

Researchers find time in wild boosts creativity, insight and problem solving

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(Medical Xpress) -- There's new evidence that our minds thrive away from it all.

Research conducted at the University of Kansas concludes that people from all walks of life show startling cognitive improvement — for instance, a 50 percent boost in creativity — after living for a few days steeped in nature.

Ruth Ann Atchley, whose research is featured in this month's Backpacker magazine, said the “soft fascination” of the natural world appears to refresh the human mind, offering refuge from the cacophony of modern life.

“We’ve got information coming at us from social media, electronics and cell phones,” said Atchley, associate professor and chair of psychology at KU. “We constantly shift attention from one source to another, getting all of this information that simulates alarms, warnings and emergencies. Those threats are bad for us. They sap our resources to do the fun thinking and cognition humans are capable of — things like creativity, or being kind and generous, along with our ability to feel good and be in a positive mood.”

The researcher said that nature could stimulate the human mind without the often-menacing distractions of workaday life in the 21st-century.

“Nature is a place where our mind can rest, relax and let down those

threat responses,” said Atchley. “Therefore, we have resources left over — to be creative, to be imaginative, to problem solve — that allow us to be better, happier people who engage in a more productive way with others.”

Atchley led a team that conducted initial research on a backpacking trip in Utah with the Remote Associates Test, a word-association exercise used for decades by psychologists to gauge creative intelligence. Her fellow researchers included Paul Atchley, associate professor of [psychology](#) at KU, and David Strayer, professor of cognition and neural science at the University of Utah.

Intrigued by positive results, the researchers partnered with Outward Bound, the Golden, Colo.-based nonprofit that leads educational expeditions into nature for people of many backgrounds. About 120 participants on outings in places like Alaska, Colorado and California completed the “RAT” test.

“We worked with a number of backpacking groups that were going out last summer,” Ruth Ann Atchley said. “Four backpacker groups took the test before they hit the trail, and then four different groups did it on the fourth day just like we had done before. The data across age groups — regular folks from age 18 into their 60s — showed an almost 50 percent increase in [creativity](#). It really worked in the sense that it was a well-used measure and we could see such a big difference in these two environments.”

Best of all, she said that the benefits of nature belong to anyone who delves completely into wilderness for an amount of time equivalent to a long weekend.

“There’s growing advantage over time to being in nature,” said Ruth Ann Atchley. “We think that it peaks after about three days of really getting

away, turning off the cell phone, not hauling the iPad and not looking for internet coverage. It's when you have an extended period of time surrounded by that softly fascinating environment that you start seeing all kinds of positive effects in how your mind works.”

Provided by University of Kansas

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