

Alfred Toepfer Scholarship 2023

## NATURE FOR ALL

A STUDY INTO HOW EUROPE'S  
PROTECTED AREAS ARE ENGAGING  
WITH REFUGEE AND ASYLUM SEEKER  
COMMUNITIES



A report by  
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## About the Author

My name is Hayden Bridgeman, I am from the UK and grew up on the Isle of Wight where I was fortunate enough to spend my childhood surrounded by the ocean and nature. I studied photography at university before realising this wasn't my calling – I felt lost and wanted to try and find what I was passionate about. What was meant to be a six-week volunteering trip, turned into a career and I still can't quite believe I get to do what I do. My first volunteering position opened my eyes to the environment and world of conservation and that this was a job that existed – you could protect habitats, landscapes, and wildlife?! I found my passion.

After volunteering I was in the privileged position to be able to continue to gain seasonal roles on various conservation projects from Ascension Island to Malaysia to the Caribbean before finding myself back in the UK and wanting to continue my conservation career. I was faced with many no's until I was lucky enough to secure an apprenticeship with the New Forest National Park Authority. The apprenticeship combined my passion and early career roles and allowed me to gain formal qualifications and continue working in the sector and get me to where I am today – North Area Ranger for the New Forest National Park Authority.

What has stuck with me to this day is how welcoming communities were when I was working abroad and how passionately people shared their country, landscapes, and cultures with visitors. I want to give this kindness back through my work in our protected areas and share what we have here with everyone, in particularly those that don't feel welcome in green spaces and that's where my motivation lies. I want to help make sure green spaces really are inclusive to all, and that everybody has the choice to access nature and reap the benefits.

## Summary

We, as a society, are so aware of how crucial access to nature is for good mental health and wellbeing, yet those that need it most are often unable to access it. The aim of this research is to gain further understanding and knowledge about how protected areas – both National Parks and Periurban parks, are engaging with some of the most vulnerable communities – asylum seekers and refugees. We, as Protected Area practitioners, must do all we can to ensure green spaces really are accessible to all and that everyone has the choice and opportunity to benefit from them.

Refugees and asylum seekers are one of the most scrutinised and vulnerable communities in our society and face huge barriers in every aspect of life - with accessing nature being just one of them. In my current role, in the New Forest National Park as North Area Ranger, I lead on an inclusivity project that works with local displaced communities to help welcome to them to the outdoors by leading guided walks and cycle rides, practical habitat management tasks and health and wellbeing days. Being able to see directly how much nature helps vulnerable groups has inspired me to continue to learn more about how we can further this work and make sure we are doing all we can.

The main aims of this research are to highlight best practice; directly address the barriers the refugee community face when accessing the outdoors and provide useful tools to help other green professionals remove these barriers in their area.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Introduction to the Scholarship Project

Now more than ever we are so aware how crucial access to nature is to good mental health and wellbeing, yet those that need it most are often unable to access it, and I want to change that. I am aware my position as National Park ranger and my access to nature is a huge privilege and as part of my role, I want to make sure we, within our protected areas, are doing as much as possible to make sure green spaces really are inclusive.

Refugees and asylum seekers are one of the most scrutinised and vulnerable communities in our society and when I realised that we didn't actively engage with this community I wanted to make sure this changed. Refugees already face so many barriers whilst living day-to-day life and one of the many they face is being able to access nature.

Over the last two years in my role as Area Ranger at the New Forest National Park Authority we have been working with local charities that support refugees and asylum seekers on the South coast of

England to work out how we can bring them into the National Park and surrounding green spaces. Our work together involves creating a welcoming safe space in the outdoors for people to get together and be in nature. We have led guided walks and cycle rides, with the focus being to explore the New Forest and feel a part of the local community. We've run habitat management conservation tasks and create opportunities for participants to do something physical and to contribute to the conservation of the New Forest and give participants a real sense of achievement. Throughout various stages of this initiative, I found myself with a few questions: Is there more we could be doing? Can we be doing this better? What are others doing? What works? What doesn't? What funding is out there? How do we reach more people? Can we create systemic change? Who can I talk to? (Okay, maybe more than a few questions).

When I saw the Alfred Toepfer Europarc scholarship opportunity I couldn't believe that this potentially could be the place to ask those questions, gather information and answers and turn it in to something valuable to the sector. When I was successful in securing the scholarship, I was extremely grateful to be given the opportunity to build on what I had already learnt. Before we continue with the research proposal and findings it is important to understand the community we are working with.

I would like to also state that I have no lived experience or background as a refugee or asylum seeker - I am not part of this community. But I am an advocate, a friend and someone who wants to make sure green spaces are accessible to all and representative of all our communities.



*FIGURE 1. AUTHOR AND OTHER SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS 2023*

## 1.2 Understanding displaced communities

Language matters. It is vital to remember how important the language we use is in relation to society's most vulnerable communities. The language used in the media creates an 'us and them' discourse which immediately creates hostility. Not only this but it is important to remember that there is a *legal* difference. Using the wrong terminology can be extremely damaging to communities of displaced people and can have a detrimental effect on their mental health and wellbeing and their journey in acclimatising to a new life. The modern definition was drafted in the United Nation's 1951 Refugee convention response to mass persecution and displacement of the Second World War and there are legalities attached to each term that denote what's available to each group.

### **Asylum Seeker**

An asylum seeker is an individual who is seeking international protection. In countries with individualised procedures, an asylum seeker is someone whose claim has not yet been finally decided on by the country in which he or she has submitted it. Not every asylum seeker will ultimately be recognised as a refugee, but every refugee is initially an asylum seeker.

### **Refugee**

A refugee is a person who has fled their country of origin and is unable to or unwilling to return because of a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

### **Migrant**

An economic migrant is someone who leaves his or her country of origin purely for financial and/or economic reasons. Economic migrants choose to move in order to find a better life and they do not flee because of persecution. Therefore, they do not fall within the criteria for refugee status and are not entitled to receive international protection.

It is imperative that governments/communities/media understand the distinction. Countries have specific responsibilities tied to legislation to help anyone seeking sanctuary and fleeing war and persecution – refugees. It is not the same for migrants. Blurring the terms migrant and refugee/asylum seeker can have serious consequences for the lives and safety of refugees as it takes away the specific legal protection that refugees require and is a very divisive way of creating animosity.

We must recognise that displaced communities are humans, individuals, mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, best friends, family. They are fleeing war, persecution, and atrocities that we can't even begin to fathom. They are fleeing because they have no choice, they are doing what you or I would do in their situation – seeking sanctuary.

