

Getting Close to Nature Down to a Lifestyle Choice

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Blue skies, green trees, and birds flying around—these are some of the iconic nature elements that we desire in our lives. When we look out of a window from our home, or take a walk on a trail, or are active in a favourite outdoor hobby, we desire at least a glimpse of nature. But as we build our cities across the landscape, nature elements can diminish or be driven into unhealthy states. Development and human actions are often causes of the extinction of species.

Sometimes, we take for granted that nature and a healthy environment will continue indefinitely, but those who work in natural resource management, urban planning, park management, and other fields that monitor and manage natural resources know differently. The dynamics of climate change, development in the forms of housing, businesses, industries, and transportation infrastructure, and consumers' lifestyle choices, product purchases, and sustainability practices are some of the changes that humans bring to nature and environmental conditions that they need to be more aware of. More importantly, we need to be ready to respond with a remedy and willing to change our ways to reduce or eliminate negative human impacts on nature.

Over the past 10 years or so, my research has focused on individuals' interaction with nature in a variety of contexts that are focused on lifestyle choices. Studying where people live, play, and vacation has allowed me to inquire why nature is important and how people are engaged in nature. Many studies have been conducted with students and colleagues on people's desire to live within or close to nature, to be outside for leisure and physically active, or to vacation in domestic and international park settings. These are some ways in which we “consume” nature in everyday life or on special occasions, like vacationing or buying a property or home for vacation.

Some of my early research on natural environments was conducted with Dr. Robert Marans, University of Michigan. We are both interested in recreation and parks, and Marans contributed his expertise in urban planning and architecture in our study of residential housing and neighbourhood design. In the 1990s, a new form of housing development was becoming popular in select US metropolitan areas—open space housing developments. In most cases, local governments realised that they had a valuable asset in tree-covered vacant property. Governments wanted to ensure that more than just single trees would be preserved, and began encouraging open space neighbourhoods with higher housing-density allowances in exchange for the preservation of larger plots of mature trees or common access to water shoreline. This generally meant dividing acreage into either high-quality natural resource plots or buildable land.

In the neighbourhood plans, developers created parkland that would become private parks owned by the residents as a group that they would need to maintain and steward. Often one-third to half of the total acreage was conserved, particularly in areas with zoning rules and aggressive open space and environmental goals. Green open space ranged from fields for sports and playgrounds to trails and wetlands in forest settings, and blue open space included common access to lake or river frontage. Homebuyers saw these neighbourhoods as offering easy access to the modern suburban “north woods” landscape with outdoor recreation included. This can translate into fewer trips away from a metropolitan area and their primary home for nature exposure, an outcome mentioned by several homeowners of open space houses. Those who purchased homes in open space neighbourhoods were agreeing to a smaller personal backyard in exchange for a more natural setting shared with their neighbours and wildlife.

Sense of place, a perspective that places attention on the intangible but essential characteristics that make each community unique, was a primary driver in the attractiveness of “housing with nature”. Creating a sense of place is well suited to incorporating health as a resource among the goals of community growth and demands for housing. Our findings showed that the recent homebuyers of open space housing developments had a strong interest in natural resources for recreation access, serene and peaceful landscapes, and seclusion and privacy (Vogt and Marans 2004). An outcome of open space neighbourhoods was the community built around the shared nature resources. Hundreds of residents were trained to be resource stewards, created governance structures to oversee their common property, and held volunteer days to steward their natural resource (Vogt and Marans 2003). Some open space neighbourhoods had “resident experts”, with related degrees or from related professions, to help guide the maintenance of the resources, while others solicited help from their local government, park managers, or landscape firms. Open space neighbourhoods provided a development style that preserved hundreds, if not thousands, of acres in the Detroit metropolitan area from being developed into just houses and private yards, and a less cultivated natural environment prevailed.

