

UK MAB Urban Forum

Urban greenspace and mental health

(Prepared for the UK MAB Urban Forum by Ian Douglas, September 2005)

“Denying the relevance of nature to our deepest emotional needs is still the rule in mainstream therapy, as in the culture generally. It is apt to remain so until psychologists expand our paradigm of the self to include the natural habitat—as was always the case in indigenous cultures, whose methods of healing troubled souls included the trees and rivers, the sun and stars” (Theodore Roszak, 1996).

For urban people, the separation from nature is greater than in other forms of human settlement, but need not necessarily be so. Natural vegetation fulfils many ecosystem and human well-being functions in urban areas. One of the more important is alleged to be improvement in mental health, through recovery from, or alleviation of, mental illness and stress and through helping to raise a feeling of well-being among people using natural areas. This paper examines the scientific evidence for such assumptions and asks whether the mental health benefits of urban greenspaces contribute to the arguments for their incorporation into planning for the creation or restoration of urban areas.

Relating environment to mental health is not made easy by a lack of clarity in the definitions of the concepts of mental health and of environment. Environment in the context of greenspaces may be taken as the biophysical surroundings of individuals, families and communities. These surroundings affect the human psyche through their direct sensory impacts. Equally our surroundings may influence our thoughts and feelings by the way they inhibit or filter our experience of other things (buildings, for example, detach us from the external environment). In addition, our biophysical surroundings mediate or affect, inhibit or encourage our social and personal relationships. Mental health may be taken in its broadest sense of mental well-being or “peace of mind”.

The commonly cited beliefs

Much of what is written about the importance of urban greenspace is related to people’s biological needs as mammals for room for various activities. Direct relationships between these needs and health are unclear.

“For a balanced urban habitat we must provide brood cover for small children; safe territory for youthful exploration; flocking, trysting and roosting habitat for young adults; and finally stable and well defined territories for older cohorts. The vacant lot in his block is of far more value to a five-year-old than is the park located three or four blocks away. Likewise, the elderly need readily accessible, comfortable, and quiet parks. With man, as with wildlife, scale and distribution of green areas are important” (Stearns, 1972, p.275).

The expansion of suburbs of semi-detached houses between 1920 and 1940 in Britain was seen as increasing the scope for improvements in physical health. “In contrast to the dirt and overcrowding of inner urban areas, suburban living offered space, low densities, gardens and access to the countryside. The emigrant from the city could rejoice in raising his family in clean and humane conditions” (Ineichen, 1993, p. 16). But such benign biophysical surroundings do not always bring good mental health. The Oxhey estate near Watford, built soon after 1950 to house people from inner London, had a rate of mental illness higher than the national average, despite having a good layout, greenspace within the estate and good access to Oxhey Woods (Martin et al., 1957). Possibly this is an early example of the “suburban neurosis” that has been widely reported from Britain’s New Towns (Ineichen, 1993).

Many emphasise that the psychological differences between different urban environments and between urban and rural life depend upon people’s attitudes and life styles and cannot be related simply to the biophysical environment (Howarth, 1976). Many modern secondary schoolchildren express fears about natural areas or wildlands to which they may be taken as part of school or recreation centre activities (Wohlwill, 1983). Such negative perceptions are often linked to preferences for manicured path settings, urban environments and indoor social recreation activities (Bixler and Floyd, 1997). Nevertheless, much of the literature refers to greenspace as offering a relief from stress. Modern urban living may involve both sensory deprivation and information overload. People can suffer from both. An excess of either one can be harmful. An adequate living environment balances sensory inputs and provides a mix that is both congenial and consistent with people’s culturally conditioned needs (Hall, 1968). Areas of natural environment in towns and cities are theoretically seen as providing the setting for recovery and recuperation from the stress and strains of the built urban environment (Kaplan, 1984). Four themes emerge from the literature of the benefits of nature in the city (Knopf, 1987; Parry-Jones, 1990):

- Nature restores
- Nature facilitates competence building
- Nature carries symbols that affirm the culture or self
- Nature offers a pleasing diversion.