The world's media plays a huge part in fuelling this narrative. Headlines using the wrong terminology are to blame in the misinformation that surrounds the refugee community and the animosity. In the last 5 years there have been 179 front pages dedicated to the dehumanisation of refugees. These sensationalist front pages do not include photographs of people, again, a technique used to depersonalise and dehumanise this community.

It is a **human right** for someone seeking sanctuary from war or persecution to seek international protection. The 1951 Refugee Convention is a law that 146 countries signed up to after the second World War. Let me say that again, it is international law protecting the basic human rights and treatment of people forced to flee conflict and persecution.

It is important to understand the full picture about why people are fleeing persecution and just how many individuals this affects. There were two main headlines in 2023 that depict the inhumane way different groups in our society are treated. There was a group of millionaires tragically lost at sea had hundreds of thousands of pounds spent on finding them as opposed to dozens of refugees and asylum seekers that are left to fend for themselves. It's a dark reflection on humanity when society tells us some deserve to live, and others do not. We must continue to question, challenge and change this narrative. Each life is worth as much as another.



**"WOW, YOU REALLY CARE - IT IS HARD TO BELIEVE "**

**- GROUP PARTICIPANT**

**"THEY ARE DIFFERENCE PEOPLE AS SOON AS THEY STEP OFF  
OF THE TRAIN - YOU SEE THEM RELAX"**

**- GROUP LEADER**

**"THE CITY IS NOT REAL LIFE; NATURE IS WHERE I FEEL ALIVE"**

**- GROUP PARTICIPANT**

**"I HAVE SPENT A LOT OF TIME IN MY LIFE WALKING - IT'S NICE  
TO WALK FOR FUN"**

**- GROUP PARTICIPANT**





### Individuals

89.3 million displaced individuals in the world with 27.1 million of them formally recognised as refugees

### Children

41% of refugees are children

### UK

Despite what the UK's media lead us to believe the UK is home to less than 1% of refugees

### Money

People seeking asylum are banned from working and are provided with just £8.86 per week (if the accommodation provides meals)

## DISPLACED COMMUNITIES

### Countries

72% of refugees live in countries neighbouring their country of origin

### Work

About 1,200 medically qualified refugees are recorded on the British Medical Associations database. It is estimated that it costs around £25,000 to support a refugee doctor opposed to a new doctor costing £200,000

### Law

The 1951 Refugee Convention guarantees everybody the right to apply for asylum.

### Conflict

The top ten refugee producing countries in 2021 all had poor human rights records or on-going conflict.

## 2. RESEARCH

### 2.1 Objectives of the study visits

- To communicate on a European scale why this work is important and encourage similar efforts in other protected areas through this report and video.
- To directly address what barriers there are to the refugee community when accessing nature.
- To gather information about best practise techniques that are currently being implemented by practitioners to help remove these barriers.
- To start a dialogue between professionals that are (or can be) engaging refugees and asylum seekers in green spaces and the outdoors.
- To build my confidence in this area of work and bring back a report as well as new skills and ideas to implement in my current role.

### 2.2. Overview of the tour

To minimise my environmental impact, I decided to go to one country for a longer period as it's a country further away. I flew from the UK to Athens on the 12<sup>th</sup> April 2024 for seven days and used the Greek Metro system to get to my site visits (and walking). I then got the train up to the East Coast of Greece to visit Mount Olympus National Park for seven days.

I chose Greece as it is at the forefront of both the migrant crisis and the climate crisis. It saw Europe's largest wildfire in 2023 and the numbers of displaced people arriving on Greek islands and the mainland are increasing.



FIGURE 2. MAP OF VISIT SITES

I have also conducted online interviews with various other practitioners in the field in the UK to continue to build on my study visits and get a thorough overview.

### 2.3. Visited areas and charities

#### **National Garden, Athens (Urban Park)**

The city's largest garden (38 acres) and in the heart of Athens. Comprising of six lakes, 7000 trees and hundreds of species of birds, fish, and turtles, it dates to ancient times when it was used as a private

garden by the Philosopher and Naturalist Theophrastus of Eresos. In the late 1830s, Queen Amalie of Greece curated the gardens as we see them today and it has been given over to public access since 1923. It is described as the lungs of Athens and a popular location for recreation due to the shady canopy and tranquillity against the busy city. It has hundreds of thousands of visitors a year from locals, tourists, cyclists, dog walkers and charity groups.

### **Antonis Tristis Metropolitan Park (Urban Park)**

A public park in Llion and the largest park in the region of Attica. The 'Environmental awareness park' it consists of 500 hectares and was created in 1832 - it is the only park dedicated to conservation education. Water is a key theme for this park and it has a specially designed system that recirculates fresh water between the parks six lakes. It welcomes 15,000 visitors on a weekend and is of huge importance to visitors and locals

### **Mount Olympus National Park**

Olympus National Park is located on Greece's East Coast and comprises of fifty-two peaks. With its highest Mytikas at 9,570 feet (2,917 m) making it Greece's highest summit and the region was also declared a World Biosphere Reserve since 1981. More than 1,700 plants are found here – representing 25 percent of all Greek flora. Larger animals include wolves, jackals, wild pigs and deer and more than one hundred bird species live in the park including golden eagles and woodpeckers. It is steeped in cultural significance and is the home of the Gods and the peak of Stefani was considered 'Zeus's Throne'.

### **Organisation Earth (NGO)**

A Greek NGO founded in 2010 with a mission to deliver community-driven change towards a fair and resilient society. They do this by engaging local authorities and other levels of government, civil society, and grassroots communities. Their work focuses on promoting nature-based solutions for climate neutral and inclusive cities, including pocket parks, community gardens, green roofs and implementing development programs for vulnerable social groups. Organisation Earth offer gardening workshops with a focus on sustainable living. One of Organisation's Earth Hubs is at a place called the 'Centre of the Earth' which sits in a 25-acre urban park just 6km from the centre of Athens. It's their main learning centre and a meeting point. Its grounds contain a beautiful organic vegetable garden which provides the backdrop to a lot of their sustainable food workshops.

### **Ecogenia (NGO)**

Ecogenia is a charity based in Greece aiming to become a National Youth Corps to empower thousands of young Greeks to feel empowered to contribute to climate action and build a resilient Greek society. They currently have a team based in Mount Olympus National Park enhancing the sustainable management of the park; gaining experience in the construction and restoration of trails and disaster prevention/preparedness in flood prevention and flammable biomass. They are currently looking at strategies to diversify their workforce and engage all socio-economic groups in the community.

