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NATURE AND HEALTH IN THE NORDPLUS PROJECT HEALING GREENERY CONTEXT: INSIGHTS FROM STUDENT REFLECTIONS

Kadri Maikov[1],

[1]*Estonian University of Life Sciences*

Abstract. The article explores the relationship between nature and health as an integrated system in which nature is an active agent in shaping well-being. The NordPlus *Healing Greenery* project intensive week course offers participants experience and knowledge in applying Green Care methods across various fields through different course topics each year. A key focus is placed on the intentional use of nature as a therapeutic and professional tool. Although the health benefits of nature are widely recognised, students' limited exposure to natural environments represents a significant concern that may negatively affect well-being and reduce engagement with nature-based health approaches. Practices such as forest therapy, horticultural therapy, and animal-assisted therapy illustrate how natural environments can be systematically applied to support health and well-being. Based on five years of feedback from 123 students, it becomes evident that the impact of nature on human health is multidimensional, ranging from mental restoration and stress reduction to physical development and social cohesion. The questionnaire gathers essay-form feedback via Google Surveys. Responses are reviewed, analysed, organised, and summarised using NotebookLM. The article presents descriptive findings enriched with students' comments, such as "*I discovered how important the natural environment is for maintaining mental health and how forests, parks and green spaces can be used for therapeutic purposes*" (Student, 2025). Figures are visualised by the author via Napkin.ai. The results show the human-nature relationship as a vital, dynamic symbiosis essential for both individual well-being and broader social and spatial practices. Most feedback shows nature's strong stress-relieving effects, while many responses emphasise its role in development, the importance of urban green spaces, sensory benefits, and animal-assisted therapy, as well as noting that cultural and individual differences influence how nature is experienced. Almost all sources highlight nature as a calming, supportive partner in well-being, while also noting its role in development and differing individual experiences.
Keywords. Green Care, nature-based well-being, therapeutic landscapes, nature connectedness, interdisciplinary learning

Introduction

There are many ways to interact with nature. Three types of interactions with nature: indirect, incidental and intentional interactions. Indirect interaction with nature is defined as experiencing nature without being in nature and includes viewing nature through a window and looking at pictures of nature. Incidental interaction with nature is experiencing nature secondary to the main activity being performed and includes walking through or by nature and taking care of houseplants. Intentional interaction with nature is defined as purposeful interaction with nature and includes visiting a park, exercising outdoors and gardening (Stott *et al.* 2024, Keniger *et al.* 2013).

Nature connectedness is viewed as a subjective, emotional relationship that goes beyond merely spending time outdoors (Martin *et al.* 2020). Connectedness to nature has also been defined by Schultz (2002, 2004) as "the extent to which an individual includes nature within his or her cognitive representation of self". Research demonstrates that nature connectedness functions as a protective factor for mental health (Gawrych, 2024). This dual benefit-strengthening both nature connection and social bonds-is significant for vulnerable populations, as nature-based programs have been shown improvements in social skills, confidence and social-emotional development (Gray, Pigott, 2026). Additionally, structured nature-based interventions support pro-social behavior and wellbeing, particularly for youth experiencing social and educational disadvantage (Gray, Pigott, 2026). The benefits appear across multiple dimensions, as nature connectedness is indirectly associated with reduced stress and depression through improved coping mechanisms (Gawrych, 2024).

For young adults navigating the complexities of identity and belonging, particularly those in multicultural contexts, nature connectedness offers meaningful pathways to both personal well-being and social inclusion and nature-based experiences are particularly valuable for fostering social connectedness, especially in multicultural and migrant youth contexts (Madera *et al.* 2025). When children have access to nature around their homes, schools, and neighbourhoods, it supports their physical and mental health as well as their cognitive development and performance. (Chawla, 1990; Vanaken *et al*. 2018).

