

Is Environmental Volunteering good for your health?

Well, we certainly think so, and so do many others who enjoy giving some of their time and energy to be involved in some kind of outdoor / environmental activity.

At the Highland Environmental Conference in March 2015, a quick consultation of all the delegates revealed the top four health benefits of volunteering as:

- Improved wellbeing / mental health (mine and others)
- Connecting with others / social interaction
- Sense of purpose - helping with something important / contributing
- Physical activity benefits

That was a very informal bit of research, but there is a wealth of more in depth studies that back up, and extend these ideas.

Just being active outdoors is good for us and even small doses of outdoor exercise can have remarkable effects on mental health. A report by Barton and Pretty (2010)<sup>1</sup> of the University of Essex concluded that getting outside and moving for as little as five minutes at a time improved both mood and self-esteem. There seems to be a particularly beneficial impact on mood for men, and also being active near a body of water, interestingly, had the biggest effect.

Pillemer et al (2010)<sup>2</sup> undertook a study following a cohort of 6,928 adults, to ascertain whether volunteering in environmental organisations in midlife is associated with greater physical activity and improved mental and physical health over a 20-year period. The results showed that midlife environmental volunteering was significantly associated with physical activity, self-reported health, and depressive symptoms. Implications, the authors stated, were that this population-based study offers the first epidemiological evidence for a significant positive relationship between environmental volunteering and health and wellbeing outcomes.

A study by O'Brien et al (2011)<sup>3</sup> shows that there is self-reported and observed evidence from and of participants that contact with nature can be beneficial to a range of excluded groups; also the studies show that the learning and curative processes that take place in green spaces can provide benefits in terms of social reintegration: in particular they studied vulnerable young people and adults.

And Ramos et al (2015)<sup>4</sup> concluded that volunteering, albeit energy and time-consuming, may contribute to a greater sense of balance for people in the workforce, which might, in turn, positively influence health.

Many successful and engaging projects in our own region demonstrate on a daily basis the positive benefits of environmental volunteering. Details of these can be found through the Highland Biodiversity website and also local CVS networks.

So, given the broad ranging, positive experiences people are reporting, we can be confident that environmental volunteering is certainly good for your health.

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<sup>1</sup> Barton J and Pretty J (2010) What is the Best Dose of Nature and Green Exercise for Improving Mental Health? A Multi-Study Analysis; *Environ. Sci. Technol* DOI: 10.1021/es903183r

<sup>2</sup> Pillemer, Karl; Fuller Rowell, Thomas E; Reid, M C; Wells, Nancy M (2010) *Environmental volunteering and health outcomes over a 20-year period*; *Gerontologist* 2010; 50(5)

<sup>3</sup> O'Brien, Liz; Burls, Ambra; Townsend, Mardie (2011); *Volunteering in nature as a way of enabling people to reintegrate into society*; *Perspectives in Public Health* 2011; 131(2): 71-81

<sup>4</sup> Ramos, Romualdo; Brauchli, Rebecca; Bauer, Georg; Wehner, Theo; Hämmig, Oliver (2015); *Busy yet socially engaged: Volunteering, work-life balance, and health in the working population*; *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 2015; 57(2): 164-172