

# Research shows: Paying attention to nature increases well-being

Can something as simple as noticing a plant, a bird, or the sky make a difference to how we feel? Research shows that the answer is yes. When Holli-Anne Passmore recently visited Kristianstad University for a seminar, it was about just that, the power of paying attention to nature in everyday life.

"Nature is all around us. It doesn't have to be a commodity far away, in a forest or a nature reserve. It could be the sky outside the window, the food we eat or plants at home," says Holli-Anne Passmore, associate professor and head of the Department of Psychology at Concordia University of Edmonton in Alberta, pointing to a wall plant in the conference room where we are sitting.

## Noticing the nature around us

Many people think that nature experiences require time and planning. That you have to get away from the city or out into "real" nature such as forests, mountains or lakes, but [Holli-Anne Passmore's research shows otherwise](#).

"One of the most important parts of my research, and of my lectures, is the need to broaden our view of what nature is. It is already everywhere in our everyday lives, the important thing is that we notice it."

This is also the basis of her method "Noticing Nature", where the focus is on paying attention to the nature around us and reflecting on the emotions it evokes. Studies show that even small elements of nature can contribute to increased well-being, better concentration and a stronger sense of coherence.

## Small changes have big effects

The method has had a major media impact. Holli-Anne believes that the reason why the method is so appealing has to do with the fact that it is so easy to use in everyday life.

"First of all, it's very simple: noticing the nature around you doesn't require any means except your attention. It also affects a deeper dimension of well-being and can strengthen emotions such as connection, wonder, and inspiration. Things that can be difficult to reach with other methods."

She compares it to the established practice "three good things", which is also effective in increasing positive emotions. Another factor is that the method does not require more time.

"In our studies, we see that the participants do not spend more time in nature, they just start to pay more attention to it. This makes the method accessible even in an everyday life where many people feel that there is not enough time."

## A growing distance from nature

At the same time, other research, including [studies from Kristianstad University](#), shows that more and more people today experience a disconnect from nature. This can manifest itself in, for example, apathy, fear or as a consequence of how the built infrastructure shapes our lives.

"In many contexts, we have lost touch with nature. We no longer know where our food comes from and we have fewer everyday experiences of nature," says Holli-Anne Passmore.

### **Is the idea that we are "naturally" drawn to nature too simple?**

"There is a debate about it. I still believe that we have an inherent connection to nature, but it may be hidden under cultural layers."

Holli-Anne believes that it is also linked to social development, urbanisation and an increased focus on consumption. But also with how we see ourselves.

"Historically, we saw ourselves as one species among many. But today there is an idea among some that man is above nature. It creates distance."

## **Same tendencies around the world**

Holli-Anne Passmore has conducted studies on several different continents and one strength of the research is that the results are consistent in different parts of the world. The studies show similar effects.

"This suggests that this is something fundamentally human. Paying attention to nature and feeling a connection to it affects us, no matter where we are."

Breaking the autopilot in everyday life can thus be the first step towards a stronger sense of presence and well-being. For those who want to start, the advice is simple:

"Look up! Put your phone away, take out your headphones. Basically, it's about becoming aware of your surroundings."

## **Related research at Kristianstad University**

The visit to Kristianstad University takes place in collaboration with [Thomas Beery, Professor of Environmental Education](#). His latest research deals with, among other things, the development of environmental behavior as part of the Swedish Canoe Association's education, the design of urban coastal hiking trails in Scandinavia, landscape identity and climate change, as well as various issues related to people's affinity with nature in collaboration with colleagues Marie Fridberg and Tanya Uhnger Wunsche.