

HENAM · CASE STUDY

The Intersection of Nature Therapy, Land Art and Ecotourism

The Case Study of the Nyimi Nyugi Nature Trail

PREPARED BY

Viktória Soós, Psychologist
Imagine Green Association

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Contents

01 Introduction 3

02 Nature Deficit Syndrome 4

03 The Beneficial Effects of Nature 6

04 Nature & Therapy 7

05 The Relationship Between Nature Therapy and Sustainability Mindset 7

06 Ecotourism 8

07 A Nature Therapy Trail as an Ecotourism Destination 9

08 Case Study 10

09 Participatory Planning 11

10 Steps of the Participatory Planning Process in Theory and Practice 12

01

Introduction

As a consequence of modern urban lifestyles, the amount of time spent in nature has drastically decreased, while anxiety, burnout and depression are increasing worldwide (WHO, 2022). The use of smart devices (especially social media platforms that generate unrealistic expectations) creates additional cognitive and emotional overload, contributing to mental health problems (Twenge et al, 2019) . Modern communication tools, streaming services and similar technologies, as well as the fragmentation of communities, have reduced time spent in nature even among people living closer to it, for example in rural areas.

In Nyim, a village of 317 inhabitants and the seat of the Imagine Green Association, we can also observe the tendency that residents gather less frequently, the use of community spaces is decreasing (or such spaces become economically unsustainable and therefore close), and participation in community events is declining. According to municipal employees and several local association members and leaders, the situation has worsened particularly since COVID:

> *"It is as if during COVID people learned that they can be alone with a phone or a TV within four walls," as one of them put it.*

However, this phenomenon undermines participatory processes, weakens collective dialogue on common issues and, naturally, harms mental health, since social interaction and connection are fundamental pillars of psychological well-being.



Eco-workshop with Ukrainian students

In Hungary, several mental health indicators are less favourable than the EU average, which is compounded by significant shortcomings in the quality and accessibility of the care system. There is a shortage of publicly funded professionals, while private services are affordable only for the middle and upper classes (a one-hour session with a psychologist starts at around HUF 15,000, and fees of HUF 20,000 per hour are not uncommon).

Therefore, there is a clear need to explore and apply alternative approaches which, although they cannot fully resolve the above-mentioned systemic problems, may help to alleviate them. One such possible alternative is nature therapy and its creative applications.

02

Nature Deficit Syndrome

The concept that distancing ourselves from nature leads to mental health problems was brought into public awareness by writer Richard Louv under the term “nature deficit syndrome.” Although it is not a medical diagnosis, numerous studies have since confirmed the negative effects of spending less time in nature.

In his book *Last Child in the Woods*, Louv focuses primarily on children, arguing that they increasingly spend their free time indoors—mostly in front of screens, or otherwise in structured extracurricular activities. The decline in time spent outdoors in nature is well documented both in research and through personal observations and interviews.

For example, a trail marker painter in Somogy County reported that fewer and fewer people go hiking nowadays, which is evident from overgrown and “untrodden” hiking trails. While adults may still participate in organised hikes, their children tend to “drop out” around adolescence. Weekend family hiking as a form of leisure activity is gradually disappearing.

As this is a global phenomenon, research also supports these observations. In the United States, for instance, the proportion of families engaging in regular outdoor excursions has decreased by 25% over the past decade. The European Outdoor Recreation Network reports similar trends in Europe, attributing them to urban lifestyles, increased screen time, the growth of organised competitive sports and academic workload, as well as changing social norms.

As a result, very little time remains for hiking—or even for unstructured play, which is crucial for children’s development.



