

Places for active outdoor recreation – a scoping review



S. Andkjær*, J. Arvidsen

Active Living Research Unit, Institute of Sports Science and Clinical Biomechanics, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Southern Denmark, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

The paper reports on a scoping literature review aiming to provide an overview of existing research on the significance of natural environments to active outdoor recreation. The study brings together research from two research areas, and the perspective is both of conceptual and summative character. The paper presents key research contributions that illuminate research, and provides an overview of research traditions in the field. A total of 51 studies are included in the literature study, and are organised by setting: 1) natural settings (forests), 2) semi-natural settings (parks) and 3) infrastructure related settings (trails and paths). Most of the studies have a quantitative design. Almost all studies are cross-sectional studies, and present snapshots of the significance of natural environments to active outdoor recreation. The majority of the studies have a health perspective with measures of physical activity in general. Conclusions are that some knowledge exists on the impact and significance of natural environments and places to people's active outdoor recreation, which can be useful to managers and administrators of natural environments as well as to the health sector. Natural environments generally seem to have great impact on people's physical activity. People seek and get various experiences from being active in natural environments and have rather different preferences to the natural settings. This may lead to the conclusion that it is relevant to apply an activity- and context-specific perspective at interventions in natural environments. Limitations of the study and future research is discussed.

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1. Introduction

Over the past 20 years research on outdoor recreation in Northern Europe has intensified, and has added significant knowledge about patterns and trends in outdoor recreation (Tordsson, 2003; Sandell & Sörilin, 2008; Andkjær, 2008; Bell, Simpson, Tyrvaainen, Sievanen, & Pröbstl, 2009). In Denmark, for example, outdoor recreation is now characterised by trips of shorter duration, and preferably also over shorter distances to closer areas, rather than long distances and trips to more pristine and undisturbed environments (Tvedt & Jensen, 1999; Gentin & Jensen, 2007). According to new studies in Denmark, the use of natural environments for recreational purposes is generally increasing, especially among adults (Larsen, 2003; Pilgaard, 2008, 2009). Studies on children's and young adult's use of nature and landscape do not show the same trend (Paltved-Kaznelson, 2009). Louv (2005) and Bell et al. (2009) observed similar patterns of

recreation behaviour in other countries. Recent research focuses on how exposure to nature effects people positively, and therefore contributes to the health of the population at large (Pretty, Peacock, Sellens, & Griffin, 2005; Abraham, Sommerhalder, & Abel, 2010; Coon et al. 2011).

Although outdoor recreation research has a long tradition in Europe which has created knowledge about patterns of participation, motives and needs within outdoor activities users and activity-groups (Tordsson, 2003; Sandell & Sörilin, 2008; Andkjær, 2008; Bell et al. 2009, Pröbstl, Elands, Wirth, & Bell, 2010) the specific relevance of various settings, facilities and products for active outdoor recreation has been studied less.

As the majority of the population in many European countries live in urban environments, they are no longer in daily contact with natural environments. Given the manifold benefits of health and well-being associated with sojourning in nature, the population should be encouraged and supported in pursuing outdoor recreation activities. If public agencies are to encourage their citizens to pursue such healthy lifestyles, then they also need an improved understanding of the factors that affect the likelihood of people's participation in active outdoor recreation.

The paper focuses on the significance of natural environments for active outdoor recreation with active outdoor recreation being characterised by both activity in and experience of nature. The main goal of this paper is to analyse the literature in order to

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: sandkjaer@health.sdu.dk (S. Andkjær), jarvidsen@health.sdu.dk (J. Arvidsen).

URLS: <http://findresearcher.sdu.dk:8080/portal/en/persons/soeren-andkjaer> (6f0b9482-4b06-4828-b9c4-62de1e674be3).html (S. Andkjær), <http://findresearcher.sdu.dk:8080/portal/en/persons/jan-arvidsen> (b9f541e3-eb3d-4ddd-a444-022a823e923b).html (J. Arvidsen).

explore the influence of different outdoor recreation settings to peoples participation in active outdoor recreation including important characteristics of relevant settings according to their likely effect on participation, health and well-being. This paper contributes to the emerging research field on ecosystem services, health and well-being (Pröbstl-Haider, 2015).

2. Method and design

The intention in the study is to identify a new research area and to point out where research and knowledge is missing. The most pertinent design in relation to the purpose of the study and the problem area therefore is a scoping review (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Jesson, Matheson, & Lacey, 2011). A scoping review is used to study an area of research with uncertainty on existing research and on the nature of this research, which is the case here. A scoping review seeks both depth and breadth of the literature search, and contains inductive elements.

In order to enhance the reliability of a literature review, Arksey and O'Malley (2005) propose a 5-phase model (Fig. 1), which provides a relevant way to organise this type of literature study.