The direct mental health benefits have been summarised (Maller et al., 2002 and Stone and Hanna, 2003) as:

- Improved self-awareness, self-esteem, self-concept, and positively effected mood state.
- Reduction of negative feelings such as anger, fear, anxiety and frustration.
- Improved ability to recover from stressful episodes.
- Effective alleviation of the symptoms of anxiety, depression and psychosomatic illness (including irritability, insomnia, tension, headaches and indigestion).
- Improved psychological health, especially emotional and cognitive aspects (including reduced symptoms of ADD).
- Restored capacity for concentration and attention

Many UK local and regional authorities have adopted the general statements about the benefits of urban greenspace. Their comments emphasise biophysical environmental benefits. Good quality greenspaces encourage people to walk, run, cycle and play. Greenspaces improve air quality and reduce noise, while trees and shrubbery help to filter out dust and pollutants. If paths and cycle networks are integrated to facilitate

commuting, they can reduce transport needs and provide safe and healthy routes to school for children that avoid hazardous road crossings.

Stockport M.B.C. stresses health and well-being aspects as well:

- Relaxation, contemplation and passive recreation is essential to stress management in today's busy world—recent evidence has brought to light the extraordinary role that good quality greenspace plays in relieving stress and promoting physical and mental health not only of individuals but the well being of the community—quality greenspace is often absent from problem neighbourhoods.
- Greenspace issues can unite the whole community and can be the focus of community development and local regeneration fostering a sense of community pride.

Stockport M.B.C. has put these ideas into action. A pioneering development, based in Stockport, funded by the local authority, the Countryside Agency and the Health Authority, promotes and improves access to greenspace in urban areas for people with physical and mental needs. The Council creates and signs accessible paths through attractive greenspace close to areas of deprivation and ill-health. GP's and community nurses refer patients to the project for exercise and well-being. Local volunteers and community groups also work with the project, to create and maintain the pathways and to complete a borough-wide network of routes.

Campaigning organisations, such as Greenroofs, use similar arguments about the mental health and well-being values of urban greenspace:

“Many psychological studies have proven that the overall quality of life can be enhanced by the addition of natural green spaces. Distinct therapeutic links exist between moods, health, recuperation time and nature. It has been suggested that mental health and emotional stability a positively influenced by green spaces and with interaction of other elements of nature. Green spaces reflect the changing seasons and provide a psychological link with the countryside. Green roofs could certainly be part of a comprehensive therapeutic environment, especially when contrasted to viewing the more common ugly roof spaces from a hospital window” (http://www.greenroofs.com/psychological_advantages.htm).

A commentary on the London Greenspace plan argues that:

“Access to green spaces also provides mental health benefits. Green spaces offer relaxation for stressed urban dwellers. Studies in the USA have shown that within three minutes of being in green space stress levels return to normal whereas recovery time in a built-up area is 25 minutes. One in five people will suffer from mental illness, including depression during the course of their lives. Regular moderate exercise is as effective as medication in alleviating mild to moderate depression. These benefits of green space represent significant savings for the health care budget which can be achieved by people having easy access to green spaces. There are particular benefits from green spaces for minority groups which have poorer than average health and limited access to the countryside”.

Recreational parks and green areas provide opportunities for healthy physical activity and the relief of stress. Furthermore, the passive benefits to physical and mental health of an urban landscape with trees have been documented in industrialized

countries (Ulrich, 1984); enjoyment of green areas may help people to relax or may give them fresh energy. Such findings broadly confirm the conclusions of others concerning contact with nature, reduction of stress and escape from dense urbanity (Ulrich, 1979; Greenbie, 1981; Nicholson-Lord, 1987; Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989; Bussey, 1996; Land Use Consultants, 2000, Pretty et al., 2003). Stronger views are expressed by some:

“Encouraging greenspace development that promotes community, reduces violence, and improves mental health. The mental and physical health benefits of community parks and other green spaces have been demonstrated. The question that remains is whether communities want to spend money up front to create an environment that prevents violence and increases psychological well-being or whether they want to spend money after the fact to address the violence and stress which results from communities without parks and communal areas” (Jackson and Kochtitzky, 2002).

