

Connecting with NATURE

FIND PEACE AND WELL-BEING
BY RECONNECTING
WITH THE GREAT OUTDOORS



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GET OUTSIDE – Itt
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BY DR. NICOLA DAVIES

All alone. Waiting for company. At your beautiful cabin in the woods or cottage by the sea. You invested in this sanctuary for all the right reasons, like everyone else, you sometimes get caught up in the hustle and bustle of the fast-paced world, and your getaway becomes much needed.

You could even be suffering from “nature-deficit disorder,” a term coined by Richard Louv, author of “The Nature Principle,” to describe the stress, fatigue and poor health caused by a lack of time spent outdoors. Fortunately, you have your own protection against nature-deficit disorder – your cabin.

No time like the present

Environmental psychologists have been studying the health effects of contact with nature since the early 1980s. More recently, researchers across a range of disciplines, including environmental health, public health policy, psychiatry, land-use planning, horticulture and the leisure industry have been contributing to the accumulation of evidence which supports that connecting with nature is beneficial for health and well-being.

So, here’s some advice: Don’t wait for the “right time”

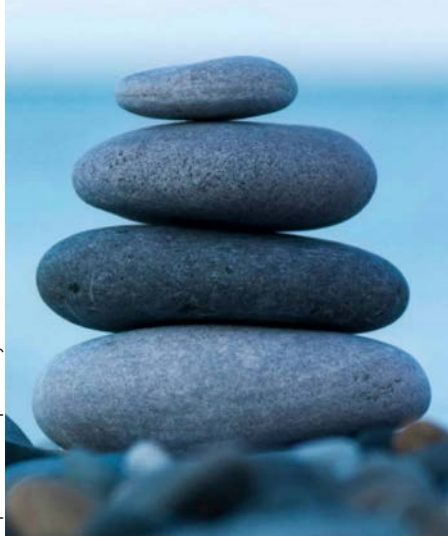
to head off to your cabin or cottage. There’s no time like the present, and if you need to justify a break, the scientific evidence is on your side.

The benefits of nature on our health and well-being are now so clear that some countries are taking relaxation in nature to a whole new level. Consider Shinrin-yoku (www.shinrin-yoku.org). It is inspired by ancient Shinto and Buddhist practices, which encourage people to let nature enter their body through all five senses. The belief in the positive effects of this practice is so strong that in Japan there are now 48 official Forest Therapy trails (the goal is to have 100 by the year 2022). Willing volunteers are taken into these natural settings to “forest-bathe,” and evidence accumulated so far does show a reduction in blood pressure after spending time in these forests.

The benefits of connecting with nature at the cabin come from the slower pace compared to the relentless pressures of city life. When taking a step back and observing the environment, all of these pressures disappear into the grand scale of the Earth itself. It is during moments like this, when relishing the natural world around us, that we experience biophilia – feeling closely associated with nature and living things.

Back to nature

Yoshifumi Miyazaki, a physiological anthropologist, believes that because humans evolved in nature, this is where we feel most comfortable. He says, “Throughout our evolution, we’ve spent 99.9% of our time in natural environments. Our physiological functions are still adapted to it. During everyday life, a



TAKE A HIKE – Itt taRenimusam, od que niat et laut fugit venderrovit esed que ditaect atecto mo eos nobis autessi magnihillum, consequo int et venda quiam, inveles solenia senit as est, tem et eior acesequantis quisquamus cum

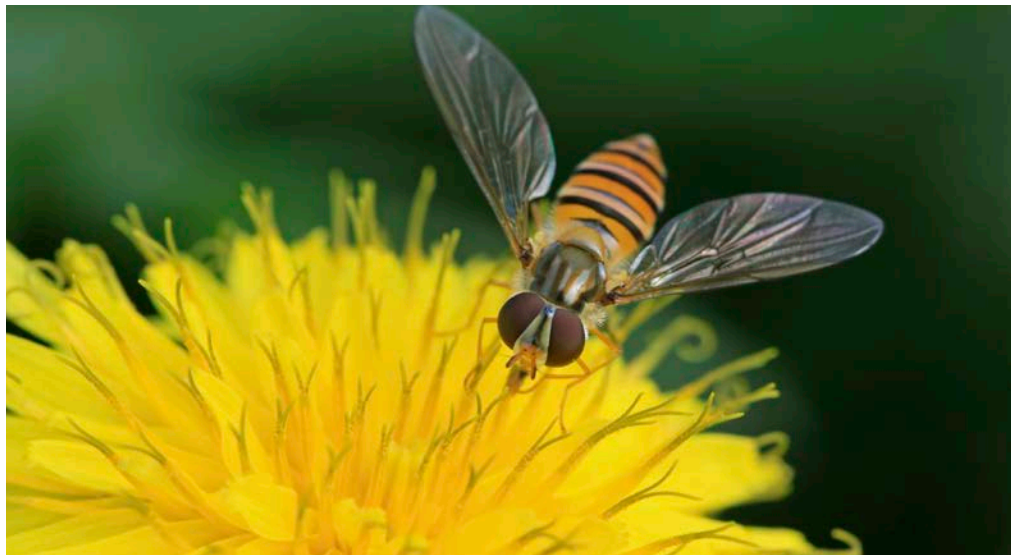
FOUR REASONS TO RETREAT TO YOUR CABIN

PHYSICAL FITNESS – More time spent outdoors is associated with higher physical activity and fitness.

