

## UN Conferences on Sustainable development

Since 2004, the Nature Agency, together with adults with learning disabilities (and their families), municipalities and companies developed a new way of using nature in social services - The Forest Helpers Program.

The Forest Helpers Program also contributes towards implementing the recommendations from the United Nations forums and conferences on sustainable development.

## The Danish Nature Agency

The Danish Nature Agency is an agency under the Ministry of Environment and Food of Denmark, which manages tasks in forests, natural areas and along the shores of Denmark.

The Danish Nature Agency manages the Ministry's approximately 200,000 hectares of forests and natural areas, to create the greatest possible value for society in terms of good conditions for outdoor recreation, nature protection and efficient operation of the Agency's forests and other natural areas.



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Ministry of Environment  
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Nature Agency

# Forest Helpers



Photo and text: The Danish Nature Agency

# What is a Forest Helper?

**Forest Helpers are adults with learning disabilities, who work in forests and nature and help with community projects. They do so with the support of a qualified supervisor.**

The goal for the Ministry of the Environment and Food, Nature Agency is to provide the Forest Helpers with a safe environment and to offer them opportunities that help their mental and physical health whilst improving local wildlife and providing services for forest visitors. Whilst working on individual projects, the Forest Helpers are encouraged by the supervisor to take on responsibility for given tasks, as well as coming up with their own opinions on how the projects should develop.

The Forest Helpers wear uniforms with "Forest Helper" printed on the back; it creates a feeling of "belonging" and team spirit amongst other Forest Helpers. It also identifies them to other forest visitors, especially when they are helping at community events.

## **Role**

The Forest Helpers get involved with many different tasks, depending on their abilities and needs. For example they might help at a visitor centre with cleaning of

outdoor facilities, supplying wood for campsites, or help with maintaining the nature trails. All Forest Helpers work both indoors and outdoors.

## **Liability and Payment**

In Denmark, the municipalities are responsible for the adults with learning disabilities, if their own families or others are unable to take care of them. The municipalities are required by national law to provide a safe environment of the disabled individuals to develop.

Previously adults with learning disabilities were placed in municipal institutions. Now, by participating in a Forest Helper Program, individuals are drawn away from institutions and into forests and other nature areas.

Municipalities participate voluntarily in a project. When doing so, they retain responsibility for the activities related to the project. This includes transportation to the place of work, work teams, health and safety and the supervision, while The Nature Agency supplies with the buildings and sites and ideas for the work to be carried out.

## **Project organization**

The municipality involved in the Forest Helpers Program decides on how the project will be organized:

- a private company supervising the project at the municipality's expense and risk.
- a project as part of the municipality.
- a project as part of the Nature Agency, with supervision of the project at the municipality's expense and risk.

The 20 ongoing projects involves one fourth of the Danish municipalities. The individual projects vary between 5 and 30 "fulltime jobs" and a single fulltime job will often involve several Forest Helpers. The 20 projects involve 300-400 persons in a total of app. 200 fulltime jobs.

## **Experiences**

Previous studies suggest the following:

- The work of the Forest Helpers need to support and develop their abilities and mental health
- Effort must be taken by the supervisor to find suitable jobs, reflecting the Forest Helpers mental and physical abilities.
- Forest Helpers develop personally better than when they were retained in an institution. Forest Helpers show great pleasure in returning to the forest and interacting with other forest visitors.
- The families of participants in the programme state that the personal development is very positive. They recognise that their family member suddenly feels to be more involved with and to have a positive impact on society.
- The Forest Helpers have after only a 2-3 month duration of the program experienced personal victories and improvements in both their mental and physical health.
- The supervisor of the project must have a thorough knowledge of the Forest Helpers abilities and health history and experience in working with individuals and groups from this background. The supervisor can therefore normally not be transferred directly from the forest staff, or from the park department.
- Forest Helpers must have their own space for privacy.