## Refugee Week Greece (NGO)

World's largest arts and culture festival celebrating the contributions, creativity and resilience of refugees and people seeking sanctuary. It is curated by a team of people and partners locally on the ground in Greece but also is an international movement with events spanning the globe. The theme for the celebrations in 2024 was 'Our Home' and everyone was invited to celebrate what Home means to them. This project is a combined project of lots of different partners across Greece including Counterpoints Arts, Athens Library, Greek Forum of Refugees and many more. This organisation played a huge role in building relationships throughout this project.

## 2.4. Site visits

### Organisation Earth, Attonis Metropolitan Park, Athens

My first trip was to Organisation Earth based in Attonis Metropolitan Park. A public park in Llion and the largest park in the region of Attica. The 'Environmental awareness park' is the only park dedicated to conservation education in Athens. I began the visit meeting the team on site at the 'Centre of the Earth' at their learning centre. This has an organic vegetable garden and permaculture garden and is the main location where groups can learn about sustainable food, biodiversity and climate neutrality. The team also run Hope Sports which is a sports program initiative and social inclusion program for vulnerable groups – encouraging individuals to benefit from sports and the outdoors both physically and mentally.

These site visits consisted of looking at different engagement sessions with varying user groups to see how best we can adapt trips for vulnerable communities:

- A visit to their head offices meeting with the wider team
- Prepping for a school session by setting up resources and carrying out a site recce
- Spent the day with a school group, a session that was encouraging young people to understand the importance of nature rich landscapes, local food production and demonstrating green skills and careers. This included a visit to their sustainable and home-grown garden to demonstrate the importance of sustainability. These visits are very 'typical' and 'off the shelf', often booked far in advance and a part of the school curriculum.
- Another group session was focused on using the garden to explore how we can reconnect with nature and how to minimise food waste while learning how every day decisions affect the environment.

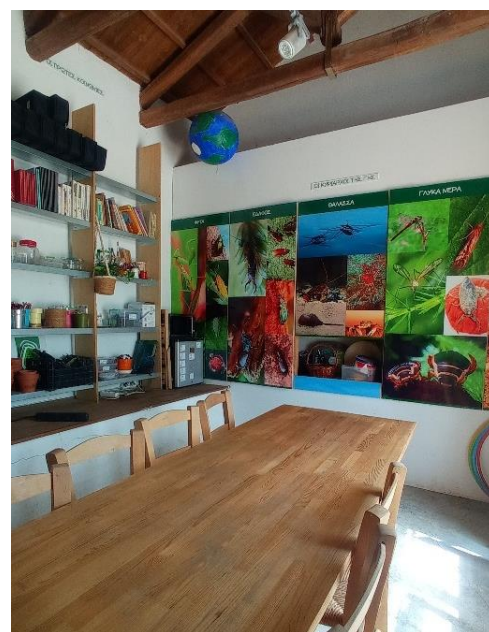


FIGURE 3. CLASSROOM AT ORGANISATION EARTH EDUCATION HUB



FIGURE 4. WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT



- An engagement session was postponed due to low mental health and motivation in the refugee group and then carried out the following day. This session involved much of the previous work but tailored to the group's ability and interest.

It was extremely beneficial to see how the different sessions were run and structured depending on the audience and how they were pitched.

### Sessions with refugee communities

Nikoletta - the education officer for O.E is in regular contact with a local guest house for unaccompanied refugees and asylum seekers which is ten minutes from the Centre of the Earth. The Guest House charity work with large scale camps in Ritsona to get unaccompanied children to a place of safety where they can then go on to find education and other services to support their childhoods and development.

This workshop is one that they lead regularly in the camps and in the centres and was focussed around how to grow fruit and vegetables and reconnect to the natural world. Many of the group that live at the centre are under 16 and have been on the move through turmoil for many years, therefore missing out on valuable schooling, stability, and skills. Workshops like this aim to teach skills and provide activities for the group after O.E leaves. Being able to create some stability and consistency is key for these young people and is very important to O.E.

Organisation Earth provides materials such as: flowerpots, soil, watering cans, seeds, small established plants such as lavender. This is for the centre to keep allowing the legacy of the workshop and the partnership to continue. It gives the participants the feeling of ownership and pride in taking care of the plants and the confidence that they can do it on their own and aren't relying on someone else.

### Key takeaways of the workshops

- It is important to put the individuals in the group at the heart of the session and be guided by the group
- Enabling longevity of engagement by donating equipment to grow produce on their own
- Rescheduling the activity after low turnout in the group due to low mental health and not just cancelling the session altogether and losing patience
- Being patient and having a drop-in style session for those that want to dip in and out when they can
- Have different levels of involvement in the session. Not everybody is comfortable with everything so having different options allows individuals to make the decision on what they want to get involved with.
- Build confidence by allowing the group to take their time. Do not rush - if one of the activities in the session is more popular then enable the group to choose and do not feel you have to tick everything on your session plan off. What works for one group – doesn't work for all groups.



FIGURE 5. PHOTO CARD RESOURCES TO HELP VISUALISE THE SESSION



- Take the charity sessions to the refugee camps or centres: some of the gardening and football sessions can be done in the camps organised by O.E. This works as the charity can send two or three staff out to a site rather than relying on finding funds for transport to get an entire group to the O.E centre
- Having photographs of objects being talked about and processes so it is easier to explain and navigate the language barrier
- Be friendly, approachable and calm
- Do not be judgemental of people's knowledge and ability of the subject or activity
- If sessions are operated as drop in and at a centre, then having different options for different ages is also important. A couple of the individuals brought their children with them which means having age-appropriate activities is important.

### **Ecogenia, Mount Olympus National Park**

Ecogenia have set up a program to empower thousands of young Greeks to feel they can contribute to climate action and build a resilient Greek society. They have set up a climate corps which is a structured way for young people to support localised climate action through the 'civic service model.'

Civic service is *'global best practice to engage young people in voluntary commitment to serve their country's pressing needs. Civic Service terms are compensated opportunities and are recognised by society as creating high social value and investing in the workforce of the future'*. Civic service is all about working together to grow professional development for young people.



FIGURE 6. AUTHOR WITH THE CURRENT COHORT OF ECOGENIA STUDENTS

Young people aged between 18 – 30 spend 14 weeks doing paid service whilst developing skills in ecotourism and natural disaster management. Skills gained include the cleaning and restoration of trails, understanding social media's impact and role in helping conservation strategies, and gaining skills to promote sustainable, responsible visits to the natural landscape. Ecogenia put the community at the heart of their programmes and each program is bespoke to the area they are set up in but with ecotourism and education as the impact areas to prioritise. They have already invested 14,000+ hours into young people with 3,700 hours of training. Ecogenia understand how important young people's time is and invests in them financially too – offering paid work. There's an incredible alumni program so that the knowledge gained over the initial cohort isn't lost and can be passed on to new members and with this a leadership development role. This model is a testament to the team that are at the heart of Ecogenia - it's powerful and empowering.

