



Vartiosaari Health Nature Trail

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The trail is a pilot project of the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra and has been created by Luonnontie. Other partners are the Finnish Forest Research Institute and the City of Helsinki.
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Welcome to Vartiosaari

By crossing the Reposalmi strait, you experienced a small but important part of centuries-old archipelago lifestyle. After crossing the water, many have said they feel different, as if they had left behind more than just the opposite shore.

Vartiosaari is about 1,3 kilometers long and 700 meters wide. It is a green area of varied landscapes, including forests, groves, hills and valleys. Within the limits of the capital city, the island has its distinctive and peaceful atmosphere and has remained uniquely preserved in both its natural and cultural environment for the past decades.

In the beginning of the 20th century, the most influential islander was Colonel Gustaf Fogelholm, a managing director of Nokia, who owned a large piece of Vartiosaari. He named his first villa "Quisisana". The word originates from Ancient Rome and means "Here you find health". Let Colonel Fogelholm be your guide and guardian along the trail!

Modern science has proven the health benefits of nature. Vartiosaari Health Nature Trail introduces these benefits through information and exercises. The two and half kilometers long forest route is marked with red-topped sticks. You will recognize each point of interest from a wooden tube. ENJOY YOUR WALK!

COLONEL FOGELHOLM RECOMMENDS:

Scan your body from top to bottom. Note how you are feeling right now.

It is likely that the Finnish word for "healthy", "terve", originates from the word "tervaspuu". It means old hard pine wood saturated by tar, and endures storms and seasons.

Boulder moved = do the same!

According to Finnish folklore, glacial erratics were rocks tossed around by giants gone wild. However, nowadays it is known they were carried by glacial ice. Ten thousand years ago this spot was at least one hundred meters below the surface of the Baltic Ice Lake. Then all of a sudden, an erratic riding on an iceberg fell to the bottom of the lake. To this very place.

Nature moves us, too. Residential areas with green spaces tempt us to take a walk. It is scientifically proven that a self-chosen walking pace is brisker outdoors than indoors, yet physically less strenuous.

Regular physical exercise improves blood circulation and oxygen flow, makes bones stronger and combats health conditions and diseases. Moreover, sunlight enhances the body's production of vitamin D.

COLONEL FOGELHOLM RECOMMENDS:

Don't try to swipe the erratic and put it in your pocket = it is the most handsome boulder around here after all = but find a stone you prefer from the nearby beach. Take it with you = you will need it later! And don't forget to sniff some salty sea air!

In Sunnanvik Park under the elms

In front of you is Sunnanvik, a farm mansion laid out on the orders of none other than Gustaf Fogelholm himself. In the summer of 1918, he resigned his position as managing director of Nokia and dedicated himself to farming and gardening. Economically it was unprofitable but Colonel Fogelholm enjoyed enormously his new calling. "It doesn't seem to do any harm to one's health to stumble on the rocks and in the sand in the sun and the rain alike", he wrote.

Studies show that hospital patients with a view to the nature need less pain relief and recover more quickly than patients with a built view. The same applies to everyone. Even looking at photographs of nature scenes leads to an increased state of well-being!

COLONEL FOGELHOLM RECOMMENDS:

Find a firm standing posture. Imagine your feet are growing roots like a tree. Stretch your arms up and keep your feet steadily on the ground. Feel the firmness of the tree within yourself; you also might want to close your eyes. Bring your arms down to the sides, as if they drew an outline of foliage. Take an oak as an example!

Woolly butterbur reminds us of medicinal plants

In all of Finland, woolly butterbur (*Petasites spurius*) has established itself only at this very spot. Flowering stems of this rare plant break through the ground in early May. Later in the summer, its massive leaves grow bigger, eventually covering the earth in a dense canopy. The Finnish name "rantaruttojuuri" ("rutto" means "plague") suggests that it was originally used as a medicinal plant. However, later it was discovered to contain poisonous compounds.

Gardens of mansions, castles and monasteries have played an important part in the cultivation and distribution of medicinal herbs. Did you know that even today over 25 percent of prescription drugs are derived from chemicals first identified in plants and their number is still increasing?

