

QUICK READS

NATURAL CAPITAL FOR HEALTH AND WELLBEING

SYNOPSIS

There is a rapidly growing body of evidence that highlights the strong links between healthy natural environments and healthy human beings, between flourishing, diverse ecosystems and social well-being. Both these fields of study—linking environmental conditions and human health and well-being and natural capital valuation—are at early stages of development, although accelerated by the recent health crises.

KEY POINTS

- The quality of human health and social wellbeing depends on the quality and diversity of ecosystem services, for example:
 - Clean air and water are vital to human health; combined with fertile soil they are also essential to good and varied food production, another primary pre-requisite of human health;
 - Access to green space increases physical activity, leading to better health and reduced costs for public health services;
 - Research increasingly demonstrates that the more diverse natural spaces are, the greater the health benefits to individuals and communities. These benefits include restorative effects on mental wellbeing, enhancing quality of life;

- Research also indicates that diverse and well-managed natural areas, especially in urban settings, reduce crime and anti-social behaviour, increasing safety and enhancing citizen wellbeing;
- Healthy and diverse ecosystems, both natural and cultural, are fundamentally important to enhancing people's quality of life and wellbeing through engagement and interaction with nature, place identity, therapeutic value, social bonding, and spiritual value.
- Measuring the full range of natural capital values available in a given environment can inform policies that can restore, conserve and augment these values.
- The links between natural capital, ecosystem services and human health and wellbeing are often overlooked by policymakers. Further research is needed to demonstrate these links more clearly, and quantify them more accurately, in order to guide policy better.

CAVEATS

- Natural capital valuation, in and of itself, will not necessarily produce good environmental policy leading to improved health and social wellbeing. There are many conflicts of interest in the currently dominant model of lightly regulated free market economics, and these influence policy in divergent directions.
- However, the more accurate such valuation is, the clearer the policy options, and their consequences for us as individuals and social groups, will be.
- There are subjective, ethical and political elements in assessing health, especially mental health and social wellbeing.



PROJECTS AND CASE STUDIES

Ireland

- Eco-Health: Project that explores the health benefits of ecosystems services as a means to supply evidence and tools for developing health promoting environments or ‘healthy places’
- GO GREEN EX: Going Outdoors: Gathering Research Evidence on ENvironment and Exercise

United Kingdom

- CoastWEB: Valuing the contribution which COASTal habitats make to human health and WEllBeing, with a focus on the alleviation of natural hazards
- Improving Wellbeing through Urban Nature: How Sheffield’s natural environment can improve the health and wellbeing of the city’s residents, and especially those with disproportionately high levels of poor health
- Demystifying Health: This report from the Valuing Nature Programme discusses the contested and complex concept of ‘health’ reflecting on its many different definitions and conceptualisations, and how it might be assessed and measured

International

- EcoHealth Network: A new network dedicated to exploring the health benefits of restoring natural capital and ecosystems

Articles

- How trees calm us down: Study finds that an additional ten trees on a given block corresponded to a one-per-cent increase in how healthy nearby residents felt

(We are in the process of updating these case studies with the many that have launched in 2020 and 2021—contact us to share an example.)

BIG QUESTIONS

- How can we get the health and wellbeing benefits of high quality ecosystem services to be recognised in policy, planning, and practice?
- How to move from GDP towards measures of health and wellbeing that include the monetary and non-monetary aspects of natural capital and ecosystem services?
- How can equity be improved across socio-economic groups and age groups in terms of access to green spaces and associated health outcomes?
- Can methods of researching and quantifying the health and social wellbeing benefits of enhanced natural capital and ecosystem services be improved upon?