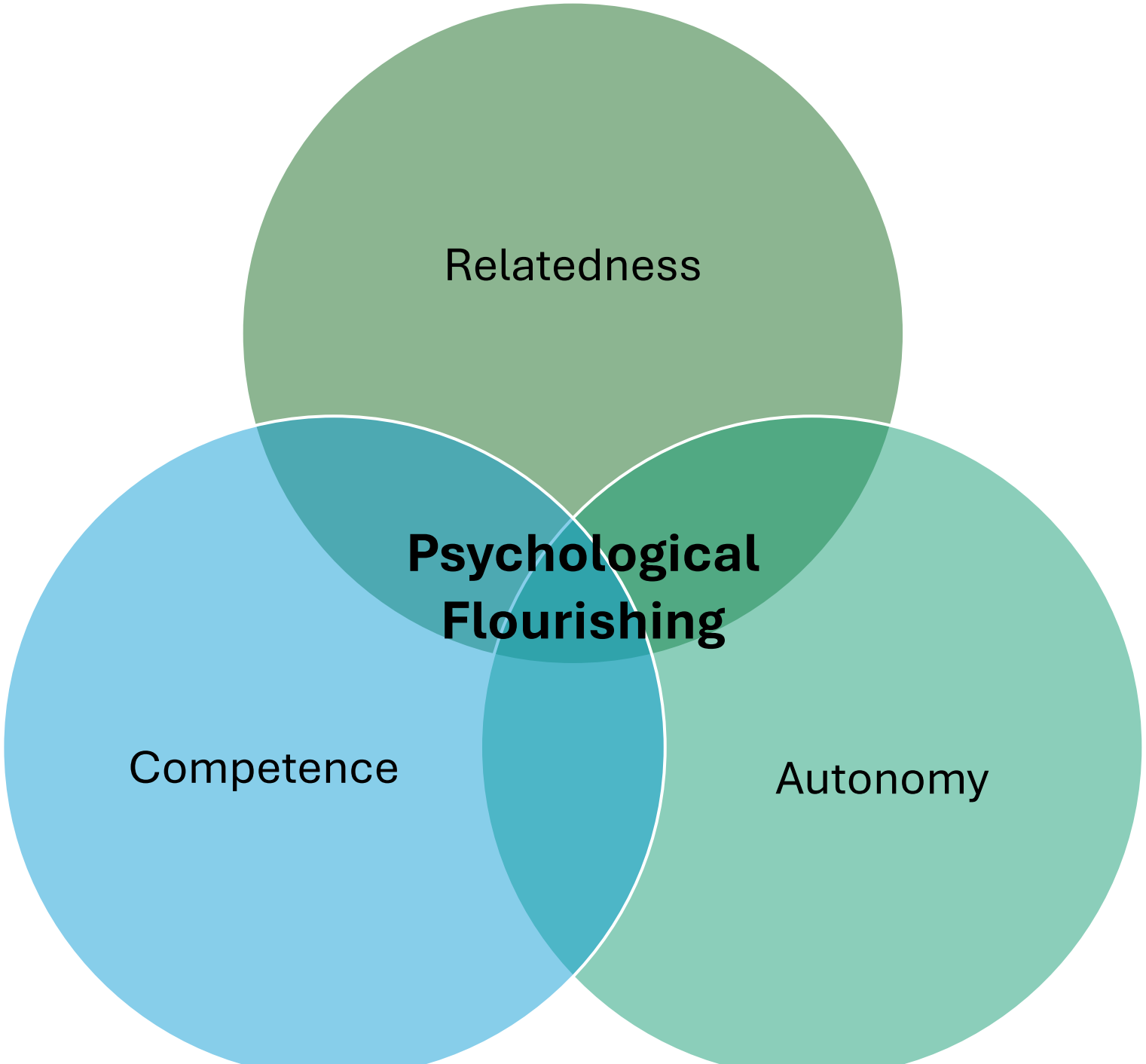
Forests and psychological wellbeing

Kathryn Williams
University of Melbourne



Overall happiness, satisfaction with life, mental and emotional health.

Linked to satisfaction of basic needs:

- **Relatedness**: belonging, intimacy, connection with others
- **Competence**: feeling capable and effective in one's actions
- **Autonomy**: self-regulation of behaviour; acting in line with own values

Ryan & Deci (2000) Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. American Psychologist 55, 68 -78.
Church et al.(2012) Need Satisfaction and Well-Being: Testing Self-Determination Theory in Eight Cultures. Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 44, 507-534.

