



WILLAMETTE PARTNERSHIP

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Research Study Shows Humans Increasingly Disconnected from Nature

Multi-sector research teams' work shows the need for deeper look into how much nature people need to derive health benefits

How do you measure a 'dose' of nature?

Aug. 29, 2017 (Portland, Ore.) — At a time of increasing disconnectedness from nature, scientific interest in the potential health benefits of nature contact has grown. Research in recent decades has yielded substantial evidence, but large gaps remain in our understanding.

For example, we know that connecting with nature is good for our health, thanks to a growing body of evidence. But how do we measure a “dose” of nature? Do we get the same benefits from gardening in our yards as we do from taking a hike in the woods? Is going outside in nature once a week for 20 minutes the same as looking out your front window onto a park or natural area?

A team of scientists says a research effort focused on questions like these has the potential to yield public health insights and has outlined seven research domains that would help us frame a national agenda for studying the health benefits of nature contact, the results of which would help to shape policies and practices for our nation.

The seven domains include questions such as the following:

- How exactly does time in nature make you healthier? Is it a reduction of stress, immune system response, or something else?
- How can we best measure the “exposure” to the healing power of nature?
- What is the right “dose” of nature? What are the best ways to study the epidemiology of nature?
- Not everyone reacts the same to being outdoors in nature. What are the responses of different populations and people with different experiences with nature?
- Does a video of nature provide similar benefits from a hike in the woods? How does technology enhance or hinder the health benefits of nature?
- Are there healthcare savings from more time in nature? How cost-effective is time in nature relative to other health actions?
- What are the design “prescriptions” on how best to design schoolyards, parks, trails, and programs that connect people and nature?

The [agenda](#) is now available for viewing in *Environmental Health Perspectives*.

“If we can implement this research agenda, we can help build the kinds of environments that support health for everyone,” says Bobby Cochran, co-author of the agenda and executive director of Willamette Partnership, a Portland-based conservation nonprofit that sees a role for the environmental sector to play in improving public health outcomes. Cochran is a *Culture of Health Leader*, a new program co-led by the National Collaborative for Health Equity and CommonHealth ACTION with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Willamette Partnership works with community leaders to build a business case for conservation by helping them quantify the economic and social benefits of environmental protection. They co-lead Oregon’s Health and Outdoors Initiative, an effort to get more people outside for their health, particularly for people experiencing the greatest health disparities. The initiative is raising awareness about one of the most tangible social benefits of conservation: improved public health.

“There is no reason why state Medicaid programs and hospital systems shouldn't be all over outdoor recreation — whether that's playing in a neighborhood park or climbing a mountain,” Cochran says.

Research should focus on populations at particular risk, such as children, elderly and communities of color. Evidence has shown that access and preference toward nature and its benefits vary by socioeconomic status, ethnicity and other demographics. The key is to study how they vary and what barriers and consequences exist.

Nearly four in five Americans and more than half of the global population live in cities, so understanding urban greenspaces is important. More specifically, how often people use greenspaces, ease of access, and in what ways they promote physical activity and social interaction.

“At a time when healthcare costs are skyrocketing, our population is aging, the opioid epidemic has reached alarming proportions, and mortality is actually rising for some groups, innovative approaches to prevention and treatment are much needed,” says the agenda’s lead author, Howard Frumkin, a professor of environmental and occupational health sciences at the

University of Washington School of Public Health. “Nature contact may well be one such approach.”

A better understanding of what works best, Frumkin says, will inform decision-makers in parks and recreation, urban and land-use planning, landscape architecture, interior designs, education, healthcare, among others.

Challenges exist to information gathering. For one, exposure measurements often don't capture variation in how people experience nature – for instance, looking out a car window to see mountains versus hiking a trail. It also is hard to quantify what a person experiences during an episode, or dose, of nature contact.

Enhancements in epidemiologic research can help build evidence on the nature-health connection. Scientists suggest using large, ongoing cohort studies and innovative data sources such as Google Street View and social media.

The research team included representatives of the University of Washington's Center for Creative Conservation; the departments of psychology, pediatrics and chemistry; and the College of the Environment. Other contributors included The Nature Conservancy, Seattle Children's, U.S. Forest Service, Willamette Partnership, Stanford University's Center for Conservation Biology, and The Natural Capital Project.

About Willamette Partnership

Willamette Partnership knows that when nature thrives, so do people. Since 2004, we've been working with forward-thinking communities to create incentive- and market-based opportunities that lead to increased conservation. Willamette Partnership helped protect vital sage-grouse habitat while improving farmers' and ranchers' livelihoods. We helped the City of Medford meet clean water regulations by redirecting \$16M of additions from its wastewater treatment plant to invest in river restoration projects that improve outcomes for fish, taxpayers, and people. We regularly convene stakeholders from across county and state lines, from opposing industries and from seemingly unrelated disciplines to give them the tools they need to protect natural areas. Willamette Partnership Executive Director, Bobby Cochran, is a *Culture of Health Leader*, a new program co-led by the National Collaborative for Health Equity and CommonHealth ACTION with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. For more information, visit www.willamettepartnership.org

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