You can successfully learn to identify some of the wild plants and use them safely for relief of less serious illnesses. Remember always to identify them with absolute precision before use. On this beach grows meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*). It is native throughout Finland and commonly found in damp meadows. Can you spot it?

COLONEL FOGELHOLM RECOMMENDS:

Pick a meadowsweet flower or a leaf. Crush the plant between your fingers so fluid will trickle out. Can you feel the aromatic scent? Aspirin was initially created from salicin, derived in 1839 from meadowsweet.



Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*)

The flowers and leaves of meadowsweet are good natural remedies for relieving mild aches. Its handsome, creamy-white flowers are gathered after Midsummer and can be dried and used as tea.

Magical power of water



This giant's kettle was formed in the Ice Age when water, produced by thawing of the ice and snow, flowed into streams on the surface of a glacier and a vertical shaft was developed in the ice. Gravel and other detrital matter, turned by the swirling water, started to drill into the bedrock and gradually a massive hole was born.


When you are looking at the lapping waves of Karpinselkä, you might ask yourself why do we all love being near water. Many dream about having a house by the sea or a lake. One explanation for this natural longing is that about 70 percent of the human body is made out of water. Right after oxygen, water is our most important basic need. Without water we would not exist.

In addition to water, the traditional four elements are fire, earth and air. Earth we feel in the solid things in nature, air as a breeze on our skin and fire in flames as well as in rays of sunshine. Can you find all the four elements in yourself? You might want to think about your body temperature, breathing, hardness of your bones and moisture in your mouth.

COLONEL FOGELHOLM RECOMMENDS:

If the weather is warm, try walking barefoot. It is a therapeutic and enjoyable form of foot massage!

Walking barefoot is believed to balance hormones and the nervous system.



Ostrich fern, benefiter of teamwork


In this grove grows ostrich fern, the biggest fern in Finland. Its flourishing is helped by black alder. Unlike other trees, in autumn black alder drops its leaves while they are still green and full of nutrients. How can it afford that? The secret is teamwork. On the tree roots lives the bacterium *Frankia alni*. This small nitrogen fixing bacterium absorbs nitrogen directly from the air and makes it available to the tree. In return, the bacterium receives carbon which is produced by the tree through photosynthesis. Similar symbiotic relationships are much more common in nature than you think. Perhaps nature could inspire us, too, to work together!

At this point, your blood pressure has most likely gone down. In addition, the level of the stress hormone cortisol in your blood might have gone down and your muscles become less tense. If you spend longer time in the cabinet of Dr. Forest, the number of your white blood cells – the defenders of the human immune system - is likely to go up.

COLONEL FOGELHOLM RECOMMENDS:

Step in the middle of the ostrich ferns and feel the jungle-like atmosphere. Breathe in lushness and relax as you exhale. Allow yourself to become enchanted! You might want to close your eyes.

It has been suggested that throughout the course of evolution humans have adapted to be calm and relaxed in sheltered environments suitable for finding food. Perhaps our cells "remember" this, although we may live in a city.



Scenic Trail = a superfood treasure trove

In the dawning of the 20th century, winding walkways were often built near villas. The purpose was to inspire people to take a walk in nature and see its beauty. In front of us is one of these trails, largely covered with moss. It is easy to imagine Colonel Fogelholm roaming around here.

Being in nature is good for eye muscles. We watch various objects from varying distances and shift our focus near and far. Moreover, nature spotting is exciting and interesting.

Also blueberry is good for eyes and has an ability to boost night vision. It used to be a part of the fighter pilot diet. Blueberries are rich with vitamins, micronutrients and minerals and contain anthocyanins which reduce risks of cardiovascular diseases. Even a fox loves blueberries!

COLONEL FOGELHOLM RECOMMENDS:

Taste blueberries and take a look around, near and far. You might want to focus on a particular spot and roll your neck = it is good for your eyes. Or maybe you want to use the Scenic Trail as your "sofa" and eye your surroundings on your back.

Being outdoors (in nature) sharpens your senses and improves attention. But although nature makes us alert, it also relaxes. This activates the parasympathetic nervous system which slows the heart rate, lowers the breathing frequency and activates digestion.