Relatedness

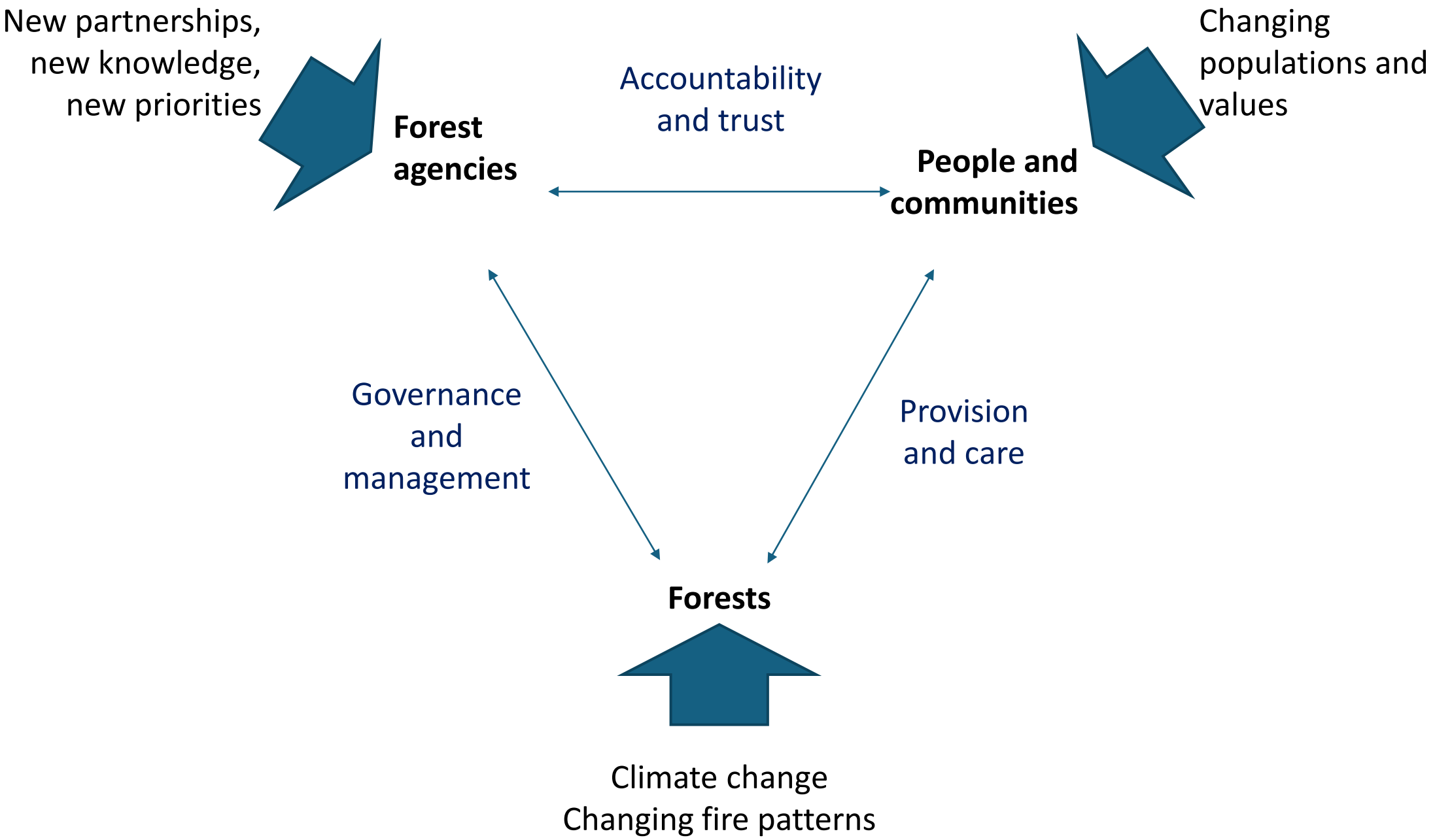
Psychological Flourishing

Competence

Autonomy

Stier-Jarmer, M.; Throner, V.; Kirschneck, M.; Immich, G.; Frisch, D.; Schuh, A. The Psychological and Physical Effects of Forests on Human Health: A Systematic Review of Systematic Reviews and MetaAnalyses. Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health 2021, 18, 1770.

Changing Forest Systems



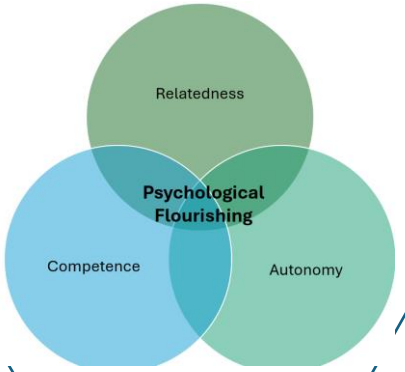
New partnerships, new knowledge, new priorities

