Nature, Culture, Health (NaCuHeal): Perspectives on creative wellbeing

Nina Elisabeth Bøe

Founder and MD at Brekkegarden & NaKuHel Sunnmøre

nina@brekkegarden.no

Introduction

NaKuHel (or in English NaCuHeal) stands for Nature, Culture, Health, and is a Norwegian network of organizations and places offering a broad spectrum of health-promoting activities anchored in art and nature. In this personal account I will introduce the history, values and philosophy of the NaCuHeal foundation and its associated organizations. Additionally, I will discuss the health-promoting potential of the NaCuHeal initiatives in Sunnmøre, on the western coast of Norway, with the overall aim being to reflect on the ways in which nature and culture can promote health, a better environment, and quality of life for all.

History of the foundation

The NaCuHeal foundation was established in 1994, but the underpinning ideas and values can be traced back to 1987, when its founder, Professor Gunnar Tellnes, was temping as a general practitioner in the community of Røst. Røst is the most remote part of the Lofoten islands, a tiny island community in the Northern part of Norway. Most of the population, now as then, live off fisheries. Despite the fact that the local fishermen had a few very good years in this period, generating substantial income, the population was in steady decline. This led Tellnes to initiate an informal research project in which he asked all of his patients: What would it take for you to want to stay here? What would it take for you to be happy, to be thriving, here? The majority of the answers were, perhaps not surprisingly, related to the lack of meaningful leisure time activities, particularly within the sphere of arts and culture (Tellnes, 2003).

In the wake of this, a series of initiatives were raised, with a range of cultural activities being instigated. Today, the mayor of Røst and his wife tell us that there has been no formalized continuation of the NaCuHeal activities in recent years – but the thoughts and visions behind it have been an integral part of a lot of the strategic thinking around the future prospects for this small community. "Everything is connected to everything", they say, arguing that local identity and a sense of belonging is essential for people’s wellbeing:
It is vital that people feel proud of their homeplace. And we mustn’t be afraid of making demands on them. That is how they feel they matter! All age groups should come together and do things together. We have a communal potato field now – perhaps that is a remnant? Set that little snowball in motion – and it will become a big “snykjærring” (snow-woman) (A. and S. Ellingsen, personal communication, 28 September 2020).

Since the establishment of the NaCuHeal foundation the network has grown along with communication of the ideas to a larger audience. The foundation’s main goal is to contribute to holistic thinking in order to promote better health, environment and quality of life. In this context, quality of life implies supplying the means for the individual by providing them with the opportunity to realize as much of their potential as possible, through art, music, literature, physical activities, nature and outdoors activities (Tellnes 2003; Tellnes 2017).

The various NaCuHeal initiatives have their specific profiles, but their work is firmly anchored within the salutogenic model of health. Salutogenesis revolves around the attempt to identify the factors which promote good health and increases our sense of mastery. Hence, NaCuHeal is about building bridges between the field of theory and the field of practice, establishing positive, vibrant meeting places where we, through our day to day work, demonstrate how the theories around salutogenesis can be integrated into our lives.

Mastering and empowerment are central to the development of NaCuHeal’s activities, embracing the process in which we increase our control over the various factors and actions that influence our health. A recognition of one’s own talents and creativity is vital, promoting practical action through creative outlets. When effective, NaCuHeal activities can indirectly promote a new zest for life, inspiration and rehabilitation. For people on sick leave, this could be part of the path back to work. We need new ways of looking at rehabilitation in society, and building collaborative efforts between initiatives such as NaCuHeal and established medical institutions can lead to a broader perspective that promotes salutogenesis and better quality of life for all.

NaKuHel Sunnmøre

NaKuHel Sunnmøre was established in 2017 as one of the latest additions to the NaCuHeal network. The activities are centred around the Brekkegarden farm in the little west coast municipality of Sande. The farmhouse was built in 1893 and is a listed building. The surroundings are peaceful and serene, with several gardens, a stream running through the property, and fields of grazing sheep and goats. A garden with heritage roses has been established, as well as a pollinator garden and a vegetable garden.
NaKuHel Sunnmøre’s aim is to establish activities for the whole population, from the youngest to the eldest, as well as being visible and engaged stakeholders in local public health work. With backgrounds in art, health and ornithology, the owners of the farm, Nina Elisabeth Bøe and Alv Ottar Folkestad, have established a portfolio of activities including local projects linked to flora, fauna and different cultural activities. The farm has hosted an array of activities since it was initiated. These have included three artist-in-residencies, activity days for schools/nurseries/organizations, arranging “The Nature School” for low-income families, summer school for children aged 7–13, as well as hosting concerts and seminars. A local horticultural association has been established and use the facilities at Brekkegarden for meetings, open talks and plant swap days. A day care centre operated between 2017–19 for people with dementia still living in their own homes. The farm, with its traditional architecture and furniture, provided familiarity and a safe spot where the participants felt they could be themselves, with all their humour and wit from a long life intact – for a little while longer.