## My time with Ecogenia:

- Spent time with their youth corps team in the National Park constructing and restoring trails improving access for visitors; rehabilitation of burnt areas and preparing for other climate related disasters including flooding; creating relief stations and litter picking.
- Talking to a local refugee that Ecogenia are working with and who is seeking to join Ecogenia's mission and are looking at ways that this work can proceed and progress
- Interviewing their management team as to how this programme works and how Ecogenia are looking to include refugee and asylum seekers
- Identifying local barriers as to how this can happen
- Working on social media learning sessions and from other conservation professionals in Greece to understand how the programs run and how they are looking to expand
- Attending the Blue Oceans conference

## Key Takeaways from Ecogenia:

- Putting local people at the heart of what you do enables them to feel empowered. Ecogenia is the epitome of community and is the exemplar for how community conservation programs can work. The way they are so successful is by putting the needs of local Greek people first and giving them the tools to succeed and give back to one of their Flagship protected areas.
- **Transport is a huge barrier** in reaching Refugee communities and local communities in general in Greece which is the same in the UK.
- Reaching refugee communities requires different ways of communicating and outreach. They are doing amazing work in having refugee voices in the conversation with their board members and executive leadership teams listening in what can be done to include this community. Ecogenia have asked the questions and are putting time into understanding what can be done at every level to ensure this group is heard, seen and represented in the climate crisis.
- It is vital in fighting the climate crisis that organisations give people the skills and confidence to serve the natural environment. And also pay them for their time.
- To truly have inclusive sustainable communities, all voices must be heard, empowered and most importantly paid for their time and that's what Ecogenia does – they recognise that conservation and green skills are imperative to fighting climate change and that young people need to be paid, and their time valued so offer a stipend.
- Enabling integration into the local community is so important and offering citizen science and building climate resilience on the ground is a valuable way of enabling people to give back to their local environment. This is a perfect opportunity for refugees and asylum seekers to feel a part of their society it enables individuals to build skills directly transferable to obtaining future employment.

Ecogenia are working with the UN Refugee Agency to look at how refugees can integrate into local society with a pathway to potential employment and Ecogenia's civic service is an ideal opportunity. Currently they are experiencing some barriers to getting groups out, which have been extremely valuable to highlight and learn from so they can then move forward in the project and partnership. One of the main barriers is transport Mount Olympus is around 1.5 hours from the nearest refugee camp and there is no public transport so there is a need to fund transport to and from Ecogenia's main hub.

The UN refugee agency are in talks with what a collaboration could look like and came to meet with Ecogenia and also met cohort members. The Greek government are focusing on integration and how to enable refugees and asylum seekers to be a part of their local communities and rebuild their lives and civic service could be a great way to do this.

Off the back of this visit there was a discussion around organising a team of 18-23 year olds from the refugee camp to go to Litorchoro for a volunteer day, the barrier to this was funding for a minibus. This is something that is all too familiar in this space and sector.

But it isn't something that is going to stop Ecogenia moving forward with working with these communities. They are working to build relationships with funders and other organisations and charities with resources that can help fund transportation from refugee camps to Mount Olympus. It's vital that this work continues as Nationally designated landscapes and green spaces shouldn't be just for those with the money to fund private transport or buy expensive bus tickets.

## **Public transport**

Providing affordable transportation to internationally designated green landscapes is crucial for ensuring equitable access to nature and promoting environmental sustainability. Green spaces such as national parks, nature reserves, and UNESCO World Heritage Sites are vital for preserving biodiversity and offering essential ecosystem services. By making transportation affordable and accessible, we can encourage a broader demographic to experience and connect with these areas. This, in turn, fosters a greater sense of environmental stewardship among diverse communities, helping to create a collective responsibility for preserving these natural treasures. Moreover, such accessibility ensures that individuals, regardless of their financial situation, can benefit from the physical and mental health benefits of spending time in nature.

The notion that access to green landscapes should be limited to the wealthy undermines the principle of environmental justice. Nature should not be a privilege confined to those who can afford private transportation or expensive tours; it should be a shared resource for all people. The benefits of spending time in green spaces, such as reduced stress, improved well-being, and educational opportunities, are essential for everyone, not just the affluent. Ensuring affordable transport options helps level the playing field, enabling people from all socioeconomic backgrounds to explore, learn, and engage with the environment. If we want to build a sustainable and inclusive future, we must break down financial barriers and prioritize accessibility to nature for all.

Within these sites visits I also conducted interviews with people within the displaced community which enabled me to get a direct understanding of what this community faces daily and just how we can help. I conducted conversational interviews often in the field or on a walk.

## 3. FINDINGS

### 3.1. Real life accounts

Having completed my site visits I have collated best practice, barriers and real-life accounts to develop a picture of how best we, as green space practitioners, can help open the outdoors to displaced communities. For safety I have kept anonymity and removed names.

I have been extremely fortunate to spend time with and work alongside people from the displaced community over the last couple of years and throughout this project. It is their generosity that has shaped the project and will enable us to implement change in how we view and work in our green spaces and make them truly inclusive. We must give them a voice in the outdoors to understand how we can work together to make the outdoors accessible. The community's openness is captured below and is extremely valuable in understanding how we can do more. This next chapter demonstrates what individuals from this community are facing and how nature makes them feel.

#### **Participant 1**

I was fortunate enough to spend some time with a young man from Ghana who has faced such adversity and horrors in his home country and along the journey to find sanctuary and safety. His honest, real-life accounts and being able to spend time with him has really enabled me to understand how we can help.

Boye spoke of feeling unsafe in the park – if I had not suggested meeting there, he would not have ever thought to come to Syntagma Square. This is for several reasons, one of the main ones is safety.

*'I do not feel safe in a park.'*

Walking through the park for Boye the refugee community in Athens is not a place of tranquillity but a place of anxiety. Feeling self-conscious and as though you do not belong, as though someone at any point might ask for your documentation and your current position can change forever.

*'It takes refugees and asylum seekers so much longer to do things compared to other members of society. A simple task like booking a doctor's appointment can take days and many hours on the phone trying to work out who I can talk to whereas someone else is already in the system or has family members that can do it for them. We do not have the luxury of free time, so walking is not a priority.'*

This conversation is a demonstration of the key themes across the displaced community. Feelings of not being welcome and feeling unsafe in the outdoors. It is assumed that nature is a sanctuary and a safe space but hearing from lived experiences that refugees face proves that that is not the case and we must not assume that everyone wants to enjoy the natural world in the same way.