Working with natural materials - workshop organised by Imagine Green and partner, Tered

The importance of unstructured play has been emphasised by several Hungarian psychologists, including Tamás Vekerdy:

> *"Parents buy into the nonsense that we live in a performance-driven world, and that if you want the best for your child, you need 'top-manager training already in kindergarten'! Companies arrive at preschools, pull children out of free play and take them off to 'train'—horse riding, swimming, English lessons... which is completely abnormal. A brilliant top manager does not grow out of early top-manager training in kindergarten. Rather, it grows out of being allowed to be a full-fledged child in kindergarten, with plenty of movement, free play and daily storytelling."*



Participatory planning workshop at the association's site

The best setting for free and unstructured play is nature itself, which offers endless opportunities for creativity. Although children may be outdoors, modern playgrounds typically provide functions and play options that are predefined by adults. Over time, children may lose the ability to engage meaningfully with "unstructured" nature.

Yet free play in natural environments contributes to better mental health. Its additional "side effects" include reduced anxiety, increased self-confidence, the development of resilience, and improved executive functioning.

The above developments have led to an interesting phenomenon: psychologists increasingly view nature as a "therapeutic tool" in our time—something that clients need to rediscover in order to support their mental well-being.

03

The Beneficial Effects of Nature

Although it has been known for centuries that when we face emotional difficulties, taking a walk—preferably in nature—is one of the best remedies, modern research has also explored the biological and psychological foundations of this wisdom.

There is now scientific evidence supporting the following effects: time spent in nature reduces stress, promotes improved mood and emotional stability, alleviates depressive symptoms, enhances cognitive functioning, and even improves memory and creativity.



Birdbox at the association's premises

These effects are discussed in several theoretical frameworks, including Ulrich's Stress Reduction Theory, Kaplan and Kaplan's Attention Restoration Theory (which argues that time

spent in nature restores attentional capacity because natural environments do not overload the prefrontal cortex and require only "soft fascination"), and Wilson's Biophilia Hypothesis, which states that connection to nature is an innate human need and that without it, a form of psychological deprivation emerges.

Moreover, we do not need excessive exposure: research suggests that as little as 120 minutes per week spent in nature can measurably improve health and well-being.

04

Nature & Therapy

For these reasons, it is no coincidence that an increasing number of psychologists, mental health professionals and coaches—also in Hungary—are working with nature as a therapeutic "tool."

Of course, this direction is not entirely new. Nature-based or similar healing practices have long been used worldwide, such as forest bathing, originating in Japan, which has also gained popularity in Hungary.

In recent years, the development of nature connection has become increasingly popular in Hungary, and longer training programmes for nature-connection facilitators are now available. The aim of such programmes is to preserve physical and mental health and to strengthen the relationship with nature. These programmes may take place individually or in groups, and their duration can range from a few hours to several days.

05

The Relationship Between Nature Therapy and Sustainability Mindset

Being in nature and connecting with it not only has a positive impact on physical and mental health, but also strengthens ecological and sustainability-oriented attitudes. Those who feel more connected to nature tend to engage in more environmentally conscious behaviours (such as selective waste collection, energy conservation and nature protection), and their willingness to help others and participate in community activities also increases (Mareques da Costa, Kallay, 2020).

In this way, by using nature "as a tool," we can achieve multiple positive outcomes. Moreover, in rural settings, nature is immediately and constantly "at hand."

06

Ecotourism

Many villages in Hungary operate with extremely limited budgets and therefore seek alternative sources of income. Ecotourism presents an obvious opportunity: offering natural attractions and local services that can be maintained with relatively modest resources, thereby generating revenue.

According to Greendex.hu,

> *Ecotourism is a form of tourism that represents responsible and sustainable travel to destinations where flora, fauna and cultural heritage are the primary attractions. In addition, ecotourism significantly contributes to the understanding, appreciation and preservation of the environment and culture.*

The main advantages of this form of tourism include the development of cultural and environmental awareness, the minimisation of tourism's harmful environmental impacts, job creation, economic growth and the mitigation of local unemployment.

"While mass tourism aims to attract large crowds through popular attractions and infrastructure, ecotourism focuses on providing meaningful and sustainable experiences for smaller groups of visitors."

