

Psychologist says our own enjoyment of nature can also benefit Earth itself

May 2 2024, by David Victorson



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Have you heard that getting out into nature can be good for your health?

While native and [indigenous people](#) have known this for millennia,

modern scientific pursuits are finally catching up, and some doctors are writing formal prescriptions that recommend their patients spend more quality time in green and blue spaces to improve their health. Even as little as 120 minutes per week can do the trick.

To capitalize on the power of the prescription, nature prescription programs, often known as "Nature RX," have been gaining popularity across the U.S. and Canada.

But what if I told you that these nature prescriptions could not only benefit the health of people, but also the health of our planet?

Research suggests that positive experiences in nature can lead to more pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors. But simply feeling good in nature isn't enough to drive the lasting change our planet needs. We need to find creative ways to translate those positive feelings into action.

One promising approach is through a behavioral strategy called "habit stacking." Just as you might stack a new habit like flossing onto an existing one like brushing your teeth, physicians can stack "Earth RX"-focused planetary health behaviors onto nature prescriptions about things like recycling, consumption habits, [renewable energy sources](#) and policy changes that protect Mother Earth.

Imagine receiving not only a prescription to go for a walk in your local forest preserve but in that same prescription, a recommendation to turn off lights when they're not in use, eat less red meat or switch to using reusable grocery bags.

This might seem like a small thing, but every bottle or can that gets recycled is one less piece of trash sitting in a landfill. And when you multiply that by millions of people, the impact starts to add up.

Take the lights in your home for example. Every flick of a switch, every bulb we illuminate counts in the climate calculus. When an American homeowner replaces a single incandescent bulb with an LED alternative, not only does the electric bill slim down, but the planet exhales in relief.

This simple substitution can save approximately 91.25 kWh per bulb per year and prevents the emission of nearly 84 pounds of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Scale that up to the nation's 144 million homes, each switching out roughly 40 bulbs per home for an average of five hours a day, and the result is an annual energy saving of about 525.6 billion kWh.

In terms of greenhouse gas emissions, this nationwide switch would cut carbon dioxide emissions by nearly 219 million metric tons annually, the equivalent to taking millions of cars off the roads for a year or closing several coal-fired power plants.

While this simplistic estimation doesn't consider myriad other factors that could influence these numbers, they do show us how individual actions can cumulatively spark collective impact on the path to a lower-carbon future.

Yes, this might sound ambitious, but it's not as far-fetched as you might think. Already, we're seeing health care organizations across the country take steps to incorporate [environmental stewardship](#) into their practices. From greening their facilities to promoting sustainable transportation options, these initiatives are proof that [health care professionals](#) can be part of the solution to our climate crisis.

By stacking these behaviors onto existing nature prescriptions, physicians can play a more active role in teaching the value of reciprocity and making it easier for people to adopt eco-friendly habits. And health care organizations can play a crucial role by promoting these

Earth RX initiatives to their patients.

In this time of growing eco-anxiety, fueled by feelings of ineffectiveness and collective learned helplessness, being given Earth RX opportunities from trusted sources like physicians can help give people greater agency to play an active role and contribute to something bigger than themselves.

A recent publication in the journal [*Global Advances in Integrative Medicine and Health*](#) focuses on the importance of cultivating this kind of reciprocity between human health and the health of our planet, especially among integrative health providers who ascribe to a "whole person/whole planet" health care philosophy.

This is in line with what environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht's called "Symbiocene," which describes a time when humans will reintegrate themselves back into nature, recognizing our interconnectedness with all living things.

Again, this idea isn't new. Traditional Chinese Medicine, Buddhist teachings and Indigenous knowledge systems have long emphasized the interconnectedness, interdependence and inseparability of humans and nature. They ask us to consider: Where does the person end and nature begin? Are people and planet truly separate entities, or are we really one in the same?

Dr. Nicole Redvers, a naturopathic doctor and member of the Deninu K'ue First Nation, often reminds us that humans are made up of roughly 60% water, and that it only takes on average three months for our cells to turn over in our different bodily systems. She states that if a person gets their drinking water from Lake Michigan, they are, in fact, a living embodiment of Lake Michigan, and that every person is a living embodiment of the rivers and lakes from which they come.

Maybe if we could actually see ourselves as part of nature instead of separate from it, we might behave in ways that are more thoughtful and less destructive, and view "green behaviors" no differently than other positive health behaviors like getting enough steps, zs, veggies and water.

But it's not just about individual actions; it's about systemic change. We need health care professionals to advocate for nature restoration initiatives, speak up for nature access as a human right, and push for policy changes that support environmental stewardship. The fact that the global health care sector [collectively contributes to 5% of greenhouse gases emitted worldwide](#) places responsibility on the shoulders of [health care organizations](#) to do their part.

Ultimately, by embracing a reciprocal relationship between people and planet, we can create a more sustainable and interconnected world. So, can physicians be part of the solution to our climate crisis? Absolutely. It starts with a simple prescription: connect with nature, and in doing so, heal our planet.

More information: David Victorson, Cultivating Reciprocity Between People and Planet: Habit-Stacking Planetary Health Prescriptions Into Existing Nature RX Encounters During Integrative Health Visits, *Global Advances in Integrative Medicine and Health* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/27536130241245429](#)

Provided by Northwestern University

Citation: Psychologist says our own enjoyment of nature can also benefit Earth itself (2024, May 2) retrieved 5 June 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-05-psychologist-enjoyment-nature-benefit-earth.html>

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