MENTAL WELL-BEING – Research has demonstrated a reduction in stress and mental fatigue with more time spent outside.

VITAMIN D – Vitamin D deficiency is a growing problem, but adequate Vitamin D can be absorbed from sunlight (all you need is 6–8 minutes in the summer and 7–50 minutes in the winter, depending on the latitude).

BETTER HEALTH – Research shows that encounters with animals and plants have a significant positive effect both physiologically and psychologically.



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feeling of comfort can be achieved if our rhythms are synchronized with those of the environment.”

Time at the cabin or cottage lets us reconnect with the land from which we’ve come. Sometimes we may feel we’ve lost this connection, but it is still within us. The sun governs our sleep cycles just as the moon governs the tides. The mere sound of water can lower your pulse rate and blood pressure. Whether we are aware of it consciously or not, we are a part of the land and it will welcome us back if we have a lapse of connection.

Connecting

So, once welcomed back, how do we actually reconnect with nature? Literature suggests there are three different levels of connection you can make with nature when at your cabin retreat (it’s likely one of these

is the reason you go to your retreat in the first place!): viewing nature, such as through your cabin window; being in the presence of nature, such as sitting and reading a book outside your cabin; and, active participation in nature, such as trekking, cycling or forestry.

Whichever method of connection you choose, take time to observe. Stop and listen. Stillness is a vital key to understanding and connecting with the natural world. Only when you stop moving do most animals start to move; what may seem like an empty forest can come alive with deer, rabbits, birds and an endless array of wildlife. Even stopping to look closely at the trees will uncover a wonderful world of smaller animals.

On ocean coasts, you follow the shoreline and watch small amphibians and reptiles scurrying or swimming in the surf. You’ll find crabs, small fish and other exotic life nestling among tidal pools. Farther out to sea, you may catch sight of the occasional dolphin at play. The tranquil, orderly existences around you can help greatly to both awaken the senses and cure stress from the world you left behind.

Beyond the animals of the forests, meadows and coasts are the lands themselves. Smell is one of the most powerful senses and is linked to memory. Few people have trouble imagining times and places at the scent of pines, mountain air or the salty breeze of the sea. So powerful is the soothing ability of scents that a whole industry has been created around wafting them under your nose. Incense, candles, bath salts, room fresheners – the list is endless. Yet nothing can fulfill the senses like the real thing.

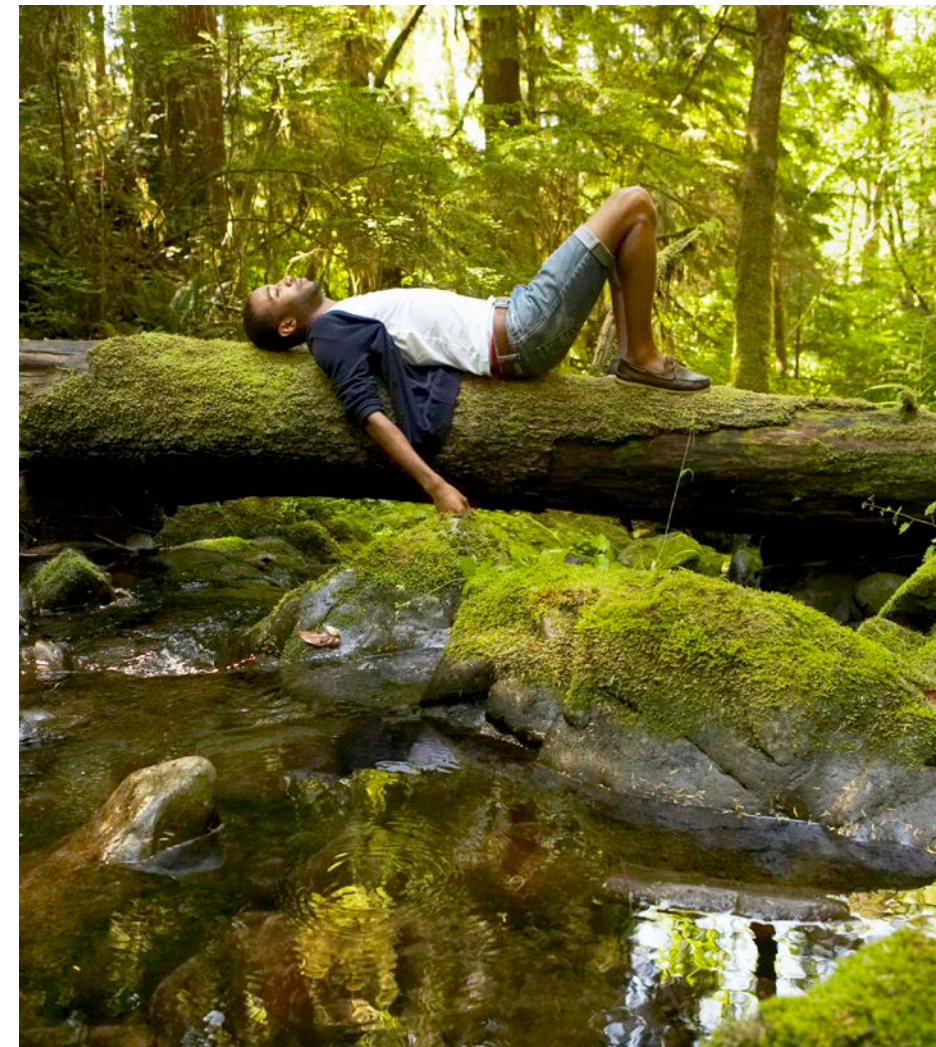
Similarly, pictures cannot capture the emotional and spiritual impact of some sights. Anyone who has seen the sunrise over a rocky New England shore, or the rose-colored dusk over the snow-capped Rockies, will understand that you cannot capture the “feeling” of actually being within these natural landscapes and witnessing such soul-changing events.