Changing populations and values

Forest agencies

Accountability and trust

People and communities

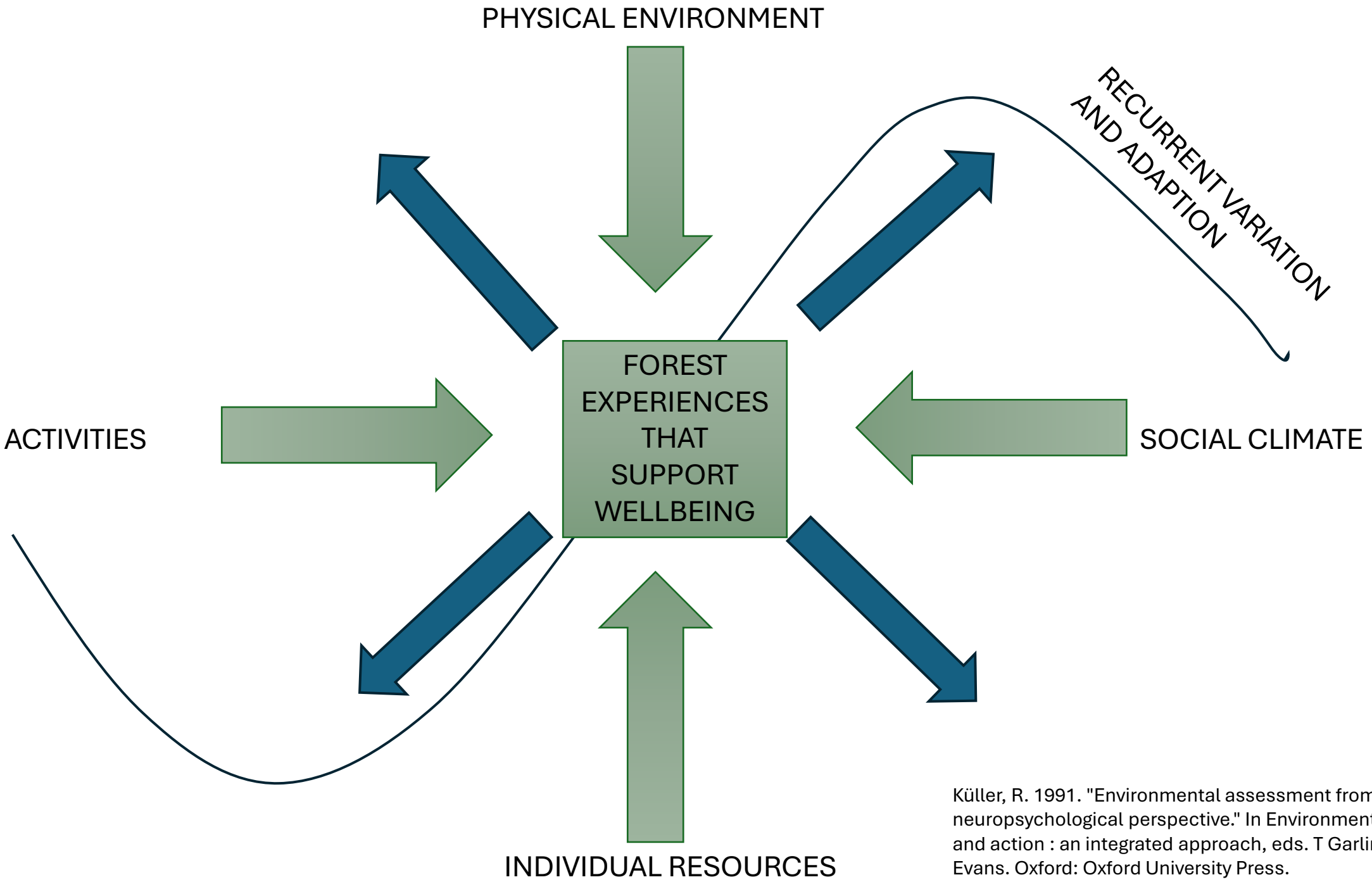


Governance and management

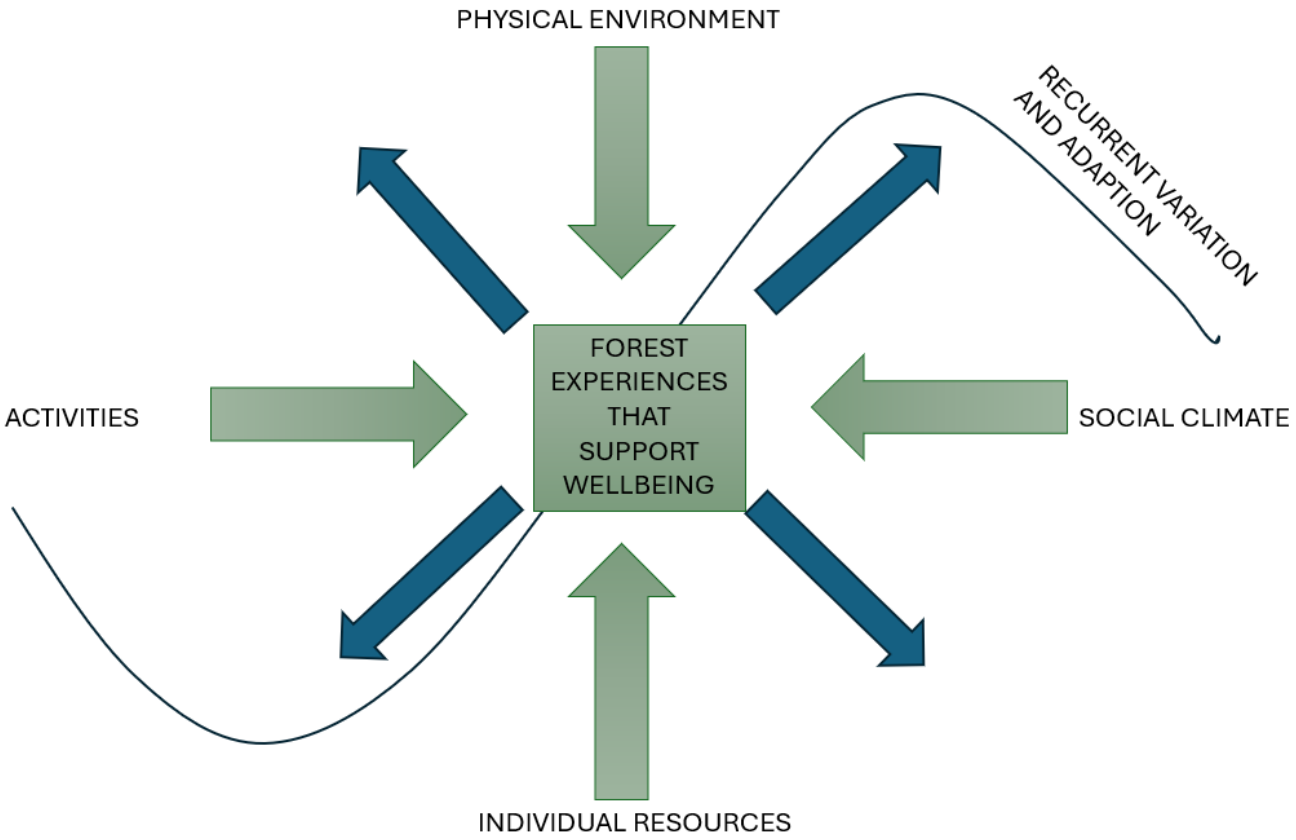
Provision and care

Forests

Climate change
Changing fire patterns



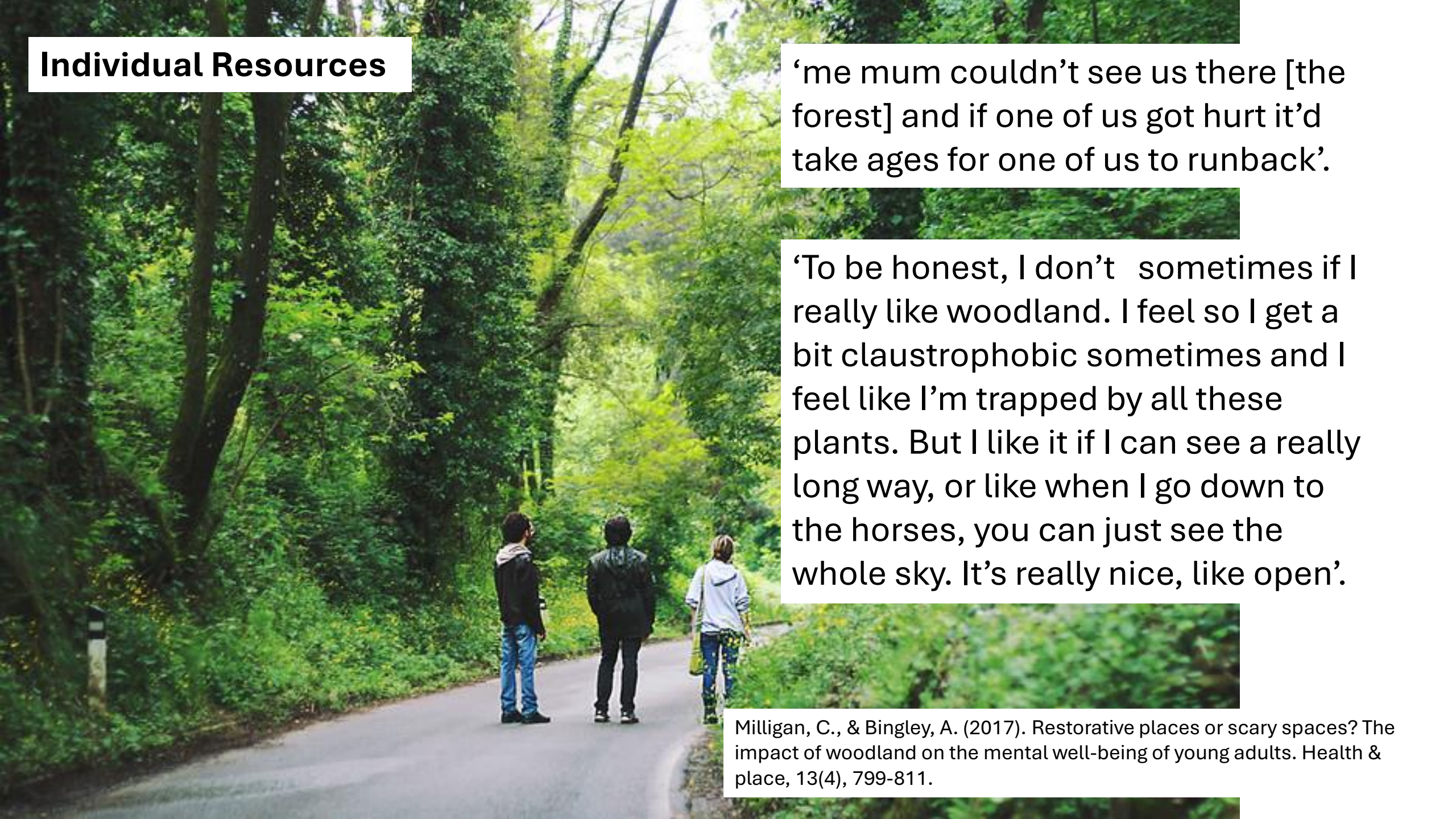
Küller, R. 1991. "Environmental assessment from a neuropsychological perspective." In Environment, cognition, and action : an integrated approach, eds. T Garling and G W Evans. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



