



LEEDS  
BECKETT  
UNIVERSITY



University of Essex



# A Natural Health Service

Prescribing nature works - and is excellent value for money

A summary of research carried out by University of Essex  
and Leeds Beckett University for The Wildlife Trusts

“

It has **stopped**  
me **living under**  
a **duvet all day**

Wildlife Trust participant

”

For every **£1** invested in  
Wildlife Trusts' volunteering  
programmes, there is a  
**£8.50 social return.**

Leeds Beckett University

“

It has **helped my depression and**  
**agitation** and helped me to wind down  
and **make decisions about my life**”

Wildlife Trust participant

“

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**

Wildlife Trust volunteer

”

“

Since coming here  
I've **managed to give**  
**up smoking** - I was  
depressed... but now I  
**really look forward to**  
**coming here**

Wildlife Trust volunteer

”

## HEALTH, WELLBEING AND THE WILDLIFE TRUSTS

The Wildlife Trusts believe everyone deserves to live in a healthy, wildlife-rich natural world and will feel better for it.

Over the past five years, an independent body of research has shown that engagement with nature improves people's health and wellbeing. The work also highlights the importance of projects and programmes delivered by Wildlife Trusts for people with poor health and wellbeing.

This document is a summary of research carried out by the Schools of Biological Sciences; and Sport, Rehabilitation and Exercise Sciences at the University of Essex and the Centre for Health Promotion Research at Leeds Beckett University.

The research showed that participating in nature conservation had a positive impact on those with low levels of mental wellbeing. It also showed that both Wildlife Trust general volunteering programmes, and activities targeted at those with a health or social need, are **excellent** value for money.

This has important implications for the National Health Service and the role of community-based approaches to health.

### Wildlife Trust programmes: an assessment of social value (2019)

In 2019, Leeds Beckett University undertook a *Social Return on Investment analysis of Wildlife Trust programmes*. They found that:

- Targeted programmes designed for people with a health or social need, **showed a return of £6.88 for every £1 invested**. This value was generated from health gains such as improved mental wellbeing.
- For those attending general volunteering programmes, the value was even higher **with a return of £8.50 for every £1 invested**. The research showed a range of benefits, such as increased feelings of positivity and levels of physical activity.

### A study of the mental wellbeing of Wildlife Trust volunteers (2017)

In 2017, the University of Essex analysed the impacts of volunteering with The Wildlife Trusts. It assessed changes in 139 participants' attitudes, behaviour and mental wellbeing over 12 weeks of group-based nature conservation.

#### Impacts on health

- People's mental wellbeing significantly improved over the 12-week period.
- Improvements were greatest for people who were new to The Wildlife Trusts.
- Participants reported enhanced feelings of positivity, increased general health and higher levels of physical activity.

#### Key findings

- 95% of participants with low levels of mental wellbeing when they started a Wildlife Trust programme reported an improvement in their mental health in six weeks.
- 69% of all participants' mental wellbeing improved after six weeks. On average there was a statistically significant rise of 8.1%.

#### Relating to nature

The participants reported significant increases in their connection to nature. This was common to all participants, and revealed that deeper, more personal relationships with the natural world could be fostered over a 12-week period.

#### Summary

The study concluded that The Wildlife Trusts are successfully reaching people with poor mental health. It also found that taking part in Wildlife Trust projects for at least six weeks resulted in significant improvements in mental wellbeing.

Over two thirds of all those surveyed experienced improved 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 research also found that, in general, people who were already active with their individual Wildlife Trust had higher levels of mental wellbeing than those who were just starting out.

## An assessment of the contributions made by The Wildlife Trusts to the health and wellbeing of people (2016)

In 2016, the University of Essex completed an assessment of Wildlife Trust projects and programmes and their contribution to the health and wellbeing of people. It concluded that The Wildlife Trusts provide significant and important contributions to both the promotion of good public health and to the treatment of illnesses as part of a programme of therapy.

