

Nature Quest



Fresh air. Open sky. The beauty of the horizon. Most of us wish we could spend more time outside enjoying nature's gifts. Now, a growing body of research is giving us even more compelling reasons to heed those desires. Discover why time spent in nature is time wisely invested in personal well-being.

When Kyra Ryan moved to a little house on the edge of a meadow with beautiful mountain views in Taos, N.M., she imagined she would spend a significant amount of time outdoors each day. But she had trouble getting started. Having just launched her own small business (one that required hours in front of the computer), and feeling in need of retreat after going through a divorce, Ryan spent most of her time connecting with the world outside by watching it through her home office window. But when, on occasion, she did make it outside for a walk, she noticed it had a positive effect on her psyche.

"I woke up to the world in a way that I didn't when I stayed inside all day," says Ryan, 37. "Anytime I felt sluggish, I could just step outside the door and walk – and it would help. Being outside gave me a lot of calm, focused energy."

So Ryan made a commitment to walk outdoors every day. In addition to clearing her head after long days at the computer and getting some exercise on days she didn't go to the gym, she found that time spent in nature made her feel better about life. "I felt like I was readjusting my settings," she says.

According to researchers in fields such as medicine, psychology and urban planning, getting outside not only feels good, it is good for you. Unfortunately, our fast-paced, overscheduled lifestyles make it awfully easy to spend our lives cooped up indoors and separated from nature. And today, more of us live in cities – and farther away from wide-open spaces – than ever before. In 1950, 30 percent of the world's population resided in urban centers. By 2007, for the first time in history, half the world's population is expected to live in cities. By 2030, that percentage is expected to exceed 60 percent.

"Never have humans spent so little time in physical contact with animals and plants, and the consequences are unknown," writes Deakin University's Cecily Maller and her fellow Australian researchers in a study on the health benefits of contact with nature. Concerned that modern society insulates people from regular contact with nature, they note, "Some researchers believe that too much artificial stimulation and an existence spent in purely human environments may cause exhaustion, or produce a loss of vitality and health."

The good news is that it doesn't take much time to start reaping the benefits of being outside, nor does it take much effort to reconnect with nature. Simply getting outside on a regular basis, whether for a picnic in the backyard or a walk around the block, can improve our bodies, our minds and the quality of our lives.

A View to Vitality

It's well documented that hospital patients who have a view out a window, or even a view of a nature-scene photograph, heal faster than those who don't. In the 1970s, Roger Ulrich, PhD, discovered that surgical patients who had a view of nature from their hospital room had shorter hospital stays and required fewer pain medications than those whose windows faced a brick wall.

If a mere glimpse of nature can do us that much good, it's not hard to imagine that putting our entire selves into direct contact with nature might offer us even more profound benefits. Indeed, time outdoors has been proven to have beneficial effects on blood pressure, brain waves and cholesterol levels. It has also been proven to boost immunity and to promote a good night's sleep. Outdoor activities encourage deeper breathing, which relaxes muscles and infuses the body with oxygen.

Getting adequate exposure to sunshine helps your body manufacture vitamin D, which plays a role in preventing health problems like rickets, bone and muscle weakness and pain, and autoimmune disorders such as multiple sclerosis and rheumatoid arthritis. Called the "sunshine vitamin," vitamin D encourages the body's absorption of calcium, necessary for developing and maintaining healthy teeth and bones.

These are just a few of many known and presumed advantages associated with spending time outdoors, and more are currently being investigated. As a result, more hospitals are starting to provide patients access to the outdoors. Healing gardens are being planted on hospital rooftops and in courtyards across the country, and an increasing number of Western medical professionals are beginning to recognize that adequate time spent in natural environments is a requisite for both health maintenance and recovery.

In National Wildlife magazine, Howard Frumkin, MD, a physician at Emory University's Department of Environmental and Occupational Health, tells writer Beth Baker: "It would not be surprising to me if we get to the point of prescribing nature as a treatment for various conditions. We need more evidence before we do that. But wouldn't it be nice if I, as a physician, could say, 'spend time in the park' instead of 'take this medication'?"

Peace of Mind

According to an emerging group of psychologists, called ecopsychologists, the natural environment plays a fundamental role in our mental health, too. Ecopsychologists suggest that a lack of connection to the natural world contributes to mental and emotional distress. They also emphasize that human health is affected by the health of the environment. Their prescription for healing? Caring for the natural environment – and mending our own connections with nature. (For more on this, check out "See the Connection" in the April 2006 archive.)

