

How Lahti is using biodiversity to improve the living environment

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KEY POINTS

► **The Nature Step to Health programme, implemented in the Finnish city of Lahti and its surrounding county, brings together local authorities, researchers, businesses and schools. It is a great example of a multi-year strategy and plan to promote healthy, sustainable eating, physical activity, active mobility and contact with nature.**

Since 2022, the city and university of Lahti, together with the social, health and emergency services of Päijät-Häme county (population 220,000), have been following a 10-year regional programme to address the complexity of environmental and health issues: Nature Step to Health. The strategy of these three institutions aligns with the national policy to reflect an awareness of interconnected challenges, such as fighting climate change, biodiversity loss and chronic non-communicable diseases with a commitment to Planetary Health. Created in partnership with the national institutes of health, the environment and natural resources, the Nature Step to Health programme brings together a range of stakeholders: public authorities, higher education and research institutions (the University of Helsinki, Lahti-Lappeenranta University of Technology, etc.), businesses (particularly in the agrifood sector) and local communities. The programme requires coordination and collaboration between these stakeholders, and focuses on four major objectives: promoting healthy and sustainable eating, increasing physical activity and active mobility, improving the living environment, including biodiversity, and encouraging contact with nature. Cooperation is now happening

on an international scale, with support from the European branch of the Planetary Health Alliance^{1, 2}; the People and Planet conference³, organised by the Lahti campus of Helsinki University, brought together 200 participants from several countries.

A “forest for health”

A wide range of actions and initiatives are designed to deliver the objectives of Nature Step to Health for different population groups. A number of day nurseries in Lahti offer activities in nature, particularly in the nearby forests and parks. Kaisla, a “mobile nature school”, is helping schools to take their classes outdoors. Situated next to the hospital in Lahti, a “forest for health” offers patients, employees and local residents the chance to experience nature – the public can also visit on guided tours.

The general idea is to infuse the four themes as widely as possible into everyone’s daily lives. Secondary school pupils and students can take summer courses. The programme supports Masters students working in this field, improving results and developing the aspirations of young people. Nursery school teachers can follow a course on diet and growth. Another example is the professional training given to managers of green spaces, which includes specific modules on renaturing and landscaping.

A wide campaign to share these initiatives and resources has helped to secure funding in the four areas of Nature Step to Health. The various projects, each involving around thirty participants, are being supported by European Union funds earmarked for the Climate Neutral and Smart Cities mission, as part of the Horizon 2020 programme. Lahti is one of six Urban Well-being Labs (like Versailles in France) supported by the €10.5 million European project GoGreenRoutes⁴, which aims to strengthen links with nature. It is in this context that the forest for health near the central hospital has been developed. This is part of a continuum, with GoGreenNext⁵ being the current step, providing €6 million

to fund pilot projects that create ecosystems conducive to health and well-being, founded in nature-based solutions.

Meanwhile, in the Lahti region, active mobility is making progress thanks to the Systemic Change Towards Sustainable Commuting (SYCLA) project, delivering bicycle parking, changing rooms and more cycle routes. In schools, a variety of initiatives are driving forward the Planetary Health diet, which is based on national recommendations for the composition of children’s meals. Finally, food technology and nutrition courses are being given to secondary school pupils. ■

1. Planetary Health is the health of human civilisation and the state of the systems on which it depends. (Editor’s note.)

2. Consortium of 420 universities, NGOs, research institutes and government bodies from over 70 countries. (Editor’s note.)

3. <https://use.metropolis.org/people-and-planet-from-theory-to-solutions>

4. <https://gogreenroutes.eu>

5. <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101157209/fr>

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