The first phase defines the study frame by identifying the topic and academic or applied problem under scrutiny, and defines criteria for the inclusion of certain bodies of literature. In the context of outdoor recreation, we determined that our study should encompass publications that focus on recreational activity while experiencing a natural setting, and address the importance of place in the context of this physical activity and experience.

In the second phase, searches were carried out in four bibliographic databases¹ most relevant for social science research in natural environments using combinations of search words from the following search categories:

- Natural environment and spatial aspects in outdoor recreation,
- Outdoor recreation activities in nature,
- Relation to the environment,
- Setting and physical surroundings.

Fig. 2 gives an overview of the search process, and Fig. 3 presents the used search words in the selected search categories.

In the third phase, the number of publications was reduced based on certain exclusion criteria to identify trends in research more clearly. The inclusion criteria in this phase were that the publication did focus on the activity and/or experience, while dealing with the importance of the natural environment to physical activity and/or experience. It was essential that the importance of the natural environment to physical activity or experience was a central scope in the study, and that the setting could be seen and perceived as natural. Any particular requirements for the study design were not included as inclusion criteria (Arksey & O'Malley 2005).

The exclusion criteria focused on the content of the studies, i.e. the importance of natural environments to physical activity or experience, the settings for these activities, and whether places and settings were perceived as natural. A study was excluded if: (1) the study had a predominantly focus on education, learning and health in relation to physical activity, (2) the setting appeared predominantly urban, (3) the activities or the natural environments cannot be transferred to a European context (e.g. experiences in exotic landscapes).

Throughout the study a distinction was made between natural settings (forests), semi-natural settings (parks) and infrastructure related settings (trails and paths). Phases 2 and 3 focused

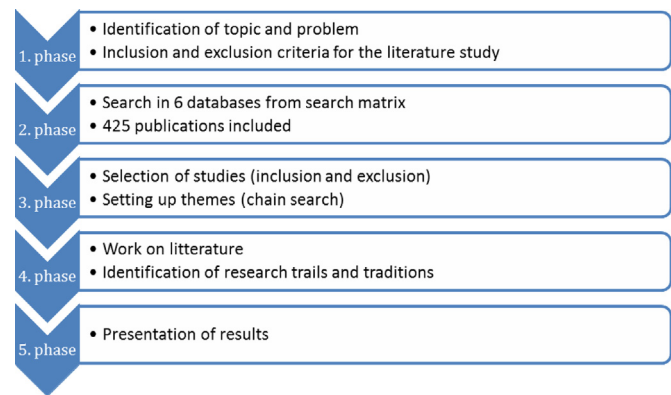


Fig. 1. The design of the scoping review.

predominantly on studies with European context, but also included some studies from North America; excluded studies from overseas typically focused on more exotic natural settings.

Since this study focuses on the health benefits associated with active outdoor recreation and physical activities, theoretical, psychological, motivational studies, which have a long tradition in North America were not considered.

Fig. 4 shows the two traditions of research that were identified as informing research on active outdoor recreation. The first tradition of research focuses on the relationship between the accessibility and nature of natural environments and the amount of physical activity. Another tradition of research focuses on the individual's experience of place and nature with a more humanistic and often qualitative scientific approach.

In the fourth phase of the study, all included publications were carefully examined and categorised in matrixes. The results of the literature review point to 4 obvious categories, which are presented in four matrixes: Active outdoor recreation in natural environments, in natural settings (forests), semi-natural settings (parks) and infrastructure related settings (trails and paths). After presenting the results, we briefly discuss the main findings.

2.1. Overview of the included studies

A total of 51 studies were included in the literature study. The studies originate from the US, Canada, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, UK and Switzerland with the majority from the US (Fig. 5, Table 1).

The studies are summarised in Tables 2-5 and discussed in the corresponding result section, where the main findings about outdoor recreation in a natural and cultural context in Europe are discussed. Most of the studies have a quantitative design. Almost all studies are based on cross-sectional research designs, and present snapshots of the significance of natural environments to active outdoor recreation. Many studies have a health perspective with measures of physical activity in general. The studies cover different research areas, and contribute to insights into the importance of natural environments to active outdoor recreation (Henderson & Bialeschki, 2005).

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Overall results

In this section the overall findings of the literature review will be presented and discussed.

The studies contain a number of general trends relating to active outdoor activities in natural environments. These trends are consistent across the different natural settings (natural, semi-natural and infrastructural) (Table 2).

¹ Ebsco Host Database (including SportDiscus and Eric), CSA Host Database (including Physical Education, Eric, Sociological Abstracts), Web of Science and Bibliotek.dk.

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