The grounds for these beliefs

The actual evidence for mental health benefits from urban greenspace may be less clear than these assertions imply. Undoubtedly, trees fulfil certain psychological, social and cultural needs of urban people. They play an important social role in easing tensions and improving psychological health. One study has demonstrated that hospital patients placed in rooms with windows facing trees heal faster and require shorter hospital stays (Ulrich, 1984). When appropriately selected and placed, trees are effective in screening out undesirable views and ensuring privacy, while permitting free visual access to the rest of the landscape.

Parks provide easily accessible recreational opportunities for people and offer opportunities for healthy physical activity. In one study (Hull and Harvey, 1989) people visiting parks expected to experience more pleasure the more trees and the less undergrowth there were. The subjects' preference for parks increased linearly with increasing pleasure and arousal. The arousal-inducing characteristics were counter to the calming influence of parks expected by the researchers. The exhilaration and arousal often came from paths through thickets of undergrowth which may have induced an element of fear into some visitors. This study and others suggest that while feelings of calm and relaxation are major components of people's emotional reactions to nature, more animated responses such as being emotionally moved and uplifted are also important (Rohde and Kendle, 1994). Enjoyment of green areas may help people to relax or may give them fresh energy (Ulrich, 1990).

Mental health specialists have noted that the nineteenth century mental asylums often had farms. In the late twentieth century, the extensive grounds around asylums became gardens in which inmates continued to work. An almost universally accepted criticism of the closure of asylums and de-institutionalisation of mental illness is about the loss of these gardens, which implies a universal assumption that gardens are therapeutic to the mind. However, gardening projects at hospitals are continuing. For example, the Rosebank Garden Project at the Royal Cornhill Hospital, Aberdeen aims to improve the well-being of people with mental health problems by transforming a bland urban garden into an imaginative haven for wildlife and thereby promoting social inclusion, basic skills and employability skills. This green space created in an inner city area is intended to have therapeutic, educational and environmental benefits

for the mental health community and the wider community (Land Use Consultants, 2004).

More recent evidence of this therapeutic value of gardening comes from Brown and Jameton's observation (2000) that recreational gardening is a way to relax and release stress and Patterson and Chang's evidence (1999) of a link between physical activity such as gardening and reduced anxiety and depression. Careful research in Britain found two dominant ways in which nature and garden work are deemed beneficial for volunteers: 1) as a passive sensory environmental experience that prompts positive reactions and 2) as a medium for action (physical, social, psychological) through which the volunteer creatively works for their own health (Parr, 2005).

Gardens represent attempts at models for the environment as paradise. Should we question this basic idea of their therapeutic quality, we would have great difficulty explaining a large proportion of the world's poetry. Evidence continues to demonstrate the therapeutic value of gardening for many different social groups, whether the inmates of institutions, the elderly or the young (Milligan et al., 2004). Gardens and gardening imply social values of greenspaces and thus demonstrate the significance of the garden city suburban design concept that permeated twentieth century planning.

Nevertheless, despite to clear value of gardens and well-spaced suburban housing, many comments from North America say that mental health benefits of contact in the suburbs, or urban sprawl, are outweighed by the mental stress of commuting by car (Frumkin, 2002). While the idea of peaceful refuge in the leafy suburbs is attractive to some, the stress and stress-related health problems stemming from frustrating rush-hour traffic loom larger than those contact with nature mental health benefits (Bray et al., 2005).

The Scientific Evidence

Broadly, the scientific evidence is of four kinds: i) the outcomes of experiments in which subjects have been tested in contrasting situations; ii) the findings of studies that used photographs and videos of natural environments to test people's reactions; iii) the results of attitudinal surveys, both quantitative and qualitative, in which people are asked about their preferences and experiences; and iv) the use of national or regional health data sets. The therapeutic value of natural environments has only been tested in a few controlled experiments which have indicated that such surroundings aid recovery from surgery (Ulrich, 1984); enhance the ability to focus attention (Hartig et al., 1991); and improve emotional states (Ulrich, 1979; Hartig et al., 1996, 2003; Wells 2000; Evans et al., 2000). To these experiments may be added studies that used photographs and videos of natural environments to test people's reactions (Ulrich, 1990; Ulrich et al., 1991). More numerous are the attitudinal surveys that demonstrate that people develop particular attitudes to greenspaces, wild landscapes and natural vegetation (such as Bingley and Milligan, 2004; Bixler et al., 1994; Bixler and Floyd, 1997; Bulbeck, 1999; Lindon and Grut, 2002; Milligan et al., 2004; Schroeder, 1982; Schroeder and Anderson, 1984; Westover, 1986). National or regional data sets are able to distinguish contrasts due more to location of residence and occupation rather than individual behaviour.