“The Butterfly Year” in 2019 at Brekkegarden, saw nearly a thousand visitors. A lot of the activities circled around the theme of “hidden spaces”. Together, we have tested our carpentry skills, sown seeds, built stone walls, made shelters and planted hedges, both for butterflies and bumblebees, and for human beings. In our most vulnerable periods, many of us will seek to nature for comfort. Research shows that in these periods, some nature types are more...
beneficial than others (Gladwell, Brown, Wood, Sandercock & Barton, 2013; Stigsdotter & Grahn, 2002). We will seek out places that we perceive as peaceful and safe – with the sound of water, birds and insects. Furthermore, we seek out nature types with a high degree of biodiversity, with a multitude of trees, plants, flowers, butterflies… And finally, we will instinctively look for a certain spatiality – places where we can hide, in a coherent totality, where we get the feeling of entering a whole new, hidden world. Looking more closely at these qualities, it should come as no surprise that these are the exact same conditions wild-life requires. In essence: where animals thrive, people will thrive. “Hidden Places” was also the title of the third artist-in-residency at Brekkegarden. Artists from Germany, England and Norway worked on the art trail “Allfar”, all exploring the theme from a variety of angles. The hidden places, virtual or real – perhaps they are more important today than ever before?

The work on “Hidden Places”, the butterfly gardens and art trails, are hence closely connected to a pilot in therapeutic horticulture begun in the autumn of 2019. The participants are part of the program for one year, and the aim is to explore how gardening activities can promote better health and quality of life. Through the dark and wet winter months, an art intervention will be part of the program as well, and in November, 2020, NaKuHel Sunnmøre will start a Shared Reading group for people who are experiencing mental health challenges.

Unravelling mysteries. Picture from the pollinator project at Brekkegarden. © Nina Bøe

NaKuHeal and Creative wellbeing
Idyllic as it may seem, small rural communities like Sande have challenges of their own. Situated right in the middle of what is called the maritime cluster on the Norwegian west coast, this part of the country has long been associated with thriving businesses within fisheries and the offshore industry. Despite periodic recessions, the industry has proven resilient over time, adapting to shifting circumstances and staying at the forefront of technological development. Despite the community’s ability to offer its young people fairly positive
prospects for the future, the development is rather similar to Røst 30 years ago. The young people leave, the population declines, and the remaining youths experience mental health difficulties. In the 2019 national survey about youth, 17 percent of young people in Sande reported that they are very unhappy at school, in comparison with 8 per cent nationally. As for questions regarding loneliness, 16 per cent reported that they often feel acute loneliness, compared to 9 per cent nationwide. A substantial amount of leisure time is spent alone, with the screen as the primary companion. In short, they report that they lack meaningful leisure activities, particularly within the sphere of arts and culture.

So, if this constitutes the present panorama, how can NaCuHeal contribute towards promoting health and quality of life for inhabitants in the region?

“Biodiversity” was mentioned above as a vital factor in people’s health, as well as for the other living creatures around us. Judging from what the young people say, there is an inherent recognition of human beings’ multifaceted creativeness. But when we lack the outlets of our creativity, we become unhappy. We need the same degree of diversity in our own lives in order to find the activities that provide meaning. In this, we should not underestimate the importance of intergenerational activities. This is supported by what the people in Røst say: this is how we build a society. In times good or bad: creating beauty – together, in nature and culture – renews and strengthens the bonds between us. This is what makes us feel proud and happy.

Working in and with nature – artistically, practically – can be a way of restoring the individual’s agency. The natural world has a responsiveness, answers our approaches, as a counterweight to action paralysis, the sense that “it is of no use, whatever I do”.

A central question for our work in NaCuHeal is how aesthetic theory can enhance our understanding of how nature and art heals and restores. Many participants in therapeutic horticulture programs point to the positive effects of the shift in their normal routines, a step out of “the normal path”, and into a different world. Fascination with this new world, is understood to be a central and necessary part of the healing process. In aesthetical theory, we point to the implications of such role changes – they can open up for a new and different understanding, as well as an extended frame of available actions. Old patterns can be reorganized, and in Jacob Levy Moreno’s words, this will inevitably lead to a movement, from is to should. From all the things we can leave behind, towards what can be.

Nature, Culture, Health - an embodiment. © Nina Bøe
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