## **Participant 2**

Maara shared a very similar experience and outlook on visiting green spaces. Walking outdoors is not something that she felt comfortable doing.

*'I do not feel safe. I would not walk on my own.'*

Maara shared that walking in a foreign country is scary. The constant potential threat of being asked for documentation or feeling self-conscious because 'you don't look like other people.' Maara shared that she doesn't have time to think about nice things because there is so much stress and anxiety around day to day living. She is never able to prioritise herself and her mental health as she is in fight or flight mode every single moment.

I also gathered thoughts from participants across all visits, both in Greece and the UK and the group leaders, to help build a picture of the impact nature can have and what it means.

Putting this community first is key to making change. Hearing direct accounts of how displaced communities see the outdoors is vital in how we can adapt experiences and make change. We must ask the questions and remember what works for one individual or user group doesn't work for all.

People from different cultural, socioeconomic, and racial backgrounds often have unique relationships with nature, shaped by history, identity, and lived experiences. By listening to and amplifying these voices, we can understand the barriers that prevent certain groups from engaging with the outdoors and recognize the profound benefits that nature offers, such as physical, emotional, and mental well-being. Ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to experience and connect with nature helps foster inclusivity and allows all individuals to benefit from its healing and restorative qualities.

I also took the time to ask visitors to the National Park and local Urban Parks how nature made them feel and why they come to green spaces. This is to highlight the importance of being in nature for our mental well-being and emphasise why all people, no matter their background, should be able to reap these benefits of nature. (I was assisted by one of the local guides who helped me translate these responses).

*'I come to relax and get away from daily life.'*

*'I enjoy walking my dog here because we get fresh air and I feel calm.'*

*'I love the colours in Spring, it brings me joy.'*

*'I have run in this park for so many years and every day it is different.'*

*'I switch off and have time for myself.'*

The fact that so many people from diverse backgrounds do not feel they can access nature in this way and benefit from these experiences the way others do is sobering and hopefully demonstrates just why we must continue to do what we can to open these spaces to all, because the benefits are so great.



## 3.2. Barriers

These barriers have been collated after multiple interviews with Refugee and Asylum Seekers, Charity Volunteers, Protected Area Professionals and from seeing on the ground engagement work in Greece and the UK. These are also in direct relation to accessing nature and green space and do not consider the full list of barriers when acclimatising to a new country. We must identify and address the barriers before we can create systemic change.

### **Cultural differences**

Walking for recreation is not universal and a part of all cultures. In some countries it is too hot or too cold to walk; or there isn't the infrastructure such as pavements. National Parks and green spaces aren't always accessible unless you are with a tour guide, as there are potentially dangerous animals. There can be a lack of cultural confidence, and negative associations with the outdoors that are rooted in a history of racial and class-based exclusion.

### **Language**

This plays a huge part in accessing and acclimatising to a new area. If you have limited language in the native tongue to the country, you are in then what information is around is inaccessible and you don't know where to look for the information. It can be very isolating when trying new experiences – which when moving to a new country, everything is new. Not just written and spoken language but body language too. When walking in a new country an individual might not pick up on social cues or the 'norm' in the new environment.

### **Transport**

Public transport is the way most of the displaced communities travel around their new local area. But it is expensive and therefore a luxury. In rural areas it is also often a limited service and does not allow access to all parts of a park or green space. Also not understanding how to access national parks and green spaces due to the inability to read timetables or ask directions due to language barriers.

### **Access and infrastructure**

Not understanding or being able to navigate the local environment whether it's understanding public rights of way or where is free and where you have to pay to visit. Not recognising infrastructure such as stiles or which gates are permitted to be used.

### **Racism and racial profiling**

The outdoors in the UK is still a predominantly white place and often people of colour feel as though they are singled out and self-conscious.

## **Feeling unwelcome/unsafe**

Many refugees do not have documents and are in long complex ordeals with the authorities to try and get their claim settled. When walking around in the outdoors you can feel like you become a target with only a matter of time until someone stops you, or that you feel self-conscious and that you don't belong.

## **Money**

In the UK refugees are given an allowance that only covers essential needs. This is for them to survive and leaves no room for recreation activities. There is no money to be able to buy train or bus tickets to travel to green spaces or, especially in the Winter, to be able to buy walking boots, a waterproof coat or other kit that would make a trip outdoors more enjoyable.

## **Time**

Refugees and asylum seekers do not have the same amount of free time that a lot of the local community have. Errands, activities, and admin all take so much more time. For example, signing up for the doctor and securing an appointment which might be straight forward for someone native can be a lengthy time costly process for an individual with no documentation, money or native language. There is no support system on hand to help – where someone who is local might have a mother or father to take on life admin tasks or you might have been signed up from birth to the local doctor – displaced communities do not have this luxury and must do everything themselves. If they can secure an appointment, it will often have taken weeks or months and be sent from one practice to the next with no answers. Again, leaving very little time for recreation.

## **Low Mental Health**

The displaced community battle with mental health struggles daily and when facing depression, anxiety and PTSD this has a knock-on effect as to how you live your daily life. It can leave you with very low motivation and the simplest of tasks become impossible.

## **Lack of family support**

There is no family structure or support network for individuals, in particularly for women, which means there is no help with childcare. This can often be very isolating and mean that individuals have even less free time to look at supporting their mental health and wellbeing. They are isolated and rely



**"IT'S SO GREAT TO SEE INDIVIDUALS OUT HERE TOGETHER"**  
**-GROUP LEADER**

**"WE ARE PATIENT AND WE LISTEN AND IT HELPS"**  
**- GROUP LEADER**

**"I GET AWAY FROM THE NOISE A LITTLE AND BE ABLE TO PRACTISE  
MY KNOWLEDGE"**  
**- GROUP PARTICIPANT**

**"I AM NOT USED TO WALKING DOWN A PATH, NORMALLY I WALK IN  
THE NIGHT AND UNDER THE TREES SO NOT TO BE SEEN"**  
**-GROUP PARTICIPANT**

**"WHEN I'M OUTSIDE, I FEEL LIGHT "**  
**- GROUP PARTICIPANT**

**"I NOTICE PEOPLE VISIBLY RELAX AND SMILE IN A RESPSONSE TO  
BEING AWAY FROM THE DAY TO DAY DIFFICULTIES OF BEING AN  
ASYLUM SEEKER"**  
**-GROUP LEADER**

**"THANKS TO THIS TRIP I HAVE CONFIDENCE "**  
**- GROUP PARTICIPANT**



## 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1. Attitude and outlook

Attitude and outlook are hugely important when engaging with vulnerable communities, especially in the outdoors, which is often an unknown place or can have negative connotations. Throughout these visits there have been three key themes across attitudes and outlook when engaging with vulnerable communities.

