

## Trees and Happiness

Shauna Doll, Raincoast Conservation Foundation

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The harbinger of the new year, 2021, was a resounding cry of relief that 2020 was coming to an end. Social media were flooded with photos and commentaries exulting the end of the year that brought so much global strife. Yet, as the days of 2021 marched steadily onward, the collective catharsis and new beginning so many anticipated slowly revealed itself to be no more than an extension of long days in lockdown, and the continued reckoning with broken social systems from behind computer screens on makeshift living room desks and kitchen counters moonlighting as conference tables. But much like in the early days of the pandemic, people took refuge outdoors.

Since last March, studies have shown a global mental health decline resulting from social isolation, employment and housing insecurity, boredom, and uncertainty about virus status, among numerous other quarantine-associated experiences (Brooks et al., 2020; Lades et al., 2020; Morgan & Boxall, 2020). However, they have also found a clear relationship between time spent outdoors and improved mental health outcomes. One Irish study found that though survey respondents only spent 8% of their time outdoors, this time resulted in a marked decrease in negative emotions. Though in decades preceding the pandemic, time spent in parks was steadily declining in North America (Shultis & More, 2011; Smith 2020), in the past year visitation to parks and urban greenspace has significantly increased, particularly in Canada (Geng et al., 2021). This demonstrates a strong human attraction to the outdoors in these times of significant mental stress.

These findings are in keeping with an ever-expanding canon of academic literature produced since the early 1980s showing the force of nature on mental, social, and physical wellbeing. For example, in 2015 a group of English researchers discovered that neighbourhoods with high urban tree densities tended to have lower rates of anti-depression prescriptions (Taylor et al., 2015). A year later, a study from a highly developed region of Malaysia indicated that those with higher exposure to “naturalness” had a greater sense of overall wellbeing than those without access to natural places (Hung Foo, 2016). North American research has shown comparable outcomes, linking access to trees and natural spaces to stress reduction and attention restoration (Sullivan & Kaplan, 2016). Even just neighbourhood tree canopy, independent from green space access, has been found to be related to better health outcomes, including lower rates of obesity, type-2 diabetes, asthma, and high blood pressure (Ulmer et al., 2016). Generally, people feel more inclined to exercise, better connected to their social circle, and more emotionally stable when they have regular access to trees, green space, and wild places. Overwhelmingly, these results illuminate the innate human need for access to nature and the negative side-effects of separation from it.

But really, do any of us need science to tell us this?

At the turn of the fifth century, poet Tao Yuanming (陶淵明) and his contemporaries wrote of the benefits and beauty of a simple pastoral life, and waxed eloquent with metaphors of nature as home:

*"It chances to find a pine tree growing all apart;  
Folding its wings, it has come home at last.  
In the gusty wind there is no dense growth;  
This canopy alone does not decay.  
Having found a perch to roost on,  
In a thousand years it will not depart."*

Fourteen centuries later, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote his famous essay, *Nature*, in which he recognized the rejuvenating effects of spending time immersed in the natural world: *"In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. Nature says, -- he is my creature, and maugre all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me"*. Considering the entire evolutionary history of human beings, the current, highly urbanized moment we find ourselves in is but a blip. Most of our history has been spent growing *with* nature rather than apart from it, and as an ever-increasing majority of us migrate to cities, we put ourselves at increased risk of losing that "wild delight... in spite of real sorrows".

Consequently, the scientific proof and innate knowledge of nature's healing powers are increasingly being mobilized by healthcare professionals and urban planners. As early as the eighteenth century, there were reports of European and American doctors prescribing time in pine forests to treat what was then known as consumption (Association of Nature & Forest Therapy, n.d.). Popularized in Japan in the 1980s, the practice of spending quality time under tree canopies ("shinrin-yoku" or "forest bathing") has been widely recognized as a potent preventative and therapeutic healthcare treatment (Hansen, Jones, & Tocchini, 2017). Indeed, nature walks are being prescribed by healthcare practitioners with increasing frequency. There are even programs, such as those offered by the Forest Therapy Institute, to certify Forest Bathing Guides and Forest Therapy Practitioners. Similarly, we are seeing trends among Canadian municipalities ratifying urban forest plans, expanding park space, and generally incorporating more "green" into cities.

Now, with spring around the corner, bringing longer days, warmer weather, and COVID-19 vaccine rollouts, we will be returned to some semblance of "normalcy". This return to regularly scheduled programming is likely to fill our calendars with commutes and commitments and may reduce the amount of time we have to spend among the trees. Though this return is welcome, let us try to be conscious of our continued focus on well-being, and always be on time with our appointments in nature.





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