





HEALTHY PARKS, HEALTHY PEOPLE

Exposure to a natural environment has been shown to positively affect our health. *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* aims to improve our wellbeing by encouraging people to get out and enjoy the natural areas around them.

by Paul Burns

If someone is looking unwell, the first piece of advice they receive is often to 'go outside and get some fresh air'. But, until recently, the benefits of escaping the urban jungle have been seriously underrated. While many people walk along the beach, through parks or in bushland simply for relaxation or recreation, few realise that time spent enjoying nature has an overwhelmingly positive impact on health and wellbeing.

Separation from the natural environment has been shown to have a detrimental effect on many aspects of health, particularly mental health. Although studies are still being conducted on this connection, it has been discovered that re-establishing contact with nature can not only help prevent disease, it can also alleviate the symptoms of many health disorders. Whether it's exercising, volunteer work, or activities like meditating or having a barbecue with family and friends, spending time in the natural environment can reduce the risk of serious illness and improve your quality



of life. Parks also provide an ideal setting for social interaction, which helps to strengthen the bonds within communities. It has also been shown that something as simple as owning a pet or establishing a small garden in your backyard can have a beneficial impact on personal wellbeing.

In recognition of the healing powers of nature, countries such as the

UK, Canada, USA and Australia are attempting to encourage greater use of parks and recreational areas to improve community health.

The term *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* was coined by Parks Victoria in 2000. In late 2004, the then Minister for the Environment launched Western Australia's version of *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* (see 'Healthy Parks, Healthy People', *LANDSCOPE*, Winter 2005). The then Department of Conservation and Land Management adopted the name to develop a program aimed at increasing community awareness of parks and other natural areas now managed by the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) and highlighting the importance of these areas to improving quality of life and physical, social and mental health.



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Main Camping on a granite outcrop along Deep River in the southern forest region. Photo – Brett Dennis/Lochman

Transparencies
Inset Tree planting in Canning River Regional Park.

Above An organised group activity on a walk along Mundlimup Trail in State forest near Jarrahdale.

Left Bike riding through Yellagonga Regional Park. Photos – Ron D'Raine



Above Lesmurdie Falls National Park.
Photo – Ron D’Raine

Environmental benefits

Being exposed to the outdoors not only benefits people, but it can also have a positive effect on the protection and conservation of the environment. *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* promotes volunteer work, which helps maintain and rehabilitate fragile ecosystems, while also ensuring volunteers receive a satisfying and rewarding experience. By contributing to the health of park ecosystems, volunteers can help with the survival of native species and the maintenance of biodiversity. Increasing the usage of national, regional and marine parks and other natural areas also raises the public’s appreciation of nature and heightens awareness of environmental issues. Although this may seem to contradict the view that increased human activity in the natural environment is inherently destructive, it is hoped that park users will feel a sense of ownership towards these conservation areas. As a result, not only will the community benefit from physical activity, social interaction and contact with nature, parks will benefit

from greater public awareness of and affection for the parks’ natural beauty.

Human health benefits

One of the desired outcomes of *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* is the prevention and alleviation of disease. The largely preventable health disorders that impose the highest social and financial cost on the Australian community have been included in the Federal Government’s National Health Priority Areas (NHPA). These priority areas were identified in response to the World Health Organisation’s global strategy, ‘Health for All by the Year 2000’. The NHPA targets include arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions, asthma, cancer, cardiovascular health, diabetes, mental health and injury prevention and control. These conditions contribute to about 80 per cent of the burden of disease in Australia so, through the *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* program, partnerships have been developed with non-government health organisations aimed at combating the incidence of such conditions. These bodies include the Heart Foundation WA, Cancer

Council WA, the Asthma Foundation of WA, the Arthritis Foundation of WA, *beyondblue*: the national depression initiative, Diabetes WA and Mentally Healthy WA. These partnerships have been important in increasing awareness of the importance of the natural environment to increasing physical activity, expanding social networks and improving mental wellbeing—factors which prevent disease and alleviate symptoms while also improving the quality of life for people already suffering chronic disease. In addition to health organisations, *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* has also partnered with other State Government initiatives such as the Premier’s Physical Activity Taskforce and the Office for Seniors’ Interests and Volunteering.

