



Nature Contact as a Health Behavior: Steps to Maturing the Field

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Summary

Studies have documented numerous benefits of time spent in nature, including improved mood, reduced stress, enhanced mental and cardiovascular health, immune function support, and improved eyesight. Despite these benefits, a study in 2017 shows that more than half of adults in the United States spend less than 5 hours per week in natural settings. The authors seek to advance the field of nature and health by adopting a structured approach. The primary objective is to foster advocacy that translates into policy and practice and creates a science-based, actionable, and inclusive framework that promotes equitable access to nature.

The suggested framework outlines **strategic activities to mature this emerging discipline**, drawing parallels from the physical activity playbook, developed during the 1990s.



Create a Professional Society and Conference

Establishing a professional society and organizing conferences will provide critical platforms for collaboration, knowledge sharing, and advocacy among stakeholders in the nature and health field. The Nature and Health Alliance, supported by REI Cooperative Action Fund, is an example of such an organization and connects researchers and practitioners in the field.



Establish a Journal

The creation of a dedicated journal for nature and health allows for the centralization of nature and health-focused publications (which are often scattered across various disciplinary journals), enhancing communication across different disciplines and making research more accessible.



Initiate Surveillance/Common Measures:

Systematic, ongoing surveillance is essential to knowing how often people engage with nature and allows us to identify disparities in access to nature. It also establishes a measurable basis to help us track progress within the field. Incorporating nature-related questions into existing large-scale surveys like the BRFSS or NHANES can provide comprehensive data to guide interventions and policy efforts.



Develop National Guidelines

The formation of unified national guidelines to specify the recommended duration and frequency of nature contact needed for optimal health benefits guides populations and allows progress tracking of public health initiatives for nature contact.



Release Surgeon General's Report

The release of a Surgeon General's Report is a significant way to bring attention to public health issues and indicates the importance of an issue. This action highlights the significance of nature contact but also allows federal agencies and nonprofit resources to provide funding for enhancing public engagement with natural environments.



Establish a National Nature and Health Plan

Developing a national plan helps focus resources and efforts in the same direction. A unified plan allows for identifying priorities, tracking progress, and providing a framework for state and local governments to follow.



Obtain a Community Guide Review

Community guide reviews are seen as the gold standard for evidence-based interventions. Reviews of nature-based interventions would lend credibility and influence public health policy, leading to more funding and enhanced implementation. Reviews are available at www.thecommunityguide.org



Form a Nature and Health Branch at CDC

Establishing a Nature and Health Branch within the CDC provides a federal focus on integrating nature into public health strategies. This branch could facilitate research, funding, and policy development on nature and health.



Identify Funding Agency Priorities and Consensus

Identifying and prioritizing funding opportunities for nature contact research through agencies like the NIH would support the studies needed to advance the field. Sustained financial backing is crucial for longitudinal studies needed to explore the effects of nature on various health outcomes and to establish nature contact as a foundational element of public health.



Develop Educational Programs

The creation of educational programs and resources to train the next generation of researchers and practitioners is a hallmark of maturing a field of study and ensures the sustainability of the field. Courses, textbooks, and shared syllabi that include nature and health modules assist in integrating these concepts into practice.



Support Clinical Efforts for Nature Prescriptions

Developing guidelines for nature prescriptions similar to those used for diet and exercise can formalize their use as a therapeutic intervention, ensure consistency in care, and eliminate barriers medical providers experience. Securing insurance reimbursement for these prescriptions is also crucial for the widespread adoption and acceptance of nature-based therapies.



Update the Research Agenda for Nature and Health

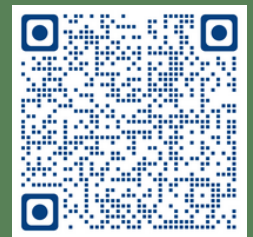
Current research recognizes the health benefits of nature contact but lacks cohesive theoretical and empirical frameworks. Future research must include developing theoretical frameworks, conducting longitudinal studies, exploring dose-response relationships, understanding the mechanisms through which nature influences health, and investigating socio-cultural factors to ensure equitable access to nature-based interventions.

Conclusion

A unified approach is crucial to advancing nature contact as a foundational health behavior. Implementing the outlined activities can build a more substantial and interconnected framework to accelerate the growth and impact of the field of Nature and Health.

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