**Kindness** is the first place to start. We, not only as custodians of the countryside and green spaces, but as fellow human beings must do what we can to include everyone in our local communities. We must treat everyone with kindness – a basic human behaviour we learn from an early age. If we champion this kindness and compassion, then our communities will thrive again. *'Kindness also helps reduce stress and improve our emotional well-being'* [Kindness matters guide | Mental Health Foundation](#) This community have faced atrocities and uncertainty that a lot of humanity cannot begin to imagine, we must put kindness at the forefront of everything we do. We have a responsibility as Rangers; Educators; Policy makers; Sustainable Transport operators; Chief Executives to ensure that we are doing all we can to open green spaces to *everyone*.

**Patience** is the second key theme that is vital to embody. In modern day society when we are focussed on numbers and *big* numbers - trying to break KPI records year upon year trying to see how many more hundreds of people we can reach it's important to highlight that working with marginalised communities takes time and patience. The impact nature has on one individual can be just as powerful as a group. Vulnerable groups require a lot more trust and relationship building to begin to feel safe in green spaces.

**Empathy** has also been a constant across these visits. Putting yourself in someone else's shoes is so important in understanding how we can do more. It cannot be stressed enough how important it is to understand the needs and feelings of others and where they're coming from, as this then helps practitioners in green spaces to see the outdoors through a different lens.

### 4.2. Approaches - Building a solid foundation

#### Outreach

This is a very common practice when engaging with new user groups in the outdoors. Partnership working and working as a team is also extremely important when creating change – we are stronger as a team. There are organisations across local, county and National level that befriend refugees and asylum seekers. Start by finding local charities that connect and support them as these charities are already trusted and understand the needs of these individuals. These charities have built up a relationship and provide services such as English lessons and access to food banks often in a safe place such as a Church or Community centre that is a trusted environment. Start by offering an initial conversation with the charities to introduce yourself and the green space you work in. Have they been before as a group? What has stopped them coming before? Would a walk be suitable or maybe an

activity such as crafting or habitat restoration? Do they work with families or individuals?

### **Personalisation**

It's important to personalise visits depending on who you are working with. An approach is dependent on so many factors including what barriers the group are facing and the way to combat this is to ask questions, open the dialogue and keep talking. These conversations will come as you begin to build the relationship with the community group.

### **Initially reach out to charities that befriend asylum seekers and refugees**

There is a very passionate network of charities and organisations that are doing brilliant work to befriend refugees and asylum seekers and guide them through the asylum process, teach English, acclimatise to the new culture and provide contacts to other support such as food banks and lawyers and generally help them navigate the asylum process. Charities will know the needs of refugees and asylum seekers locally and will be a point of contact and trust for displaced communities. These groups are a huge resource and are often looking for ways to help the communities settle into their new surroundings and are very keen to work together. A simple internet search to see what charities are in your area is a great place to start and send a personalised email to those charity contacts saying you want to open green spaces to the group and how can you help them visit the National Park/Landscape.

### **Build a relationship with a key contact of someone that the group trusts**

Having one contact within a charity/organisation makes for a much more streamlined cohesive approach. It allows you to have one to one conversation and really have an in depth understanding of a person and how they work. This person often will be someone that has direct connections with the group as they will act as a familiar face for the group and really understand each individual and their needs. The trusted key contact will help raise morale and motivation amongst the group and encourage

### **Take your green space to the group**

This is a great place to start – visiting their centre or safe place where groups meet with a charity to learn English or pick up food parcels works really well to introduce yourself and your national park/landscape. Taking games, activity sheets, translated leaflets and nature artefacts into their familiar place is a great introduction. This was particularly useful because skulls, skins, models and visuals are universal and easier to interpret and recognise.

### **Walk in nature near their safe space**

After a session inside it's good to look at green spaces nearby to them. What will the group be able to access more easily? A local park or Common; a sea front or just walking outside for recreation in the town. This will build confidence in walking in the outdoors and the local surroundings and community. Engage with volunteers of the charity to start these walks and conversations so that after you leave there is that awareness and confidence to walk in the local neighbourhood.



### **Start small engage with a small group**

It doesn't matter how small or big the group is. Getting people out in nature who don't feel it is for them is powerful and important. Three people or twenty-three people, opening up green spaces to anybody and everybody is important.

### **Be prepared to change dates/days**

Low mental health including suicidal thoughts and PTSD are rife throughout displaced communities and this has an impact on attendance of visits. The tumultuous changes with legislation can affect whether people have the headspace to take part in recreational activities. Anxiety can be crippling and leave individuals feeling helpless and feel like they have no way out, and this can be debilitating and can change in an instant. With one phone call/text it can change a whole person's existence and therefore commitment can be transient to visits and planned activities. This does not mean that the visit should not be run again – it can be postponed.

**Solution:** Offer a couple of alternative dates/days when planning a visit and include any other organisations in these conversations e.g. caterers, minibus hires. Explain the situation and who you're working with and ask for understanding and flexibility.

### **Weather will impact visits**

Refugee and asylum seekers have limited clothing and footwear options. Often only owning one pair of shoes means that mud and rain can prove a huge barrier as washing facilities at hotels and houses can be minimal. So not wanting to ruin their only shoes is a really big thing to think about.

**Solution:** Have a bank of wellies or walking boots and waterproofs that can be used for visits and then returned. Or run visits in the Spring/Summer when the weather hopefully is more reliable.

### **Run visits in areas with good phone signal**

This can be tricky depending on your surroundings but it's something to consider adapting on a visit. Start low key and nearer to villages or train stations. There is a very intensive rigorous process asylum seekers face that involves lots of communication with the authorities and often at a moment's notice will need to take phone calls from lawyers. If a visit is in an area with phone signal it allows people to take calls and still be a part of the visit.

**Solution:** Run activities in different areas of the park closer to civilisation. Ask what providers the group generally use or what the volunteers use and scope out areas that your work provider covers. Have a bank of sites that you know have reliable phone signal.

