

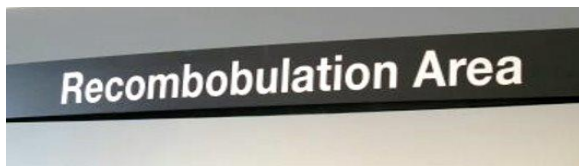


Respite in Shades of Green

Nature May Be the Ultimate Therapist's Couch!

by Ken Finch, President, Green Hearts INC

For five years now, passengers leaving from Milwaukee's Mitchell International Airport have grinned at a unique sign that says, "Recombobulation Area." Anyone who has flown in the past decade knows the drill at the security check-in: you take off just about everything except your belly button, pass uneventfully through the scanner, and then try to get everything put back on and in its proper place – usually as you're in a rush to catch your flight.



Well, as you come out of the security bottleneck in Milwaukee, you find the official Recombobulation Area where – without holding up the rest of the line – you can refill your pockets, put your shoes back on, and take two or three tries to get your belt through every loop. There's nothing fancy to the space, yet it's a wonderfully simple idea that makes the airport hubbub just a touch more fun and a bit easier to handle.

Flying can be stressful, but so is much of modern life. In our hurried, over-scheduled, never-off-the-grid lives, who couldn't use a time and place for regular bouts of "recombobulating?" Well, good news: you've got it; we all do. It's called nature – and no matter where you live, there's a bit of it nearby that can calm your mind, lower your blood pressure, and make the world seem a little more pleasant and spiritual.

Of course, this is not a new discovery. The positive and restorative effects of nature have been recognized and celebrated for as long as humans have lived on this Earth. Whether in natural haunts like forests, ocean shores, and mountaintops, or in human-created forms like beautiful gardens and cozy fishing

cabins, we have always turned to nature for peace, revitalization, and mindful thinking. Benedictine retreat centers are usually found in lovely and isolated landscapes; Thoreau used his Walden Pond haven for his most famous writing; and uncountable millions of us are drawn to outdoor destinations for rest and renewal – even spaces as simple as a shady backyard hammock or a picnic blanket spread in a local park.

The eminent biologist Edward O. Wilson coined the term "biophilia" to name what he argues is an innate human attraction to nature. Once you start looking for signs of this biophilia, you'll see them often – from how we protect our natural parks to how we design our home landscapes; from how contentedly we linger around a campfire to how often we advertise cars in beautiful outdoor scenes; and even to how we can program digital rainstorms to lull us to sleep. All of these reflect our attraction to the natural world and how we turn to it for wisdom and revitalization. Why do you suppose ol' Isaac Newton was sitting under that famous apple tree to begin with? It's powerful stuff, this nature!



The author's favorite place to recombobulate is Bourne Pond in Vermont. Where is your special place for revitalization?

The comfort, peace, and renewal of time spent in green spaces is easy to dismiss as a “duh!” realization, since it is such a widely shared human perception. In recent years, though, rigorous, quantitative, international research has been validating and extending our understandings about the beneficial effects of time spent in nature. The scope of these research findings is dramatic – in fact, so much so that it is hard to capsule, and almost overwhelming when it is assembled effectively, as in Frances Kuo’s “Parks and Other Green Environments: Essential Components of a Healthy Human Habitat.” (Published by the National Recreation and Park Association; see http://www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/nrpa.org/Publications_and_Research/Research/Papers/MingKuo-Summary.PDF)

In short, time spent in nature supports a wide range of factors that are vital to psychological, social, and physical health. Research-demonstrated positive effects have been found on depression, resiliency, mood, cognition, healing, anxiety, classroom performance, stress, attention deficit disorder, and conservation values – among others! Here’s just a small sampling.