Spreading the *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* message

In order to achieve its goal of encouraging people to realise the benefits of spending time in the natural environment, the *Healthy Parks, Healthy*



Left Whitewater rafting on the Murchison River in Kalbarri National Park.
Photo – Brett Dennis/Lochman Transparencies



Below left A family enjoying a picnic at Yellagonga Regional Park.
Photo – Ron D'Raine

People program must spread its message and gain recognition in the wider community. This task is a continual process involving the production of promotional material and promoting the program through events that occur in DEC-managed parks. The program has released promotional items including bookmarks, brochures, posters, stickers and flyers. The *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* message is also incorporated into DEC activity programs which attract more than 300,000 participants annually. *Nearer to Nature* (see 'Getting nearer to nature', *LANDSCOPE*, Summer 2004-2005) is one such program that provides school students and the wider community with hands-on activities

and the opportunity to learn about the natural world. *Nearer to Nature's* seasonal programs enable children of all ages to get a close look at native wildlife, trek through bushland, swim in marine parks and learn about outback survival skills, Indigenous culture and nature's wonders. In addition, the program promotes popular events such as 'Moonlight Meandering', which allows adults to enjoy guided walks and a sunset picnic in the picturesque Perth hills. You can also organise your own day out with families, businesses or clubs with a group booking.

Another example of how *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* is encouraging people to spend time in nature is the inclusion of the program in DEC's

EcoEducation program. EcoEducation ties in with the school curriculum to bring students of all ages in contact with nature and teaches them about native plants and animals. EcoEducation's *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* school excursions encourage students to care for their park areas and to enjoy being involved in outdoor physical activities. Educating school children about the need to stay healthy and appreciate the natural world is particularly important in light of the childhood obesity epidemic and the necessity for future environmental stewardship.

Healthy Parks, Healthy People has also publicised events that take place in WA's regional, marine and national parks, such as Rotary's annual Jetty to Jetty Swim held at Woodman Point Regional Park. It also worked with Arthritis Foundation of WA to launch Arthritis Week. The launch included an organised walk in Herdsman Lake Regional Park and was designed to endorse the benefits of exercise to those suffering from arthritis, as well as to promote local parks as a venue for outdoor recreation and contact with nature. By working together, *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* and Arthritis Foundation of WA were also able to raise community awareness of serious diseases like arthritis and osteoporosis. There are plans for *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* to attempt similar collaborations for the launches of Heart Week and Diabetes Week in future years.

The most recent *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* venture has been the development and implementation of a park-based activity program for seniors, in partnership with the Physical Activity Taskforce, the Office for Seniors' Interests and Volunteering and the Bibbulmun Track Foundation. The 12-month program includes a monthly park-based activity for



Above Snorkelling in Shoalwater Islands Marine Park.
Photo – Michael James/DEC

Right A bushwalker crossing the Warren River in Warren National Park.
Photo – Dennis Sarson/Lochman Transparencies



seniors aimed at increasing levels of physical activity, encouraging social interaction, improving mental health and minimising the risk of depression. It is hoped this will provide participants with more confidence and skills to encourage frequent park visits while also expanding participants' knowledge of the natural environment and its importance to our quality of life. *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* has also been incorporated into the Department for Planning and Infrastructure's TravelSmart program by including Yellagonga Regional Park in TravelSmart materials and highlighting the importance of the natural environment for active travel. *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* is also involved with the Office for Seniors' Interests and Volunteering's Active Ageing Strategy and the Physical Activity Taskforce's Walk WA strategy.

Future plans

In the future, the *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* plan is to develop more projects in collaboration with other organisations and government departments. These include working with schools and local governments

to encourage students and citizens to take part in regular volunteer work in programs like 'Adopt a Park'. Partnerships will be developed with tourism and media outlets, as well as community representatives from different cultural groups, including Aboriginal groups, to widen its appeal. The program will also work with tertiary institutions to conduct research on the association between health and park attendance and gain a better understanding of the benefits of being in nature. There is also a plan to expand the program into regional areas.

The *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* initiative is a formalised program that builds on something people have always known. The human animal is inseparable from the natural world, and there is no better place to re-establish

contact with nature than in one of the many DEC-managed parks in the State. Because of the work of *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* in promoting the use of regional, national and marine parks, the community and the environment can reap the rewards now and well into the future.

Paul Burns was a final-year, creative writing student at Curtin University when he undertook his placement working on *LANDSCOPE* and provided this article.

For more information on *Healthy Parks, Healthy People*, please contact DEC's *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* Coordinator Cathy Gazey on (08) 9431 6514 or by email (cathy.gazey@dec.wa.gov.au).

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