



## Human Health and Sustainable Forest Management

### **Policy recommendations of the FOREST EUROPE Expert Group on Human Health and Well-being**

Forests have an important role to play in preventative health care. The research shows that forests improve the quality of life and wellbeing in general. By investing in forests and encouraging people to use forests, the population's health can be improved. Recent experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic also show the irreplaceable role of forests and green spaces that are accessible to the public, especially in and around cities. These spaces have played a critical role in people's wellbeing as they cope with the lockdown restrictions. It highlights the essential role for forests and green spaces for the recovery phase and in future situations where a connection to nature and caring for nature are increasingly important.

We should invest in enabling particularly children and young people to access forests for their health and wellbeing regularly. This would create a healthier future population who are aware of these benefits. Through this approach, forests could help reduce the burden on health care services by improving population health and preventing illnesses, providing economic impact by saving public money.

Because of various positive effects of outdoor education (such as strengthening and developing new social relationships, participation and community capacity building, better socio-emotional development, improved learning results), Forest Pedagogy concepts can be utilized and forests can play a role in curative medicine. Various innovative projects designed for patients with specific health-care needs can be delivered in forests, combined and evaluated alongside traditional medicine.

Evidence base demonstrating the benefits of health interventions in forests is growing. There is a need to convince the traditional health-care system of these benefits and engage it in delivering more treatments in forest environments.

Although there also are risks to people from taking part in activities in the forests, the numerous benefits outweigh these risks. Risk-prevention and risk-management should be developed and professionalized. For this purpose, forest therapists and forest health guides need to have appropriate knowledge and skills.



## Policies and Strategies



Growing political attention towards the benefits of forests for public health and well-being calls for the integration of sustainable forest management in key international as well as national policy objectives and strategies:

- European and national forestry policies should explicitly mention the health benefits of forests as well as address modern public health-care agendas and the potential role of forests in health promotion and the preventative aspects of ill-health;
- similarly, efforts should be made to mainstream social functions of forests including those related to human health (such as recreation, tourism, ecotherapy) into other policy domains;
- the momentum created by the recent COVID-19 pandemic should be utilized to highlight the importance of forests and other green spaces for public health, and particularly for mainstreaming and promotion of these ecosystem services in public-health policies;
- specific strategies or policies at national and municipal level focusing on promoting recreation in urban and peri-urban forests and green spaces should emphasize the benefits for citizens (e.g.

by the designation of certain areas of forests for recreation or health-related activities);

- health benefits of forests are gained through repeated use, therefore, easy access to forests available for public recreation needs to be enhanced and secured for all citizens, measurable targets for the availability and accessibility of forests and other natural areas surrounding towns and cities should be developed and applied in land-use and urban planning;
- funding mechanisms for long term provision of cultural forest ecosystem services related to recreation and health benefits should be developed and reflected in policies (use of payments for ecosystem services), various grants or tax deductions can also provide incentives for private forest owners and managers;
- forest disturbances intensified by climate change such as wildfires, storms, insects and plant diseases might threaten or reduce the provision of forests' benefits for public health. New policies should enable and promote proactive forest-risk management and climate change adaptation measures in forests, and forests designated for recreation should be actively managed.

## Research and Evaluation



Ongoing and additional research, monitoring, and evaluation of health and well-being programs in forests are important to consolidate the understanding of their efficiency and suitability for various target groups:

- monitoring of outdoor recreation opportunities in forests (and green spaces) and associated health benefits should be further developed and implemented;
- policy instruments supporting various pilot projects, further research and monitoring,

education and communication should be sustained to develop the current evidence-base into practice;

- health care sectors have strict requirements regarding the evidence-base, thus more information on dose-response is needed and a holistic view on health and health promotion should be promoted. The creation of quality standards should improve the credibility of forest-related health products.

## Stakeholders and Beneficiaries



Identification and motivation of stakeholders, beneficiaries and service providers are important to strengthen the offer of forests' benefits for human health:

- the motivation of forest owners should be stimulated by payments for ecosystem services (including forest ecosystem services related to health benefits), or other instruments such as compensation for increased costs resulting from their provision, assistance and encouragement, or by incentives covered by grants or tax deductions;
- effective legislative and institutional frameworks should allow and promote payments for these ecosystem services, including their flexible adaptation to the changing economy and environment;
- further research and monitoring in the field of payments for particular ecosystem services and other financial tools should be intensified, including both, the search for financial sources and the development of new tools for their provision;
- management of forest visitors should ensure their safety and avoid adverse environmental impacts or impacts on forest management.

Public recognition of all services delivered by forest owners and managers as well as public awareness on the topic are necessary for advocating forest health benefits, the role of sustainable forest management in this context, and the acceptance of payments for ecosystem services:

- effective public awareness campaigns should be developed by the forest sector to promote sustainable forest management and health benefits of forests;
- communications should focus on accessible and general health-benefits messages e.g. physical fitness, mental health, improving immunity etc. rather than providing detailed specifics e.g. blood pressure or heart rate variability;

- communication and advocating by rationale arguments may often give rise to counter-arguments in the audience – in such cases, storytelling or similar communication techniques evoking positive feelings and sensations may be more effective forms of communication;
- compelling narratives about how we use our forests responsibly can motivate people to actively experience the forest, gain first-hand emotions in nature and better understand the positive effects personally;
- appropriate forms of citizen involvement in forests and forestry such as outdoor education or volunteering in forestry activities may provide positive effects for human health, and simultaneously build the positive experience and emotions from work in forest;
- communication by role models and influencers through their emotions and positive experience can also effectively facilitate the process of informing the public and attract the attention of young people – such communication can be intensified e.g. through interviews with role models (influencers) and using advertisements or social media with videos, podcasts, etc.;
- public perception and recognition of these services can be supported and improved through specific programmes that offer education for sustainable development and/or Forest Pedagogy;
- to address the health sector and policymakers, medical doctors/practitioners and service users should be involved in sharing their experience and advocating for forest-based health projects, as influencers for this topic;
- innovative demonstration projects should be established to showcase and enable a clearer understanding of the health benefits of forests by policymakers.



## Collaboration and Partnerships



Collaboration and partnerships among forestry, environment, education, tourism, health and social inclusion sectors can provide new opportunities for the delivery of health and social benefits for diverse populations in urban and rural areas. Simultaneously, the provision of these benefits can provide opportunities for stakeholders to diversify their businesses or supplement their incomes:

- forestry experts, planners and landscape architects, as well as public health officials and other stakeholders, should improve collaboration with each other to understand priorities in different sectors and how these priorities can be addressed;
- to facilitate collaboration between various stakeholders, markets need to be developed to support the rising demand - this could lead to increased interest from the private sector, including health-insurance companies as there is potential for savings in health-care by preventing ill-health;
- collaborative practise in building and maintenance of infrastructure, amenities, and facilities in forests should be developed and intensified.