Controlled experiments. The controlled experiments include work that showed that views of natural scenes from hospital windows aided patients' recovery from gall bladder surgery (Ulrich, 1984) and that prisoners with views of nature reported sick less often (Moore, 1982); and suffered fewer stress-related physical symptoms (West 1985). These experiments suggest that mere visibility of nature may have powerful preventative and curative effects on people's health (Rohde and Kendle, 1994). Hartig et al. (1991) found that subjects' completion of a proof-reading exercise was improved following contact with nature through a hike in a wilderness area or a walk through a park close to the city. Such findings were considered to support the Kaplans' view (1984, 1995) of the restorative benefits of nature.

Hartig and co-workers (2003) have gone further by conducting experiments in urban and natural situations in two phases: indoor and outdoor. In the natural environment, the two phases were sitting in a room with tree views, and then walking in a nature reserve. In the urban environment, the two phases were sitting in a room without views, and then walking in an urban area. This careful experiment using students around 21 years old in attractive but not spectacular natural vegetation and in the City of Orange, California, revealed that in the initial 10 minutes of the environmental treatment, subject's diastolic blood pressure (DBP) declined among those seated in a room where trees could be seen through the windows, but increased in those in a room without views. After walking for 20 minutes, the difference in DBP of subjects in the natural and urban areas was significant. Self-reported overall happiness was also greater in the natural environment at this stage. However, after the walk had been completed, the differences in DBP between urban and natural walk subjects had disappeared. Emotional differences, however, remained. This Hartig et al. (2003) found converging evidence from different types of measures that natural settings contribute to positive outcomes. Nevertheless, they caution that the magnitude of the effects is not solely produced by the influence of natural vegetation and attractive landscapes. The negative effects of the windowless room and the urban settings also contribute to the differences.

In terms of the practical implications of their work, Hartig et al. (2003) conclude that regular access to restorative, natural environments can halt or slow processes that negatively affect mental and physical health in the short- and long-term, and that, for urban people in particular, easy pedestrian and visual access to natural settings can produce preventive benefits. Public health strategies that incorporate use of areas of natural vegetation in urban areas may have particular value in an era of rapid urban growth, rising health care costs, and deteriorating environmental quality.

Nancy Wells has examined the impact of transforming a barren asphalt space into a green garden within a nursing home environment and has studied the relationship between childhood exposure to nature and adult environmental attitudes (Evans et al., 2000; Wells 2000). A house surrounded by nature helps to boost a child's attention capabilities. When children's cognitive functioning was compared before and after they moved from poor- to better-quality housing that had more green spaces around, profound differences emerged in their attention capacities, even when the effects of the improved housing were taken into account. The children studied who had the greatest gains in terms of "greenness" between their old and new homes also showed the greatest improvements in functioning. The results suggest that the natural environment may play a far more significant role in the well-being of children within

a housing environment than has previously been recognised (Wells, 2000). A similar beneficial relationship was found in rural areas (Wells and Evans, 2003).

People using a healing garden at a children's hospital in California had positive effects on users, with 54% reporting they were more relaxed and less stressed, 12% refreshed and rejuvenated, 18% more positive and able to cope, and only 10% having no difference in mood (Whitehouse et al., 2001). Even short visits appeared to be beneficial, as nearly half of all observed visitors spent less than five minutes at a time in the garden. However, a majority of adults and children in the hospital did not know of the garden nor knew of its potential.