An analytical framework to support decisions with attention to psychological wellbeing

Bridge forest planning and management activities with experiences of individual people.

- Examples
- Principles
- Questions to consider



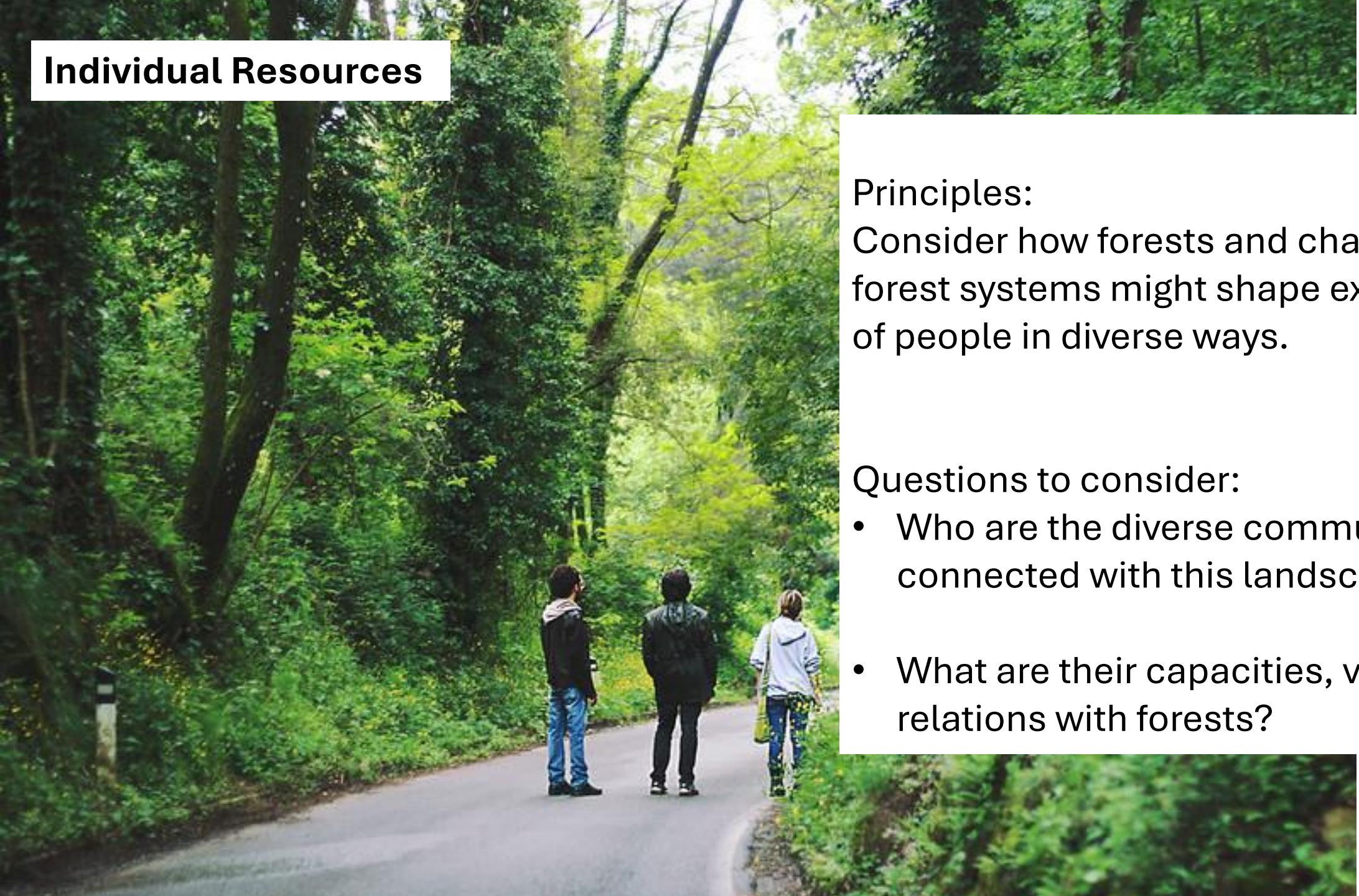
Individual Resources

‘me mum couldn’t see us there [the forest] and if one of us got hurt it’d take ages for one of us to runback’.

‘To be honest, I don’t sometimes if I really like woodland. I feel so I get a bit claustrophobic sometimes and I feel like I’m trapped by all these plants. But I like it if I can see a really long way, or like when I go down to the horses, you can just see the whole sky. It’s really nice, like open’.

Milligan, C., & Bingley, A. (2017). Restorative places or scary spaces? The impact of woodland on the mental well-being of young adults. Health & place, 13(4), 799-811.