A key focus is placed on the intentional use of nature as a therapeutic and professional tool. Practices such as forest therapy, horticultural therapy and animal-assisted therapy illustrate how natural environments can be systematically applied to support health and well-being. According to the *Healing Greenery* project description, the project aims to apply green economy principles to create inclusive living environments for

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socially vulnerable groups while promoting interdisciplinary collaboration and students' professional competences. Despite increasing research on nature-based well-being and Green Care approaches, limited attention has been paid to how students from different cultural and professional backgrounds perceive the health benefits of nature within interdisciplinary learning environments. Understanding these differences is important for developing inclusive, accessible, and culturally sensitive nature-based educational and therapeutic practices.

The object of the research is students' perceived health benefits from nature and their experiences of nature exposure in different cultural and professional contexts. The study employed a qualitative comparative approach to analyse how cultural and professional differences influence students' perceived health benefits of nature. Data were collected through questionnaires and analysed using thematic content analysis. Research question is - How do individual, cultural, and professional differences shape students' experiences of nature-related well-being and nature-based approaches?

Method

Intensive week course programme

The NordPlus Healing Greenery intensive course is structured in three stages.

In the first stage, prior to the intensive week, participants reflect on and describe their personal experiences with nature. They also work collaboratively to evaluate Green Care activities in their home countries, focusing on their practical applications, effectiveness, and contribution to well-being.

The second stage consists of the intensive week programme itself and includes three core components: a Green Care methods panel, a Healing Garden panel, and supportive lectures, such as Creativity. Additional activities include ice-breaking sessions, the formation of international multidisciplinary groups, and visits to Green Care-related sites. Although the overall course structure remains consistent each year, the thematic focus and/or design tasks vary annually. During the COVID-19 period (2021-2022), the programme was conducted online using landscape design programmes. In subsequent years, participants developed group posters presenting therapeutic green space designs and action plans for Green Care initiatives.

In the third stage, following the course, participants provide reflective feedback through Google-based questionnaires describing their learning experiences and personal insights gained during the programme.

Questionnaire and participants

The study employed a qualitative comparative approach to examine how cultural and professional differences influence students' perceived health benefits of nature and engagement with nature-based approaches.

Data were collected between 2021 and 2025 through Google Forms questionnaires.The questionnaires contained open-ended questions encouraging essay-format reflections on learning experiences, emotions, professional/personal development.

A total of 123 students from four countries participated in the study. Participants represented four disciplinary fields: landscape architecture, social work, agriculture, and health care. The research environment was international and multidisciplinary. Participation in the study was voluntary, and all data were collected anonymously.

Data analysis and research procedure

The responses were reviewed, categorised, and analysed using thematic content analysis. Thematic categories were identified inductively based on recurring themes, keywords, meanings, and experiences related to nature, health, well-being. A single response could contain multiple thematic categories. Frequency percentages presented in the results indicate the proportion of responses in which a particular theme appeared.

NotebookLM was used as a supportive tool for organising, summarising, and reviewing the qualitative data, while thematic categorisation, interpretation, and final analysis were conducted by the author. Responses considered irrelevant to the research focus were excluded from the analysis. The findings were validated through repeated comparison of themes, participant reflections, and cross-checking of recurring patterns within the dataset.

Figures were created using Napkin.ai. AI tools were used to support language editing to english, text structuring, and formulation.

Results

The results section presents the main themes identified in students' reflections between on nature, health, and well-being. The analysis focuses on the multidimensional value of nature, therapeutic and sensory experiences, human-nature relationships, and the evolution of students' perceptions over time.

The multidimensional value of nature in well-being, perception and therapeutic practice

The findings demonstrate the comprehensive and multidimensional value of nature in supporting human well-being, social inclusion, and therapeutic practice. Approximately 95% of the responses emphasise nature's immediate and highly effective role in reducing stress and anxiety while promoting inner peace, emotional balance, and psychological restoration (Figure 1). Participants consistently described nature as a calming and grounding presence rather than merely a decorative element, reflecting a significant shift in perception towards understanding greenery as an active contributor to well-being. As one student stated, "*I now see greenery not just as decoration, but as a living partner in well-being*" (Student, 2025). Nature was frequently characterised as a freely accessible therapeutic environment, particularly through practices such as forest therapy, horticultural therapy, and animal-assisted therapy, which participants associated with emotional recovery and relief from the pressures of urban life.

