





Healthy Parks, Healthy People

Getting out into the great outdoors has long been considered **'good for the soul'**.

It offers an opportunity to spend time with friends and family, to meet new people or to enjoy some quiet time.

Now, a program aptly named *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* has formalised the tangible benefits of people visiting and enjoying Australia's natural areas—for their own good as well as for the good of the environment.

by Jim Sharp

There is worldwide recognition that healthy outdoor activity is good for people physically, however, the health and well-being benefits arising from contact with nature are rarely reported. National parks and other reserves are the ideal place for people to engage in recreational activity as well as practical environmental volunteer work that contributes to the health of individuals, families and communities, and also to the health of these natural areas.

The Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) manages more than 25 million hectares of national parks, marine parks, State forests, conservation parks, nature reserves and marine reserves and is the largest provider of outdoor recreational opportunities in Western Australia. Last year there were more than 11 million visits to these natural areas by locals, interstate visitors and international tourists, and some 6000 people were registered as volunteers to help manage, protect and promote these areas.

Healthy Parks, Healthy People is part of CALM's charter to protect WA's natural areas while providing sites and activities to help people enjoy the parks and improve their health. The program aims to foster an awareness and appreciation within the community of



the health benefits gained from visiting parks. It also aims to highlight how people can be involved in contributing to the health of these areas through a range of environmental and recreation activities.

Your health and well-being

Research from the Faculty of Health and Behavioural Sciences at Deakin University in Melbourne reports that contact with nature reduces mental fatigue, enhances ability to cope with stress, boosts immunity, promotes healing, enhances self-esteem, alleviates the symptoms of

depression, and improves quality of life and overall health and well-being.

Natural areas can also provide a setting for community engagement and the formation of social networks, help to foster a sense of identity and ownership, and provide an opportunity for integration within communities. Through the natural environment, people share experiences and hence develop social interconnectedness. Evidence suggests that individuals who are socially isolated have poorer health, an increased risk of disease and a lower life expectancy than those with more extensive social networks.

There is also evidence to suggest that contact with nature may improve the symptoms of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and also reduce aggression, crime and violence. The reduction of these types of anti-social behaviour can potentially improve community cohesion as a result of the emotional health benefits of spending time enjoying nature.

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Main Golden View Lookout, in a new national park near Mundaring, provides spectacular views over the hills.
Photo – Ron D'Raine

Above Volunteers removing weeds at Beeliar Regional Park.
Photo – Michael James/CALM

Left The Munda Biddi Trail provides a range of options for one day, weekend or end-to-end bike rides.
Photo – Ron D'Raine





Above The Swan View Tunnel, a heritage-listed railway tunnel, is one of the features of the Railway Heritage Trail in John Forrest National Park.

Right Community programs, such as Nearer to Nature, provide opportunities for people of all ages to have close encounters with native animals.
Photos – Ron D’Raine



Data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare showed that regular physical activity could lower the risk of heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, stress and depression, and could also reduce the risk of developing certain cancers, including breast and colon cancer.

Thirty minutes or more of moderate-intensity physical activity (such as brisk walking) on most days is all that’s needed to gain health benefits.

Heading to a park after a busy day to enjoy the natural surroundings of the bush—the sound of birds, the feeling of the breeze on your skin, the smell of the earth—lets you unwind and recharge.

Parks are the perfect places for physically active pursuits such as walking, kayaking, canoeing, cycling, camping, climbing or abseiling that boost your health.

The natural advantage

A healthy environment provides a range of services to the community by purifying the air and water, maintaining the biodiversity for present and future generations to enjoy, mitigating floods and droughts, ensuring soil fertility and nutrient availability, and assisting in pollinating native plants.

Parks help to keep the environment healthy and are also important places for people to learn about the natural world. They provide the opportunity

for community understanding, enjoyment and appreciation of parks, wildlife and the natural environment, as well as opportunities for involvement in their management.

Many countries have acknowledged the full range of benefits associated with natural areas and are now successfully implementing initiatives such as *Healthy Parks, Healthy People*. This aims to encourage greater use of parks as a means of ensuring the protection of these areas, as well as the improvement of individual and social health.



