

Clear your head and mind

Taking a walk in the woods can do more than get you moving.

by Karen Giles-Smith

Which sounds more relaxing: Chilling in your favorite chair or taking a walk in the park? According to research, walking in natural settings reduces mental fatigue more than walking in urban settings or kicking back in a comfy chair.

That's because natural places are restorative, particularly for people who live in urban areas. City-dwellers often deal with noise, crowds and pollution which can cause mental fatigue and exhaustion. Natural places, such as parks, offer an opportunity to relax and recharge.

"Cares fall away because you're focused on a different environment—a complex creation," says Chuck Nelson, PhD, associate professor in the department of Community, Agriculture, Recreation and Resource Studies at Michigan State University and chairperson of the Clinton County Green Space Commission. "People go to nature to celebrate the life that's around us and the peace and serenity that exist."

You may have noticed that taking a walk in nature clears your mind. Research shows there's something to it: Contemplating nature reduces nervous system activity, resulting in relaxation.

In fact, there are many health benefits associated with viewing and being in nature.

A 2008 review of international research, "Healthy Parks, Healthy People" by Deakin University faculty, Melbourne, Australia, found that green environments foster psychological well being, reduce stress, boost immunity, enhance productivity, and promote healing. In particular to physical health, studies show that viewing nature may reduce heart rate, muscle tension and blood pressure. How does it happen? Some researchers believe the health benefits stem from the positive psychological response to natural environments: Viewing and being in nature evoke feelings of pleasure, sustained attention or interest, "relaxed wakefulness," and result in diminished negative emotions such as anger and anxiety.

Much of the pleasure people experience in natural environments is a result of observing nature. By observing and



Jennifer Bradford-Vernon and her daughters, Maggie and Ruth, enjoying the Hayhoe Riverwalk in Mason

contemplating nature, people may develop a clearer understanding of their relation to the natural world and may feel a sense of oneness with nature and the universe. "The woods are alive—living and breathing like us—and we feel an incredible kinship," says Nelson. "When we have the opportunity to have direct contact with nature, we realize we need to take care of it: The green web of plants supports itself and us."

Dr. Nelson is involved in a research project to determine how people use non-motorized trails in Michigan, such as the Lansing River Trail. When asked why they visit the trails, the first response people usually give relates to "exercise" and "getting in shape". But after reflection, respondents mention that they enjoy spending time in nature because they feel engaged and learn a lot.

"Nature is a storehouse of incredible knowledge," says Nelson. "When you're out in nature, your senses come to life and you begin to think about how all of nature's building blocks work together. There are amazing things out there every day." Sometimes you see them; sometimes you don't. When you do, it inspires you to come back again and again, to take a closer look.

Jennifer Bradford-Vernon of Mason and her two daughters, Ruth, 16, and Maggie, 14, enjoy the local parks and trails in all seasons for hiking, biking,

kayaking and cross-country skiing. "The big benefit of living in Michigan is the beautiful geography," says Bradford-Vernon. "And we're fortunate that we live in an area where parks are accessible and affordable for everyone. It's great to be able to get out in the fresh air and enjoy nature."

Bradford-Vernon and her daughters frequent the trails through Burchfield Park in Holt and the Hayhoe Riverwalk in Mason. "There's a stretch of trail through Burchfield Park that follows the Grand River—it's lovely any time of year," says Bradford. "In the winter, it's partially iced over; in the spring, the river swells—it's always a new experience."

Bradford-Vernon believes that balancing activities like theater and art galleries with nature appreciation is important, and she teaches her children the value of nature as her parents did for her. "Being in nature improves quality of life," says Bradford-Vernon, "which is particularly important now that people are living longer."

The family's favorite experiences include cross-country skiing at night on the gas-lighted trails in Burchfield Park and seeing the blooms in the spring. "The wildflowers and flowering trees are glorious," says Bradford-Vernon. "There's nothing like walking past a big patch of honeysuckle—the scent is overwhelming. Being in nature is a multi-sensory experience."



Gear up—what to bring

Obtain a map of your destination and determine which areas are open to your type of travel.

Make a realistic plan, and stick to it. Always tell someone of your travel plans.

Contact the land manager for area restrictions, closures, and permit requirements.

Check the weather forecast for your destination. Plan clothing, equipment, and supplies accordingly.

Carry a compass or a Global Positioning System (GPS) unit and know how to use them.

Carry water and emergency supplies even on short hikes.

Your pack weight should not exceed 1/3 of your body weight.

What to wear

Choose appropriate footwear for the terrain. Solid, lightweight walking boots are best. Sandals can be used on trail in summer, and around your campsite.

Dress in layers and always carry a jacket. Weather conditions can change unexpectedly.

Source: Tread Lightly Tips for Responsible Hiking, treadlightly.org

Tools for nature observation

Sunglasses
Paper or notebook
Pencil or pen
Binoculars
Magnifying glass
Camera

Resources for nature observation

Naturalist's Guide to Observing Nature by Kurt Rinehart
The Nature Handbook by Ernest Herbert Williams
Keeping a Nature Journal by Clare Walker Leslie
Woods Walk by Henry Art and Michael Robbins (for children)

5 Best-tasting, eco-friendly energy bars

Luna White Chocolate Macadamia, \$1.39, lunabar.com

Olympic Granola Almond Chocolate Trail Bar, \$2.99, olympicgranola.com

One Lucky Duck Chewy Almond Crunch Bar, \$6.50, oneluckyduck.com

Clif Bar Cool Mint Chocolate, \$1.39, clifbar.com

Honey Stinger Peanut Butter 'n Honey, \$1.49, honeystinger.com

Source: Sierra Club



Walking/hiking trails in Ingham County

Ingham County Parks: inghamcountyparks.org

Burchfield Park, Holt: Over 16 miles of trails for hiking, biking and cross-country skiing

Hawk Island Park, Lansing: 3.6 miles of trails which connect with Scott Woods Park

Lake Lansing Park North, Haslett: Over 5 miles of hiking trails convert to ski trails

Lansing Parks: lansingmi.gov/parks/

Lansing River Trail: 8 mile stretch of trail through several parks, natural areas and Potter Park Zoo (lansingrivertrail.org)

Scott Woods Park: ¾ mile of paved trail connects with Hawk Island Park

Frances Park: Woodland trail and formal rose garden

Fenner Nature Center: 4.5 miles of nature trails

East Lansing: cityofeastlansing.com

Northern Tier Trail: 5 mile trail connects parks and neighborhoods

White Memorial Park: Trails for nature walks or cross-country skiing

Meridian Township: twp.meridian.mi.us

Harris Nature Center: 6 miles of nature trails and ¾ mile paved loop trail on the banks of the Red Cedar River

Nancy L. Moore Park: Approximately 2 miles of creek-side nature trails and ½ mile paved trail

Delhi Township: delhitownship.com

Valhalla Park: Nature trail and cross-country ski trails.

Source: Michigan Trails and Greenways Alliance, michigantrails.org

Trail tips

Michigan offers a wonderful array of parks and trails in a variety of settings. Visit Michigan Trails and Greenways Alliance Web site, michigantrails.org, to obtain a free copy of the Michigan Trail Map and Directory, the Heart of Michigan Parks & Trails brochure, and to use the interactive "Trail Finder" to locate trails by region and view details such as maps, trail type, parking, points of interest and restroom facilities. For example, the Trail Finder shows that the Lansing River Trail is an open multi-use paved trail with foot trail off-shoots and the Potter Park Zoo as a point of interest.

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