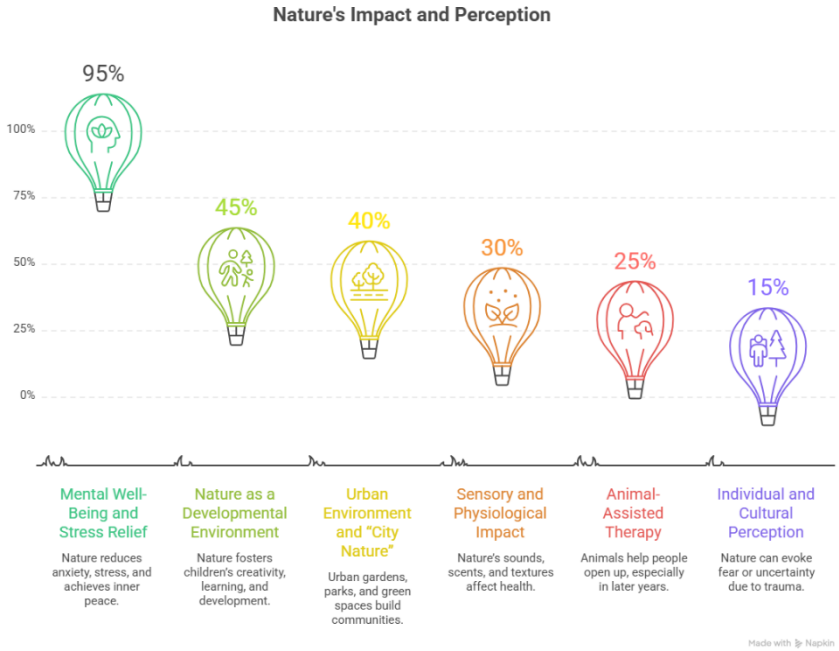

Figure 1. Nature impact and perception

Approximately 45% of the feedback further highlighted nature's developmental role, especially in supporting children's creativity, learning capacity, and physical and emotional growth, while 40% of participants stressed the importance of urban green spaces, describing parks, gardens, and therapeutic landscapes as essential community-building environments and restorative spaces (Figure 2). Students repeatedly emphasised the necessity of integrating nature into everyday urban life, noting that even small-scale interventions, such as indoor plants or balcony gardens, positively influence mood and well-being. One participant reflected: "*Nature around us reduces stress and improves health, and it is important to create pleasant outdoor environments"* (Student, 2022).

In addition, approximately 30% of responses focused on the sensory and physiological dimensions of nature, highlighting the significance of sounds, scents, textures, and visual experiences in supporting health and emotional regulation. Students increasingly recognised the importance of multisensory design approaches in therapeutic landscapes, as reflected in the observation: "*Our environment is not only what we see, it is also what we feel, smell*" (Student, 2023), alongside reflections such as "*I learned about the importance of sensory experiences-like using sight, smell, sound and touch-when spending time in nature*" (Student, 2025).

Landscape design was also associated with mental health support and emotional well-being. Participants acknowledged that thoughtfully designed outdoor environments can reduce anxiety and improve mood, while simultaneously recognising that perceptions of nature are highly subjective and culturally influenced.