Individual Resources



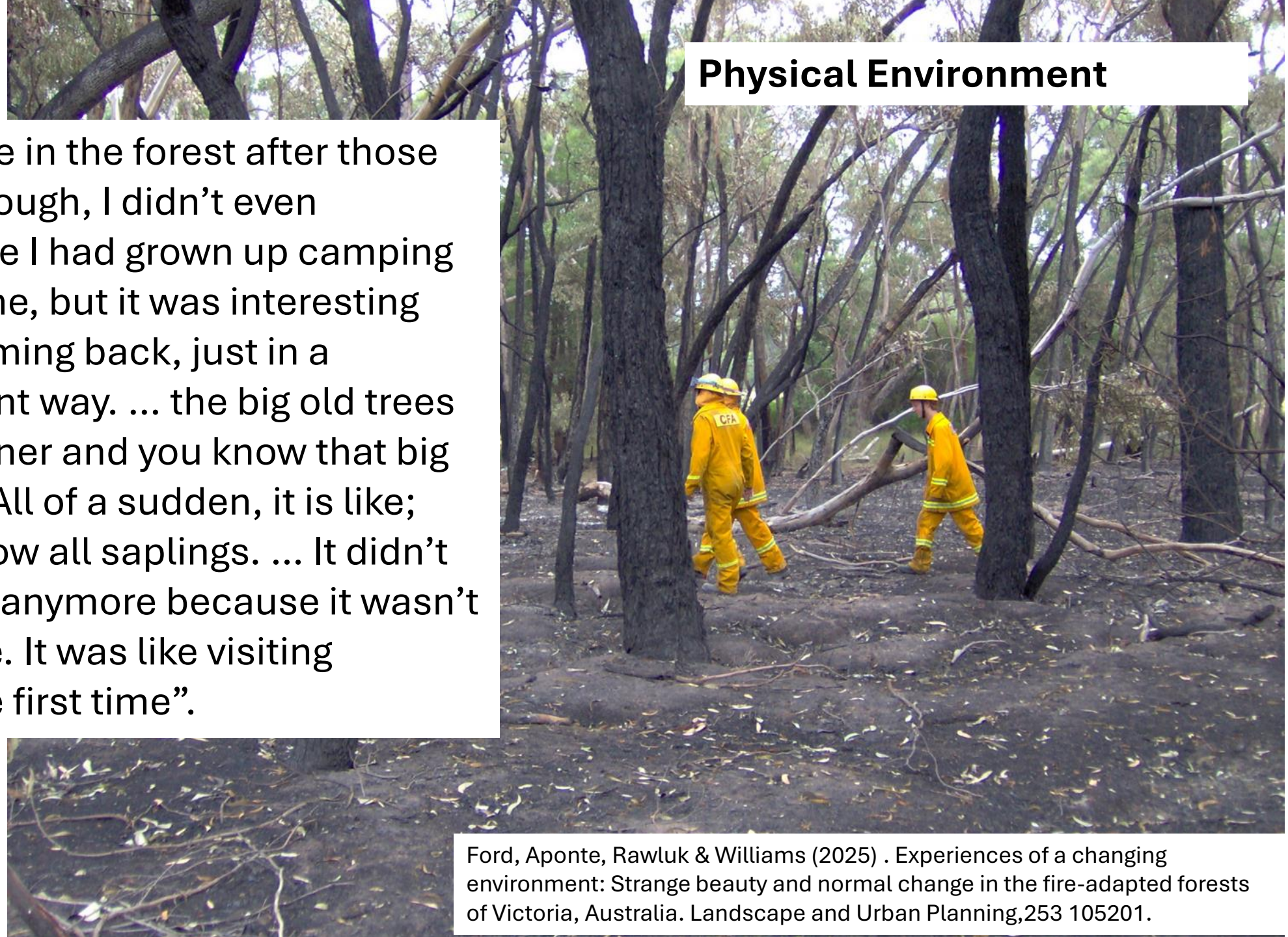
Principles:
Consider how forests and changes in forest systems might shape experiences of people in diverse ways.

Questions to consider:

- Who are the diverse communities connected with this landscape?
- What are their capacities, values, and relations with forests?

Physical Environment

“Seeing the change in the forest after those bushfires went through, I didn’t even recognise the place I had grown up camping in … It was just gone, but it was interesting how fast it was coming back, just in a completely different way. … the big old trees that you turn a corner and you know that big tree is on the left. All of a sudden, it is like; okay, that is just now all saplings. … It didn’t feel as comforting anymore because it wasn’t our place anymore. It was like visiting somewhere for the first time”.



Ford, Aponte, Rawluk & Williams (2025) . Experiences of a changing environment: Strange beauty and normal change in the fire-adapted forests of Victoria, Australia. Landscape and Urban Planning,253 105201.

Physical Environment

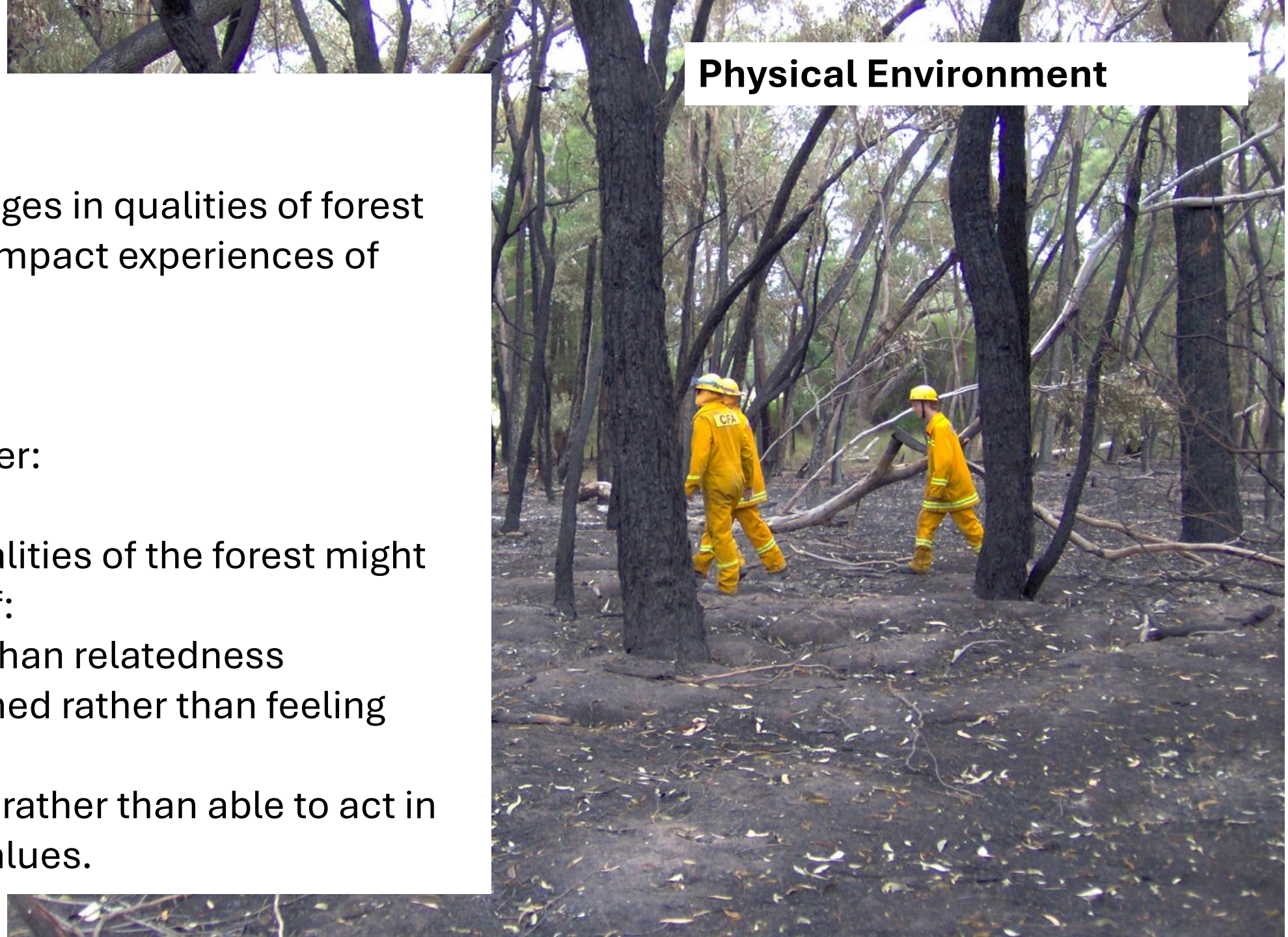
Principles:

Consider how changes in qualities of forest landscapes might impact experiences of diverse people.