But this view has yet to take root in conventional medical literature. For example, you won't find much mention of nature in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), points out Theodore Roszak, professor emeritus of history at California State University, East Bay.

In the updated version of his 1992 book, *The Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology* (Phanes Press, 2001), Roszak notes that the DSM – a seminal text often used in making mental health diagnoses – "never asks about the quality of people's relationship with the natural world in which our species spent 99 percent of its evolutionary history."

But perhaps ecopsychology's time has come. Increasing numbers of people are dealing with stress-related conditions and depression. Today, one in four people can expect to be affected by a mental disorder such as depression at some point in his or her life. In fact, a landmark study by the World Health Organization reports that in the United States and other nations with developed economies, major depression is the leading cause of disability. The same study predicts that by the year 2020, depression will be the second leading cause of disability worldwide. And many experts suspect that getting people back outside may help.

Many studies have produced strong evidence that even brief encounters with natural settings (even simulated ones) can elicit significant recovery from stress within three to five minutes. Time in nature is often recommended as a stress-management technique to promote relaxation – important for those people dealing with stress-related conditions

such as tension headaches and panic attacks, and for those trying to quit smoking. In fact, a nature prescription is suitable for virtually anyone seeking a little downtime.

Time outside has also proven particularly important for those who have difficulty with attention and concentration. In their 2004 study, researchers at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign found that kids with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) had significantly reduced symptoms when they spent some quality after-school hours and weekend time outdoors enjoying nature.

In her 2003 study, Mary Ann Stark, RNC, PhD, found that time in the natural environment helps pregnant women in their third trimester improve their concentration, which is important as they prepare both for birth and for the subsequent demands on their time and attention. According to Stark, an assistant professor at Western Michigan University's Bronson School of Nursing in Kalamazoo, time outside is important for everyone, at every stage of life, for different reasons.

"We all need mini-vacations throughout our day so we can get away from life's hassles," she says. Being outdoors, smelling different smells and hearing different sounds, she notes, allows our brains to become restored so that we can cope better with whatever life throws our way.

Spirit Lifter

For many people, time outside is about more than just leisure. It is an important part of their spiritual lives. Witnessing new growth and rejuvenation within the natural world can inspire us as much as it calms us.

After Susan S. Scott, PhD, suffered a herniated disc several years ago, she found that nothing her talented team of spine specialists, physical therapists and naturopathic doctors did helped her more than walking in nature. For Scott, a psychotherapist and the author of *Healing with Nature* (Helios Press, 2003), sitting down for any length of time was very painful, and so she began conducting walking sessions with many of her patients. She saw great results – both for herself and them. Now she sees walking as more than just a means for physiological and psychological healing. She sees it as an opportunity to reflect on the abundance and healing available to us at all times. She sees walking as a spiritual practice.

So does Stephen Altschuler of Sebastopol, Calif., who finds that walking outside is a form of meditation for him. Author of *The Mindful Hiker: On the Trail to Find the Path* (DeVorss & Company, 2004), Altschuler is a practicing Buddhist who works as a counselor with disabled students at Santa Rosa Junior College. He says he's made a point of building time in nature into his own daily spiritual practice and heartily recommends it to others, regardless of religious orientation.

Many people, Altschuler says, are overwhelmed with the pressures and responsibilities of everyday life, so they don't prioritize getting outside. But simply making the conscious decision to spend even a little time outside each day, he says, can do wonders for both the body and mind. Whether you spend a few minutes walking barefoot in the grass or a few hours hiking on a park trail, it can dramatically lift your spirits.

"Going outside is immediately rejuvenating," notes Altschuler. "It doesn't take days and days. Just one experience of feeling open to the elements – wind, ocean, sun – can make a difference."

Green Gifts

When city parks were first designed in the 19th century, it was because city officials believed that the value of these green, open spaces would benefit society as a whole. Exposure to nature, they thought, would improve psychological well-being, reduce the stresses associated with urban living and promote physical health. They also hoped that parks would reduce disease, crime and social unrest.

They were right. And the benefits of public green spaces are still proving significant today. In their landmark 2001 study published in *Environment and Behavior*, Frances Kuo and William Sullivan compared the experience of people living in public housing surrounded by trees and grasses with that of people living in public housing with less vegetation. They found that people living near more greenery experienced lower levels of fear, fewer incivilities, less aggressive and violent behavior, and lower crime rates.

