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LIVING

Enjoy nature's healing ground

Almost everyone has intuitive sense of the restorative power of natural environments

Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul.

John Muir

Once again, environmental programs in Ontario are on the chopping block. Just last week, the McGuinty government announced the elimination of the equivalent of 28 full-time jobs and 102 seasonal positions at the Ministry of Natural Resources. Many of the impacts will be felt in Ontario's provincial parks. This is only the latest in a long list of cuts by government to the environment that began last spring. It's quite obvious that politicians are responding to what they believe people will tolerate. While there is almost no tolerance for the reduction of health services, cutting environmental and park-related programs creates relatively little protest. All of this strikes me as ironic, given the proven benefits of nature and natural areas to our mental, spiritual and physical well-being. More and more researchers are discovering that contact with nature not only improves individual health but is also an effective population-wide strategy for positive health outcomes.



DREW MONKMAN

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

I think it's fair to say that almost everyone has an intuitive sense of the restorative power of natural environments. This is partly why people enjoy being outside and partaking in everything from hunting and fishing to hiking, camping and golf. The stress reduction and enhancement of emotional well-being, however, are not dependent on the activity performed in the natural environment. Instead, the benefits come from the qualities of the forest or other natural environments themselves. It's being in contact with nature that matters. I remember that my grandfather went on the deer hunt each fall for years without ever killing a single deer. He simply loved being in the woods and with friends.

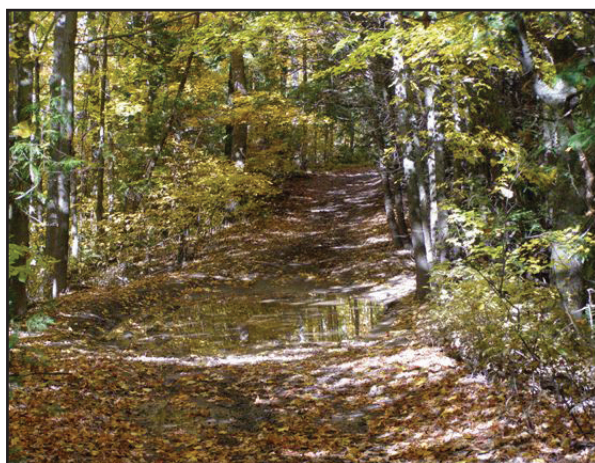
MENTAL HEALTH

The restorative power of nature should not come as any surprise. We tend to forget that, as a species, we have spent millions of years evolving in natural environments, side-by-side with trees, birds, mammals and beautiful natural landscapes. This in itself goes a long way towards explaining the strong psychological, emotional, spiritual and physical links between people and nature. This is why we feel happier and calmer walking down a sidewalk under a canopy of trees in an older residential neighbourhood than walking under the blazing sun in a new, treeless housing development. Trees, like so many elements of the natural world provide us with a sense of well-being.

A recent study by Marc Berman, a research fellow at the Rotman Research Institute at Baycrest in Toronto, suggests that the benefits may come from the way in which trees, flowers and animals quietly tug at our attention. They are not "in our face" the way so many elements of the crowded, noisy urban environment are. When we are walking down a



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Any season is a good time to get outside and enjoy the mental and physical benefits of being in the natural world, but fall in the Kawarthas is particularly peaceful and beautiful.

busy sidewalk, we are forever being bombarded with external distractions such as crowds and noise. These distractions relentlessly tax our attention and increase the likelihood of perceived stress and annoyance. They force us to put our voluntary attention on high alert, if we are to avoid getting hit by a car or simply walking into someone. According to Berman, natural environments give voluntary attention a break since nature's stimuli are far more subtle.

HUM OF INSECTS

Compare the gentle hum of insects against a background of sun-kissed fall leaves to the sounds, crowding and confusion of a busy mall. Natural environments therefore allow the mind to wander aimlessly and then to become gently engaged with one's surroundings. Berman's study also showed that volunteers suffering from depression who took a 50-minute walk in a woodland park had improved cognition (e.g., the ability to remember and repeat figures) compared to those who took a walk through city streets. In another paper that Dr. Berman published in 2008, he showed that normal adults, too, received a mental boost after just an hour-long walk in a woodland park.