Question to consider:

What emergent qualities of the forest might create of a sense of:

- rejection rather than relatedness
- being overwhelmed rather than feeling competent
- being controlled rather than able to act in line with one's values.



Social Climate

Changes to the environment: landscapes, ecosystems, and weather patterns		
Cause of change	Social changes • Rural abandonment • Rural depopulation • Abandonment of agriculture and the countryside	Climate changes
Impact on environment	Changes to the landscape and ecosystems: • Abandonment of pastures and fields • Advancement of forest into former agricultural land and high-elevation pastures • Increased urbanization in valley bottoms	Changes to weather/climate: • Increased average temperatures across all seasons • More dramatic, extreme, and violent weather events • Less snow in winter • More frequent periods of drought • Shifts in the timing of the seasons and disappearance of spring and fall
Impact on well-being	Distress associated with: • Disruption of sense of identity as tied to place and to an agricultural past • Disruption of sense of connection to place • Place-based knowledge becoming less reliable	Distress, anxiety, worry associated with: • Unpredictability of the weather • Uncertainty regarding the future • Loss of feelings of control • Loss of reliability of place-based knowledge

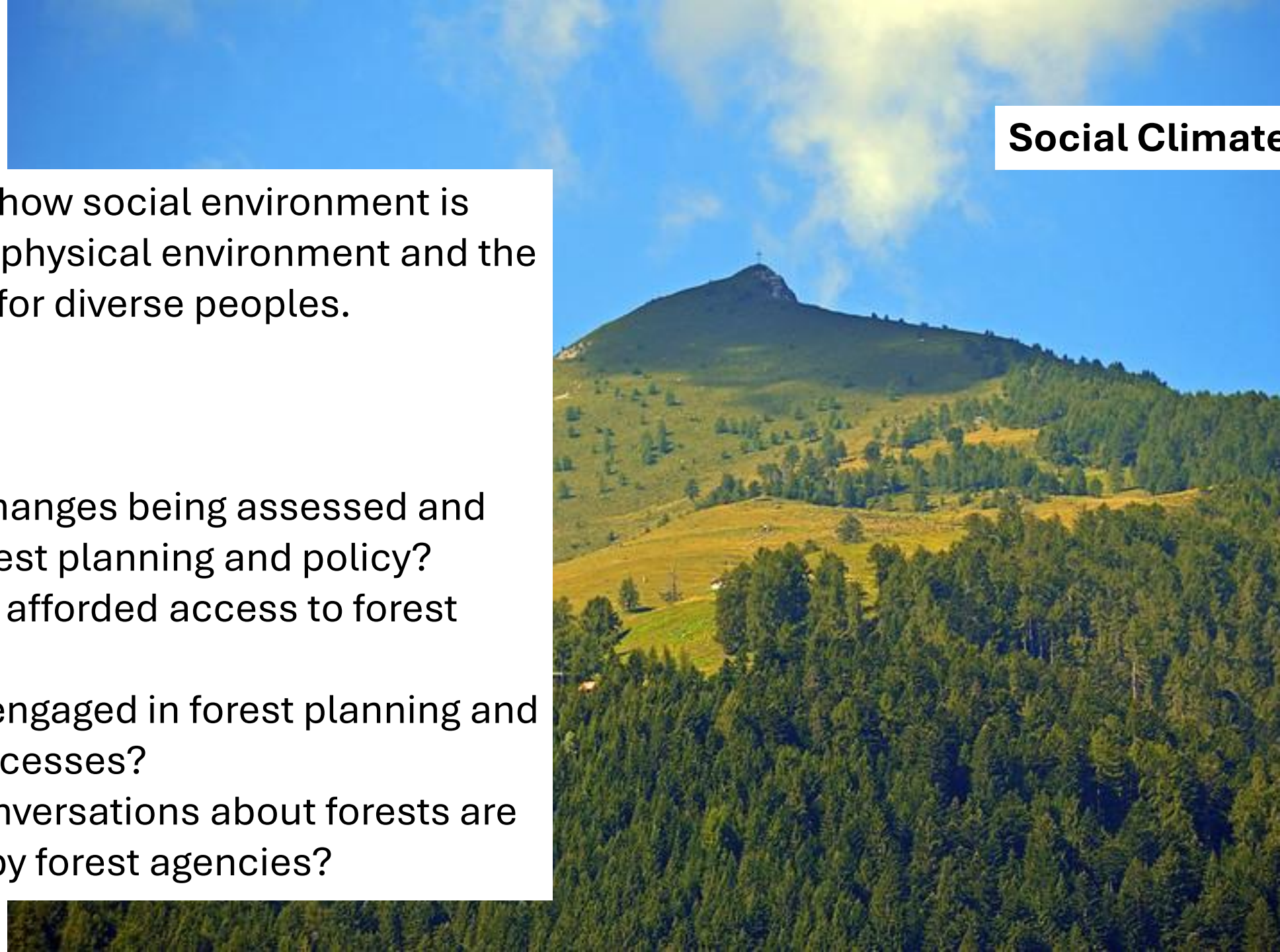
Whitaker, S. (2023) "The forests are dirty": Effects of climate and social change on landscape and well-being in the Italian Alps, Emotion, Space and Society, 49, 100973

Social Climate

Principle: Consider how social environment is changing alongside physical environment and the implications of this for diverse peoples.