Specifically examining the mental health benefits of gardening Hester Parr (2005) found that gardens, gardening and nature were generally experienced as therapeutic by volunteers and staff. The therapeutic effects included a variety of positive emotions and behaviours, with volunteers experiencing the therapeutic effects of gardens in both active and passive ways. The process of cultivating plants was a particularly effective part of healing. Garden staff were highly positive about the healing potential of gardens and garden work, volunteers being influenced by the staff's beliefs and practices can influence volunteers

Tests using slides and videos. Experiments by Ulrich and co-workers suggest that visual exposure to nature through slides or videos may improve subjects' moods. Three studies have shown a connection between trees and lower levels of violence (Mooney and Nicell, 1992; Rice and Remy, 1994, 1998). However, these studies involved prison inmates and Alzheimer's disease patients living in nursing homes. What about people who are not living in institutional settings? The role of urban greenspaces in promoting social interaction and well-being among the elderly is generally regarded as highly positive (Kweon et al., 1998). For older adults, social integration and the strength of social ties are profoundly important predictors of well-being and longevity. Biophysical environments probably can be designed to promote older adults social integration with their neighbours. Kweon and colleagues (1998) examined this possibility by testing the relationships between varying amounts of exposure to green outdoor communal areas and the strength of ties among neighbours.

Research in which people watched disturbing films, followed by a video of a natural and/or built environment showed that people who were exposed to the natural environmental were recorded as having improved mood and marginally better concentration (Van den Berg et al., 2003). This demonstrates a relationship between mental and physical well-being and exposure and access to the natural environment.

Thus exposure to natural scenes reduces stress. However, this is unlikely to be the same for all people, all of the time. Bixler and Floyd (1997) used slides in classrooms in rural, suburban and urban schools in Texas to discover the reactions of 450 middle school students to examine reactions to insects, woodland environments, handling soil and pond water, encounters with snakes or severe storms, and similar outdoor experiences. Students reporting negative perceptions of wildland environments had lower preferences for such environments and activities with them and to some degree also had higher preferences for indoor environments and activities. Counter to popular assumptions about urban attitudes to the natural world, mostly rural and suburban students had these negative attitudes.

Attitudinal surveys. Partly because of important American findings and recommendations on the value of physical activity as part of healthy living (Pate et al., 1995; U.S. Department of Health and Human services, 1996), many countries have adopted new physical activity guidelines that indicate the value of moderate-intensity activity, such as brisk walking, to achieve health improvements. Often it is suggested that the surroundings in which the walking occurs add mental health benefits to the physical health gains (Ball et al., 2001). Theoretical social studies emphasise the importance of interactions between individual psychological, social and biophysical environmental variables (Sallis and Hovell, 1990; Sallis and Owen, 1997). In questionnaire surveys in the East Midlands of England, getting away from stress was associated with relaxation and nature- seeing it, being in natural places and learning about it, suggesting a role for natural greenspaces in stress reduction (Bell et al., 2004).

However, there can be associations between getting exercise and becoming de-stressed, as well as just being in a natural area. Telephone interviews with over 3000 Australian adults revealed positive associations of environmental aesthetics (a composite score based on Likert scale responses to questions about the friendliness of the neighbourhood, the attractiveness of the local area and the pleasantness of walking near home) with walking for exercise in the two weeks prior to the interview. Those reporting low environmental aesthetics were about 40% less likely to walk for exercise than those returning high scores (Ball et al., 2001). As a whole, this survey supported the case for environment-focused public policies and interventions to influence physical activity. Areas of natural vegetation and wildlife habitat in urban areas could form a key part of the local facilities, parks, cycle paths and pleasant areas that may encourage more adults, including those with poorer mental health, to take exercise.

However, there is much to suggest that natural, or wild, areas are unattractive and induce negative reactions on the part of many people. Direct behavioural evidence of such negative reactions is limited because the use of wildlands for recreation is an activity chosen by individuals and thus those who dislike them avoid them. Behavioural surveys conducted among adult visitors in urban natural areas thus sample an already self-selected group likely to have positive attitudes to wildlife. Students attending compulsory field classes represent a broader range of attitudes. Bixler et al. (1994) collected examples of negative reactions by urban students on field trips observed by park naturalists and teachers of environmental science. Some of the attitudes found were generalised fears of the woods; of wildlife; and of insects and spiders; disgust reactions to the dirtiness of the environment; and discomfort from extreme weather conditions.

