

Equitable access to outdoors will improve conservation, health in Utah and beyond



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A walk in the woods, in the desert or even a city park can boost both your mood and your health, but access to nature isn't always equal.

A group of scientists, health care researchers and community practitioners, including nearly a dozen representatives from the University of Utah, want to change that. We've formed the Nature and Health Alliance (NHA), a new research and practice collaborative group comprised of scholars, educators, practitioners and community members, with the goal of getting more people outside.

A growing body of research has revealed links between nature exposure with physical, emotional and mental health. Even short periods of time engaging with nature can reduce anxiety and stress, improve cognitive function and enhance social interactions.

But myriad questions remain about nature's beneficial effects and who gets access to those benefits.

We know that not everyone has access to nature and outdoor activities and the health-enhancing benefits they bring.

With support and financial backing from the REI Cooperative Action Fund, the alliance is bringing together bright minds and passionate spokespeople in the burgeoning field of nature and human health to raise awareness of the health benefits of engaging with nature. We aim to create a national movement as we expand understanding of the importance of access to nature for everyone.

Our initial work is bridging disciplines that typically have few "cross-points" — medical researchers, representatives of community organizations, educators training the next generation of health care workers and people figuring out ways for insurance companies to cover the costs of gaining benefits of nature services.

In addition to REI and U. faculty, the alliance includes representatives from Harvard University, the University of Washington, Texas A&M, the University of Vermont, Houston Methodist University, UCLA, the University of Maryland and the University of California San Francisco.

Our new movement is inspired by pioneering work to connect nature and health at the University of Washington. In 2019, those interdisciplinary efforts also sparked the creation of a state chapter, called "Nature and Human Health-Utah," which is now also supported by the REI fund.

All of the participants in the alliance have a very real commitment to groups of people who have been underserved by nature before — not only particular ethnic groups who have lacked access to the health benefits of nature, but also groups with physical limitations that make getting outside difficult, such as people with disabilities, senior citizens and incarcerated individuals.

Emerging collaborations promise new ways of looking at both human and planetary health, with research helping to shape understanding, expand outreach and foster engagement.

Our first meeting, held at the University of Utah campus this spring,

showcased the knowledge sharing that is already happening.

Jeff Rose, an assistant professor in the Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism and College of Health, discussed early findings from his research on relationships between nature and people who experience homelessness. And Tracy Aviary staff shared how they are devoting funds and staff resources to promote access to nature for groups who have lacked such connections in the past, particularly those who live on Salt Lake City's west side.

We are also exploring pathways to create reciprocal actions for nature and health. We understand that recognition of the health values of nature can stimulate a greater sense of protection and conservation of nature.

Our objectives aren't just on paper. They are things we can accomplish now and that will work for the diverse geographies and cultures reflected by alliance members.

Scientists are people, and what's more personal than the topic of human health and nature? Our initial gathering set the stage for a collaborative, cross-disciplinary effort for the group in the years to come. We believe our collective work from this event will contribute to the improved health of our human communities and of our planet.

Nalini Nadkarni is a professor emeritus in the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Utah. Learn more about the alliance at www.NatureAndHealthAlliance.org.