Along Country Road to the vegetable gardens

Many Helsinki residents spend their free time tending their garden plots here on Vartiosaari. Gardening brings peace of mind, invigorates and makes life feel more meaningful. Have you tried green fingers therapy?

Not only gardening but being in nature in general relieves stress that often causes illnesses. With its numerous details for all senses, nature helps you to distract from thoughts spinning through your mind. Therefore, you live more in the moment, and become less negative and anxious. Also inner conflicts and mental fatigue are relieved. Have you noticed that in nature you tend to look at everyday things from a new perspective?

A Finnish study suggests that contact with garden soil decreases susceptibility to allergies. This is believed to result from picking up some beneficial bacteria along the way.

COLONEL FOGELHOLM RECOMMENDS:

Walk backwards one hundred steps along the Country Road. It builds your less developed muscles and is said to be equivalent to 1,000 steps of conventional walking. The Chinese do this exercise because it is good for the brain.



Animals lift your spirit

"Stroking a horse is not just a physical experience. With the fingertips one is able to sense its friendly mood, its sympathy for a human."

Thus said a well-known Finnish painter, Akseli Gallen-Kallela. Perhaps you have experienced something similar with a horse or some other animal. Many people keep pets, and for good reasons. Equine assisted therapy is used in a variety of therapy fields and dogs visiting care homes are offering the elderly the chance to have their spirits lifted. Also, by taking care of wildlife, for example by feeding birds, we can form a meaningful relationship with animals.

This stable used to belong to a farm called Vådö. Over the years, it has provided a home for all typical Finnish farm animals. Even in the 21st century, the stable accommodated horses, chickens, sheep and rabbits. Its current residents are three goats owned by Vartiosaari Stable Association.

COLONEL FOGELHOLM RECOMMENDS:

Pick leaves of different plants from the courtyard and try out which ones the goats like the best. They too have their favorite food. Being generous is also good for you!

From the corner of the barn, the trail takes you to the coniferous woods and up to the rocky crags. Take a deep breath! Essential oils obtained from conifers, such as pinene, are great for the lungs. You might want to embrace some solid old pine and relax. Feel how its firmness helps you relax.

Note that from this point onwards, the trail becomes more challenging. The rocks are slippery when wet. If you decide to finish your hike here, take the Country Road back to Reposalmi.

Looking far from the Guardian Hill

This lookout point is the reason behind the name Vartiosaari ("Guardian Island"). Very long ago, this place was important to spot ships sailing towards the Vartiokylä hill fort located four kilometers away. The stone pile is a sea cairn built in the Tsar Era. Painted white for improved offshore visibility, it served as a navigation aid.

The view before us was printed on a postcard in the year 1898. The Ministry of Environment has nominated the Helsinki coastline one of 27 national landscapes in Finland. National landscape is a landscape with strong symbolic value and generally acknowledged significance in national culture, history and representation of nature.

A semi-open area offering good visibility to open spaces but also shelter from others' eyes is one of the fundamental properties of human concepts of paradise. This has been shown by a study comparing paradise representations in different cultures.

COLONEL FOGELHOLM RECOMMENDS:

This is a good spot to take a break and admire the national landscape. If the sky is clear, let your gaze become soft and relaxed, and focus on the blue sky. Can you recognize the same spaciousness in your mind? Picture your thoughts as clouds that trail off and disappear.

Next, the trail goes through a more sheltered forest. According to studies on green spaces and their health-promoting properties, a "proper" dense forest is a great source of well-being.

Surrender yourself to the magic of the forest on your way to the next sight.

✂ THE DISTANCE TO THE NEXT POINT OF INTEREST IS ABOUT 250 METERS.

"Table of Tapio" – a spot to show gratitude

Sometimes a rare mutation can stop the vertical growth of a spruce and make its top to spread out flat. Older generations in Finland used to call this kind of a tree "Table of Tapio". As the name suggests, it was used as an altar for making offerings to Tapio, the god of the forest.

The Table of Tapio can be seen as a symbol of gratitude. Although the world is full of troubles, there are many good things worth cherishing. Today we can be grateful to ourselves for visiting this forest!