Vulnerability in natural greenspaces was a greater concern among women than men responding to a questionnaire about natural areas in the East Midlands of England (Bell et al., 2004). The concern was reinforced by statements made in focus groups in the same study and reflects findings of other research (Burgess, 1995b, Ward Thompson et al., 2004).

Several surveys and focus group discussions led by Burgess and Harrison have demonstrated diverse attitudes to urban greenspaces in various communities, especially in Greater London (Burgess, 1995a, b; Burgess et al., 1988). Members of

ethnic minorities in the East Midlands form a smaller proportion of visitors to greenspaces than their proportion of the population as a whole (Bell et al., 2004). In East Midlands focus group discussions, people from ethnic minorities spoke of being uncomfortable in natural areas, of finding them alien to the urban settings with which they are unfamiliar, and of not having enough information about green areas (Bell et al., 2004). The extent and nature use of parks and peri-urban countryside for recreation to relieve stress are likely to differ widely among individuals and social groups. Probably most groups gain many well-being and emotional benefits from contact with nature in urban areas.

As reported by Kweon et al. (1998), the benefits of contact with natural landscapes seem particularly significant among the elderly. In focus group exercises and interviews with people over 65 in Carlisle, Milligan et al. (2004) found natural areas to be intimately linked to older people's social interactions in ways that can be central to relieving the stresses of everyday life. For many the aesthetics of a pleasing and tranquil landscape formed an important element of the therapeutic qualities of social encounters outdoors. Overall, the natural landscape was seen to contribute positively, in both active and passive ways, to the mental well-being of the interviewees.

Sullivan and Kuo (1996) found less violence in urban public housing where there were trees. The role of natural areas in helping to reduce anger, as confirmed by Hartig et al.'s experiments (2003) deserves special attention particularly as anger in urban settings often leads to violence which can affect many people other than the angry individual (see Kuo and Sullivan, 2001). Residents from buildings with trees report using more constructive, less violent ways of dealing with conflict in their homes. They report using reasoning more often in conflicts with their children, and they report significantly less use of severe violence. Also, in conflicts with their partners, they report less use of physical violence than do residents living in buildings without trees.

Both young and old benefit from contact with nature. Taylor et al. (2001) asked parents of ADD children to describe situations that were most and least healthy for their children. Although in many cases the parents had not categorized them in that way, the findings showed that the most helpful settings were natural environments. For people in nursing homes, even an hour outdoors in contact with nature improves directed attention capacity. Powers of concentration increase for very elderly people after a visit to a garden, compared to that after resting indoors in their favourite room (Ottooson and Grahn, 2005). The more impaired an individual is, the greater is this effect (Kaplan, 2002).

Synthesising ideas and findings on the physiological and psychological benefits of urban forests and nature, Schroeder and Lewis (1991) developed Kaplan and Kaplan's concept (1989) of fatigue directed attention (the result of constant externally generated demands for attention characteristic of the urban environment) and proposed several reasons why nature – “the green pause that refreshes” – might act to restore spent or flagging mental capacities. These include positive memories associated with nature; the way trees can offer shelter; and deep-seated, culturally ingrained emotional or spiritual connections with nature. They also recognised negative impacts derived from feelings of fear induced by dense tree cover and feelings of annoyance due to the untidiness of nature. Perhaps there is a threshold for

many people when positive influences of nature give way to fear and negative impulses. This threshold varies with people's perceptions and may alter as environmental conditions change, for example being positive on the beach when the sea is calm but negative when storm waves are crashing down on the sand and noisily shifting the mineral grains about the shore. In urban natural areas, reactions may cross thresholds, as implied by some of the work reported here, when well-spaced trees give way to totally shaded, dense thickets and undergrowth which may hide unexpected terrors.

National or regional data sets. A study using data from the Health and Lifestyle Survey, a population based community survey of England, Wales and Scotland in which psychiatric morbidity was assessed using the General Health Questionnaire found an association was found between urban residence and the prevalence of psychiatric morbidity (odds ratio 1.54, 95% CI 1.32-1.80) which persisted after adjustment for various confounding factors (odds ratio 1.34, 95% CI 1.13-1.58) (Lewis and Booth, 1994).

