

Back to nature

Four years ago, *Root & Branch* explored the connection between nature and mental well-being. Since then, evidence has been stacking up, and Covid-19 has brought it right into the mainstream. **David Chandler** and **Hannah Eves** look back, around and ahead.

The Covid cloud has hung heavy over much of 2020, but there is some silver lining – specifically, many people have noticed nature like never before. They've listened to it, walked in it, observed it and found respite in it. While 'our' world was turned upside-down, the rest of creation carried on regardless and, in the process, helped people survive one of the toughest times in recent history.

It's only natural

That nature is good for our mental well-being is increasingly understood and accepted. According to a University of Birmingham blog, scientists are recognising its beneficial effects on 'immune functioning, mood and feelings of well-being. Experiencing nature has been shown to reduce stress levels, and help people feel less overwhelmed and more in control of the situation'.

“ I love taking the time to be mindful of all the beautiful green spaces around me... Watching the birds and squirrels always has a calming effect and takes me out of my own head. ”

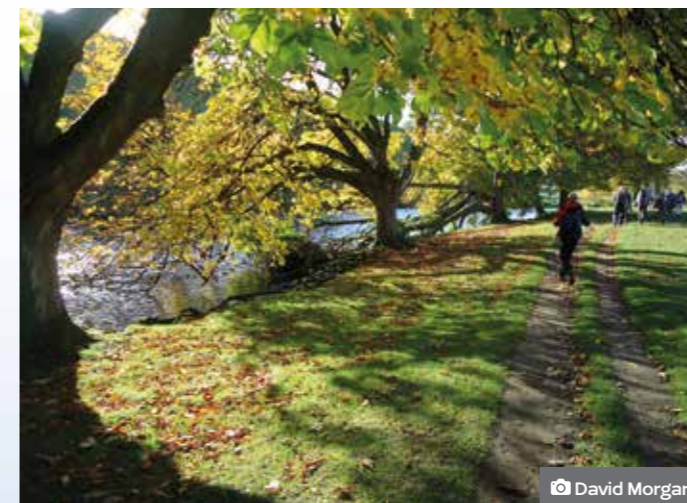
The benefits are not simply a product of exercise: walking in a park as opposed to a busy city street was found to make it much easier to concentrate and ignore distractions afterwards. Attention Restoration Theory suggests that natural environments restore our capacity for directed attention, while built environments do just the opposite. Biophilia – our innate connectedness to the non-human creation – may play a part. It seems that God made us in such a way that our response to nature helps us to think and aids our survival.

Views of nature have also been shown to lower our pulse rate and reduce muscle tension and blood pressure. This is the so-called Psycho-Physiological Stress Recovery Theory, and it shows that nature can be quick-acting medicine: typically, stress levels drop within minutes.

Research in 2019 showed that a daily 20-minute dose of nature can make a difference, and just two hours a week can have a significant effect. University of Exeter research in 2016/17 found that while wildlife project volunteers are not paid financially, they receive a substantial mental health bonus. According to research commissioned by the RSPB, 'time spent in natural environments is known to promote a positive outlook on life and enhance our ability to cope with, and recover from, stress, illness and injury'.

God's prescription

These findings might not surprise you – they may well just affirm your own experiences. And there is biblical support as well. If you're fearful, think about two sparrows, says Jesus (Matthew 10:29-31). Worried? Jesus suggests birdwatching or botanising to ease your anxiety (Matthew 6:25-31). When Jesus battled temptation, he did it in the wilderness, in untamed nature (Matthew 4:1). And when he was wrestling with the supreme stress of his pending execution, where did he go? To Gethsemane, a garden at the base of the Mount of Olives (Matthew 26:36).



David Morgan



Volunteers at Wolf Fields. Kailean Khongsai

On the NHS?

Researchers at the University of Sheffield suggest that nature-based prescriptions could play an important part in a Covid-19 recovery strategy, both in the short- and long-term. But how likely is this to actually happen?

To some degree it's already started. The Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT) see a connection between human health and a healthy natural environment, and suggest that wetlands are particularly important. They talk of the 'special role of water' in well-being, and are involved in a number of nature and well-being projects. This includes work with local health care providers to offer nature-based 'blue prescriptions'.

Closer to home, our very own urban nature reserve at Wolf Fields in West London can be prescribed as good medicine by Southall's social prescribing centre, which works in partnership with local GPs.

In July 2020, Environment Secretary George Eustice gave a speech on environmental recovery, acknowledging that a connection with nature contributes to well-being and improved mental health. Starting in autumn 2020, the government will be investing 'a further £4m in a two-year pilot to bring green prescribing to four urban and rural areas that

“ I've had mild to moderate problems with anxiety, depression and OCD all my life, and in recent years volunteering on my local city farm has been the most therapeutic thing I've ever done. ”

have been hit the hardest by coronavirus and then we want to scale that project up'.

According to [inews.co.uk](https://www.inews.co.uk), this pilot will see the NHS in England 'prescribing green' formally for the very first time. (NHS Shetland in Scotland has been issuing 'nature prescriptions' since 2018, while New Zealand GPs have been using the idea for decades.)

Things may be moving in the right direction, but there is a snag. Green prescribing is commoner when there is green space and a nature-based organisation near the GP's surgery. Southall fits that particular bill but is probably an exception, as it tends to be easier to prescribe successfully in more affluent parts of the country than in less privileged areas.

Learning the lessons

Nature has helped us through the pandemic and should be an integral part of the 'new normal'. Let's not return to the old normal. And let's hope George Eustice meant it when he said, 'When we destroy nature, we undermine our very foundations. Every country faces a choice as they map out their recovery – store up problems by sticking with the status quo, or get back on our feet by building back better and greener.'

Pray that we do indeed build back better and greener – for our mental and spiritual health, and to reduce the chances of another pandemic.

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Quotes from [mind.org.uk](https://www.mind.org.uk)

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