



University of Essex



Volunteering: A Natural Health Service

A summary of research by the University of Essex for The Wildlife Trusts

Volunteering with The Wildlife Trusts improved peoples' mental wellbeing in 6-12 weeks.

Read more inside.

“It has **stopped** me **living under a duvet all day**”

“It has **helped my depression and agitation** and helped me to wind down and **make decisions about my life**”

“I come every week and I don't like missing it for any reason... **Getting out in nature makes me feel like I've been born again**”

“Since coming here I've **managed to give up smoking** – I was depressed... but now **I really look forward to coming here**”

Quotes from Wildlife Trust volunteers

Protecting **Wildlife** for the Future

Health, wellbeing and The Wildlife Trusts

This document summarises scientific research carried out by the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Essex on behalf of The Wildlife Trusts, to:

- Study the mental wellbeing of volunteers on Wildlife Trust projects.
- Collect information from projects across The Wildlife Trusts to evaluate their impact on people's health and wellbeing.
- Review the scientific literature, to investigate whether nature-rich environments had any specific impacts on people's health and wellbeing.

The findings are particularly important for people who live with a mental health condition. The research showed that nature volunteering had the most significant impact on those with low levels of mental wellbeing at the start of the project.

The research showed a range of other benefits, such as increased feelings of positivity, levels of physical activity and contact with nature. People who were already volunteering for Wildlife Trusts had higher levels of mental wellbeing than those who were just starting out, yet continued to improve their mental health.



A study of the mental wellbeing of Wildlife Trust volunteers (2017)

This study looked at 139 people volunteering with The Wildlife Trust. It assessed changes in participants' attitudes, behaviour and mental wellbeing over the course of 12 weeks, during which they took part in nature conservation volunteering activities.

Some participants had been referred by health and social care providers; some joined specifically to help them improve low levels of mental health; others had recovered from previous periods of poor mental wellbeing; and some were taking part for other personal reasons not related to their mental health.

Key findings

- 95% of participants with low wellbeing at the start reported an improvement in 6 weeks, which increased further over the next 6 weeks.
- The mental wellbeing of more than two-thirds of participants (69%) had improved after just 6 weeks. On average there was a statistically significant improvement of 8.1% in the sample

Impacts on health

- The mental wellbeing of participants improved to a statistically significant extent over the 12-week period.
- Improvements were greatest for people new to volunteering with The Wildlife Trusts and those who had low levels of wellbeing at the start.
- Participants reported significantly enhanced feelings of positivity, increased general health and pro-environmental behaviour, higher levels of physical activity and more contact with greenspace.

Relating to nature

The participants reported significant increases in their sense of connection to nature. This was common to all volunteers, whether or not they were new to The Wildlife Trusts. This is important to The Wildlife Trusts, as it shows the role of volunteering in helping people to form a deeper, more personal relationship with the natural world.

Conclusion

The study concluded that The Wildlife Trusts are successfully reaching people with poor mental health. Volunteering on Wildlife Trust projects for at least 6 weeks resulted in statistically significant improvements in mental wellbeing. The greatest improvements were for people who had low wellbeing at the start, or were new to volunteering with The Wildlife Trusts.



An assessment of the direct and indirect contribution made by The Wildlife Trusts to the health and wellbeing of people (2016)

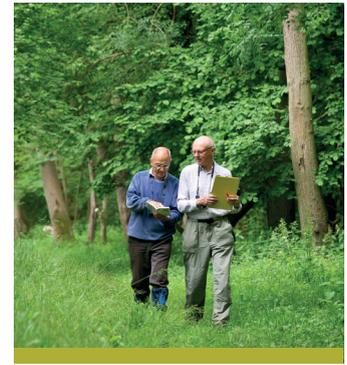
In 2016, the University of Essex completed an assessment of Wildlife Trust projects and programmes and their contribution to the health and wellbeing of people. It concluded that The Wildlife Trusts provide significant and important contributions to both the promotion of good public health and to Green Care in the UK. (Green Care refers to the nature-based activities run by The Wildlife Trusts being used to treat illnesses or as part of a programme of therapy.)

“After a long period of illness it has helped me to re-engage with society and socialise in a constructive way.”

“The programme has changed my life. I would definitely recommend the programme as the benefits of being out with other people with supportive and understanding staff are huge.”

Participants reported positive changes in how they felt about themselves, other people and the importance of nature. Through interviews the researcher noted many instances of:

- Increased feelings of pride.
- Participants feeling like valued members of society.
- An increasing awareness of the importance of nature.



Wellbeing benefits of natural environments rich in wildlife: a literature review (2015)

The University of Essex produced an independent literature review of published research in 2015. This drew together the increasing body of evidence and research and concluded that:

“Overall there is a large body of evidence to suggest that contact with a wide range of natural environments can provide multiple benefits for health and wellbeing.”

Environments rich in wildlife, and increasing people’s contact with them, can result in:

- Improvements to health through increased physical activity.
- Reductions in stress and anxiety.
- Increased positive mood and self-esteem.
- A better and healthier social life.

Conclusions

Volunteering with The Wildlife Trusts on nature conservation projects improved participants' mental wellbeing at 6 and 12 weeks. The change was particularly significant for those who had a low level of wellbeing at the start.

This offers an important non-medical service that can help to provide prevention at scale and reduce the current burden on the National Health Service – community-powered health that does not rely solely on medication and traditional service provision.

Find out more

You can read the three full reports produced by the University of Essex at wildlifetrusts.org/health

If you'd like to find out more about what we do and how we can help you go to wildlifetrusts.org/health



The Wildlife Trusts

Everyone deserves to live in a healthy, wildlife-rich natural world, and will feel better for it. The Wildlife Trusts have more than 800,000 members including 150,000 members of our junior branch. We have more than 800,000 members including 150,000 members of our junior branch Wildlife Watch. We have around 40,000 active volunteers. We care for 2,300 nature reserves and every year we advise thousands of landowners and organisations on how to manage their land for wildlife. We also run marine conservation projects around the UK, collecting vital data on the state of our seas and celebrating our amazing marine wildlife. Each Wildlife Trust is working within its local communities to inspire people about the future of their area: their own Living Landscapes and Living Seas.

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Nature and public health

People's health and wellbeing can be improved by ensuring there are wildlife-rich natural spaces near the places where people live and work so they can easily access them. This is important where access to nature is poorest, and pressure on health services is greatest, such as in towns and cities. Bringing people close to nature benefits both and can help promote health equality.

Achieving this requires a joined-up approach across local and national government, particularly in public health, planning, transport, and parks and leisure. It is important that local health plans assess how accessible nature is to people and, where it is poor, action should be taken to bring them closer to it. The plans should also include measures to increase nature volunteering, which will provide the twin benefit of maintaining and creating wildlife-rich green spaces as a local, natural health asset, and improving the health and wellbeing of the local population.