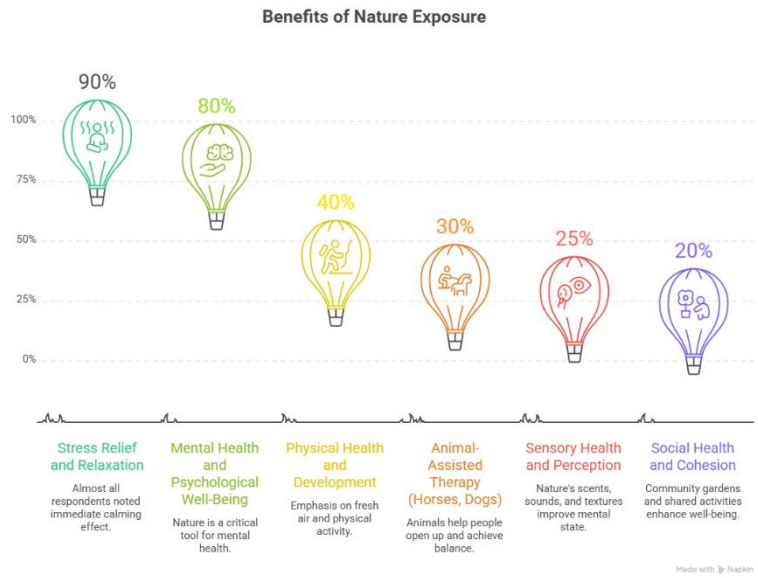

Figure 2. Benefits of nature exposure

This critical awareness is evident in the reflection: "*I observed that people are trying to design some possibilities for others, they assume that these 'others' have the same perception and the same attitude towards nature, however it is not so*" (Student, 2025).

Approximately 25% of responses highlighted the therapeutic role of animals, particularly horses and dogs, in facilitating emotional openness, relaxation, and social connection. At the same time, 15% of participants identified important cultural and individual differences in experiences of nature, noting that natural environments may evoke uncertainty, discomfort, or fear, especially among individuals with refugee experiences or differing cultural understandings of public and private landscapes. For example, one participant noted: "*For me as a foreigner it is confusing. First problem is lack of understanding about places which I can go to: is it public or private land...?*" (Student, 2025).

The findings demonstrate that the human-nature relationship is not universal or static, but shaped by cultural background, previous experiences, environmental familiarity, and personal perception. Nature emerges not only as a restorative environment, but also as a complex social, sensory, cultural, and professional resource with significant implications for therapeutic practice, inclusive design, and interdisciplinary approaches to well-being.

Promoting health through nature: mental well-being, therapy, and inclusive design

The findings strongly demonstrate the significant role of nature in promoting mental, physical, and social well-being through therapeutic experiences and inclusive environmental design. Approximately 90% of respondents highlighted nature's immediate ability to reduce stress and promote relaxation, frequently describing feelings of calmness, emotional relief, and inner peace. Nature was repeatedly characterised as an essential resource for coping with the pressures of contemporary life and supporting emotional resilience. Students often described natural environments as "therapy in itself", emphasising their restorative influence on psychological well-being and recovery from emotional overload. One participant reflected: "*The forest therapy confirmed what I had already experienced -that being in the forest has a strong positive effect on my well-being*" (Student, 2025). Experiences of grounding, mindfulness, and emotional balance emerged as recurring themes throughout the responses, indicating that nature-based experiences contribute directly to psychological stability and self-awareness.

Approximately 80% of participants emphasised the importance of nature in supporting mental health, including its role in preventing burnout, depression, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. Students highlighted the growing importance of therapeutic approaches based on contact with natural environments, particularly within stressful urban and professional contexts. Reflections repeatedly connected nature with stress management and emotional recovery, as illustrated in the statement: "*I learned about how life changing one walk in the forest can be... it helped me to realize how to connect with nature when I am overworked or when I lose contact with myself, because it will help me manage stress*" (Student, 2024). Similarly, another participant stated: "*This experience had a very calming effect on me-it helped me relax, reduce stress and ease my anxiety*" (Student, 2025). The findings suggest that students increasingly perceive nature not only as a passive environment, but also as an active therapeutic resource supporting long-term mental well-being.