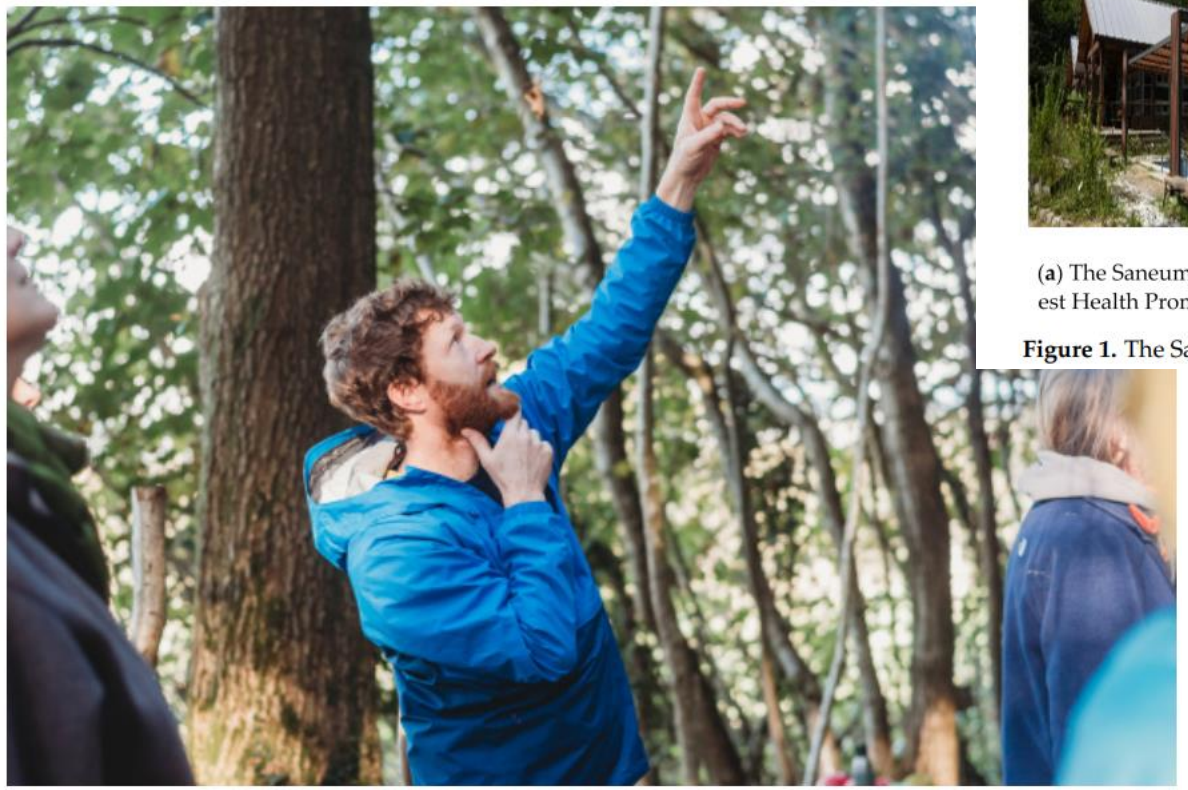
Questions:

- How are social changes being assessed and considered in forest planning and policy?
- Who is and is not afforded access to forest places?
- Who is and isn’t engaged in forest planning and management processes?
- What kinds of conversations about forests are being promoted by forest agencies?



Activity

Social Forestry for Woodlan Owners and Managers

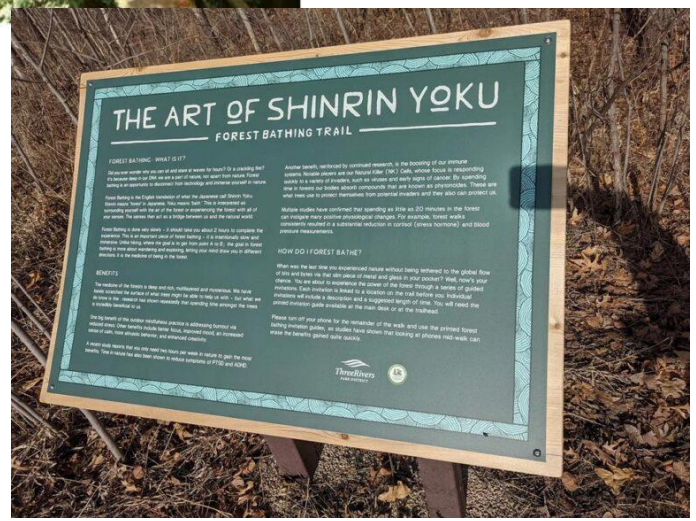


As an owner or manager of a woodland, we know the benefits to our mental and physical health working in the woods can bring. Social forestry projects aim to bring these benefits to those that need it most.

(a) The Saneum Healing Forest Health Promotion Center

(b) A trail along the valley

Figure 1. The Saneum Healing Forest.



Kang M-J, Kim H-S, Kim J-Y. Effects of Forest-Based Interventions on Mental Health: A Meta-Analysis of Randomized Controlled Trials. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. 2022; 19(8):4884. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19084884

Jeon, J.Y.; Kim, I.O.; Yeon, P.-s.; Shin, W.S. The Physio-Psychological Effect of Forest Therapy Programs on Juvenile Probationers. Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health 2021, 18, 5467

