

Are some natural environments more psychologically beneficial than others?

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Spending time in rural and coastal locations is more psychologically beneficial to individuals than time spent in urban green spaces, a new study in the journal *Environment & Behavior* reports.

During this innovative study, researchers from the University of Surrey, University of Exeter, University of Plymouth and Plymouth Marine Laboratory worked with Natural England to examine the experiences of over 4,500 people when spending [time](#) in nature and investigated for the first time how different environmental settings and their quality impacted on psychological wellbeing.

Asking participants to describe their visit and to evaluate their overall encounter, researchers discovered that those who visited rural and coastal locations reported greater psychological contentment than those who spent time in urban green spaces, such as city gardens and parks. It was also found that visits to natural areas of protected or designated status i.e. national parks, also resulted in improved mental wellbeing.

Researchers found these visits to nature (especially those to protected sites and to coastal and rural green settings) were associated with both greater feelings of relaxation and refreshment but also stronger emotional connections to the natural world. Interestingly it was discovered that visits longer than 30 minutes were associated with a better connection and subsequently had greater psychological benefits.

Socio-economic status was also found not to be a factor in enjoyment of

nature, demonstrating the importance of providing free/affordable entrance to sites. This will help prevent socio-economic inequality in accessing nature.

Lead author of the paper Dr Kayleigh Wyles, who undertook the research whilst at Plymouth Marine Laboratory and now Lecturer in Environmental Psychology at the University of Surrey, said:

"We've demonstrated for some time that nature can be beneficial to us, but we're still exploring how and why. Here we have found that our mental wellbeing and our emotional bond with nature may differ depending on the type and quality of an [environment](#) we visit.

"These findings are important as they not only help unpick the mechanisms behind these psychological benefits, but they can also help to prioritise the protection of these environments and emphasise why accessibility to nature is so important."

Professor Mel Austen, Head of the Sea and Society Science Area at Plymouth Marine Laboratory said: "It was surprising to learn that the extent of protection of marine environments also affects the extent of mental health benefits that people gain from their interactions with the sea.

"People's health is likely to become an increasingly important aspect to consider as we manage our coasts and waters for the benefit of all users."

The positive benefits of interaction with nature are well documented with numerous studies reporting a reduction of stress levels in participants and an increase in overall wellbeing in those spending time in nature. This is the first study of its kind which shows that different types of [natural](#) environments have more of an impact on psychological [wellbeing](#) than others.

More information: Are Some Natural Environments More Psychologically Beneficial Than Others? The Importance of Type and Quality on Connectedness to Nature and Psychological Restoration. *Environment and Behavior*. DOI: 10.1177/10013916517738312

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