The village of Nyim, which serves as the seat of the Imagine Green Association, also faces financial constraints, yet it possesses significant local assets. Its natural beauty and proximity to Lake Balaton make it an ideal ecotourism destination; however, it has not yet "been put on the map." For this reason, the mayor's office has set the objective of establishing places worth visiting that would attract hikers, horse riders, cyclists and families arriving by car for day trips from the surrounding region. A key priority is to move toward ecotourism attractions and services, as the residents do not wish to promote unsustainable mass tourism or loud festivals—nor is Nyim currently suited for such developments.

In addition to its natural beauty, an important resource of the village is its highly motivated and enthusiastic community. Although they represent a minority within the overall population, they nevertheless create significant local value. Several local civil organisations operate in the village, including both long-established residents and newcomers who have settled there.

07

A Nature Therapy Trail as an Ecotourism Destination

Through a small grant (TESCO support of HUF 500,000), an opportunity emerged in 2023 to collaborate on a joint project in which the Imagine Green Association initiated the creation of a nature therapy trail. The concept was to develop a trail on the outskirts of the village that would combine ecotourism with nature therapy. The idea was inspired by the Olari Health Trail presented by Finnish partners within the URBACT Health & Greenspace project, which Viktória Soós had become familiar with.

The Olari Health Trail is a nature-based trail located in Central Park of Espoo, offering visitors more health-promoting natural experiences than an average nature trail. Along the approximately 2.4 km route, which includes eight checkpoints, visitors encounter an exercise at each stop. The exercises were designed with three main target groups of the trail in mind. They encourage hikers to observe, explore and experience the many health benefits of nature, ranging from mental well-being to improved physical condition. For children, the trail provides memorable learning experiences; for those less familiar with forest environments, it offers guidance on building a personal connection with nature and gaining new knowledge. For individuals seeking health benefits, the exercises along the route create a pause in everyday life, helping them reconnect with the sensations of body and mind.

In Nyim, the goal was to bring together the various civil actors of the village and provide them with the opportunity to co-create a nature therapy trail through a participatory planning process. The objective was not only to establish the trail itself, but also to strengthen the local community, enabling the realisation of further joint projects in the future. This is how the “Nyimi Nyugi” Nature Therapy Trail was born.

08

Case Study

The Nyimi Nyugi Nature Therapy Trail

The “Nyimi Nyugi” Nature Therapy Trail invites visitors to take a pleasant 5-kilometre walk among the rolling hills of Somogy County. With its seven stops and corresponding exercises, the trail encourages visitors to step out of their everyday routines and focus solely on themselves and the surrounding landscape.

Along the walk, visitors are given tasks that support reflection, stress reduction and inner calm.



A stop at Nyimi Nyugi trail

The trail was created through a five-session participatory planning process, during which local residents discussed what kinds of stations they would like to establish along the route. The “adopters” of each station—its creators—developed the detailed concepts for their respective stops. A local graphic designer, Fanni Sall, designed the visual identity and the information boards, while an illustrator created the graphics for the panels.

The trail has proven to be highly successful: within a year, it has been viewed by thousands of users on Google Maps. Local camp organisers and yoga instructors use it as part of their programmes, either as a camp activity or as a tool for meditation.



A stop at Nyimi Nyugi trail

09

Participatory Planning

In the case of the Nyimi Nyugi Nature Therapy Trail, the keys to success were the following:

Gaining the Support of the Local Municipality

Particularly in smaller settlements and rural villages, it is essential to secure the support and involvement of the local municipality. For this reason, we began with this step in Nyim as well. As we had already participated in several municipal projects—including international URBACT projects—and maintained a strong relationship with the Association of Climate-Friendly Municipalities, we had both the theoretical knowledge and practical experience required.

