

The Role of Nature-based Experiences in the Development of Wellness and Sustainable Practices

Background to the Project

Wellness is now seen as central to redefining the National Health agenda (NHHRC, 2009). As yet no Australian studies have measured the role of the natural world as a benefit to wellness.

For centuries psychologists and philosophers have recognised the importance of the natural world to human health. Carl Jung theorised that an encounter with the natural world could trigger deep positive transformations. Research over the last twenty years has gradually been identifying the benefits to human health and wellness attributed to re-connecting with and physical activity in the natural environment (Brymer, 2009; Brymer & Oades, 2009; Burls, 2007; Maller, Townsend, Brown, & St Leger, 2002; Pryor, Townsend, Maller, & Field, 2006). The significance of feeling connected to natural environments, families and friends are described as a foundational requirement for human health and wellbeing (Maller et al., 2008). However, research has also shown that humanity has become so disconnected from the natural world that it has become a crisis termed “Nature Deficit Disorder” (Louv, 2008).

At the same time, feelings of connection, unity or being a part of the natural world are a causal step to emotional care for and wanting to protect the natural world (Schultz, 2002). By returning to nature and experientially recognising that we are interconnected with nature, we rekindle values that lead to caring for and the commitment to look after the environment (Brymer, Downey, & Gray, 2009; Dunbar, 2004; Mathews, 2006; Schroll, 2007; Schultz, 2000).

In summary, theoretical perspectives indicate that feelings of connection to the natural world are essential for positive health and wellness. In turn these experiences trigger a desire to protect the natural world which, when enacted in a hands-on way, may lead to a greater sense of wellness.

Research aims:

1. To identify and measure the specific contribution of nature-based experiences to the health and wellness outcomes of national park and ecotourism visitors.
2. To identify the types and specific characteristics of nature-based experiences that produce the greatest health benefits for park and ecotourism visitors.
3. To investigate the impacts that nature-based experiences have on visitor’s attitudes and behavior towards natural environments.
4. To produce guidelines for the design of visitor experiences in parks and ecotourist settings that maximize health and wellness outcomes for visitors.

Nature of the Project

The project aims to obtain a better understanding of the relationship between human health and wellness and the natural world by asking about:

- The specific contribution of nature-based activities in facilitating positive health and wellness
- Motivations and expectations for participation (e.g. park visitation) and levels of satisfaction.
- The influence that these experiences have on the relationship between people and the natural world.
- How such experiences might come about.

The benefit from this exploration will be a deeper understanding of the relationship between people and the natural world, the role of this relationship in the development of positive changes in health and wellness behaviours and the potential of these experiences to develop care for the natural world.

Getting the project off the ground would mean that a key question about how to facilitate nature-based experiences to foster positive health, wellness and sustainable practices asked around the world would be addressed here in Australia, further emphasising the leading role Australia is taking in visitor and sustainability research.

I will be seeking support for this project in the coming months in the hope of submitting an ARC Linkage application in 2010.

Academic Team:

Dr Eric Brymer is a lecturer for the Department of Health, Queensland University of Technology. He has over 25 years experience as a facilitator and researcher of nature-based experiences. As a consultant he has advised international and government organisations in the U.S., Europe, UK, Asia and Australia. He began his academic career in April 2008 specialising in nature-based experiences and wellness and already has 15 publications in this area.

Professor Roy Ballantyne is the Head of the School of Tourism, University of Queensland. He has a well established international reputation for his work in environmental education, environmental interpretation, free-choice environmental learning, wildlife tourism and ecotourism research. He has 86 papers in refereed journals, over 60 other publications (books, chapters in books, major research reports and teaching development materials) and 6 ARC Discovery/Linkage grants.

Associate Professor Mardie Townsend teaches at Deakin University in the area of 'Public Health', focusing particularly on the links between 'People, Health and Place'. Mardie is leading research on: motivations and benefits of environmental volunteering and the benefits of hands-on contact with nature for people experiencing depression. Mardie has published widely, including co-authoring and editing the 'Healthy Parks, Healthy People' literature review; co-authoring and co-editing 'Sustainability and Health'; and contributing a chapter in 'Urban Design Futures.

Dr Jan Packer is a Senior Research Fellow in the School of Tourism at the University of Queensland. As the leader of the Tourist Behaviour and Visitor Experiences research team, Jan has been involved in numerous projects designed to understand and facilitate visitor experiences in natural and cultural heritage sites, including zoos and aquariums, botanic gardens, national parks, ecotourism and wildlife tourism attractions. She has been a Chief Investigator on two ARC grants. She has over 30 refereed publications in the areas of visitor studies, informal learning, environmental education and higher education and is the Chief Editor of the international journal *Visitor Studies*.