

# Biodiversity and human well-being

By Margrit Beemster

Researchers have found that demographic factors such as age, gender and years lived in a neighbourhood are more important in influencing personal well-being than variations in biodiversity or natural features in neighbourhoods.

A Charles Sturt University research project analysed responses from nearly 1000 surveys delivered to randomly chosen households in 36 local neighbourhoods in nine regional centres and towns in Victoria and NSW. The results were analysed in three different studies.

Associate professor Gary Luck, an ecologist from the Institute for Land, Water and



Dr Dianne Boxall's social research project showed that people with a higher sense of neighbourhood well-being feel a greater connection to nature.

Society, led the study examining the relationship between biodiversity and well-being, comparing the responses from the survey with data on biodiversity (bird species richness and abundance, plant density, vegetation cover, and levels of urban development).

"Basically there was no strong relationship between variations in neighbourhood environment and personal well-being," said Dr Luck.

"People who lived in neighbourhoods with more birds and more flowering plants didn't get a higher score than those who lived in neighbourhoods with less birds and plants. There are other factors which also influence people's well-being, such as your age and how much income you had.

"The same went for people's connectedness to nature. We did find, however, a stronger, more positive relationship between the natural features of the neighbourhood and neighbourhood well-being, but still demographic factors tended to be more important."

Dr Dianne Boxall, a psychologist from the Centre for Inland Health, led the study on relationships between neighbourhood well-being and connectedness to nature, and personal well-being.

"The idea is that, from an evolutionary perspective, human beings have an inborn predisposition to prefer the natural environment, and are more likely to relate to it than an artificial one," said Dr Boxall.

"Perhaps people choose where they live because they are choosing an area that is going to make them feel better. Access to green space and biodiversity might be attractive to people without them even realising it. Using the Neighbourhood Well-being Index it appears that people in a richer, more biologically diverse environment are expressing more satisfaction and happiness than those in a less diverse environment, bearing in mind the demographic factors are still important."

Dr Boxall found a small but significant correlation between the Neighbourhood Well-being Index and connectedness to nature. That is, the higher the sense of neighbourhood well-being the greater the connection to nature.

"Feelings of neighbourhood well-being and connectedness to nature might be associated with people's long-term care for the environment," said Dr Boxall. "If we can understand what makes people feel connected then hopefully we can improve people's care for the natural environment."

Dr Penny Davidson, a social researcher from the Institute for Land, Water and Society, looked at how factors such as outdoor activity levels and demographics influenced connectedness to nature.

She found that people who were more active felt more connected to nature. Women felt more connected than men, as did people with a higher level of education, and people with pets.



Researchers from Charles Sturt University were surprised to find that demographic factors played a bigger role than neighbourhood biodiversity in people's sense of well-being.

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