### **Have several different options for activities**

It doesn't just have to be about education and formalities. With language barriers you need to welcome people and build up that safe space first. It can be about enjoyment and physical activity too. It can be handy to have a frisbee or tennis ball and don't bombard with information. Visits often can be about just being in a natural space and in the outdoors and the feelings of being free and in nature. Allowing time and space for people to sit with their feelings, chat with friends and experience the countryside.

### Not just walks

There are lots of options that begin to open as you develop a working relationship with a community group. A sense of team building through tree planting and conservation tasks including invasive species removal. These activities can offer a real sense of achievement and can build on a person's confidence.

**Solution:** Refugee and asylum seekers can volunteer; it helps build experience in the country and when applying for right to remain can help with applications and experience.

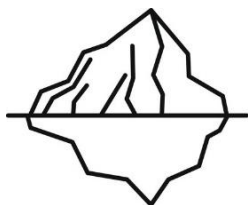
### Transport

Public transport is a huge barrier to accessing green spaces and providing an accessible, affordable service to navigate out green spaces should be a number one priority for Protected Areas. This will allow individuals to make decisions that help the environment and enable freedom in the outdoors. Currently the options to travel through nationally designated landscapes are often limited to owning a vehicle and this must not be the norm.

**Solution:** Where you can provide transportation options, whether that's budgeting for a minibus or car sharing. In an ideal scenario look at public transport options. Find a bus stop or train station and run your visit from there. This enables the group to acclimatise to their new local area and builds confidence. It also aids in longevity of visits and being able to benefit from

## 4.3. Tools

There are some useful tools that are helpful when running inclusive visits:



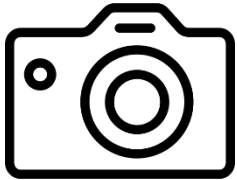
**Ice breakers:** These are a great way to introduce each other and welcome people to a space. Often starting brief by passing something around like a tennis ball or a pinecone and inviting people to say their name and what country they are from. Important to welcome everyone and include those from the native country too to show everyone is the same and everyone is welcoming each other. As the visits progress this activity can change but sometimes there is a high turnover in displaced communities, and you will often see new faces so it is a really good place to start.



**Google translate:** Any language translation app is extremely helpful and often translations can be downloaded in advance. Some apps you can speak into, and it will translate directly for you and play it out in the chosen language, you might only need a word or a phrase. The main languages of the group can be determined before or as the relationship develops and you begin to get to know the community. Translation apps are widely used throughout the refugee and asylum seeker community and are so beneficial when communicating – and can also be a great ice breaker.



**Emojis:** Another way of communicating that is easy and readily available is through emojis. When explaining local wildlife and pointing to things in person as you are on a walk and in the environment, it can be useful to have a note on your phone open and be able to directly write in picture form. It can be a quick way to communicate the words you are trying to talk about. Whether it's a mushroom or a tree, a badger or fox, it enables you to communicate what you're trying to convey.



**Downloaded or printed photos:** A great way to engage about the local area and landscape is to have some pre downloaded or printed images. It is best if you can search them on your phone there and then as it enables flexibility and you never know what species might come up! But if you have a bank of images of local wildlife and their name in English it can really help, bring a place to life and help start conversations.



**Tea and coffee:** Hot drinks are universal and a real bonding point and time to relax and share. They provide a good break point and a chance to have a relaxed conversation with people. Also, an energy boost if you have been walking or tree planting and need a moment to pause and re-group.



**Picnics (be culturally aware):** Food is universal and can bring people together so quickly. It is a huge part of Eastern cultures to share food and eat together and that is no different in Western culture too. But make sure to be inclusive. Introduce English culture and practises but be aware and inclusive of others. Picnics and a break for lunch enable relaxed conversation.

“

**"BEING  
SURROUNDED BY  
NATURE HAS  
GREATLY HELPED  
MY MENTAL  
WELL-BEING."**

”

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

There are currently 12.4 million refugees across Europe, experiencing trauma with devastating consequences and made to feel unwelcome in society and we as protected areas can help change that. We know how much green spaces and nature can provide support for our physical and mental health and yet those that need it most are often unable to benefit. We speak so often about being inclusive and ensuring that all parts of our society can feel included in the outdoors, and we can play such a pivotal part in creating these inclusive spaces for all to benefit from.

To have truly cohesive inclusive spaces in the outdoors we must put our communities first by asking what works for them. We must ask questions about how we can support our refugee and asylum seeker communities and must always work with patience and empathy. It is no good and there is no point in assuming we have the answers and assuming we know how green spaces look for everyone. We must be adaptable and flexible in our ways of working and the approaches we take. This study has outlined the barriers to the outdoors which we must remain aware of and take into account not just when running visits but when navigating our parks online and in person. We must ask questions and continue to hold ourselves accountable and strive to be better.

We have a responsibility as custodians of the outdoors to ensure that everyone feels represented, seen and safe in green spaces. This study outlines what practical steps can be taken to begin that relationship with refugee communities and empower groups to feel confident navigating green spaces – both urban and rural. We must question policies and push for **sustainable transport to be a priority**, for both the benefit of people and nature.

I hope this study will act as confidence and capacity building for other organisations and individuals for them to use to help them work with groups that don't feel the outdoors represents them.

This study has already been used internally having presented it to our wider engagement team that also run outreach projects as well as a learning session for the wider authority. It will act as the basis to begin to create a network of practitioners that want to or are already engaging with this community. The aim is for this network to be a space for people to share good news stories and best practice and give those that want to a space to discuss how we can continue to do better and open our green spaces so all.

This study has been used as the basis for a workshop on how rangers are engaging with refugee and asylum seeker communities at the World Ranger Congress 2024 and a panel on inclusivity.

### 5.1. Summary of recommendations

- \* Be open minded, patient and empathetic in your approach
- \* Work in partnership: If you are a protected area practitioner and want to start engaging with this community, look online in your local area at charities that befriend refugees and asylum seekers and ask the question – how can we make our green space accessible for you?

- \* Don't always work the same way you always have done; just because a session has a structure for a school group doesn't mean it needs to be delivered the same way but a session can have the same content and theme.
- \* Assess the needs locally to your area. Your groups might not be facing the same barriers that have been addressed in this report. Being sure to address them and seeing what can be done on a group-by-group basis is essential.
- \* Phones and technology can be a great tool to accessing the outdoors – too often phones are dismissed as something we shouldn't think of or use when in nature but they can be a really good tool to helping people engage with nature. Whether it's through photography or video, accessing a translator app, navigating on a map app or buying train tickets, they're useful and a really good tool. They can also be a safety net for those in new experiences or joining a new group and can make someone feel less self-conscious.
- \* Having a bank of outdoor appropriate clothing is useful and can really assist groups in getting outside and allow you to work with more groups. But also looking at what equipment and resources you can source for the group to keep. If they are able to keep their own binoculars/boots/rain coats it allows them to continue the activity after the session has ended and builds confidence and legacy.
- \* When writing grant proposals or looking at your budgets for visits always try and factor in either travel or subsistence as navigating rural areas can be extremely costly for individuals and often impossible on public transport.
- \* **Accessible, affordable public transport should be a huge priority for protected areas.**



## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone that has made this project everything I hoped it would be and more. The warmth, kindness and passion has been overwhelming, and I will remember it forever.