“

After a long period of illness, it has helped me to re-engage with society and socialise in a constructive way.

Wildlife Trust participant

”

“

It has changed my life. I would definitely recommend the programme, as the benefits of being out with other people with supportive and understanding staff are huge.”

Wildlife Trust participant

Participants reported positive changes in how they felt about themselves, other people and the importance of nature including:

- Increased feelings of pride.
- Feeling like valued members of society.
- Increased awareness of the importance of nature.

## Wellbeing benefits of natural environments rich in wildlife: a literature review (2015)

In 2015, the University of Essex produced an independent literature review of published research. 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.”**

The results showed that people who have regular contact with wilder, natural surroundings experienced:

- Improvements to health through increased physical activity.
- Reductions in stress and anxiety.
- Increased positive mood and self-esteem.
- A better and healthier social life.

## CONCLUSION

**Prescribing nature works – and saves money.** Independent research has shown that taking part in Wildlife Trust activities results in people being more active, having better mental wellbeing and feeling healthier.

A natural, community-based approach to health offers an important non-medical service that will deliver health prevention at scale and reduce the current burden on the NHS.



SCRUB CLEARING © THE WILDLIFE TRUSTS

## NATURE AND PUBLIC HEALTH

The findings of the independent research outlined in this document have important implications for nature's role in delivering public health. A natural approach to health is evidence-based and cost-effective. It should be playing a more significant role in the prevention and treatment of illnesses. The Wildlife Trusts would like to see more investment in:

### Promoting greater access to nature

People's health and wellbeing can be improved by ensuring there are easily accessible wildlife-rich natural spaces where they live and work. This is particularly important where access to nature is poorest, and pressure on health services is greatest.

A change in approach is needed. Health Commissioners, Departments of Public Health, Planning, Transport, Parks and Leisure all have a role to play. Local plans must identify where access to nature is poor and take action to improve it.

### Health prevention at scale

We need investment to increase green exercise and nature volunteering programmes which provide twin benefits: for those getting the health benefits from taking part, and for the local population, who benefit from having wildlife-rich spaces on their doorstep.

The body of research into the impact of volunteering with The Wildlife Trusts shows that engaging with nature promotes wellbeing and prevents mental illness from developing or getting worse. **A social return of £8.50 for every £1 invested in Wildlife Trust volunteering programmes** strengthens the argument for a community-based approach to health. This will reduce the current burden on the National Health Service – as well as support nature's recovery.

### Nature on prescription

We need investment in targeted programmes that help people improve their mental, physical and social wellbeing. **A social return of £6.88 for every £1 invested in targeted Wildlife Trust programmes** strengthens the argument for 'nature on prescription' to be standard practice for GPs and NHS mental health providers, supported by specifically allocated NHS funding.

## FIND OUT MORE

You can read the full reports produced by the University of Essex and Leeds Beckett University, or find out more about what we do and how we can help on the Nature for Wellbeing pages of The Wildlife Trusts' website [wildlifetrusts.org](http://wildlifetrusts.org)



## THE WILDLIFE TRUSTS

The Wildlife Trusts is a grassroots movement of people from a wide range of backgrounds and all walks of life, who share a set of common beliefs. It has more than 800,000 members, 40,000 volunteers, 3,000 staff and 600 trustees. Each Wildlife Trust has been formed by groups of active and motivated people getting together to make a positive difference to wildlife and future generations, starting where they live and work.



### The Wildlife Trusts

The Kiln, Mather Road, Newark,  
Nottinghamshire NG24 1WT  
[wildlifetrusts.org](http://wildlifetrusts.org)

Registered Charity No 207238



University of Essex

University of Essex  
Wivenhoe Park,  
Colchester CO4 3SQ  
[essex.ac.uk](http://essex.ac.uk)



LEEDS  
BECKETT  
UNIVERSITY

Leeds Beckett University  
City Campus, Leeds  
LS1 3HE  
[leedsbeckett.ac.uk](http://leedsbeckett.ac.uk)