

Go take a hike

Opinion: Spending time in nature is good for your health and the broader community

BY JOE KELLY, SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 4, 2013

true



A walk in the woods can enhance our sense of connection and appreciation for the natural environment.

The Japanese have a wonderful expression for spending time in the woods: Shinrin-yoku, or forest bathing.

Widely practised in Japan, forest bathing involves visiting a forest expressly for its health benefits. Advocates of Shinrin-yoku claim that breathing in the volatile organic compounds produced from trees, called phytoncides or wood essential oils, helps to promote relaxation and reduce stress. It works just like aromatherapy, set in the great outdoors.

Whether or not you buy into the aromatherapeutic effects of trees, the general health benefits of nature are well founded. **Studies show that spending time in nature can help to enhance your mood, increase energy levels and heighten your overall well-being.** In fact, being outside for just 20 minutes a day is sufficient for boosting your vitality levels. Spending time in nature can also increase your resistance to illnesses, promote longevity and decrease the risks of mental illness.

It might not be a surprise that time spent in nature is good for your health. However, have you ever considered how spending time in nature can help to make the world around you a better place?

To explore this question, I challenged myself to spend one hour in nature every day in March. In the most primitive sense, nature is any natural setting untouched and uninfluenced by civilization. Strictly speaking, a park with a maintained trail system and other amenities is not truly in a natural state. For me, however, spending time every day in authentically wild places is impractical. So, for the purpose of this challenge, I relaxed the definition of nature to include some minor human influences (a park with trails and picnic areas is considered to be nature; a soccer pitch is not).

One way that spending time in nature benefits the broader community is by promoting positive social interactions with others. **Free of the distractions and background noise present in the city, the serenity of nature provides a perfect venue to connect with others.** Even strangers seem more willing to exchange pleasantries in natural settings than in urban ones. These interactions can help to build stronger social ties and connectedness in a community. **When social ties are strong, people feel less isolated and more inclined to help and support one another.**

Whenever I was joined by friends or colleagues on my excursions, our conversations seemed more

genuine, thoughtful and inspiring than had they occurred in a busy downtown café. One reason why nature promotes more enriching social interactions is that fresh air and natural light help to elevate people's mood. Additionally, the physical activity from walking or hiking has been shown to improve the functioning of your brain, reduce stress and increase energy levels. Quite simply, nature puts you in a better frame of mind for engaging in positive interactions with others.

Spending time in nature can also make communities safer. The sights and sounds of nature help to reduce mental fatigue by restoring the mind's ability to concentrate and pay attention. When mental fatigue is relieved, people are better equipped to manage their problems calmly and thoughtfully rather than with anger and aggression. This can help to reduce the propensity for violence and crime in a community.

This month, I experienced the benefits of a calmer disposition first-hand. As a result of a computer glitch, and quite possibly some human error, I lost four hours worth of work from my laptop. I was surprised at how calmly I responded. A more stressed-out version of me would have slammed my desk and hailed my computer with expletives. This time, I simply took a breath and then recreated all my lost work over the next two hours. I'd like to think my daily jaunts through nature were at least partly responsible for my calmer disposition.

One of the more surprising benefits of nature is its power to change our outlook on life. Research has shown that exposure to nature can shift a person's values and priorities from personal gain to a broader focus on community and connections with others. Simply put, nature has the intrinsic ability to make people more caring and empathetic. I personally find it uplifting to know that nature brings out the best in people.

Spending time in nature is good for the planet, too. It can enhance our sense of connection and appreciation for the natural environment. A stronger environmental ethos can promote more environmentally friendly choices and behaviours in our daily life, such as recycling, conserving energy or taking transit. In addition, time spent in nature means less time spent on more materialistic and resource-intensive pursuits like watching TV or shopping.

Imagine if every one of us spent some time each day in nature. It's not a stretch to say our communities would be more connected, less stressed, healthier and more caring. We'd likely treat each other, and the natural environment, a lot better than we do now. Knowing that you are helping the world around you, while enjoying the scenic beauty of nature, provides extra incentive to get outdoors more often.

Joe Kelly is a professor at Capilano University. He is taking on a new challenge each month to make the world a better place. Follow his adventures at vancouversun.com/projectchange or twitter.com/myprojectchange.

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