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7-15-2015

Green Space

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Recommended Citation

Helming, Luralyn M., "Green Space" (2015). *Faculty Work: Comprehensive List*. Paper 289.

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Green Space

Abstract

"Our time spent looking at, experiencing, and engaging with nature improves our lives."

Posting about the psychological benefits of time spent outdoors from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/green-space/>

Keywords

In All Things, nature, Stephen Kaplan, stress management, landscape

Disciplines

Christianity | Health Psychology

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

Green Space

 [inallthings.org/green-space/](https://allthings.org/green-space/)

Luralyn Helming

This article has not been easy to write; I would rather stare out the window at the trees. It is especially difficult for me to maintain focus on my laptop as I reflect on the general benefits of staring at trees. It is a growing topic of interest: the benefits of green space, green neighborhoods, natural environments, restorative environments, or the many other names researchers have used to communicate the great outdoors. That is one problem within this field, trying to capture what it is exactly we are talking about. One group defined it as “areas containing elements of living systems that include plants and nonhuman animals across a range of scales and degrees of human management, from a small urban park through relatively ‘pristine wilderness’”.¹

But this definition is technical and not particularly user-friendly. I prefer the four integral pieces identified by Kaplan: a space that gives a feeling of being away; a space that is consistent and sufficient such that it is its own world; a space that evokes fascination with many aspects to perceive and consider; and, lastly, an environment compatible with your purpose. Researchers have demonstrated a growing interest in green space because of the benefits exposure to natural environments has.

This is hardly a new insight. St. Bernard included gardens in his hospice in the 1100s because he believed they had a healing impact. But today, researchers and policy makers are pushing towards research-based evidence that these spaces are important for physical and psychological health. And the research is saying YES! It matters. Access to natural environments is related to improved physical health, increased longevity, improved social health, and improved mental health. This improved mental health includes psychological restoration, improved mood, improved attention, and reduced stress and anxiety.² Natural views from hospital windows led to decreased need for pain medication and faster recovery time by patients recovering from gall bladder surgery; natural views for prisoners were related to fewer requests to go to the infirmary;³ time spent interacting with these environments was tied to better recovery for breast cancer patients.⁴ Our time spent looking at, experiencing, and engaging with nature improves our lives.

Beyond these general findings, researchers have also found that the impact is more extreme for people in more extreme circumstances. For people living in poverty, the effects are more extreme.⁵ People who have depression experience a more significant effect on their mood by walking through nature rather than urban settings as compared to people who do not have depression.⁶ For children, exposure to nature seems to buffer them against stressful life events and threats to their self-esteem.⁷

There are three theories attempting to explain how this works. The first, stress reduction theory, proposes that our bodies automatically respond to nature by reducing the indicators of stress in our bodies. Our heart rate drops, cortisol levels drop, skin conductance drops, and muscle tension drops when we are exposed to nature. The second theory, attention restoration theory, claims that nature replenishes our brains' abilities to intentionally direct our attention. People who have walked through natural settings compared to urban settings, who viewed pictures of natural settings rather than urban settings, and who have views from their windows of growing plants rather than built structures, all score better on measures of attention than those who do the opposite. The third theory suggests that the benefits of viewing or being in nature occur because humans have a natural preference for nature. Just as we have a need to feel as though we belong socially with other people, we have a need to feel that we belong and are connected

with our environment. This need cannot be met in a world of built structures. This is why most people, when mentally tired, will choose to expose themselves to nature, independent of any experimental constraints.⁸ These theories provide suggestions for what we might look for as we consider the impact of nature on our own lives.

Consider yourself first: perhaps you prefer walks through relatively green environments, find yourself distracted by the views of nature out your windows, or have a garden. You could ponder ways to improve this experience, such as creating gardens or choosing views that provide that feeling of spaciousness and retreat. I spend most of my time in my garden pondering how to make my garage look less like a garage, to create a garden that makes me feel like I don't live in the middle of town. Look at your view choices in your workspace. Most of us don't have control over the position or the possession of a window, but you can choose calendars or artwork with images that provide a similar feeling.

Consider others as well. If people in extreme circumstances experience the most extreme effects as a response to nature, perhaps we ought to be making sure they have access to green spaces. School playgrounds could be designed with these ideas in mind. The landscaping of public housing should be designed with these ideas in mind. The location and quality of public parks ought to consider the needs of all the community. Public parks should provide places where visitors can access the feeling of retreat and children can enjoy play structures. Perhaps office windows with a view should not be a workplace standard rather than a status you attain. Even if offices are unable to provide all employees with a view outdoors, the artwork displayed in the office should reflect some consideration of the importance of green space. Access to nature reserves, whether at a local, state, or national level, should be supported and increased. Access to nature enriches our lives in many ways, and we ought to take advantage of it and increase its availability, especially for those who may be more strongly effected by its power than ourselves.

Footnotes

1. Gregory N. Bratman, J. Paul Hamilton, and Gretchen C. Daily, “[The Impacts of Nature Experience on Human Cognitive Function and Mental Health](#),” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1249, no. 1 (February 1, 2012): 120, doi:10.1111/j.1749-6632.2011.06400.x. [↩](#)
2. See Catharine Ward Thompson et al., “[More Green Space Is Linked to Less Stress in Deprived Communities: Evidence from Salivary Cortisol Patterns](#),” *Landscape and Urban Planning* 105, no. 3 (April 15, 2012): 221–29, doi:10.1016/j.landurbplan.2011.12.015 for review of the literature. [↩](#)
3. Nancy M. Wells, “[At Home with Nature Effects of ‘Greenness’ on Children’s Cognitive Functioning](#),” *Environment and Behavior* 32, no. 6 (November 1, 2000): 775–95, doi:10.1177/00139160021972793. [↩](#)
4. Stephen Kaplan, “[The Restorative Benefits of Nature: Toward an Integrative Framework](#),” *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, *Green Psychology*, 15, no. 3 (September 1995): 169–82, doi:10.1016/0272-4944(95)90001-2. [↩](#)
5. Ward Thompson et al., “[More Green Space Is Linked to Less Stress in Deprived Communities](#).” [↩](#)
6. Marc G. Berman et al., “[Interacting with Nature Improves Cognition and Affect for Individuals with Depression](#),” *Journal of Affective Disorders* 140, no. 3 (November 2012): 300–305, doi:10.1016/j.jad.2012.03.012. [↩](#)

7. Bratman, Hamilton, and Daily, "The Impacts of Nature Experience on Human Cognitive Function and Mental Health." ↩

8. See *ibid.* for a summary of the theories. ↩