

Connection to nature

In brief

Connection to nature is all about our attitude towards nature - the degree to which the natural world forms part of our personal identities, our emotional relationship with it, along with its impact on our knowledge and behaviour. Connection to nature is a relatively recent avenue of research and highlights how this connection influences our long-term wellbeing, sense of place in the world and our pro-environmental behaviours.

The reciprocal benefits of 'contact' with nature is something that has long been considered significant by those working within environmental sectors, but until the late 1990s the sense of 'connection', as distinct from simply spending time in nature, had not really been studied. The research so far shows that there is a clear link between levels of nature connectedness and wellbeing, with people who feel a stronger sense of connection more likely to feel happy and fulfilled.

Conversely, a lack of connection to nature, or 'nature deprivation' may contribute to detrimental effects on people's health and wellbeing due to an absence of the benefits to mental health that spending time in natural spaces can bring, combined with more sedentary lifestyles.

The research may also have important implications for tackling the climate crisis and destruction of ecosystems. Human populations who are 'disconnected' from nature, either physically or emotionally, are less likely to care about the natural world and its potential destruction, an effect that could be exacerbated as global urbanization progresses and we become increasingly disconnected.

By seeking to quantify the relationship between people and nature, the research in this area begins to provide a statistically significant framework by which connection to nature can be measured, allowing future work to monitor changes over time and between populations, along with the associated impacts.

Research overview

Much of the early research into connection to nature involved developing measures to assess levels of connection, see for example the work of Shultz in 2001 and Mayer and Frantz in 2003. In the UK research conducted by the RSPB, in partnership with researchers from the University of Essex looked at establishing a baseline for connection to nature in UK children using weighted questionnaires to calculate a 'score of connection', and subsequently expanded to also study adults and teenagers.

In this work, where connection to nature is described as the mixture of feelings and attitudes that people hold towards the natural environment over time, levels of nature connectedness were measured, and associated impacts identified. The framework for definition included four elements:

- enjoyment of nature

- having empathy for creatures
- having a sense of oneness with nature
- having a sense of responsibility for the environment

Nature connection and wellbeing

Developing a connection to nature, as distinct to simply spending time in nature, has been shown to consistently benefit mental health and wellbeing. Wellbeing benefits that have been associated with connection to nature in the published literature are:

- Increased life satisfaction
- Improved positive emotions
- Openness to experience
- Increased mindfulness / attentional capacity
- Increased meaningfulness
- Knowing the self / internal state awareness
- A sense of identity and community within a larger system of meaning / belonging
- Direct positive affect derived from enjoyment in the natural world
- Social wellbeing

The extent to which this effect can be considered independent of other influencing factors, such as socio-economic status, health conditions or even personality type has been considered to a limited extent by several studies. Further research is needed, but initial results suggest that whilst factors such as these do certainly will influence the extent to which a connection with nature may be developed in the first place, nature connection itself is found to influence mental wellbeing regardless of background. The phrase ‘nature deficit disorder’ has been coined to describe the opposing effect, the detrimental impact of human lives increasingly led indoors, at work, and in front of screens.

Nature connection and pro-environmental behaviours

The correlation between holding an enduring connection with nature and taking positive action to preserve the environment is also highlighted in the research. Nature connection is seen by many to be a key factor in encouraging pro-environmental behaviours. Many are concerned that global development and technological advances have disconnected humans from nature to such an extent that, at the very point that the earth is in environmental crisis, people are decreasingly likely to act. The research suggests that nurturing nature connectedness may make people more likely to take action and adopt pro-environmental behaviours.

Connection to nature is being considered increasingly important to the wellbeing of not only our population but also of our countryside and as such has been embedded in the UK governments’ 2019 25-year environment plan.

Care farming and connection to nature

Care farms provide a myriad of opportunities to connect with nature. They are intrinsically places of connection, already incorporating contexts and activities that actively develop and

support an individual's connection with nature. The [Nature Connectedness Research Group](#) identifies 5 pathways to helping people feel more connected: *Contact* – using the senses to tune in to nature; *Emotion* – feeling the emotions that nature brings; *Beauty* – noticing nature's beauty; *Meaning* – allowing nature to bring meaning to our lives; and *Compassion* – caring about and taking action for nature.

Care farming activities which deepen a sense of nature connection could therefore have long-term benefits for both service user wellbeing and the wider natural environment.

Sources

- Bragg 2014
- Bragg et al 2013/14/15
- Mayer and Frantz 2004
- RSPB 2013
- Schultz 2002

Further Reading

- The RSPB [resources and reports](#), along with an [overview](#) of their Connection to Nature work to date
- Natural England – [Connection to Nature Evidence Briefing](#)
- Nature Connectedness Research Group - <https://www.derby.ac.uk/research/centres-groups/nature-connectedness-research-group/>
- [A New Relationship with Nature](#)
- DEFRA - [A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment](#)
- [Finding Nature](#) – a blog by Prof. Miles Richardson

More information

Find out more about [connection to nature](#) on our website. This resource is produced by the Growing Care Farming team at Social Farms & Gardens.

Growing Care Farming aims to increase access to health, care and educational services on care farms. Growing Care Farming is part of the Government's Children & Nature programme and is delivered by Social Farms & Gardens, in partnership with Thrive.

Visit www.farmgarden.org.uk/gcf for more details or follow our latest updates on Twitter [@GrowCareFarming](#).

Last updated: April 2021

