

The Benefits of Nature for Health and Wellbeing

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The wellbeing and health of humans is intrinsically linked to the health of the planet and our surroundings.^{1,2} Spending time in natural environments (e.g., forests, grasslands, gardens, and parks) can result in significant positive mental and physical health benefits, including boosting mood, regulating body temperature, reducing stress, microbiome development, cognitive development, and lower probabilities of cardiovascular disease and diabetes, to name but a few.^{1,2,3}

The benefits of nature are seen at both the individual and the environmental level. Native trees with broad canopies reduce surface temperature,³ which soon must be maintained as a vital feature of urban cities as summers get hotter. Increased shaded areas and reduced surface temperature could play an important role in reducing the rates of heatstroke and heat exhaustion. Community forests and parks provide space for recreation, and also results in combating obesity and the negative effects of air pollution.³ These green spaces also protect threatened species and slow biodiversity loss, which in turn has a positive impact on nutrition and pharmaceutical supplies. Despite humans failing to look after and cherish nature, nature continues to look after us.

Despite the reputation worldwide, the Emerald Isle is a severely nature-depleted country. The little wilderness and wild nature that remains is often inaccessible by public or active transport. These natural sites are also too often in a poor ecological condition. In a country that was once an Atlantic rainforest, Ireland now has one of the lowest forest covers in all of Europe.⁴ Only a fraction of Ireland is national parks and wooded or natural areas, with only 1% covered by native trees.⁴ Citizens in Ireland are deprived of access to nature, with 35% of people surveyed reporting not having visited a nature or wildlife reserve in the last year.⁴

If access to nature was improved, people may start to connect with and cherish nature more, and consequently derive health benefits.² Ireland should look to follow the lead of other European countries, particularly in considering greenspace expansion in the design of cities and urban communities.

One example to follow is Oslo, a capital city which is almost entirely surrounded by a largely wooded area, *Marka*. The area over 300 km² is easily accessible by active, public, or private transport, therefore providing the citizens of Oslo with easy passage into nature. In comparison to Dublin, which has many beautiful hikes in the surrounding countryside - which are often only accessible through private transport. Larger and wilder national parks are required in Ireland, and incentives to restore native forests. Nature is a public health investment as well as an important tool for fighting climate change.

By looking after the world around us, we are looking after ourselves, both directly and indirectly. Hippocrates famously proclaimed that “Nature itself is the best physician.” Thus, investing in nature is not only an investment in planetary health, but also human health.

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