Another area of research that showcases the importance of natural environments is developing community trail networks and promoting walking and biking to school-aged children as a means of travel from home to school. Over the past hundred years, we have become increasingly dependent on cars. Currently, we feel the effects of this car-dependency in: poor air quality; non-porous pavements that cause excessive water runoff and flooding; a dependency on oil and global policies that support oil supply; and rising obesity levels. Increasingly, trails have been a popular park and recreation development in the past 20 years. In Michigan, the Pere Marquette Rail-Trail, located in Midland, is one of the early mid-distance trails that wasn't within a park but instead followed an unused rail bed.

Research conducted over several years with Dr. Charles Nelson, a colleague at Michigan State University, documented that a trail is able to connect communities in more ways than just transportation. Since 1999, Vogt and Nelson have documented the uses and benefits of trails and they have shared their findings Michigan online at trails.anr.msu.edu. Community trails are a new type of park that places public recreation closer to many more people's houses, passes businesses that park-users may have never visited, and appeals to a larger and more demographically diverse local population and tourists who

spend money in the local economy. The economic and social benefits from public investments in linear trails are larger than most “square” parks since linear trails often pass through several communities with retail areas and neighbourhoods. Linear trails are also particularly desirable to long-distance cyclists and runners.

Community support for linear trails is evident in the studies we have done in Michigan, United States. Linear trail projects in the communities we studied have a history of citizen engagement that includes working with local- and state-elected officials and governments, soliciting financial support from foundations, and growing a citizen base of financial donors and trail stewards—often resulting in a group of “friends” of the trail that provides a co-managed community asset.

Trail development and research on a dozen or more trails in Michigan were timed with the emergence of a US programme called “Safe Routes to School”. In the early 2000s, several areas in the United States launched transportation-based efforts to bring back walking and biking to school as a transportation option for students aged 8 to 13 years old. As housing sprawled across communities, as crime prevented kids from being safe in the outdoors in some cities, or as US transportation and urban planning designs left out walkability and cycling, the proportion of students walking or biking to school has plummeted from the 1960s to today. Nationally and in Michigan, the research I have conducted over the past 10 years shows that one or two students in ten walks or bikes to school, a drop from four or five students in ten some 50 years ago.

Where trails and sidewalks exist, with strong leadership from school principals, teachers, and willing parents, students were found to be more likely to walk or bike to school. Elements of the landscape were studied by asking students how they arrived to school and about the social, natural, and built elements they saw along their route (Knollenberg, Kwon, and Vogt 2010). Walkers reported higher levels of seeing neighbours than non-walkers, a step toward higher levels of neighbourhood interaction. Seeing natural elements was reported by 87 percent of the 12,750 students at 54 schools in Michigan, which suggests exposure to green environments and fascinating stimuli. Trails and programmes that promote active transportation and recreation for students, like Safe Routes to School, are becoming more popular and part of everyday routines. With the increase in such trails and programmes, the daily recommended targets for physical activity levels and outdoor exposure to the sun are more likely to be met.



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1. Mapping the opportunities for nature in our lifestyle choices (Illustration: Feng Dexian).

2. Tulips are abloom for Tulip Time Festival (Photo: Holland Convention & Visitors Bureau).

3. Tulip-lined boulevard in Holland, Michigan (Photo: Holland Convention & Visitors Bureau).

4. Children walking to school (Photo: Michigan Fitness Foundation).

5. Students standing on new sidewalks for walking to school (Photo: Michigan Fitness Foundation).

The study of tourism is another area of research that highlights the relationship between humans and nature. An area's landscape and natural features often draw tourists to visit it for sightseeing or participation in nature activities. Most cities and many rural areas have professional organisations like tourism bureaus that produce attractive marketing promotions to showcase the cultural and natural elements of an area. Events and festivals are centrepieces of destination marketing and also offer opportunities for residents and tourists to celebrate a community's heritage.


