


SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL

FINDING THE NATURE CURE



Re  **set**

**lessons from
lockdown**

FINDING THE NATURE CURE



How the pandemic revealed access for all to green space and nature was essential

From tree-lined streets becoming places of refuge, to wildlife re-emerging in cities and new calls for equal access to green space, the pandemic brought us a new awareness and appreciation of the many benefits of places where we can feel closer to nature. Many people forced to stay at home suddenly had more time and less space. Parks became valuable places for daily exercise, dance studios, outdoor gyms, **playgrounds for children**,¹ and **artists' studios**.² The value of green space rose and there were calls for it to be included more effectively in planning and urban design. After all, green spaces will be imperative to **how cities can prepare for climate change emergencies**³ by helping manage stormwater, heat stress and air quality.

For those without gardens, public green spaces were a vital lifeline bringing well known therapeutic benefits. And not only parks – one study found that in Spain, Israel and Croatia some people started using even small urban areas of greenery and **tree-lined streets**⁴ as places of refuge during the pandemic when larger parks were still closed. Access to urban green space was cited as important for providing places of solace and respite, as well as for exercise and relaxation. Places where parks were closed opened people's eyes to the huge role they play and the ensuing discussion about accessibility highlighted the inequality in access to greenspace in most countries. Bringing this learning into future town planning and public financing is now of paramount importance.



The figures were striking – particularly after the early strict lockdowns where people started to appreciate the short periods of time they were allowed to be outdoors. In May 2020, 36% of people in the UK responding to a government agency's **People and Nature Survey**⁵ said they were spending more time outside during the pandemic than before. This rose again to 46% in July 2020, a pattern that was repeated across the world, particularly in **highly urbanised**⁶ societies like Australia and Hong Kong. Oslo, Norway, saw a **291% increase**⁷ in outdoor recreation activity during the pandemic relative to a three year rolling average for the same days, particularly for pedestrians (walking, running, hiking) and cyclists.

The therapeutic role of green spaces has long been known. A **review in 2019**⁸ identified 28 nature-based measures and activities used in different countries to improve health and well-being, from organised gardening programmes to **forest bathing**.⁹ But the past few years have seen an explosion of research finding concrete links between increased exposure to nature and not just improved physical health, but better **mental health**¹⁰ too. This has huge implications for how transitions are planned, as mental health issues are estimated to account for as much as a third of all years lived with disability, and **around 13 per cent of disability-adjusted life-years (DALYs) lost**.¹¹ That is similar to the toll of cardiovascular disease and circulatory disorders. The beneficial effects of urban green spaces include improved mental health, reduced cardiovascular morbidity and mortality, obesity and risk of type 2 diabetes, and improved pregnancy outcomes. Access to green space provides psychological relaxation and stress alleviation, increased physical activity, and reduced exposure to air pollutants, noise and excess heat.

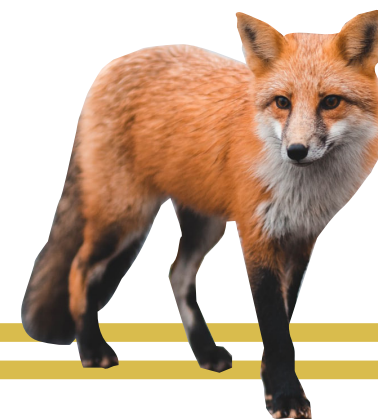




“Open spaces, particularly wild ones like the UK’s south west coast path, literally saved my life when I was deep in depression. I think the pandemic has brought more and more people into a relationship with open spaces. They’re so nourishing and vital to us all.”

Chris Nichols, Consultant, Gameshift

A survey of **5218 responses from 9 countries**¹² found that the severity of lockdown significantly affected mental health, and contact with nature helped people to cope with these impacts. This was particularly marked for those affected by strict lockdowns, such as in Spain, where respondents said that nature helped them to cope with lockdown measures; emotions were also more positive among individuals with accessible outdoor spaces and views containing blue-green elements (plants-water). People who could not access urban green spaces, either because the parks were closed or because of travel limitations, experienced a sense of deprivation, including increased incidences of depression and anxiety.

