



European Cooperation in the field of
Scientific and Technical Research

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COST is supported
by the EU RTD Frame-
work Programme



ESF provides the
COST Office through
an EC contract

COST Strategic Workshop



Health and the Natural Outdoors

Executive Summary

There is a convincing evidence base that confirms the benefits to human health and well-being of close contact with nature, animals and plants.

A COST Strategic Workshop was held in April 2007 in Larnaca, Cyprus. Its purpose was to identify the extent of knowledge in this field and the implications for policy and for future research. The Workshop found that nature-based approaches can contribute significantly to health objectives in Europe by ensuring that people have contact with nature in their everyday lives and that nature would be an integral feature of health care environments and approaches. More effective coordination and communication of existing knowledge and understanding, combined with increased investment in new research, is necessary to capitalise on the benefits of nature-based approaches.

Key findings from the workshop:

- There is evidence of substantial economic benefits arising from lower rates of illness and a reduced requirement for medical interventions. Because of the potential scale of the savings a concerted, Europe-wide effort to understand the costs and benefits is called for.
- Access to nature should be considered in public health policy in Europe. There are examples of national custom and national practice that could be adopted more widely.
- Access to nature and natural places can be a central theme in promoting contemporary lifestyle-based public health approaches.
- A more persuasive evidence base is needed on the links between natural outdoor environments and human health and wellbeing. Studies should investigate the mechanisms at work, and look at effects for different target groups.
- Questions about health deriving from contact with nature should be incorporated into national health surveys.
- Health should be a central theme in urban and land-use planning, for example, in debates about urban densification. Effort spent in developing tools and strategies that integrate healthy lifestyles into urban planning and greenspace management will be well repaid.
- New research should be based on a more comprehensive catalogue of existing studies. Substantial research has been carried out, but it is widely dispersed. Findings need to be cross-referenced, for example, against other health care and epidemiological research.
- Future research requires common theoretical frameworks and more robust methodologies. Some high quality studies now exist, but broader application of more rigorous methods will lead to greater acceptance in medical and related fields. Common frameworks, definitions and methodologies will enable cross-border comparisons.
- More knowledge is needed about health-related products and commodities from nature. Multidisciplinary work should cover the process from identification of promising substances to their commercialisation.
- The therapeutic and mainstream application of human contacts with wild and domesticated animals and plants is under-researched relative to the potential benefits. The processes at work are not properly understood.
- Cross-sectoral, multidisciplinary research is needed. Areas for future research include the health benefits of outdoor environments, as well as issues such as food security and quality, and environmental protection.
- As research on the health effects of the natural outdoors is still dispersed, international networking and collaboration should be strengthened. COST and the EU's Seventh Framework Programme are among the suitable platforms for this endeavour.