

Smells experienced in nature evoke positive wellbeing

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Credit: Petr Kratochvil/public domain

Smells experienced in nature can make us feel relaxed, joyful, and healthy, according to new research led by the University of Kent's Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology (DICE).

Smells were found to play an important role in delivering well-being benefits from interacting with nature, often with a strong link to people's personal memories, and specific ecological characteristics and processes (e.g. fallen leaves rotting in the winter).

Nature is known to play an integral role in promoting [human health](#) and well-being, shown especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, previous research has been limited in investigating which attributes of nature (e.g. smells, sounds, colors) affect human well-being and why.

This study published by *Ambio* examines the role of smell in influencing well-being through nature. Researchers found that smells affected multiple types of human well-being, with physical well-being noted most frequently, particularly in relation to relaxation, comfort and rejuvenation. Absence of smell was also perceived to improve physical well-being, providing a cleansing environment due to the removal of pollution and unwanted smells associated with [urban areas](#), and therefore enabling relaxation. Relaxation reduces stress and lowers [cortisol levels](#), which is often linked to a multitude of diseases, and so these findings could be particularly significant to public health professionals.

The research, carried out in woodland settings across four seasons, also found that smells evoked memories related to childhood activities. Many participants created meaningful connections with particular smells, rather than the woodland itself, and associated this with a memorable event. This, in turn, appeared to influence well-being by provoking emotional reactions to the memory.

The study was co-led by Dr. Jessica Fisher, a Postdoctoral Research Associate at DICE. She says that "nature is a multisensory experience and our research demonstrates the potential significance of smell for well-being."

"The study provides findings that can inform the work of practitioners, public health specialists, [policy-makers](#) and landscape planners looking to improve well-being outcomes through nature. Small interventions could lead to public health benefits."

More information: Phoebe R. Bentley et al, Nature, smells, and human wellbeing, *Ambio* (2022). [DOI: 10.1007/s13280-022-01760-w](https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-022-01760-w)

Provided by University of Kent

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