

The benefits of connecting with nature

Fact sheet

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Sustainable
Communities
and Waste

National Environmental Science Program

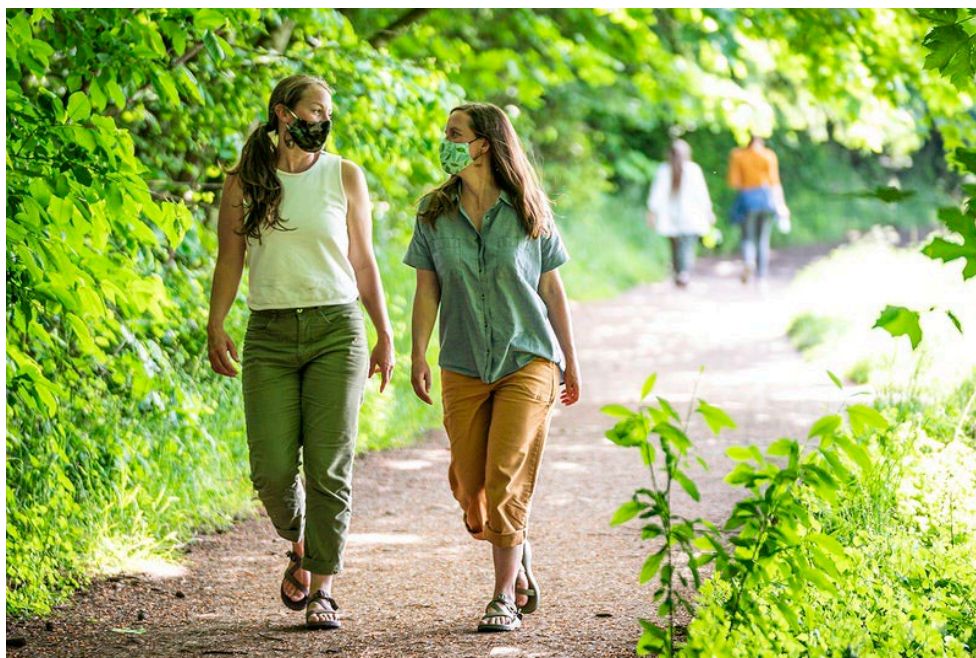
Nature itself is the best physician – Hippocrates, the ‘father of medicine’

Throughout history and around the world, the benefits of being in and around nature for our physical and mental health and wellbeing have long been recognised.

Whether we actively engage in the outdoors, or quietly admire the view from a window, connecting with nature improves our quality of life. Today, evidence demonstrates many ways that nature can support good health and restore the human body and mind.

What is nature?

‘Nature’ can mean different things to different people and in different contexts. It might be a national park, a wilderness area, a manicured park, an urban forest, a home garden, or even a roadside verge.



What does it mean to connect with nature?

Research suggests individuals engage and connect with different types of nature, and in different ways across their lifetimes. Part philosophy and part practice, nature connection builds on our

affinity with non-human nature, sometimes known as *biophilia*, and the associated emotions and behaviours of this relationship.

The act of ‘connecting with nature’ can include engaging with nature in physical, emotional or cognitive ways^{1, 2}.

Wellbeing benefits of engaging with nature

Studies have found that any vegetated area – including private gardens, manicured parklands, or urban forests – can provide health benefits³. People who live near nature or spend more time in it tend to have improved physical and mental health outcomes compared to people with less nature access or engagement⁴.



Health and wellbeing benefits:

- increased physical activity → less obesity and chronic disease
- increased social activity → less loneliness and isolation
- lowered stress levels → greater happiness and life satisfaction, improved stress recovery
- improved immune functioning → less allergies, greater resilience
- improved mindful attention → better ability to focus and concentrate
- a greater sense of joy, beauty, peace and freedom.

How does it work?

The wellbeing benefits of nature connection are diverse. Some emerge from physical activity in nature, others from living near nature and still others from looking at nature³. Urban nature delivers important ecosystem services by filtering out air pollutants, providing shade and creating opportunities for exercise and social interaction. Exposure to biodiverse microbial communities in urban green spaces can also improve health⁴, while nature can help lower cortisol levels and restore one's attention⁵. Urban greening and biodiversity measures

like planting trees and maintaining wetlands help cool cities and prevent flooding, at the same time creating important ecological habitats³.

People who feel most 'connected with nature' tend to be happier, healthier and act in ways that are good for the environment ('pro-environmental behaviours'). These benefits have driven large urban-greening projects across Australia, often improving access to green spaces or creating more tree cover. They have encouraged the rise of 'forest bathing', 'nature prescriptions' and other outdoor health initiatives.

Nature can be more powerful than any medication – Oliver Sacks

Healthy people, healthy planet

Nature connection benefits human health, AND the health of the planet. It predicts measures of wellbeing, as well as people's attitudes and behaviours towards sustainability; research shows that a stronger psychological connection with nature can lead to greater pro-environmental behaviours⁶. People vary in how connected with nature they feel. This personal nature connection is shaped by experiences in our childhood and throughout our lives². Experiences that support feelings of 'belonging' in nature or valuing nature in emotional and ethical ways are influential in creating connections that support sustainable behaviours.

Challenges and opportunities

Despite the benefits of nature connection, not everyone has access to healthy, nearby nature. Recognising and understanding the range of benefits that connecting with nature can provide, and how this varies across habitat types, communities and individuals, can improve the design of health-promoting green spaces, and healthier communities, across Australia. But this is not straightforward: community opinions differ (e.g. some want more trees, some want less); climate change can affect initiative longevity; and urban greening and other nature-based solutions are not free of risks (e.g. bushfires and falling tree limbs).

Knowledge gaps and research

In regional, rural and remote areas, people may live nearby nature but they often have poor health, and the environment can suffer from landscape simplification. And nature connection research often isn't translated to impact.

[Research by the Sustainable Communities and Waste Hub](#) will examine the value of connecting with nature in different forms, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander connections to Country. Our research will inform the development of effective nature-based solutions in policy and practice across Australia. The Sustainable Communities and Waste Hub is funded by the Australian Government under the National Environmental Science Program.



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