

# The best natural healer turns out to be nature

By Dennis Peck, *The Oregonian*  
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Rob Finch/The Oregonian

*Thomas Doherty says studies show the more people can come into contact with nature, the better their health, and he walks his talk by hiking in Forest Park with his daughter Eva every weekend.*

By chance, a small hospital in Pennsylvania became the setting of a remarkable experiment. Scientist Roger Ulrich noticed some surgery patients recovered in a room with a view of leafy trees, while others recovered in an identical room, except its windows faced a brick wall.

Ulrich decided to test whether the view made any difference in the outcome for patients. He looked back at records on gall bladder surgery over a period of 10 years. The results proved enlightening.

Patients with the tree view were able to leave the hospital about a day earlier than those with a wall view, the study revealed. Patients with trees in sight also requested significantly less pain medication and reported fewer problems to nurses than wall-view patients. Contact with nature, even as limited as a view through a window, enhanced recovery from illness.

Researchers have learned much about the restorative effects of nature since Ulrich's landmark study appeared in 1984. Studies repeatedly have shown that contact with nature can lower blood pressure, reduce anxiety, relieve stress, sharpen mental states and, among children with attention and conduct disorders, improve behavior and learning. Regardless of cultural background, people consistently prefer natural settings over man-made environments.

"We know that exposure to natural environments has clearly beneficial physiological effects," says Portland psychologist Thomas Joseph Doherty.

But if exposure to nature is beneficial, what happens when we withdraw from it? That's one of the defining questions for ecopsychology -- an emerging branch of psychology rooted in the idea that mental health requires, in addition to strong bonds with fellow humans, a connection with nature and an understanding of our place in the ecosystem we are a part of.

Doherty, who recently launched the peer-reviewed Journal of Ecopsychology, is one of many psychologists concerned that the loss of connections with nature has the potential to inflict deep harm to human well-being.

"By losing that connection, we lose some of our ability to restore ourselves," Doherty says.

Many of the ideas and concerns of ecopsychology emerged in the 1960s counterculture movement. But the term "ecopsychology" was coined in the 1990s by an influential theorist and writer, Theodore Roszak, a professor of history at California State University, Hayward. Roszak believes psychologists have a duty to address environmental problems.

"Therapists know a great deal about the private anguish that divides the psyche and breaks the heart. But they have so far not applied their knowledge and their skill to our dysfunctional environmental relations," Roszak said in a recent essay. "Ecopsychology seeks to broaden therapeutic work and psychological research into environmentally relevant areas."

The problem has become urgent -- "one of the central psychological problems of our times," according to Peter Kahn, a University of Washington developmental psychologist. He points to our shrinking interactions with nature -- animal and plant species dwindling in numbers or going extinct; atmospheric pollutants and artificial lighting blotting out views of the stars; aircraft blaring machine noise into every corner of remaining wilderness, fossil fuel emissions altering the entire planet's climate -- and he notes that the things we are losing are disappearing quickly.

"We don't necessarily recognize that it's happening," says Rachel Severson, a doctoral candidate in psychology at UW who has co-authored studies with Kahn. "We don't recognize that we are adapting, and that there is a diminishing of our experience in terms of human well-being and flourishing."

### **Simulated nature**

For insight into the problem, the UW psychologists conducted a series of experiments using high-definition plasma screens that displayed real-time views of plants, birds and other wildlife to office workers in windowless rooms. Exposure to simulated nature produced measurable gains in the workers' sense of well-being and clarity of thinking.

Next, the psychologists compared workers in an office with windows facing a real outdoor greenspace, and workers in a windowless office with and without plasma screens displaying views of the greenspace. Researchers compared how long it took workers' heart rates to recover after a series of pop-quiz type tasks.

Real window views proved more restorative than simulated views via plasma screen, which proved no different from a blank wall in the heart rate recovery test.

"People recovered better from low-level stress by looking at an actual view of nature," Severson says.

Researchers don't know why real view worked better. The limits of a two-dimensional display might have failed to provide the necessary stimulus to the brain. The UW psychologists believe the explanation lies in the relationship between the person and the natural scene.

"The important part is knowing that if you walked outside you could touch the tree, or smell the leaves. It's part of an actual, direct experience," Severson says. "You don't interact with digital nature. You are an observer."

But rapid advances in technologically simulated nature may be changing what people consider to be the full human experience of nature, according to Kahn and colleagues. "Kids are spending more time playing video games, interacting with computers, with technologies that are more and more compelling with each generation," Severson says. "That's been the impetus for much of our work."

### **Dealing with dread**

Psychologists also are responding to the growing level of anxiety and feelings of helplessness among people alarmed by the onslaught of bad news about the environment: melting glaciers, thawing permafrost, collapsing fisheries, mercury contamination throughout ocean food chains, and on and on.

People have myriad responsibilities competing for their attention, Doherty points out. They have pressing duties as parents, spouses, employees, citizens and to themselves. On top of that, Doherty says "you are shoehorning in yet another duty," that of planetary caretaker.

Citing Roszak, Doherty says that part of the answer supplied by ecopsychology is to validate that an emotional connection to nature is normal and healthy. Doing so will help the environmental movement be more effective, he says, by appealing to positive ecological bonds rather than promoting conservation based on messages of fear or shame.

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