Approximately 40% of the feedback highlighted the physical health benefits associated with nature exposure, including access to fresh air, opportunities for physical activity, and support for children's physical development. Participants associated outdoor activities such as walking, gardening, and play with healthier lifestyles and improved overall well-being. At the same time, approximately 25% of responses focused on the psychological and physiological dimensions of nature experiences, including sensory stimulation through sounds, scents, textures, and visual qualities. Students increasingly recognised that environmental experiences influence both cognitive and emotional processes. As one participant explained: "*I learned about the psychological and physiological benefits of greenery-from reduced stress levels to improved air quality*" (Student, 2025). Another participant reflected: "*I didn't have a structured or theoretical framework to explain why and how these effects occur. During the course, I gained deeper insight into the psychological and physiological benefits of healing greenery*" (Student, 2025). These responses indicate growing awareness of the scientific relationship between environmental quality, sensory perception, and human health.

Therapeutic methods involving direct engagement with nature also emerged as an important theme within the findings. Approximately 30% of participants, particularly within the 2024 group, highlighted the value of animal-assisted therapy involving horses and dogs in supporting emotional openness, rehabilitation, and emotional balance. Forest therapy and horticultural therapy were similarly recognised as intentional healing approaches that promote mindfulness, emotional recovery, and connection with the environment. One participant noted: "*Understanding the therapeutic benefits of interacting with horses has been eye-opening. This form of therapy can greatly aid in physical, emotional and mental rehabilitation*" (Student, 2024).

Students also increasingly associated therapeutic landscapes with professional practice and inclusive design approaches. Landscape architecture students, in particular, emphasised that environmental design should actively support physical and mental health rather than serve purely aesthetic purposes. As reflected in the responses: "*Good landscape design affects physical and mental well-being*" (Student, 2021) and "*Green Care is about nature and its resources and how can I use those in my profession to help people to maintain their overall health*" (Student, 2021). Participants further highlighted the importance of accessibility and inclusivity within therapeutic environments, stressing that healing landscapes should support individuals with disabilities and reduce experiences of social isolation.

The findings demonstrate that students perceive nature as a multidimensional health resource that integrates emotional restoration, physical activity, sensory experience, therapeutic practice, and inclusive environmental design. Nature-based approaches were consistently viewed as valuable tools for improving well-being, strengthening resilience, and supporting more inclusive and health-oriented professional practices.

Human-Nature Relationships

Approximately 95% of the responses describe nature as a powerful emotional supporter and calming force, emphasising its role in creating a sense of grounding, inner peace, and relief from stress and anxiety. In addition, 70% highlight a significant cognitive shift in which nature is no longer viewed as mere decoration, but as a "living partner" in well-being (Figure 3), reflecting a reciprocal relationship in which humans care for nature and, in turn, benefit from it. Furthermore, 40% of the responses focus on the sensory relationship with nature, stressing the importance of engaging through smells, sounds, and textures, such as hugging trees or walking barefoot, as ways to deepen connection. Approximately 45% underline the essential role of nature in child development, supporting physical, emotional, and cognitive growth, as well as creativity and learning. At the same time, 30% raise concerns about increasing alienation from nature in urban environments and emphasise the need to consciously restore this relationship through parks and gardens. Finally, 15% point out that human-nature relationships can also be complex or negative, as past trauma or cultural unfamiliarity may cause nature to be perceived as intimidating or unsettling.

Many students described nature as a place where they can reconnect with themselves and organise their thoughts, providing relief from daily routines and urban noise. As participants reflected: "*I also experienced firsthand the power of nature to create a sense of grounding and inner peace*" (Student, 2025) and "*I learned to be in the forest in a more mindful and reflective way, simply being present with my thoughts*" (Student, 2025). The findings also suggest that relationships with nature do not need to remain incidental, but can be consciously integrated into everyday routines through practices such as forest therapy and mindful outdoor activities.

Landscape architects and social workers particularly viewed their professional role as facilitators of environments that encourage human-nature interaction, especially for vulnerable groups. Nature was also described as an important teacher, particularly for children, supporting responsibility, creativity, and sustainable attitudes. One participant stated: "*Mostly i've learned that no matter where children grow up they need nature in their life*" (Student, 2021).

