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Experiencing Natural Environments, Experiencing Health: A Health Psychology Perspective

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

In

Health Psychology

Massey University

Albany

New Zealand

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2010

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my supervisor, Professor, Kerry Chamberlain, for his steady guidance and support, unwavering patience, and for imparting valuable knowledge and fostering independent thinking and learning.

Without the willingness, co-operation, eagerness and valuable input from the participants this study could not have taken place. I would like to convey my thanks to all of them.

I would like to express my gratitude to the staff and administrators at the Cornwall Park Visitors' Centre for their friendly support and recommendation of participants for the study.

Thanks also go to the Massey University Human Ethics Committee for valuable suggestions and granting the approval to conduct this research.

Abstract

This aim of this study was to explore the importance of natural surroundings to human health from a health psychology perspective. The increase in built environments have replaced green spaces in the urban areas and the effects of this has been explored by several disciplines ranging from environmental psychology, leisure studies, urban planning, public health to name a few. Findings from these studies have shown that natural environments do play a significant role in human health. However, it was deemed that exploring the influence of nature on human health from a health psychology viewpoint would provide a different dimension to this established link between nature and humans to press for preserving and providing more green spaces in the cities. Urban green areas offer several benefits such as space for exercise, leisure, psychological space for rejuvenating, healing and social connections that are all crucial for our wellbeing. This study explores the many ways natural settings contribute to health and wellbeing from a health psychology angle. A qualitative design was employed using a phenomenological approach to understand the everyday experience of being in nature/natural environments. Cornwall Park/One Tree Hill in Auckland was chosen as the site for this study. Nine women and men between the ages of 30 and 70 were chosen from this site to take part in the study. Methods of data collection were mainly in-depth interviews and photo-discussion. The data was analysed using a phenomenological approach based on the guidelines developed by Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (1990). The findings revealed that natural surroundings influenced people positively in many ways that contributed to their physical, mental and spiritual well-being. Natural environments satisfied a wide-range of needs, such as providing a place/space to exercise, to be alone and reflect, connect with nature, recreate, heal and socialise to name a few, in green, quiet, pollution-free, aesthetically pleasing settings. The essence of the phenomenon that is estimated to have been captured in the study is, "human experience in nature from the point of view of health psychology, or human experience of wellness, being in nature".

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