Implications of the scientific evidence

The scientific work reported here provides clear evidence that among many sectors of society there are positive benefits for mental health and well-being to be gained from both active and passive involvement with natural areas in towns and cities. Regular access to restorative, natural environments can halt or slow processes that negatively affect mental and physical health. Walking in natural areas provides opportunities for social interaction that are particularly beneficial for the elderly. Exposure to natural scenes reduces stress. Trees play an important social role in easing tensions and improving psychological health. People feel better living around trees. Houses surrounded by nature help to raise children's attention capabilities. Thus living in areas with trees helps to reduce anger and violence and improve the ability to concentrate and work effectively.

The scientific evidence broadly confirms the comments of others concerning contact with nature, reduction of stress and escape from dense urbanity (Ulrich, 1979; Greenbie, 1981; Nicholson-Lord, 1987; Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989; Bussey, 1996, Grahn, 1994, 1996). However, it also implies that for many the greatest value of urban woodlands and natural vegetation is as an escape or refuge away from urban life and probably human (urban) activity (Greenbie, 1981; Nicholson-Lord, 1987). To provide this refuge, areas of urban natural vegetation have to be accessible and allow the user to feel secure (Burgess, 1995a and Burgess, 1995b) and confident in their use (Coles and Bussey, 2000)

Nonetheless, the number of studies is limited and almost entirely confined to the USA, Europe and Australia. They sometimes embrace subjects of varying ethnic background and educational attainment, but are often restricted to certain age groups, such as students or elderly people. There may be some bias in the type of research questions due to the efforts in government-funded research on such topics as urban forestry and the health benefits of physical recreation.

Notwithstanding these limitations, in countries like the United Kingdom, there are likely to be considerable mental health gains from contact with nature in urban areas.

Put together with the physical health, biodiversity, local climate modification, air pollution and greenhouse gas mitigation values of nature in urban areas, these gains warrant the inclusion of a variety of greenspaces in all urban design, from formal city squares to patches of natural vegetation and wildlife habitat. All such greenspaces will have multi-purpose benefits, particularly when integrated with protection of steep slopes, urban drainage design and floodplain management. However it is important to note the negative perceptions some people have of some areas of natural vegetation. Unlit footpaths through natural woodland are not suitable for commuter routes to railway or bus stations. Thus planning for natural landscapes in urban areas must involve public participation and close consultation with residents and local communities. There are no single, simple, off-the-shelf solutions that urban designers can incorporate unquestioningly. Both people and nature are complex. What works in one situation may not work in another either for cultural and social reasons, or for ecological, biogeochemical or climatic reasons. However, an abundance of existing good practice is available to help urban designers, planners and managers increase the use of natural areas and to work with those concerned with public health and mental well-being to create healthier cities with urban landscapes that offer positive incentives to take physical exercise in pleasant surroundings.

Conclusions

There is good scientific evidence that contact with nature in urban areas can improve mental health and can help in the restoration on psychological well-being. The evidence is strong enough to make the case for the inclusion of areas of natural vegetation in both urban planning, particularly for the expansion of existing towns and the creation of new urban settlements, as planned in the Thames Gateway area of the United Kingdom. Such areas need to be strategically located to give accessibility to both the young and older people likely to use them and to provide for different types of enjoyment, from dog-walking and jogging to bird-watching and environmental education. Public participation in the planning and management of such areas, especially through interaction and consultation with local communities, will enhance their value and will help to reduce vandalism and other forms of misuse.

Nevertheless, the experimental, survey and quantitative scientific evidence is based on relatively few studies from a narrow range of countries. It indicates that there are cultural and social contrasts in attitudes to, and perceptions of, natural vegetation in urban areas. However, it is insufficient to indicate whether the observed contrasts apply more widely than in the specific socio-economic situations in which the surveys were conducted. For example, would old people in Miami, Florida respond in the same way as old people in Carlisle, England did? Thus a good case could be made for international comparative studies, or even comparisons between countries and regions within the United Kingdom, to examine how different social groups in similar sized urban areas in around ten different regions or countries enjoy, use and react to urban nature.

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