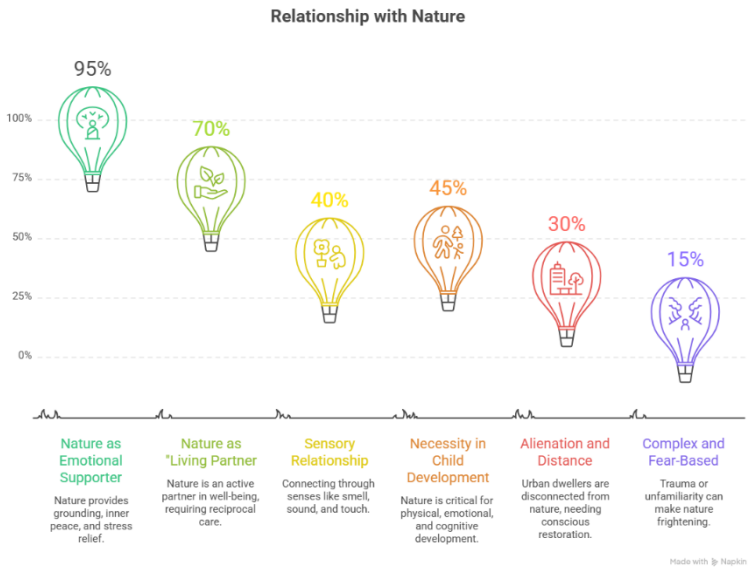

Figure 3. Relationship with nature

At the same time, the findings demonstrate that relationships with nature are subjective and culturally influenced. Several participants noted that experiences of "healing nature" may differ according to cultural background, previous experiences, or familiarity with natural environments. For some individuals, unfamiliar forests or landscapes may feel intimidating or unsafe. As one participant observed: "*Surprised that there are people who are afraid of nature, like not able to step out for road to the forest or meadow without fear*" (Student, 2025).

Evolution of students' reflections over the years

Development of kindergarten green environment (N=26) (2021) Students highlighted the importance of natural environments for children's physical, psychological, social, and cognitive development, noting that exposure to nature supported creativity, learning, and emotional balance. Plant-based activities and outdoor environments were also associated with stress reduction and improved mental well-being.

Community gardens, urban gardening, and public parks for social cohesion (N=22) (2022) Students recognised urban green spaces as effective tools for reducing stress and enhancing mental health, particularly within healthcare settings. Reflections emphasised the role of community gardens in fostering emotional stability, social cohesion, and accessible well-being resources in urban environments.

Educational services (N=19) (2023) Students explored how healing environments could improve cognitive functioning and reduce stress through deeper connections with nature. Particular attention was given to sensory and spatial details, such as flowers, scents, and garden design, as well as the importance of accessibility for people with disabilities. The integration of perspectives from social work, healthcare, and landscape architecture emerged as a central theme.

Green therapy for different age groups (N=23) (2024). Reflections highlighted the restorative role of horse- and dog-assisted interventions in physical, emotional, and psychological rehabilitation. Nature was increasingly described as a meditative and transformative space that supports stress management, inner balance, and recovery from the pressures of everyday urban life.

Application of Green Care concept elements for personal wellbeing (N=33) (2025). Reflections emphasised mindfulness practices, including sensory awareness and forest bathing, alongside growing recognition of the psychological and physiological benefits of natural environments. Students also acknowledged individual differences in responses to nature, recognising that while natural settings may foster grounding and inner peace for some individuals, they may evoke discomfort or anxiety in others.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate a clear development in students' understanding of nature-based well-being approaches between 2021 and 2025. Early reflections were characterised by a general awareness of the positive effects of nature on well-being, particularly in relation to children's development, creativity, and stress reduction. Over time, however, students' perspectives became increasingly nuanced and sophisticated, moving towards practical therapeutic applications, interdisciplinary understanding, and evidence-based approaches.

Similar to previous research, the findings confirm that nature connectedness functions as an important protective factor for mental health and emotional resilience (Martin *et al*., 2020; Gawrych, 2024). Students increasingly perceived nature not merely as a pleasant or passive environment, but as an active partner in health, well-being, therapeutic practice, and social inclusion.