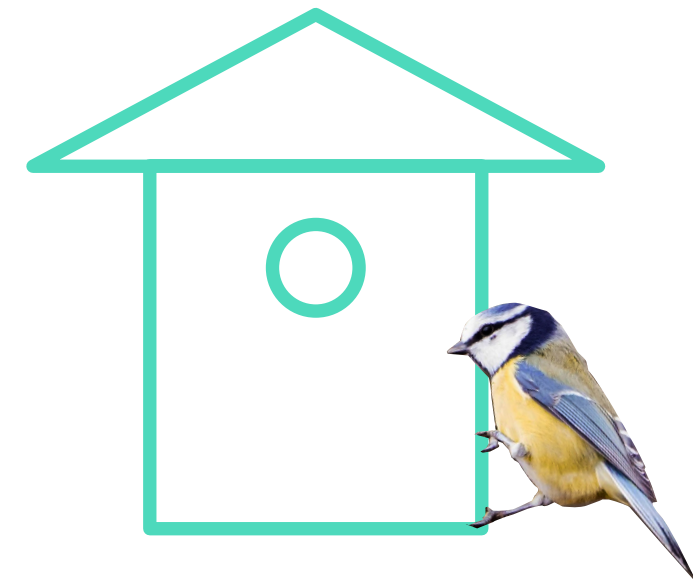


Parks were often caught between the needs of the population and public health concerns, and were subject to both closures and over-use, leading to the double whammy of reductions in income and higher costs. Governments and municipal authorities need to remember and use the evidence of how vital these spaces were during the pandemic; once life appears to return to normal, green spaces are rarely top of the funding list. Urban planning needs to incorporate the lessons learnt during COVID-19 in order to raise well being, reduce illness and **future-proof our communities**.¹³

As people **poured outside into parks**¹⁴ and gardens – or not, if they had no access – this drew immediate attention to the lack of greenspace in poorer communities and how this links to inequality and racism. Access to public greenspace became a political issue; a human right at a time of global health crisis. **Research**¹⁵ showed that, across the United States, areas with lower income and where the majority of residents were people of colour had fewer parks and green spaces. This meant that the communities worst affected by COVID-19 also had the least nature nearby. This inequality was particularly noticeable among children, for whom **outdoor play**¹⁶ is hugely valuable – and especially at a time when social isolation and inactivity was increasing during lockdowns.

Humans need to have access to greenspace for running about, breathing clean air and enjoying the sights and smells of nature, but parks, gardens and public green space may also play an intrinsic role in our survival. Without green spaces wildlife cannot thrive and **we depend entirely on the natural world**¹⁷ for our basic needs, from clean air and water to nutrient recycling, flood defence and pollination. The pandemic enabled many of us to see what is all around us – the natural world – with new eyes and to appreciate it on a new level.

Some cities saw **wild animals wandering the streets**,¹⁸ surprised to see that humans had apparently disappeared and people trapped at home became fascinated with whatever wildlife they could see from their windows. In the UK, **charities such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and the Wildlife Trusts saw huge spikes in web traffic**.¹⁹ Visits to the RSPB website increased by 69% year-on-year in March to May 2020 with 79% of those users being new to the website. In the same period, the RSPB recorded a tenfold increase in views of its **Build a bird box**²⁰ web page. People wanted to engage with nature on their doorstep in a way and at a scale not seen before.



The reawakening of our need for green space also increased the level of interest in **land rights issues**²¹ and open access to wilder or farmed areas. In the UK in particular, where there is a long history of forced land enclosures taking what had previously been common land into private ownership, more people have been calling for wider access. There may be **117,800 miles of public footpath**²² in England but the right to walk anywhere over private land that is mountains, moors, heaths and downs exists only in Scotland – and only since 2000. UK writer and illustrator Nick Hayes’ book *Trespass* was a surprise pandemic hit, writing honestly about **intentional trespassing**²³ on private land. The anti-racism movement has also joined the call to **welcome more diverse people**²⁴ into **the countryside**,²⁵ and even the UK charity **National Trust**²⁶ started to actively address the fact that many historic estates were purchased with profits from the slave trade and its reliant industries.

A just transition to a more sustainable world will require **equal rights to connect with nature**²⁷ and greenspace for all. The battle for the land varies around the world – from proving or gaining access to ownership to claiming the right to roam – but we all depend on green space and its biosphere directly for the clean air and water we need to survive. The pandemic brought this into particularly sharp focus for urban populations, where the inequality of access to green space and its many benefits became literally a matter of life and death during lockdowns. Learning from this is **already informing planning**²⁸ and provision for the future.

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