An example of a successful heritage festival that I have studied for the past few years takes place in the city Holland, Michigan, United States. Original settlers that came from Holland, Europe, brought many of their trades with them, including making furniture and growing tulips. The community in Michigan's Holland city is well known for the millions of tulip bulbs planted each fall, and when the warm spring temperatures come, the tulips provide a reason to celebrate spring and leave winter behind. Tulip Time Festival, held in Holland city, attracts close to 50,000 attendees, and over 8,000 stay overnight in the nearby area across eight festival days and nights, according to figures I generated from surveys and observations. Over 50 percent of the festival attendees come from other US states and some from foreign countries. Six out of ten travel parties come for the festival's Dutch and tulip-themed attractions, and an additional 15 percent come just to see the flowers. Hundreds of local volunteers make the festival possible and one of the highlights of the festival is a "People's Parade" for the locals to show their Dutch heritage and community spirit. Using observational counting techniques, an estimated 16,000 spectators watched the parade in 2013.

Another study of the same community, but on the summer visitors, further shows tourists' interests in nature. Almost one-quarter of summer visitors were drawn to the area for the sand beaches along Lake Michigan, one of the freshwater Great Lakes of North America, and another eight percent visited the area for outdoor recreation. Parks along Lake Michigan and inland areas play an important role in the economy, particularly in summer. The spring tulips and the festival are the "kick-off" to showcasing the area's natural amenities that elicit tourism and recreational economic impacts.

This set of research featured in this commentary aligns nicely with Pretty and Smith's (2004) three levels of human engagement with nature that fulfil psychological and physical needs: seeing and watching nature; being outside in nature; and participating or interacting

with nature. Many studies, including my research, have shown that these levels of interaction with nature bring improved emotional states, deeper social bonds, improved fitness levels, and stronger nature appreciation. These benefits are primarily focused on the benefits to individuals and centred around lifestyle choices and quality of life.

There is increasing evidence that select individuals want more than a personal level of participation in nature-based activities and instead are willing to commit to a deeper, more socially enduring commitment and effort to care for nature in one's community or beyond. This level of involvement is called community engagement and the stewardship of natural environments. Examples of such behaviours found in the research projects highlighted in this commentary include: volunteering to remove invasive species in a park; joining a citizen-based "friends" group to raise funds to turn a former rail bed into a natural corridor with a trail; managing an open space or a shared park facility in one's housing subdivision; creating a community garden to feed others; and supporting the reuse of former industrial site, like military bases, landfills, or shipping channels, as public parks. While nature is a prescription for people to be healthier (Beyer et al. 2014; Hansmann, Hug, and Seeland 2007; Korpela et al. 2008), people are increasingly supporting or becoming involved in the conservation of existing natural environments, as well as treating or repairing developed landscapes. Direct efforts through community engagement and stewardship are important, but everyday behaviours at home, in transit, or outdoors recreating also play a significant role in achieving a more sustainable environment.

Across the globe, landscapes in urban and rural areas have been subject to development. Increased focus is on further greening and restoration of nature to improve the overall health of the planet. Places that are "unique" or "original" are particularly worthy of our attention as planners, scientists, writers, and citizens. Continued housing, business, institutional and government development can potentially become a more forceful economic activity and compromise the value and contribution of nature. If left to unchecked development, we can expect negative environmental and social conditions that will ultimately alter sense of place and sustainability. When people are more interested and attached to natural environments, they will express it through choices of where they live, how they transit, where they recreate and vacation, and community engagement. Only then are we more likely to reap a multitude of social, environmental, and even economic benefits alongside the inevitable future development. 

Actions for Daily Doses of Nature

- Go outdoors and participate in leisure and recreation interests.
- Choose to live in an area with rich greenery. Increased demand for green housing and natural environments are catching the attention of developers and government planners.
- Create sustainable nature landscapes by planting native trees and flowers. Watch birds, insects, and butterflies during visits to these natural areas.
- Assess the opportunities for non-motorised transportation to work, school, shopping, appointments, and other trips.
- Ask for natural open space or community gardens shared by the neighbourhood.
- Volunteer to assist public parks to maintain recreation facilities and ensure safe park environments.
- Join a citizen-science programme and help naturalists and park managers create an inventory of plant and animal populations in the parks and nearby areas.
- Buy household products that reuse materials and are created by processes that are less harsh on the natural environment.
- Use science-based evidence when presenting research on the role of natural areas and parks in sustainable communities, particularly with policy makers, elected officials, developers, and those who build infrastructure with public and private funding.

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