People with a grateful attitude are more optimistic and satisfied with their life. Scientists have found that they also regularly experience many health benefits, such as a reduced risk of cardiovascular diseases.

COLONEL FOGELHOLM RECOMMENDS:

"Charge" the stone you found on the beach as "a gratitude stone". You can do it by touching the Table of Tapio with the stone. Whenever you hold it in your hand or see it in your bag, it reminds you of gratitude. You might also want to make an offering to Tapio by putting some pretty leaf or cone on the altar. If you are tiny, don't hesitate to creep under the tree!



Looking for answers in the stone labyrinth

This is a stone labyrinth also known as "Jatulintarha". Local rascals built it in 1999 to pay respect to an old islander tradition practiced for centuries in this region. The labyrinth is a universal symbol for mystery: how and where to find the right direction in life.

Being in nature improves concentration and clarity of thought. Also, it boosts the ability to perform tasks demanding great precision. If you feel tense, the reason might be some unsolved problem. In nature we calm down and are thus more likely to find an answer we are looking for.

Jatulintarha has played a part in forming pairs. In an old game, a girl stood in the middle of the labyrinth connected by a rope to a boy circling around the maze. The rope was not supposed to touch the ground and the players had to regulate its length by turning back and forth.

Do you prefer to be in nature by yourself or with others? Many outdoor activities encourage us to connect with other people but they also offer a chance to withdraw from social interaction.

COLONEL FOGELHOLM RECOMMENDS:

Step inside the stone labyrinth!
When you reach the center, make
a wish.

To children, playing in natural environment is a brilliant way to improve physical endurance. Walking and running on uneven ground is great for balance and agility.



Enjoy the silence in Forest Church

When Amazon Indians wander, they stop from time to time without any apparent reason and are quiet. They tell that “otherwise, the soul can’t keep up with the body”.

Slowing down and being silent are good for health. The opposite of silence is noise, racket. The might of loud noise was already mentioned in the Old Testament: screaming trumpets made the Wall of Jericho fall down.

Noise is mentally and physically harmful once the level is greater than 55 dB. It causes hypertension, sleeplessness, aggressive behavior and lack of concentration. Regular exposure to noise is associated with the risk of a heart attack.

Silence is an antidote to all these and a source of well-being. Find your own quiet place in nature and visit it often!

This forest sanctuary was consecrated as a quiet ecumenical place of worship in 2002. For years it was regularly used by the local Carmelite monastery and the service on Christmas Eve has become an annual tradition among the islanders.

COLONEL FOGELHOLM RECOMMENDS:

Sit down like a wandering Indian
and listen to the silence between
each sound.

Pasture = the end of the trail

Did you pay attention to the pretty little cottage with its lush garden by the road? It is called "Suotorppa" ("Swamp Cottage") and it belongs to the oldest islander, Mrs. E. She is almost 90 years old but lively and lives in the middle of nature by herself.

Being in nature increases the lifespan. According to a research, the probability of five year survival of the senior citizens studied increased in accordance with the walkable green spaces they had near their residence. Also, a positive attitude, a meaningful focus in life and physical exercise are also important ingredients for longevity. Contact with nature boosts them all.

In the forest of Vartiosaari, you have now had a good dose of nature, which could be even measured. How wonderful! How do you feel now?

Visiting green spaces at least 5 hours a month or hiking in a bigger forest outside urban areas 2 to 3 times a month produces a distinct improvement in health.

This is the last sight of the Health Nature Trail. You will find back to the starting point by following this path and turning to the right from the next crossroads on the main road. The starting point Reposalmi lies at the end of it, some 350 meters from here.



COLONEL FOGELHOLM THANKS AND BOWS:

Pay it forward. Who could join you next time for a day out in the forest?



Nature Health Trail

- 1 Reposalmi shore
- 2 Glacial erratic
- 3 Sunnankivi park
- 4 Woolly butterbur
- 5 Giant's kettle
- 6 Ostrich fern grove
- 7 Scenic trail
- 8 Country road & vegetable gardens
- 9 Stable
- 10 Guardian's rock, national landscape
- 11 Table of Tapio
- 12 Jatulintarha - stone labyrinth
- 13 Elf Church
- 14 Pasture area