We were well aware that local leadership knows best whom else to involve, can assist in designating the locations of the nature therapy stations, coordinate with landowners, and provide venues and tools for collaborative work. Without the municipality's support, numerous obstacles may arise in a small settlement, which are difficult to overcome alone. It is advisable to begin from the municipality's needs—clarifying what our project and organisation can offer to the local community—understanding long-term strategic objectives and aligning project ideas accordingly so that different initiatives reinforce one another. In Nyim's case, we learned that the municipality had long been considering an ecotourism-oriented direction but had not been able to move forward due to a lack of funding and project opportunities.

Gaining the Support of the Local Community

It is difficult to implement a project alone; therefore, it is crucial to involve local residents and initiate actions not merely for them, but together with them. Almost every settlement has civil

organisations, and it is worth learning about their visions before presenting one's own. In Nyim, we were able to involve several civil organisations in the joint work, including the Nyim Village Beautification Association, the Nyim Heritage Association, the Tered Experience Workshop, the Nyim Eco-Community and the Áramszünet Community Space.

Facilitating the Participatory Planning Process

Participatory planning has become an increasingly popular concept worldwide, and many municipalities attempt to apply it—with varying degrees of success. In Hungary, especially in rural contexts, it is still relatively new, and the facilitation skills required to conduct a successful participatory process are often lacking.

Participatory planning means that stakeholders are genuinely involved in the planning process from its earliest stages. A key element is activating and engaging local stakeholders and communities in developing a shared vision and strategy that truly reflects the needs, perspectives and priorities of the community.

In Hungary, a dominant pattern has long been that "those in charge will decide" what is best for residents. Unfortunately, this mindset can still be observed today. However, without understanding and consulting the needs of the population, a settlement cannot be developed effectively or sustainably. Decisions imposed on residents without prior consultation are unlikely to remain sustainable in the long term. In contrast, by involving residents, initiatives and projects become something they feel ownership of, fostering a sense of responsibility that greatly facilitates the municipality's work later on and saves considerable resources. Therefore, it is essential to broaden traditional decision-making frameworks and ensure that participatory planning allows space for everyone's involvement.

During the planning of the Nyimi Nyugi Trail, we widely advertised each session and scheduled them at a time (Sunday at 4 p.m.) that was convenient for most people. As a result, 16–20 participants regularly attended from the village's total population of 317.

Our general experience was that the participatory planning process itself was almost more important than the final outcome of the project. It can be understood as long-term team building, and the committed "core group" that implemented the trail can be relied upon for future projects as well, such as the Healing Nature and Mind through Land Art (HENAM) project.

10

Steps of the Participatory Planning Process in Theory and Practice

1 **Find a credible (preferably local) facilitator.**

It was important for us to select local facilitators, relying on Nyim's own resources. This helped build trust and "validate" the process within the community.

2 **Get on the same page.**

Present the objective of the joint work clearly and in detail. It is essential to use language that everyone can understand and to avoid typical project or funding jargon.

3 **Brainstorm together.**

While the overall goal—the idea of creating a nature trail—was already defined, decisions about which stations to include and what the route should be emerged from collective brainstorming.



Participatory planning of the trail

4 **Foster a sense of ownership.**

In order to avoid potential conflicts or excessively prolonged discussions, we decided that each station would be "adopted" by an organisation or a group of individuals. These adopters discussed the content of their station among themselves and presented only the finalised concept to the larger group for discussion. This resulted in a far more efficient process than if everyone had contributed to every station. It also prevented the more dominant voices—often present at workshops and similar events—from overshadowing others.

Establishing a sense of ownership was equally important for future maintenance: the adopters also assumed responsibility for maintaining their stations after the project had officially concluded.

5 Build together.

Participants walked the route of the trail together several times. These shared walks created further opportunities for getting to know one another and for team building. According to participants, such occasions had not occurred in many years—the last comparable experience they recalled was preparing together for the regatta competition in Siófok.



Walk along the route of the trail

6 Celebrate the result with an opening event.

At the conclusion of the project, the participants organised a joint opening ceremony and an inaugural walk along the trail, which turned into a day filled with positive atmosphere and shared celebration.



