

Green cities mean healthier people

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(Medical Xpress)—Australians will be happier, safer and healthier if they look after the nature spots in their cities, according to new research led by The University of Queensland.

The research was led by Dr Richard Fuller from UQ's School of Biological Sciences and the National Environmental Research Program's (NERP) [Environmental Decisions](#) Hub, an Australian [Government research](#) hub hosted by UQ.

Dr Fuller said the research showed that having nature nearby can boost people's health, improve their ability to think, and help lower violence and aggression in the community.

"Conserving nature in cities, such as restoring habitats or setting up reserves can be expensive relative to conservation actions outside cities," Dr Fuller said.

"This often raises the question of whether we should invest in keeping biodiversity within our urban areas.

"The answer is yes, as scientific studies around the world now show that experiences of nature provide important benefits to many aspects of our lives, including our mental and physical health, [social relationships](#) and even our spiritual wellbeing."

One study that compared the effects of exercising in a green space and an urban environment revealed that stress was reduced after exercise in

forest or parks but not in built-up areas. Another study showed that children who participated in gardening or who visited parks had improved self-esteem and mental wellbeing.

Spending time in nature can also help sick people recover faster, Dr Fuller said.

"Patients in rooms with a view of trees spend less time in hospitals, require fewer strong [painkillers](#) and have fewer postsurgical complications than those whose rooms overlook a brick wall.

"Nature can also lower [death rates](#). Various studies in the UK and Netherlands show that people living near green spaces have lower disease loads and [mortality rates](#)."

As well as physical and mental health benefits, the restorative properties of nature can improve a person's ability to tackle mentally challenging tasks, the studies showed.

"We constantly direct our attention towards avoiding hazards and coping with noise and sights in busy urban environments," Dr Fuller said.

"This requires sustained effort and can lead to mental fatigue, resulting in reduced ability to concentrate.

"A study shows that when asked to repeat a sequence of numbers in reverse order, students who previously walked through a busy city street performed poorly compared to those who had walked through a tree-lined arboretum."

Another study that tested people's ability to proofread reveals that those who spent their vacation in the wilderness made few mistakes, whereas the performance of those who spent their holidays elsewhere was poorer.

The benefits of living close to nature also extend to wider society. In Chicago, violence and aggression were significantly lower in buildings with more surrounding vegetation, Dr Fuller said.

In addition, having shared green spaces in urban areas encouraged social interaction and fostered empowerment. People who participated in community conservation projects often benefited from the social support they encounter there, he said.

"While we aren't sure which aspects of nature deliver these benefits – whether it's particular types of garden, trees or animals – there is mounting evidence that having green spaces close to us has a positive impact on our lives," Dr Fuller said.

"This is a win-win situation for conservation and society - so we should hold on to our green spaces instead of clearing them for development."

Dr Fuller says Australians could plant more trees and shrubs in their backyards to encourage biodiversity.

"It's important to have lots of vegetation where possible, including denser thickets, tall trees, low-growing shrubs and scraggly grass where birds and insects abound," he said.

"In the meantime, spend more time outdoors, especially with your children. A nationwide survey in US shows that growing up in natural environments has a strong influence on positive environmental attitudes in adult life, and they are more likely to appreciate and support conservation in adulthood."

More information: Keniger, L. et al. What are the benefits of interacting with nature? *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/10/3/913/pdf

Provided by University of Queensland

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