Above Canoeing in Canning River Regional Park is an enjoyable pastime in the Perth metropolitan area.
Photo – Michael James/CALM

Exploring and recharging with CALM programs

Nearer to Nature

Many parks in and around Perth offer a range of organised visitor activities. The Nearer to Nature program offers a variety of nature-based activities that are fun for children and adults alike, at venues in and around Perth. Nearer to Nature activities include interaction with animals, exploring forests and wetlands, canoeing, marine park touch pools, frog searches and Indigenous activities.

CALM Bush Rangers

The Bush Rangers program is part of the State government's Cadets WA Program. It encourages secondary school students to become involved in the environment and receive the benefits of being in natural surroundings, being involved in outdoor recreation and in developing social skills and networks.

Indigenous Heritage

The Indigenous cultural heritage program provides opportunities for people to learn about Aboriginal heritage, with Aboriginal people in the natural environment. By demonstrating the interaction of people, land and nature, the program provides insights into how Aboriginal people lived for more than 40,000 years before the arrival of Europeans, and how they continue to practise their traditions.

EcoEducation

EcoEducation programs have shown more than 130,000 school students how to relate to the natural environment. EcoEducation programs are implemented in schools and help students develop an appreciation of the biological and physical diversity of the natural environment and the need for a range of management procedures for conservation.

Urban Nature

Within the Perth metropolitan area, the Urban Nature program provides advice and expertise to many different groups working to ensure the conservation of urban bushlands and wetlands. Most of these groups are volunteers who strive to improve the natural environment in urban areas, and thereby improve the health of the urban population.

In New Zealand, doctors and other health professionals are prescribing volunteer work or other lifestyle changes for patients through their Green Prescription Scheme. The New Zealand Ministry of Health reported in 2003 that 73 per cent of New Zealand doctors had prescribed under this scheme for their patients. Patients prescribed volunteer work included those with weight problems, high blood pressure, increased risk of heart disease and stroke, diabetes, high cholesterol, and stress or anxiety problems.

The *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* initiative was first implemented in Australia in 2000 by Parks Victoria, and based on its success, has been adopted by CALM and tailored for implementation in WA. The program encourages people to get out and enjoy themselves in natural surroundings through recreation pursuits and involvement in voluntary environmental activities to protect WA's parks.

Get involved

The *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* initiative is being linked to a range of nature-based visitor activities and



Above Boardwalks offer viewing points in Beeliar Regional Park.
 Photo – Michael James/CALM

Right Fred Jacoby Forest, within one of the new national parks recently created by the State government, is home to a heritage-listed oak tree—believed to be the oldest in WA. The specially-designed boardwalk is popular for picnics and photos.
 Photo – Ron D'Raine



programs (see box) across Perth's national, regional and marine parks such as Herdsman Lake Regional Park, Yanchep National Park, Penguin Island, Marmion Marine Park, and also the Bibbulmun Track and Munda Biddi bike trail. These parks and other natural areas in and around Perth attract up to five million visits each year for people to engage in active exercise such as bushwalking, bike riding, dog walking, swimming and other water activities.

People currently registered as CALM volunteers contribute to many important conservation projects around WA, such as caring for wildlife, collecting and surveying flora, rehabilitating vegetation, coordinating visitor surveys, building visitor track and trail facilities, carrying out research and conducting tours. Volunteering gets people into parks doing physical activity with a community of like-minded people, while contributing to the management of these areas.

The number of volunteers assisting with these projects grows annually and demonstrates the increasing public interest and concern for the conservation of WA's unique natural areas. Volunteers contributed 355,000 hours across various environmental and recreational projects during 2003–04, an increase of 34 per cent from the previous year.

Healthy partnerships

The *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* program provides a unique opportunity to develop partnerships with leading conservation, health and community groups. Partnerships can effectively achieve common goals to benefit the community and parks. The aim of the partnerships is to work collaboratively to facilitate and inspire the community to use parks for improved lifestyle and health, and also for the health of parks.

Healthy Parks, Healthy People highlights many more reasons to value

and protect our superb parks. As well as being an essential means of conserving our natural environment, they also make a vital contribution to the health of the community—so do yourself and the environment a favour and venture into the outdoors with family or friends and enjoy improved health for your body, mind and spirit, and the environment.

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