

Nature, Nudity, and Mental Well-Being

photos by Michael Cooney

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The Enlightenment and its accompanying Industrial Revolution fostered the hope and expectation throughout Europe and North America that science, engineering, and technology would answer every important question and resolve each important problem. Rationality and empirical inquiry would lift humanity above its reliance on nature and entanglement with emotion; it would assist and guide our evolutionary progress; authentic social utopia was within reach. Those promises,

however, were less than fully achieved.

The Romantic Movement rose to challenge what it saw as blind, misdirected faith in technology, and urged individuals to seek wisdom and health from nature instead. Early naturists like France's Gaston and André Durville often spoke in these terms, promising mental, social, and physical health by turning away (at least in part) from artificially mechanized life, arbitrary social customs, and an over-reliance on science and technology. They advocated

a return to nature in an effort to get away from the dank, dirty, industrialized cities, and to explore nature's clean air, water, and land freely. Those less than committed to full social nudity often agreed.

Henry David Thoreau gave voice to this Romantic confidence in nature's vitalizing powers in the simple, minimally dressed life he advocated in *Walden* (1854), saying, "We need the tonic of wilderness." In his later essay "Walking" (1862), he says, "I think that I cannot preserve my health



experience. Today, however, in the escalating mania for personal technology, scientists—grounded in empirical, rational approaches to method and discovery—are finding that the Romantics, and the early naturists, were right. Time spent away from a techno-infused life and immersed in the slow-flowing ease of botanical nature has specific, verifiable benefits to mental health. Naturists may have experienced this and preached its good news for over 100 years, but science is catching up to spread the word.

Two recent studies illustrate what scientists are saying lately. Stanford University professor Gregory N. Bratman and five scholars published an article with the catchy title, “Nature Experience Reduces Rumination and Subgenual Prefrontal Cortex Activism,” in *PNAS* 112.28 (July 14, 2015): 8567-8572. Bratman et al note the increase in percent of people living in urban areas, and that such environments

and spirits, unless I spend four hours a day at least—and it is commonly more than that—sauntering free through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements.”

The avid hiker and national park advocate John Muir repeatedly wrote of the peace, solace, wisdom, and health found in nature’s wild places. In *Our National Parks* (1901), he counsels, “Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life....Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.” Thus, according to the Romantically-inclined Muir, communing with nature is an effective means of both acquiring and restoring mental health.

Early naturists, Thoreau, and Muir came to these conclusions from personal



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are clearly associated with an increase in mental illness. Through a set of clinically accepted testing procedures, they showed that people who went for a 90-minute walk through a natural environment reported lower levels of brain behavior directly connected to such maladies.

Walking itself was not the causal factor, as people tested who walked the same amount of time in urban environments showed no such reduction of negative brain activity associated with depression and maladaptive patterns of self-referential thought. Bratman et al conclude that the direct experience of nature may improve mental well-being, and suggest that “accessible natural areas within urban contexts may be a critical resource for mental health in our rapidly urbanizing world.” Of course, John Muir told us that a century ago.

Another recent study, this time by Ruth Ann Atchley, David L. Strayer, and Paul Atchley, show that immersing ourselves in natural settings improves many of our otherwise healthy cognitive abilities. In “Creativity in the Wild: Improving Creative Reasoning through Immersion in Natural Settings,” published in *PLoS ONE* 7.12 (December 12, 2012): 1-3, they show that “four days of immersion in nature, and the corresponding disconnection from multimedia and technology, increases performance on a creativity, problem-solving task by a full 50% in a group of naive hikers.” That is, being in nature makes you smarter.

Atchley et al argue that hours spent away from the hub-bub of car traffic, concrete, computers, cell phones, social media, and digital miasma, and *in* environments rich in slower, single-tasking goals (like examining a tree, or watching a bird feed her young) are “emotionally positive and low-arousing,” and thus supportive of cognitive abilities.

The authors explain that high levels “of engagement with technology and multi-tasking place demands on executive attention to switch among tasks, maintaining task goals, and inhibit irrelevant actions or cognitions.” This lowers a person’s ability to think well or solve problems. Time spent in nature and away from our various

techno-gizmos is “particularly effective in replenishing depleted attentional resources.” Such time—like on a wilderness hike—is “associated with a gentle, soft fascination, allowing the executive attentional system to replenish.” Studies Atchley et al point to show that such experiences in nature assist people in proofreading, pattern recognition, and other empirically-testable cognitive tasks. In short, complex thinking is improved by spending time away from one’s cell phone and walking about in nature. But again, Henry David Thoreau could have told us that over a century ago.

To fully experience nature and reap its benefits is not without significant challenges in our over-connected world. The first is to put down the many devices that populate our lives and live for a moment “screen free.” We may initially experience boredom from the lack of constant stimulation, but as Thoreau and Muir would say, on the other side of this unease we can find a deep connection with nature and peacefulness that the digital world doesn’t offer.

Studies have not yet been conducted determining that being *nude* in nature has a marked effect on cognitive abilities and mental health. With the same kinds of procedures used by Bratman et al and Atchley et al, scholars could verify (or falsify) what naturists have been saying for decades. The testing would be moderately simple. Measure three sizable groups of neutral participants for cognitive ability, keep one in an urban setting, expose the second group clothed to natural experiences, expose the third group nude to the same natural experiences, and then measure each group for any changes.

Or, we can ask any naturist who has spent time clothes-free for any length of time in a natural setting. Anecdotally, the message has been clear: nude and natural is a path to mental, social, and physical well-being. Today, naturism provides opportunity to escape our screens, devices, and sound systems, and return to a more natural state, which—it turns out—makes us smarter and healthier. **N**