Another research study done in the Netherlands entitled "Natural environments – healthy environments?" found that living in a green environment was

positively related to experiencing fewer health symptoms, feeling more positive about one's general physical health and to doing better on tests of mental health. The relationship was even stronger for stay-at-home housewives and the elderly. The authors believe that at least part of the reason for these findings may be that attractive green areas in one's living environment leads people to spend more time outdoors and therefore become more physically active. It has also been known since the 1990s that even pictures of natural settings can have a positive effect on one's mood and ability to concentrate. Therefore, even for people who do not become more active, they may be healthier simply as a result of the positive impact on their mood.

GREEN RECOVERY

Stephen and Rachel Kaplan, renowned researchers in the field of environmental psychology at the University of Michigan, have demonstrated that hospital patients recover faster if they can see green space and office workers are more productive and report greater job satisfaction if they have a view of nature. Their work has also shown that even exposure to rather mundane natural landscapes lifts people's moods and enhances their ability to mentally focus. This is great news for people who are limited in their ability to get outside. Like Dr. Berman's

work, the Kaplans have also found that too much focused attention on anything can lead to mental fatigue and stress and that exposure to nature provides the ageless remedy.

NATURE AND CHILDREN

Contact with nature also has proven benefits for children. Studies in 2003 by Nancy Wells, a researcher at the New York State College for Human Ecology, found profound differences in the ability of children to concentrate when exposed to nature. She noted that "green spaces may enable children to think more clearly and cope more effectively with life stress." There are also studies such as those done by A.F. Taylor showing that children exposed to nature exhibit fewer symptoms of attention deficit disorder (ADD). As a teacher, I almost always found that my students with ADD were calmer, happier and more focused when out in nature. For example, I was always impressed by the change that came over them during our annual two-and-a-half day stay at the Camp Kawartha Outdoor Education Centre.

Richard Louv, in his book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our children from nature deficit disorder* writes about the dangerous divide that exists these days between children and nature. He explains in the book how many health problems are a result of this disconnect. As Louv puts it: "time in nature is not

leisure time; it's an essential investment in our children's health (and also, by the way, in our own)." Much of the key to nature play for children, however, is allowing them to explore on their own terms without too much parent intervention. Let them decide what they want to do, be it climbing a tree, building a fort or catching frogs. Letting kids discover on their own also builds their confidence.

THE SPIRITUAL

Natural areas – and I would include here a well-landscaped yard or garden with native trees and plants – contribute immensely to a person's sense of place and, therefore, to emotional and spiritual happiness. Sense of place is the meaning people give to the land (including the city) through the process of living in it. It also includes the emotional dimension of knowing and identifying with a specific location, landscape and mix of species. Sense of place roots us and helps us to know who and where we are. What are the elements of a sense of place in the Kawarthas? In the Peterborough area, it is limestone and white cedars, the patchwork of woodlots and fields and the song of the meadowlark. Further north, it is pink granite, white pine, sparkling lakes and the call of the loon. Everywhere in the Kawarthas it is the frog chorus in the spring and the drop-dead beauty of scintillating leaves in the fall.

Sense of place is not limited to the country, either. It can be found in Peterborough's rail-trails, in all of our older city parks, in the architecture of the downtown and in sitting with a coffee at the Silver Bean Café on the Otonabee River. Conversely, urban settings where big box stores, fast food outlets and shopping malls dominate and the most common trees are non-native Norway maples and weeping willows detract from our sense of place – and, I would argue, our happiness. There is nothing in these landscapes that roots us in the Kawarthas. We could be in almost any urban environment in the world.

PRESERVE THE BENEFITS

Let's be careful, however. The health-giving benefits of nature do not come from a simple path or sidewalk across a treeless urban park or along the side of a busy road like Medical Dr. The restorative power of the once beautiful walkway between Parkhill Rd. and Weller St. is long gone. That is one reason why so many of us in the naturalist and environmental community are opposed to the extension of the Parkway. We will lose a wonderful, easily accessible natural corridor that plays both an ecological and public health function. Thanksgiving is a weekend when families enjoy going for walks together. If you're feeling rather frazzled, why not consider an outing in one of the many natural areas in or close to Peterborough. You'll be taking part in what the Japanese call shinrin-yoku or

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