To the people in the field and on the ground, behind the scenes and leading from the front making space for marginalised communities in the outdoors, I commend you and I have learnt so much.

To Organisation Earth, Ecogenia and Refugee Week Greece thank you for your time, generosity, and knowledge and for all the amazing work you do in local communities in a time of crisis – you are brilliant, and I can't wait to continue to share your story for the months and years to come.

To EUROPARC Federation and the Alfred Toepfer Stiftung F.V.S for giving me the scholarship and trusting me with this opportunity. I am hugely proud that the Federation recognise the importance of this work and want to highlight what can be done in Protected Areas across Europe to help some of our most vulnerable communities. It's been a very special project, and I can't thank you enough.

To Southampton and Winchester Visitors Group for their continued support and passion for welcoming everyone to our community. To my New Forest Family - I couldn't have done this without you. Particularly a huge shout of thanks to my manager Gillie and also to Jim, a real champion of inclusivity both in and out of the forest (and for sending me the link to the Europarc application!)

And last but not least, to my partner Jamie – for your endless patience, for listening to everything and for looking after the dog!

## Toolkit & Resources

Links to refugee and asylum seeker charities. All include helpful resources around legislation, welfare, health and wellbeing advice and how to support this community:

### [UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency | UNHCR](#)

Safe guarding the rights and well-being of people forced to flee for over 70 years. 'Our vision is a world where every person forced to flee can build a better future.' Established by the General Assembly of the UN in 1950 in the aftermath of the Second World War.

### [Homepage - Refugee Council](#)

Championing the rights of refugees. Refugee Council provides specialist help and advice to refugees. They pride themselves on having an in-depth understanding of their needs and challenges this community face. They work through campaigning and raising awareness as well as through research, policy and advocacy.

### [Home - Refugee Action](#)

Refugee Action help refugees who've survived some of the world's worst regimes. Help getting this community basic support and help them to build safe, happy and productive lives in the UK.

### [www.unicef.org.uk/](#)

Unicef provide Nutrition and life saving food, education, emergency relief from children and water, sanitation and hygiene as well as vaccines. They work across Afghanistan, Gaza, Lebanon, Sudan Ukraine.

### [NACCOM - The No Accommodation Network](#)

NACCOM produced a strategy and theory of change and has been building a network to increase the strength of accommodation they are able to offer. They continue to campaign for and support the implementation of plans to prevent and end destitution caused by the immigration systems. NACCOM put people with lived experience at the core of what they do.

### [Women for Refugee Women](#)

A charity that support women who are seeking safety from persecution in the UK. Their aims are to build confidence, skills and connections in person and online. They offer a number of different classes and activities.

### [Home - Southampton & Winchester Visitors Group](#)

A local group to the New Forest that befriend refugees and asylum seekers and helps them access local services such as food banks, English lessons, lawyers, doctors' surgeries and provides a local community place to connect with others.

# Engaging with refugee communities as a protected area practitioner

## Attitude and Outlook

As protected area practitioners we must remain kind, compassionate and patient. Go back to basic human behaviours and treat others with kindness. Put yourself in someone else's shoes and understand the needs and feelings of others.

## Personalisation

What works for one group doesn't work for all groups or even all individuals within that same group. We must adapt and be flexible with how we offer sessions/walks/activities.

Offering different length walks, or the change to just sit and be in nature rather than walking.

## Tools



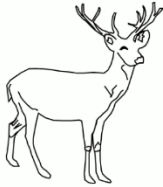
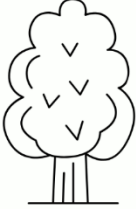

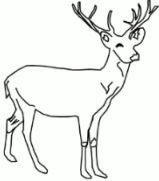



Using ice breakers; Google Translate; Emojis; Downloaded/printed photos or physical artefacts; tea/coffee and refreshments; picnics; physical maps; mobile phones; volunteers to support your session so there's more capacity to have 1:1 conversations

## Trust

This community have been through extreme adversity and are living in a new often intimidating environment. Trusting new people takes time, so try having a consistent group lead and someone that can be a familiar friendly face. Work with someone this group trusts at their charity.

## Small steps

These relationships take time. Working with new communities requires dedication and patience. It also requires a lot of empathy and an understanding that group sizes will sometimes be small, but that does not make this work any less valid. Even if a group is only four people, that's still four people that have benefited so greatly from being outside.

 <p>PIG СВИНЯ</p>	 <p>LEAF ЛИСТОК</p>	 <p>HEDGEHOG ЇЖАК</p>	 <p>DEER ОЛЕНЬ</p>
 <p>MUSHROOM ГРИБ</p>	 <p>TREE ДЕРЕВО</p>	 <p>BAT КАЖАН</p>	 <p>FOREST ЛІС</p>
 <p>PIG _____</p>	 <p>LEAF _____</p>	 <p>HEDGEHOG _____</p>	 <p>DEER _____</p>
 <p>MUSHROOM _____</p>	 <p>TREE _____</p>	 <p>BAT _____</p>	 <p>FOREST _____</p>
 <p>PIG لحم الخنزير</p>	 <p>LEAF برعم</p>	 <p>HEDGEHOG القنفذ</p>	 <p>DEER أيل</p>
 <p>MUSHROOM نبت فجأة</p>	 <p>TREE شجرة</p>	 <p>BAT خفاش</p>	 <p>FOREST غابة</p>

Greek

Arabic



# Session planning

The session that O.E ran was around growing your own produce and nature connection. There were elements of science and biology as well as mindfulness but at the heart of the session it was about just being outdoors and together which is the most important part.



Choose a subject or activity that enables lots of different aspects of involvement.



Have lots of visual and physical props - when there is a language barrier photos and props are very helpful.



Run a 'Drop-in' style session with regular breaks and chances to relax and chat informally.



Playing games creates a friendly atmosphere - try picture games or group discussions around a theme EG. how do plants grow?



Use of phones to be seen as a good thing - they can be a sense of safety for some people and act as a translator.