Zoltán Bauer
- Zsuzsa Rihay





accessible
forest