- Kuo’s own research found that public housing residents who live in buildings surrounded by trees experience fewer incidents of violence than do residents living in identical buildings with very few trees. (1)
- Two studies compared hospital patients with the same afflictions and prognoses, but while some patients had natural views from their rooms’ windows, the others could see only streets and buildings. On average, the patients with natural views requested less pain medication and were released from the hospital earlier. (2)
- Researchers from Herriot-Watt University (Edinburg, UK) “outfitted a group of test subjects with mobile electrodes fastened to their heads. The subjects then took programmed walks in three different environments – an urban shopping district, a park with a lush green environment, and a busy commercial zone. The results showed evidence of brain-wave activity indicating relaxed states – lower frustration, lower ‘engagement and arousal,’ and higher meditative states – when moving in the green space, and just the reverse when moving out of it.” (3)
- The Japanese have a long cultural practice of visiting woods for relaxation, which is known

The Peace of Wild Things

by Wendell Berry

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

(translated) as “forest bathing.” Experiments found that 15 minute walks in the forest reduced stress more than the same time walking in urban environments, as revealed by measures including lower pulse rates, lower blood pressure, and lower concentrations of cortisol. (4)

- Recent studies have found that treating depression with a soil bacterium, *Mycobacterium vaccae*, can have a very similar effect to taking the drug Prozac, since they affect the same neurons. Thus, taking a walk in nature or digging in a garden can offer people a natural mood lift. (5)

The list of similar studies and other beneficial effects of “nature time” is already long, and it is growing rapidly. But even without this data, most adults instinctively grasp that time spent in nature can rejuvenate their energy and emotions. And they certainly have no trouble understanding the hectic, multi-tasking life pace which makes such doses of “vitamin N” (for Nature) valuable to them.

But what of children? They’re just kids, right? How much more easy-going could their lives be? In truth, modern children’s lives may be every bit as frenzied as their parents’ and caregivers.’ The days of carefree after-school play and free-roaming weekends have been largely extinguished – replaced by longer schooldays, more homework, soccer leagues, tutoring, gymnastics, music lessons, play dates, church groups, pre-dawn hockey practices, band camps, theater rehearsals, and countless other scheduled activities crammed into nearly every once-free moment of their lives.

Childhood has never been like this before. Is there any doubt that stress, mental exhaustion, and

performance anxiety are now a huge, on-going challenge for our children – even if they can't clearly express it?

So can nature help children, too? The answer is absolutely “yes” – so long as we can get them back outside into more natural settings. The experience of nature offers truly significant therapeutic benefits for children, just as it does for adults.

For instance, Wells and Evans found that children with nature nearby their homes are more resistant to stress; have lower incidence of behavior disorders, anxiety, and depression; and have a higher measure of self-worth. This research studied over 300 American kids, 8 to 11 years-old, and found that greener home surroundings made them more resilient against the effects of stress and adversity, regardless of socioeconomic status. And the greatest benefits accrued to the most vulnerable children! (6)

Another study found that in Swedish day care centers that devoted a lot of time to play in more natural settings, the children showed greater ability to concentrate and pay attention than did children in child care centers that spent less time outdoors and had only a manufactured playground. (7)

Nature experiences have also been found to lesson the symptoms of attention deficit disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in children – and the greener the kids' play surroundings, the fewer symptoms they displayed. (8)

Just as with adults, the research findings about children and nature are both expansive and expanding. They deserve our attention, and our action!

So what can we do? First comes awareness: we must sincerely value children's quiet time in the outdoors. Amidst all the deserved hype about the need to get our children more physically active, we also should also respect their need for slow, peaceful, reflective moments when their brains and their spirits can process their busy lives, and they can simply enjoy the beauty and rejuvenation that nature offers.

How can we foster these quiet, contemplative moments? Create sheltered, private outdoor niches for kids to relax in – like a tall tree swing, a playhouse hidden amidst shrubs, a hammock chair tucked away in a quiet corner of the yard, or a soft bed of grass to just lie on and watch the swallows spinning overhead. And then – *imperatively!* – give them plenty of free time to enjoy their special outdoor places.

Whether raising your own child or working to bring hundreds of children back outside, remember that just as active nature play can fortify growing bodies and spark momentous adventures, quiet and reflective time in nature can calm and mend young spirits. Children need their own time and natural places to recombobulate. And they don't even have to take off their belts.



*Comfy?
Centered?
Recombobulating?
Seems likely!*

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- (3) Dolesh, R. (2013) “The ‘soft fascination’ of nature.” *Parks & Recreation*, April 2013.
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Bringing Children and Nature Back Together

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