Opening walk of the trail



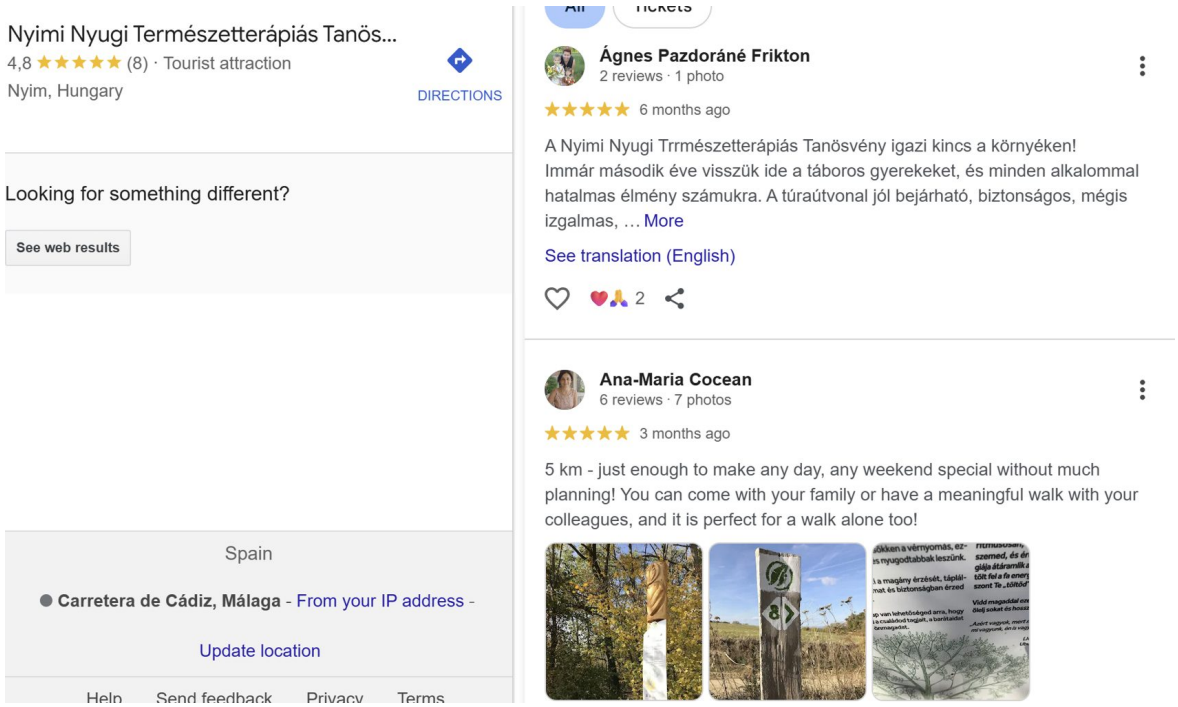
Doing yoga together on the opening day of the trail

To ensure a positive atmosphere, we provided food and drinks at every session. Many participants also contributed homemade cakes, which further strengthened the sense of community.

The result of the project was a well-known and widely appreciated nature trail, used not only by local residents but also as a basis for services built around it (such as autumn yoga and walking sessions, or summer camp days for children).

7 **If we create a physical location, we must also ensure its online presence.**

The trail was added to several hiking-related websites as well as to Google Maps. Since its launch, it has been viewed online by thousands of users. Municipal staff have also confirmed that more visitors have come to the village since the attraction became discoverable online.



Nyimi Nyugi trail on Google Maps

8 **Monitor the afterlife of the created project.**

Our association regularly follows how and by whom the trail is being used, observing its ongoing impact and utilisation within the community and beyond.



Event organized on the trail



Winter yoga event on the trail

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Prepared by	Viktória Soós, Psychologist, Imagine Green Association

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