THE LINK BETWEEN NATURE AND WELL-BEING

Are you an outdoors person? If you feel a rush of good feeling when outside taking in the scenery, you’re not alone. A study on happiness and natural environments by MacKerron and Mourato (8) found that people scored significantly higher in measures of subjective well-being (happiness) when randomly beeped outdoors versus when in urban settings.

The authors used the Experience Sampling Method in an unprecedented large-scale study in the United Kingdom; their analysis was based on 1,138,481 responses from 21,947 participants during a 6-month period. All self-selected participants were recruited primarily by traditional and social media (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) and voluntarily signed up to use a free public app called Happiness. Not only were participants randomly beeped throughout the day, but their precise location was determined by GPS. Data concerning the type of habitat each individual was in, as well as the weather and time of day, were collected by the GPS. The types of habitat included marine and coastal margins, freshwater wetlands, mountains, grasslands, enclosed farmland, woodlands, inland bare ground, suburban, rural developed, and continuous urban land cover types. When beeped, participants were asked to report how happy they were using a sliding scale from 0 to 100. Data also were collected on the participants’ activity at the time, whom they were with, and whether they were at home, at work, or elsewhere.

Here are some of the results. Activities performed in natural environments, such as running, gardening, or bird watching, showed substantial positive associations with happiness, and marine and coastal margins were found to be happier locations than other types of habitats. However, every type of habitat except inland bare ground was linked with greater happiness when compared with a continuous urban setting. As you might expect (and corroborated by other research), people were happier in higher temperatures and sunshine and happier at home than at work.

MacKerron and Mourato offer three reasons that may explain why natural environments are linked to health, well-being, and happiness. First, known as biophilia, is the idea that humans are intrinsically drawn to other living systems, to all that is alive and vital. It is postulated that exposure to other life forms positively affects the nervous system, reduces the stress hormone cortisol, and restores the ability to focus and be attentive. Second, natural environments are less likely to include harmful stressors such as noise and air pollution. And third, being outdoors can increase the likelihood of physical activity and social connection — both known to influence well-being positively.

It remains to be seen whether the study’s results can be generalized to the entire population. As the authors point out, the 21,947 participants primarily were well-off (enough to afford an iPhone®, iPad®, or iPod®), young (66% were younger than 35 years), and employed; 13% were full-time students. It also is possible that the very act of responding to the Happiness app may have influenced the participants’ perception of their happiness or that their mood when beeped influenced whether or not they responded.

There is a growing amount of research being conducted on green space (natural environments) and well-being, health, and physical activity, and favorable findings abound. The bottom line? It’s time to get outside and move!