

Nature Contact as an Aspect of Active Living

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Over the past few years, increased public health research has been conducted on the health benefits of nature contact with the COVID-19 pandemic spurring increased interest. These benefits are widespread and include short-term effects on mood and attention and longer-term effects on the immune system and mental health (Frumkin et al., 2017). Although there is a history of outdoor recreation and wellness research in the leisure sciences field, nature contact more broadly has recently been conceptualized as a measurable and modifiable health behavior (Kelly, 1980). Steps to maturing the field as a public health issue have been articulated (Maddock & Ranzani, 2024).

The field of Active Living emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Until then, most psychological and public health research focused on individual-level theories of promoting physical activity (Sallis et al., 2006). The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funded an Active Living Research initiative to bring together the public health community with urban planning, transportation, parks and recreation, and other affiliated disciplines (Sallis et al., 2006). Although much of the early focus was on the built environment, including public and active transportation, street connectivity, and walkability, there was a consistent

effort to increase physical activity in parks and other greenspaces (Floyd et al., 2008).

Being physically active in natural settings provides benefits and could make time spent physically active more enjoyable (Maddock & Frumkin, 2024). A recent systematic review of physical activity in rural adults considered the relationship between the built and natural environments (Muller et al., 2024). Several articles published in JHEAL have considered the natural environment, including a paper led by Nicole Odell in this issue (Odell et al., 2024). A scoping review of nature-based physical activity published in JHEAL is the second most-read article in the journal, with over 5,000 reads and 25 citations (Christiana et al., 2021).

Given the growing evidence that active living should include both the built and natural environment, JHEAL will actively seek papers related to nature contact and wellbeing starting in 2025. We are excited about the potential improvement in human health from spending more time in natural settings and hope this emphasis spurs additional research in active living. We are especially eager to disseminate work focused on interventions, partnerships, and equity in nature contact and active living.

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