A journey into nature is a vacation for the spirit. As removed as you might think you have become in modern society, you are governed by earth’s seasons and rhythms no less than the birds in the trees. There is a reason so many centers for psychological healing are located in natural settings. Connecting with nature provides a unique opportunity for spiritual and psychological healing and growth. Stillness and peace help people to learn the art of relaxation. The simple sound of a rushing brook can teach more about inner peace than a stack of self-help books. The smell of fresh mountain air can provide more balm for the soul than a basket full of aromatherapy candles.

Nature’s entertainment

If you are like most cabin owners, you are likely surrounded by a natural setting at your retreat, so the possibilities are endless when it comes to entertaining activities outdoors. Hiking or backpacking are excellent ways to fill your lungs with the fresh peaty scent of saturated nature, feeding your brain oxygen, and getting some exercise. Research by psychologists Paul and Ruth Ann Atchley of the University of Kansas and David Strayer of the University of Utah found that after three days of hiking in the wilderness, participants in an Outward Bound course improved their scores on tests of creativity by 50%.

If backpacking isn’t for you, there’s always trail running, mountain biking or rock climbing. But for those who are less active, even a leisurely walk has benefits, according to research comparing leisurely forest walks with urban walks. In one study by Miyazaki and his colleague Juyoung Lee, there was a 12.4% decrease in the stress hormone cortisol, a 1.4% decrease in blood pressure, and a 5.8% decrease in heart rate in forest walkers. The forest walkers also reported better



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FOREST BATHING – Itt taRenimusam, od que niat et laut fugit venderrovit esed que ditaect atecto mo eos nobis autessi magnihillum, consequo int et venda quiam, inveles solenia senit as est, tem et

moods and lower anxiety when compared to the urban walkers.

Some prefer to relax at the cabin. In which case, perhaps the best outdoor entertainment is fishing, bird watching or meditating under an ancient tree. If your interests are more scientific, studying the indigenous flora and fauna can be a fascinating pastime. You would be amazed at the amount of life teeming under a rock or a decomposing log. Children are experts at bug catching and are bound to find the grimmest grubs possible. Use this opportunity to educate them – and yourself – about nature’s wildlife.

Just being alone in the peace and quiet and having no demands on your time is a dream vacation for many. For others, mixing it up a bit with a cook-off or watching

the stars or enjoying a good movie might seem more appealing. All are possibilities as you enjoy your time with nature.

Tune out, drop in

Timothy Leary, the counterculture icon, once told young baby boomers to tune in and drop out. Sometimes, however, people need to instead tune out and drop in. They need to tune out from the high bandwidth, fast-paced modern world and drop back into life-in-the-moment. The comedian Louis C.K. has suggested that if we could put the phone down, the resolution is amazing. All too often, people have the habit of recording a moment for posterity instead of living in it. A journey to that remote cabin is our chance to reconnect with the moment – embrace it. ■

Dr. Nicola Davies is a psychologist and freelance writer who loves spending time in nature – especially with her cats!

Biophilia:
A hypothetical human tendency to interact or be closely associated with other forms of life in nature.