

ESIKOTO project, Finland:

Health and well-being for asylum seekers through nature-based activities

Nature-based integration

Nature can significantly improve asylum seekers' quality of life. It can play a crucial part in the pre-integration process by enhancing their understanding of the local culture and human-nature relationship, improving their personal well-being or increasing their knowledge about livelihoods connected to nature. However, local nature is usually unfamiliar to asylum seekers, and they can sometimes see it as frightening. For this reason, ways of promoting the health and well-being impacts of nature amongst asylum seekers are needed. One way is through voluntary work in protected and outdoor recreational areas.

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Activation for well-being

The pre-integration period is currently not utilized effectively and the asylum seekers participate little in society. Their role has been largely passive, and opportunities for participation are almost non-existent.

Launched in Oulu, the ESIKOTO project is intended for asylum seekers living across Northern Ostrobothnia Region. The main aim of P&WF in ESIKOTO project is to involve asylum seekers in meaningful nature-based activities, which enhance bonding with the rest of the society, as well as prevent institutionalization.

In the ESIKOTO project, P&WF will:

- Identify effective ways to utilize the natural environment as part of pre-integration
- Create a tool for use by professionals
- Create an information package about the Finnish nature for asylum seekers

The project activities are organised in close cooperation with the voluntary sector, especially regarding the organization of activities but also in development of sustainable operating models.



Nothing beats experience!

"I have only seen photos of Finnish nature but through this work, I can now see it with my own eyes, and at the same time I can spend time with Finns. It is very important to me."

"Pekka told us what wood to use so that we can get a campfire going easily and what animal traces are visible in the snow. During two weeks of volunteering in Riisitunturi National Park we have learned a lot about nature and also about Finnish culture."

"It is very beautiful in Riisitunturi National Park."

"It was very cold for the first two days but we have strong motivation to work."

"It is hard work but I like it and I am ready to do more."

Good deeds and meaningful activities

For Finnish people, a diverse and clean natural environment is not only an important place for leisure activities but also a crucial part of their culture and livelihoods.

For asylum seekers, going outdoors independently is a big step, although the Finnish Everyman's Rights and fairly good accessibility facilitate visiting nature on a regular basis. Interest in nature and nature-based activities among newcomers can be promoted in many different ways. However, as an advocate of voluntary work, P&WF sees engaging asylum seekers in voluntary conservation work as a win-win situation in nature-based integration.

During the first six months of the ESIKOTO project, asylum seekers helped to maintain hiking trails in some protected areas on a voluntary basis, as well as participated in biotope restoration in Natura 2000 areas.

This type of work helps asylum seekers learn about nature and the Finnish outdoor culture, allowing them to spend time with local people and feel that they do meaningful work.

THE TWO-YEAR ESIKOTO PROJECT (MAY 2016–APRIL 2018) IS FUNDED BY THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND (ESF) UNDER THE PRIORITY AXIS 5, WHICH AIMS AT STRENGTHENING SOCIAL INCLUSION AND COMBATING POVERTY. THE PROJECT IS IMPLEMENTED BY OULU DEACONESS INSTITUTE (PROJECT SUPERVISOR), PARKS & WILDLIFE FINLAND, DIACONIA UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES AND VUOLLE SETTLEMENTTI. THE TOTAL BUDGET IS €1,1M.

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FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE PROJECT (IN FINNISH) AT

www.metsa.fi/esikoto



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