Activity

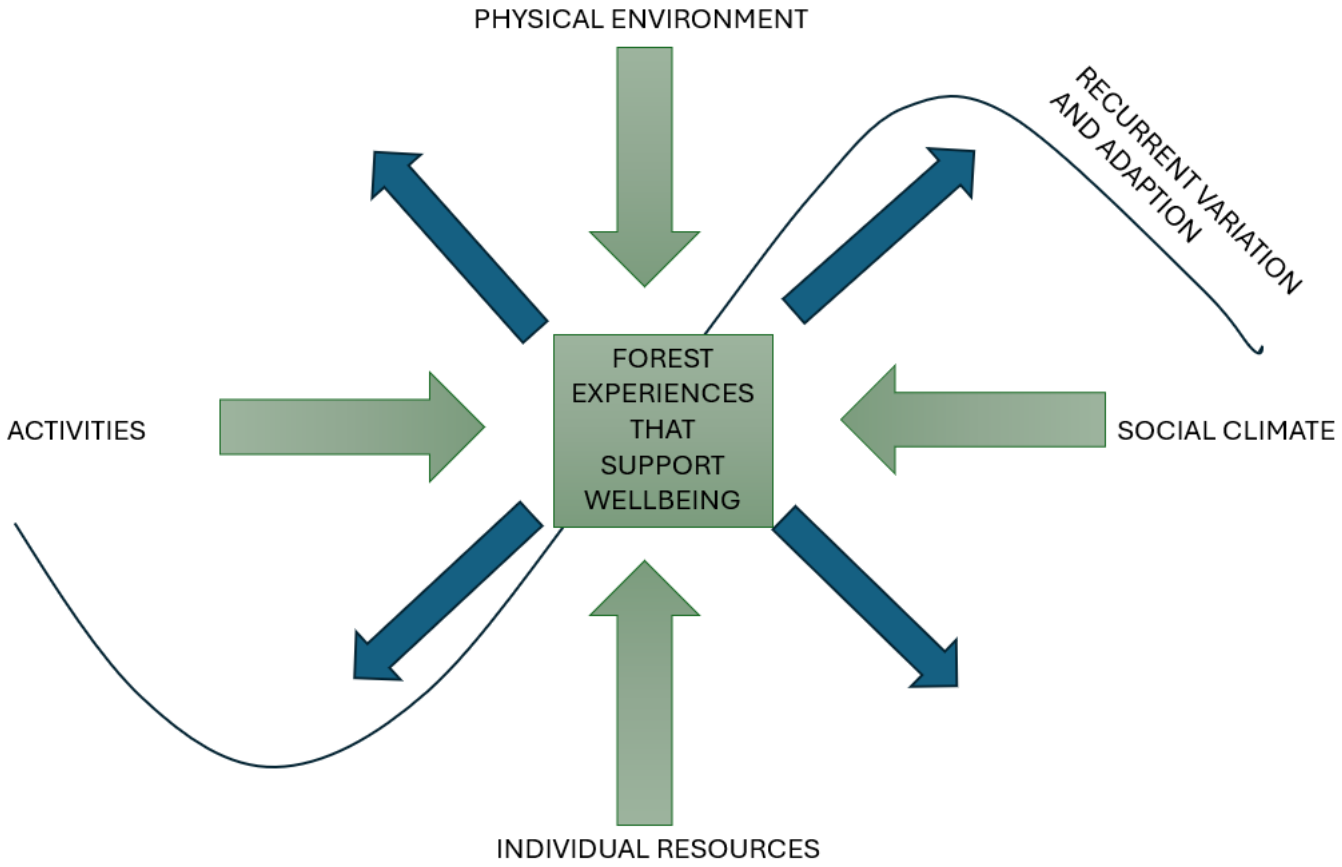
Principle: Consider how forest agencies can add value through programs specifically designed to promote wellbeing.

Questions:

How will changes in policy or planning impact existing activities that support wellbeing?

How can opportunities for wellbeing activities be enhanced?

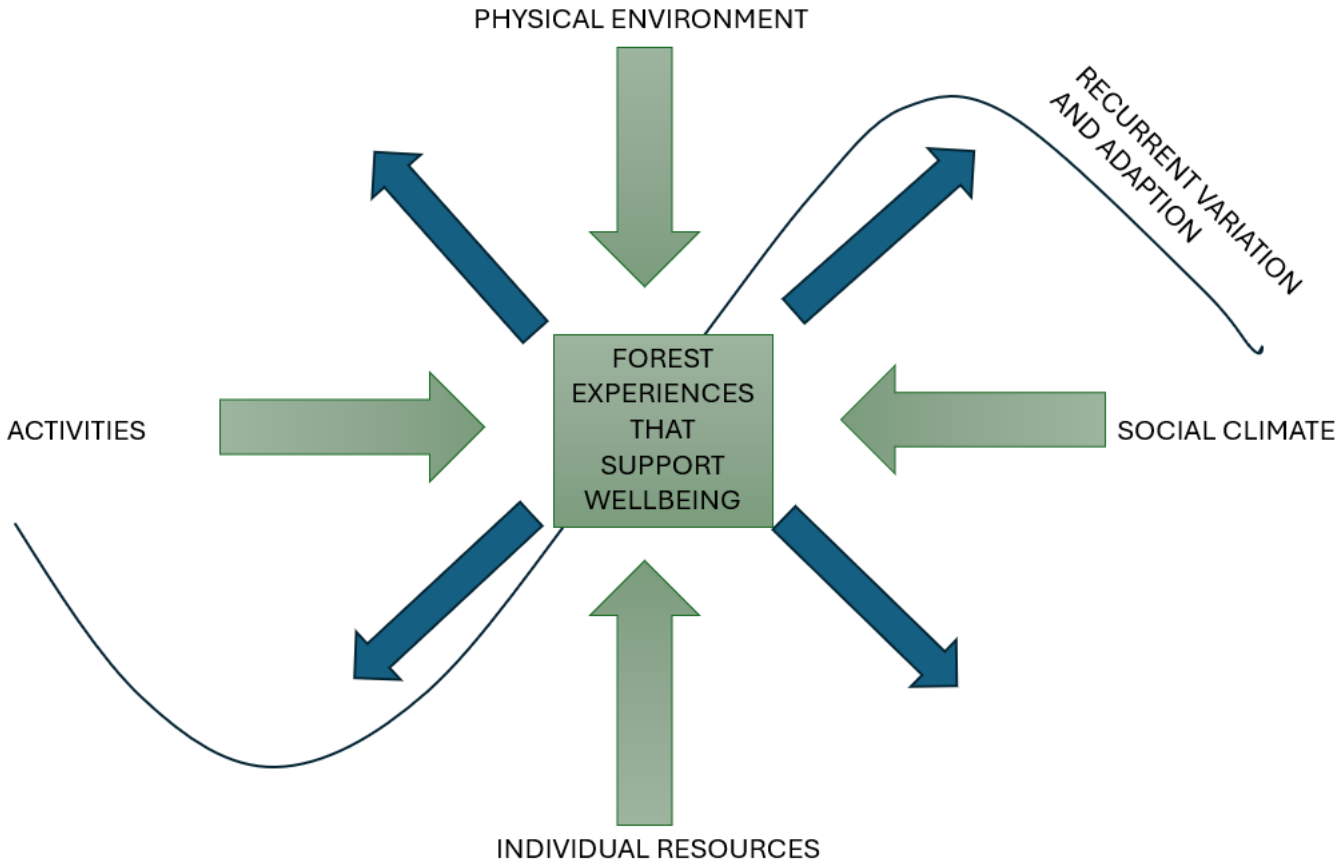
Recurrent variation and adaption



"And we'd gone out straight away, we probably shouldn't have done but we wanted to see what had happened to our birdwatching and our walking areas. It was confronting to see the devastation of the fires. But to see the new growth coming through was quite amazing. And that sort of triggered – well, this is what happens, this is why the Australian bush is like it is, because it's used to fire, flood, and famine and it just happens this way."

Ford, Aponte, Rawluk & Williams (2025) . Experiences of a changing environment: Strange beauty and normal change in the fire-adapted forests of Victoria, Australia. Landscape and Urban Planning,253 105201.

Recurrent variation and adaption



Principle: Keep in mind that well-being changes across time and that people are constantly adapting to changing systems.

Questions:

How can we foster better conversations about how forest systems are changing?

How can we promote opportunities for people to adapt as conditions, capacities and values change through time?