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
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.


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

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.

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.