Other studies have shown that green spaces in a community can reduce stress, enhance productivity, promote healing in psychiatric and other patients, and are most likely essential for human development and long-term health.

That's why Richard Louv is concerned by the fact that children are spending less and less time outside. In his book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Algonquin, 2005), he argues that time outside is essential for the healthy development of children and that access to nature is important for future generations. His book has struck a chord.

Inspired by Louv's book, the National Wildlife Federation is now launching programs to get kids directly involved in the outdoors, including the Green Hour, a national campaign to convince parents to encourage their children to spend at least one hour a day in nature. The state of New Mexico is currently considering a bill that proposes funds for a pilot program called the "New Mexico Outdoor Classroom." And Derek Thomas, chief operating officer of Newland Communities, the nation's largest privately owned community developer, has committed the company to designing communities that offer new ways for the young to engage in nature.

It's time, argues Louv and his fellow advocates for time in nature, that we acknowledge this inherent human need – and that we begin more actively claiming and safeguarding our access to nature-based experiences.

So how can we do that? For starters, Louv asserts, "We can preserve the remaining open space in our cities." Furthermore, he notes, "We can weave nature experiences into our classrooms, and nature therapy into our healthcare system – and, as parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, we can spend more time in nature with children. Here's the bonus: When we give our children the gift of nature, we gain all the same benefits they do – the stress reduction, the longer attention span, the renewed sense of wonder."

Get in Touch

Kyra Ryan is now comfortably settled in Taos. She's still working at home, and she's constantly learning how important it is for her to get up, step away from the computer and her climate-controlled office, and step out into a world composed of real, natural elements.

"The human body is a natural organism," she says, "not a machine. But when I work too long on my computer, I dream in Windows. Being outside is a good counterbalance and it gives me a healthier outlook on life. In fact, I get cranky if I don't get out."

Ryan now has another good reason to get outside. She recently gave birth to a baby boy. She says Isaac loves going for walks in the stroller. "I always notice that he's much calmer afterward. It's grounding for both of us."

Time in nature, it seems, is a breath of fresh air for people of all ages. And the best part? Taking it in is often as easy as stepping outside.

Karen Olson is a Minneapolis-based writer at work on a book about our connection to the natural elements.

Eight Ways to Get More Time Outside

If you're having trouble finding time to get outdoors, try these close-to-home micro-excursions. All you have to do is open your door and step outside.

1. **Sip Your Morning Tea.** Grab your morning paper and read it outside with a cup of coffee or tea. Or consider a workday ritual that gets you out for an afternoon sunshine break.
2. **Take a Nap.** All you need is a towel, blanket or a hammock and a nice patch of shade. It's easy to catch some z's, or perhaps just watch the clouds roll over.
3. **Have Lunch.** Instead of sitting at the kitchen table, the office cafeteria or your desk, take your lunch to a local park, your office building's outdoor bench or your own backyard.
4. **Connect With Friends.** Forget that after-work drink. Going for a walk or jog with a pal is a great way to catch up, get exercise and cover some new ground.
5. **Pay Bills.** Who says you need to sit at your desk to do basic household tasks? It's just as easy to take your bills outside and enjoy some fresh air while you catch up on business.
6. **Make Calls.** Alright, so you'll miss out on some of the sounds of nature, but taking and making even a few of your daily phone calls outdoors on a cell or cordless gains you at least a change of scenery and a little sunshine.
7. **Play Games.** Want more quality time with your kids? A simple piece of chalk can provide hours of entertainment, whether you use it to play hopscotch or tic-tac-toe, or just to draw pictures on the sidewalk.
8. **Watch the Stars.** Stepping outside at night to see the moon and stars can change how you feel about your day.

Resources

BOOKS

The Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology by Theodore Roszak (Phanes Press, 2001)

Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder by Richard Louv (Algonquin, 2005)

WEB

www.ecopsychology.org – The site of the International Community for Ecopsychology lists recommended readings, counselors and upcoming events.

greenhour.blogspot.com – The National Wildlife Federation's Green Hour campaign suggests many ways to encourage your kids to spend at least an hour a day outside.

www.hookedonnature.org – This site offers simple activities and experiences for connecting children and adults with nature.