The focus of the intensive courses evolved considerably over the five-year period.

In 2021, the Nordplus intensive course concentrated primarily on Green Care in educational settings, particularly in kindergartens and schools. Students explored how natural environments could support children's learning, creativity, and emotional well-being, while also developing digital landscape planning skills through the SketchUp programme. Due to the pandemic, the course was conducted entirely online, which strengthened international teamwork and digital communication skills.

In 2022, perspectives expanded towards the therapeutic and social value of urban gardens and green spaces, particularly within hospitals, children's homes, and care institutions. The programme highlighted the importance of nature as an accessible and restorative resource for mental health and community well-being following the pandemic period.

By 2023, reflections became more holistic and interdisciplinary, with students from social work, healthcare, agriculture, and landscape architecture collaboratively exploring healing environments and well-being promotion. Particular attention was given to sensory experiences, accessibility, and therapeutic landscape design. The importance of sensory and multisensory experiences identified in the present study further expands existing discussions regarding therapeutic landscapes and environmental perception.

In 2024, the focus shifted strongly towards animal-assisted and forest-based therapies, with students increasingly describing nature as a source of restoration, mindfulness, and reconnection with the self. The findings also support earlier studies indicating that nature-based interventions may strengthen social connectedness and inclusion, particularly among vulnerable or socially disadvantaged groups (Gray, Pigott, 2026).

By 2025, reflections had become notably more evidence-based and mindfulness-oriented, incorporating awareness of psychological and physiological effects alongside structured therapeutic approaches such as forest therapy and sensory awareness practices.

The interdisciplinary structure of the Healing Greenery intensive course appears to have supported broader understanding of Green Care approaches across professional fields, particularly in landscape architecture, social work, healthcare, and agriculture. Over time, students demonstrated greater awareness of accessibility, inclusion, sensory experience, and the therapeutic role of forests, gardens, and animal-assisted interventions. The findings further reinforce contemporary perspectives that position nature not merely as a passive setting, but as an active contributor to health, well-being, and therapeutic practice. At the same time, unlike some earlier studies that present nature primarily as a universally restorative environment, the present findings highlight that experiences of nature may vary according to cultural background, previous experiences, and environmental familiarity. Later reflections demonstrated greater critical awareness regarding individual differences in how people perceive and experience natural environments, recognising that some individuals may experience wild environments as restorative, while others may perceive them as uncomfortable or anxiety-provoking. The results therefore emphasise the importance of inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches when designing therapeutic and nature-based environments.

The study has several limitations. The sample size was relatively small and based on reflective self-reported experiences within an intensive course setting. The findings therefore cannot be generalised to broader populations. In addition, the qualitative interpretation of responses may involve subjective elements despite thematic cross-checking procedures.

Conclusions

- The findings demonstrate that nature is most consistently perceived as both a supporter of mental health and an emotional partner, while themes related to development, urban environments, and sensory experiences appear moderately, and social, individual, and cultural dimensions are emphasised less frequently.
- Students recognise the natural environment as an indispensable resource in today's stressful and rapidly changing world.
- The analysis highlights the human-nature relationship as a vital and dynamic symbiosis that is essential for both individual well-being and broader social and spatial practices.
- Nature is increasingly perceived as a contributor to holistic health and well-being, with the focus shifting from merely promoting physical activity towards supporting deeper mental, emotional, and social health.

- The findings suggest that nature-based approaches can support therapeutic, educational, and inclusive practices across different professional fields.
- Nature supports health and well-being; however, its benefits and meanings vary according to cultural, professional, and individual factors.
- The study also demonstrates the growing importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in understanding and applying nature-based health approaches within education, healthcare, social work, and landscape architecture.
- The findings indicate that students increasingly perceive nature not simply as a passive environment, but as an active and meaningful partner in promoting health, resilience, inclusion, and quality of life.

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Information about the author

Kadri Maikov, Estonian University of Life Sciences, landscape architecture department, lecturer. Research field(s): healing gardens, health, landscape.
Email address: kadri.maikov@emu.ee