

# The rewards of 'nearby nature'

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I live in one of the liveliest neighborhoods of a large city. I've lived in this city for almost all of my adult life, and I love all the urban sights and noises, right down to the sirens. But I also know the many patches of nature hidden away in my city. On those occasions when I need solitude and quiet and respite from the hectic metropolitan pace, I am minutes from streams and woodland.

My rural friends don't think of these urban enclaves as real nature, but I disagree. I feel restored when I get out among the oaks and sassafras and yarrow and I hear the warblers singing. And new research backs me up on this. It comes from the Happiness Lab at Carleton University, which is located in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada's capital and a city about the size of mine. Psychological scientists Elizabeth Nisbet and John Zelenski suspected that most people, including city dwellers, don't believe in the emotional benefits of nearby nature—and therefore simply don't bother. They wanted to disprove this notion by showing that even short nature walks can increase one's sense of well-being.

But they wanted to go further. They wanted to demonstrate that this increased sense of well-being also boosts our sense of connectedness with nature, which in turn could bolster a sense of stewardship for the natural world. To test this experimentally, they recruited a group of volunteers, ranging in age from 16 to 48 years old, and asked them to take a walk—a leisurely 17 minute autumn stroll on or near the Carleton campus. Some walked outdoors, along the Rideau Canal, a green corridor that runs through the heart of Ottawa. Others walked across campus, but through a series of tunnels that were built for students changing classes in nasty weather.

The volunteers thought they were part of a personality study, and they answered a number of questions before and after their walks—questions about how relaxed they were, how curious, how interested and fascinated they were with life. The scientists also measured their feelings of connectedness with the natural world. Finally, some of the volunteers predicted how the walk would make them feel.

The results were unambiguous. Those who had walked along the urban greenway reported feeling more positive, more relaxed, and more fascinated with life—and they reported fewer negative emotions than did the tunnel walkers. What's more, those who had forecast their feelings before walking outdoors consistently underestimated all of their positive emotions, while those who strolled in the tunnels overestimated how good they would feel after walking. The outdoor walkers' boost in positive feelings also led to a greater sense of connectedness with nature.

The scientists ran a slightly different version of this experiment and got the same results, [reported online in the journal \*Psychological Science\*](#). Again walking outdoors elevated the walkers' moods more than walking indoors. And again, they did not fully appreciate in advance how good this nature stroll would make them feel. Although people are innately drawn to nature, there seems to be a psychological disconnect that prevents them from fully anticipating the benefits. As a result of this disconnect, people forego opportunities for nature walks—missing out on the mood uplift and the sense of natural

connection. Although the system of tunnels under Carleton's campus was built for inclement weather, students and faculty frequently use them even on temperate days, isolating them from the greener pathways through campus.

The link between feelings of connectedness and green action remains speculative, but plausible. Other research has shown that people who feel closer to the natural world not only spend more time outdoors, they also engage in more environmentally sustainable behavior. All these findings taken together could have policy implications: Instead of trying to motivate people's green actions with fear, guilt or economic incentives, policymakers might encourage more contact with nature. In cities, that might mean designs that make contact with urban nature unavoidable.

One clear message here is that the grandeur of national parks is not needed for these positive effects. And while a quick stroll on an urban greenway is clearly not going to save the world, it could be an important step in the right direction, toward what the scientists call a "happy path to sustainability."

Wray Herbert's book, [\*On Second Thought\*](#), explores the human mind's powerful connection to the natural world. Excerpts from his two blogs—"We're Only Human" and Full Frontal Psychology"—appear regularly in *The Huffington Post* and in *Scientific American Mind*.