

'Blue space' important to seniors' well-being

In-depth study shows fountains appreciated as much large bodies of water

BY ERIN ELLIS, VANCOUVER SUN JUNE 22, 2015

true



"It's not just about putting in a fountain, it's about providing a destination for somebody who might not otherwise have a destination. It's about providing a multi-generational meeting space where people can remain socially connected." — Researcher Joanie Sims-Gould.

Photograph by: Gerry Kahrman, PNG

When Vancouver-based social scientists asked low-income seniors to guide them around favourite spots in their neighbourhoods, they were looking for an answer to this question: What makes a good place to grow old?

What they found reinforces the notion that nature heals the human soul, but also something they hadn't expected. "Blue space," their term for any body of water — from a humble koi pond to the wide ocean — was just as important.

There's no debate about the soothing nature of water, but what surprised researchers was a favourite blue space could be a public fountain just as readily as the ocean or a river. Likewise, green spaces might be no bigger than a community garden or a street bench within view of flowers.

"In 2016, there will be more people over the age of 85 than under the age of 15 in Canada," says Joanie Sims-Gould, a gerontologist and assistant professor in family practice at the University of British Columbia's faculty of medicine. She's the senior author of research conducted by a team at the Centre for Hip Health and Mobility.

"There's increasing evidence to show that where people live really matters to their health. And as we think about an aging population, it becomes important for us to think about ways in which we can improve people's health without having to turn to the health system."

<http://www.bchousing.org/Initiatives/Providing/SAFER>

Only seniors receiving the provincial Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters grant were included in the study, meaning individual incomes were below \$2,550 per month. They represented a range of ethnic backgrounds including Caucasian, Aboriginal, Chinese, South East Asian, Japanese, Filipino, Dutch and German.

Below are some of highlights from the small, in-depth study in which researchers spent two to three hours with each of the 27 subjects between the ages of 65 and 86. It's the final stage of a six-year project funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research looking at how older adults get around Metro Vancouver and what keeps them active. It was published this month in the journal Health and

Place.

"I love the water ... I have a phrase that I think is important, and I call it my 'sit-and-stare time.' So it's just blanking your mind ... I can do that by the water. To me, it's a spiritual experience going down and watching the water." — Helen, 74.

"It's just so beautiful right on the water ... If you're feeling at all upset over anything, just head down to the water. It just seems to calm your mind." — Gloria, 68.

"When I was recovering from my hip (operation), one of the things I used to do is just go up to the corner and sit on the bench and walk back." — Barbara, 75.

"I think that it would drive me up the wall if I couldn't go out and sit in the park or something." — David, 80.

"I don't want to be cooped up all day ... I like fresh air and observing other people's beautiful yards ... the fresh air and having a change of scenery. And some nice people stop, and they tell you interesting things about themselves.

"You see the children and the people walking around ... Sometimes I take my coffee along and sit there and read. And the people who walk their dogs will sometimes stop and talk and say, "Where do you live?" It's kind of a social thing, too." — Anna, 73.

"Sometimes you pet a little dog or something like that. It's kind of neat to be able to see other people that live in your city, too, so that you're not just isolated.

"I love the mountains and I love the water, and I can't see any here ... If I lived down (by Stanley Park), I'd walk on the seawall every day, no doubt about it. But I just don't have the energy to ride my bicycle down that far. And I just don't want to take the car down there because then it's counterproductive driving the car down and walking and driving the car back, so I just don't do it." — Jack, 87.

"It's not just about putting in a fountain, it's about providing a destination for somebody who might not otherwise have a destination. It's about providing a multi-generational meeting space where people can remain socially connected. " — Researcher Joanie Sims-Gould.

"They have really made a point the last few years that the brain really benefits from exercise. And so everybody at my age is, you know, terrified that their brain's going to go to mush so we're all into doing things that keep us active." — Robert, 71.

"I just know I have to go out and do walking because if I don't, I'm going to get old too fast. It just seems when you go out, your brain kind of clears up or something ... The fresh air and watching the trees and looking at different things, it just gives you a different outlook." — Norma, 76.

"I am afraid of falling because I have such a lot of osteoporosis. I don't want to fall ... I pick a good day, a non-icy day to buy more groceries than usual to make sure that I've got enough." — Ava, 74.

"I don't run anymore because I did run for the bus and fell. And I think you have to pay attention probably all over Vancouver, but in (my neighbourhood), there's lots of uneven sidewalks." — Barbara, 75

The take-away message

For urban planners, says Sims-Gould, the message is clear. Easily accessible public spaces with greenery, water and places to sit can improve the mental and physical health of the very oldest in society, bringing them in contact with people of all ages if properly designed. It may seem intuitive, she concedes, but when developers try to scrimp on shared outdoor areas, this type of research can support citizens who want it.

eellis@vancouversun.com

===

[Click here to report a typo](#) or visit vancouversun.com/typo.

Is there more to this story? We'd like to hear from you about this or any other stories you think we should know about. [CLICK HERE](#) or go to vancouversun.com/moretothestory

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)



"When I was recovering from my hip (operation), one of the things I used to do is just go up to the corner and sit on the bench and walk back." — Barbara, 75.

Photograph by: Martin Meissner, AP

