

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations that constitute this document were based on a narrative review of scholarly literature, performed by Manchester Metropolitan University, and in conjunction with the Sport & Recreation Alliance<sup>1</sup>. The document reports exciting and compelling recommendations relating to the rich, economically beneficial, and as yet largely untapped benefits of nature-based recreation.

### Introduction

*‘The NHS budget is several hundred times larger than the amount spent on conservation’* (p. 227)<sup>2</sup>, yet conservation, and green space, offers an amazing and untapped upstream intervention to the economic burden currently faced by the NHS (e.g. Pretty, 2002, National Trust, 2003). It is subsequently recommended that nature-based interaction form a far more extensive part of public policy in order that the economic strain on the NHS is alleviated: *‘the benefits and pleasures of nature are valued highly on a personal level but these rewards have little influence in the policy area’*.<sup>3</sup>

These recommendations (stated below) fall in three key areas: first, the need to utilise ecotherapy as an economic, upstream intervention, second, the need to reframe outdoor exercise as restorative recreation, and finally, the idea that ‘free play is free’: that the true value of nature as a free and effective resource should be far more greatly exploited.

These recommendations are now expressed in greater detail below.

### Utilise Ecotherapy as an Economic, Upstream Intervention

The cost of stress to the UK economy stood at £6.8bn in 2014, with ACAS figures reporting that mental ill-health (including stress, depression and anxiety) caused 91 million lost working days each year, with sickness absence costing £8.4 billion each year, £15.1 billion loss in reduced productivity, and £2.4 billion in the cost of replacing lost staff. Worse, the World Health Organisation forecasts depression to be the second greatest health concern globally by 2020. The great news is that a wide range of scholarly literature<sup>4</sup> paints a very clear picture: that nature offers ‘an upstream health and wellbeing promotion intervention’<sup>5</sup>, with clear and statistically significant improvements in physiological, psychological, social and biochemical outcomes<sup>6</sup>. For many demographics, adherence to outdoor exercise programmes is actually superior to its’ indoor counterpart (e.g. gym programmes)<sup>7</sup> suggesting that this valuable resource remains very much untapped – and offers a

---

<sup>1</sup> The Literature Review and Recommendations document were written by MMU Research Associates Dr. Elesza Zehndorfer, Dr. Chris Mackintosh & Dr. Natalie Darko.

<sup>2</sup> Pretty, J., Peacock, J., Hine, R. Sellens, M., South, N., Griffin, M. (2007), Green Exercise in the UK Countryside: Effects on Health and Psychological Wellbeing, and Implications for Policy & Planning. *Journal of Environmental Planning Management*. 50, 2, pp. 211-31.

<sup>3</sup> Morris, N. (2003). Health, well-being and open space: Literature Review. OPENspace: Research for the Inclusive Access to Outdoor Environments.

<sup>4</sup> (e.g. Pretty et. al., 2003, 2005, 2007)

<sup>5</sup> Rogerson, M., Brown, D.K., Sandercock, G., Wooller, J., Barton, J. (2015). A comparison of four typical green exercise environments and prediction of psychological health outcomes. *Perspectives in Public Health*. May 2016, 136, 3. Pp. 171-179.

<sup>6</sup> (MacArthur, I. (2002). ‘The health context’, paper presented at The Greenspace and Health Living National Conference. Manchester, 14<sup>th</sup> May; Gordon, J. and Grant, G. (eds.) (1997). *How we Feel*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.)

<sup>7</sup> Gladwell, V.F., Brown, D.K., Wood, C., Sandercock, G.R. Barton, J.L. (2013). The great outdoors: how a green exercise environment can benefit us all. *Extreme Physiology & Medicine*. 2, pp. 3.

<sup>8</sup> (e.g. Bowler, D., Buyung-Ali, L.M., Knight, T.M. & Pullin, A.S. (2010), A systematic review of evidence for the added benefits to health of exposure to natural environments. *BMC Public Health*. 10, pp. 456; Ryan, R.M., Weinstein, N., Bernstein, J., Warren Brown, K., Mistretta, L., Gagne, M. (2010). Vitalising effects of being outdoors and in nature. *J. Environ. Psychol.* 30, pp. 159-68; Berman, M.G., Jonides, J., Kaplan, S. (2008). The cognitive benefits of interacting with nature. *Psychol. Sci.* Dec 18, 12, pp. 1207-12; Korpela, K., Borodulin, K., Neuvonen, M., Paronen, O.,

promise of significant and positive contributions to alleviating economic costs to the NHS that are associated with stress-related illnesses.

Recommendation: Invest strategically in ecotherapy as a means of alleviating economic strain on the NHS

### **Reframe Outdoor Exercise as Restorative Recreation**

Outdoor exercisers can benefit from exercise, whilst also relaxing in nature and enjoying the truly beautiful aesthetic beauty of their surroundings. Such an enervating experience moves past the functional outcomes of exercise to a chance to reconnect with nature, to experience pleasure, and to escape from everyday life (Barton et. al., 2009, Hammitt, 2000). Moving ‘away from physical exercise per se in population groups who are inactive or insensitive to exercise prescriptions’ (Korpela et. al., 2014, p. 5) to restorative benefits of nature perhaps explains the impressive adherence rate of outdoor exercise programmes. It is possible to exercise, in nature, without feeling the pressure of ‘exercising’ or being exposed to images or messages relating to bodyfat, body image, BMI, and other ‘benchmarks’, and it is recommended for this reason that outdoor programmes are valued and reframed as principally a restorative recreational experience (for which exercise-related outcomes are a welcome secondary outcome).

Recommendation: Reframe outdoor exercise as restorative recreation to maximise its’ emotional and restorative (as well as physical) health-related benefits.

### **Maximising Utilisation of a Free Resource: Free Play is Free**

*‘Free play is free’*.<sup>9</sup> Playing outdoors offers a free, enervating and healthy resource for exercise and recreation for all social groups, particularly in times of economic distress, and amongst harder-to-reach and poorer societal groups.<sup>10</sup> This underscores the potentially far-ranging implications of investing more extensively in a resource (green & blue space) that is free for many to utilise, and which subsequently offers far greater adherence to exercise in mainstream, hard-to-reach and at risk groups (Ward Thompson et. al., 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013).

Recommendation: Greater investment in nature & outdoor-based interventions is recommended for all, but particularly for hard-to-reach & at-risk groups, in order that adherence to exercise across the socio-demographic spectrum is maximised.

### **Summary**

The effects of nature on our emotional health are incredible and cannot be replicated. Nature offers a means for restorative recreation that stands to alleviate significant strain on the NHS, offers free recreation for hard-to-reach and at-risk groups, and exhibits strong adherence rates to exercise-based programmes. The greatest recommendations, informed by scholarly review, are subsequently that this wonderful resource receive far greater attention and investment if its benefits are to be truly realised for the population at large.

---

Tyrvaenen, L. (2014). Analysing the mediators between nature-based outdoor recreation and emotional well-being. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*. 37, pp. 1-7).

<sup>9</sup> Godbey, G. (2009). *Outdoor Recreation, Health & Wellness*. Outdoor Resources Review Group. Discussion Paper. May 2009, RFF DP 09-21.

<sup>10</sup> Knapp, P., Hartsoe, C. (1979). *Play for America: The National Recreation Association., 1906-1965*. Arlington, VA: National Recreation & Park Association.