

Helping wildlife helps people

A report on the scientific evidence

Biodiversity underpins the health of our planet and has a direct impact on all of our lives. The biodiversity crisis we now live in means millions of people face a future where food supplies are more vulnerable to pests and disease, and where freshwater is in short supply. This is before we even consider the unseen costs to human health and wellbeing. There is a lot of scientific research that explores the link between time spent in nature and the reduced risk of mental health problems, improved mood and reduced stress, as well as benefits to physical health and wellbeing. Some of these papers are referred to in this report but this is not a complete list. The purpose of this report is to draw on the scientific evidence available to state the case that helping wildlife helps people, through improved health and wellbeing.

Re-establishing meaningful connections with nature has never been more important, as more than 90% of the UK's population now live in urban areas with varying degrees of connectedness to nature. This is part of the reason why we established our 'wildlife friendly town' concept, concerned that the lack of connection, growing disregard for plants, animals and wild areas will likely lead to further ecosystem degradation and species loss. As Sir David Attenborough put it "no one will protect what they don't care about; and no one will care about what they have never experienced".

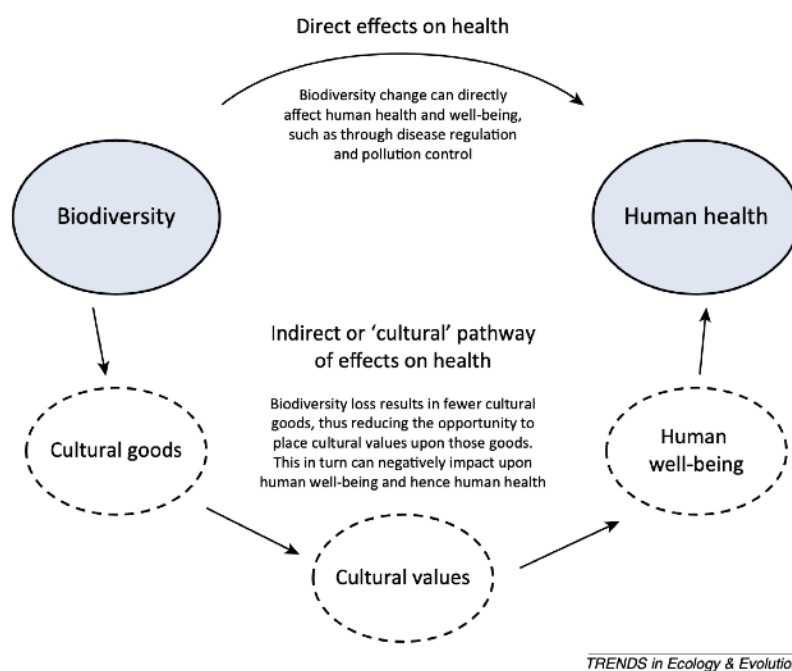
As interest and support of this subject has grown in recent years, the University of Derby established a 'Nature Connectedness Research Group' who contributed to the creation of The Wildlife Trusts' '30 Days Wild,' a project with parallels to our own wildlife pledge campaign: attempting to reconnect people with nature. In a recent paper by the group it was noted that participants of 30 Days Wild felt, "a sense of place and history and rekindling of childhood emotions" (Richardson et al., 2018). Another word commonly used for nature-connectedness is 'biophilia', the 2012 National Trust report, 'Natural childhood' refers to the term biophilia, originally coined by the psychologist Erich Fromm and later popularised by biologist Edward O. Wilson, who describes biophilia as "the connections that human beings subconsciously seek with the rest of life."

Health benefits provided by the natural world are not always fully appreciated because we get them for free, but by spending time in nature every day, we can all reduce our levels of stress, improve our concentration and avoid physical illnesses associated with inactivity, such as obesity. A research project carried out by Natural England (2009) revealed where people have good access to green space they are 24% more likely to be physically active. The conclusion made was if the population were afforded equitable access to green space, the estimated saving to the health service could be in the order of £2.1 billion per annum in England alone! So clear is the link between increased contact with nature and better mental health that in 2007 the charity MIND

launched a campaign to incorporate nature into mainstream NHS treatments, under the banner *Ecotherapy: The green agenda for mental health*. In a review in 2013, Russell et al., found “the balance of evidence indicates conclusively that knowing and experiencing nature makes us generally happier, healthier people.”

A literature review of over 200 sources carried out by the University of Essex and The Wildlife Trusts in 2018 specified a number of ways people benefited from nature, through improved psychological and social wellbeing, including reductions in levels of stress and anxiety, increased positive mood, self-esteem, resilience and improvements in social functioning and social inclusion. Furthermore natural environments rich in wildlife are associated with further benefits to improved emotional, social and psychological wellbeing. A systematic review by Lovell et al. (2014) found an association between time spent in wildlife-rich environments and increased improvements in mental health and healthy behaviour. An article by Clark et al. (2014) concurred and wellbeing was noted to increase in individuals who perceive themselves to be in areas more diverse in birds, butterflies and plants. Figure 1 below is from their 2014 article and neatly illustrates the interrelated benefits humans derive from biodiversity.

Figure 1



In summary, we need nature and wildlife to thrive, yet we are increasingly disconnected from our natural environment and the wildlife that live alongside us. Author and journalist Richard Louv summarised this condition by coining the phrase Nature Deficit Disorder and whilst not being a medical diagnosis, it is a useful idea when thinking about the consequences for our health and wellbeing. In an article in 2008, Curtin commented on the after-effect of a wildlife encounter leaving “a deep sense of well-being that transcends the initial encounter leading to spiritual fulfilment and psychological health benefits.” The scientific evidence is unequivocal, helping wildlife helps people.

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