Lived Experience and Mental Wellbeing: The Benefits of Taking Adults with Disabilities and their Caregivers out into Nature

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Background
Connecting with nature contributes to quality of life and overall mental health. Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (formerly Alberta Parks) is committed to providing easy and inclusive access to park experiences and programs, regardless of physical ability (Alberta Parks, 2014). By removing barriers to facilities, programs, and daily operations, people with disabilities can experience nature with everyone else. By making people feel welcome, everyone can get involved in parks, nature, and recreation programs.

Adults of all ages with disabilities can enjoy outdoor experiences. Participating in programs with others can help to encourage a sense of belonging. Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (formerly Alberta Parks) is currently developing programs that use the strengths of people in nature as a foundation. For example, the Alberta Adaptive Nature Challenge is a wilderness experience designed to showcase the abilities of adults with disabilities. Adaptive programs use creative ways to move people with physical restrictions around difficult terrain, for example by using several helpers to carry a wheelchair across a stream.

Since the program began in 2008, many participants have provided moving narratives about the mental and physical health benefits the experienced from this inclusive activity (Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation, 2009). However, before using nature programs to specifically promote mental health, systematic research is necessary (Bowler, Knight, and Pullin, 2009; Maller, Townsend, Pryon, Brown, & St. Leger, 2005). An in-depth examination of mental health benefits from nature interventions would consider issues such as what promotes or what prevents health.

Objectives
The overall objective of this research is to understand the mental health benefits of nature experiences for adults with disabilities. Specifically, we wanted to examine the mental health effects felt by adults with disabilities following day trips offered by the Push to Open Nature Society, and the 2012 Alberta Adaptive Nature Challenge.

The research questions were as follows:
1. What are the quality of life outcomes of individuals participating in an adaptive nature experience?
2. What effect, if any, does participating in an adaptive nature experience have on an individual’s mood and emotional state?

Method
People attending recreational nature trips were asked to participate. A total of 80 participants were sampled which included adults with disabilities (including seniors) and their voluntary caregivers. All 80 were surveyed before they began their nature program; 11 of those were also surveyed afterward. The number of participants who chose to answer questions after completing the nature program was low, probably because most people were quite tired. Each participant completed the following standardized measures: a nature experience questionnaire, a measure of quality of life, and a measure of current...
mood. The reflective writings and comments in the questionnaires were coded to identify common themes.

**Results**

Three related themes emerged about the meaning of inclusion in nature for adults with disabilities and their caregivers:

1. Sensory activation: sensory experiences about being in nature and participating in recreational activities (for example, sitting by water, touching the caves, watching the wheelchair on the shore)
2. Social relations: new experiences of themselves and others
3. Reimagined time and place: an altered experience of self in time (for example, feeling timeless or weightless in nature, wanting more time in nature, feeling an escape from the world)

We expected that participants would have felt differently about their usual roles in nature, sensing a new experience of being a helper or helped. However, no participants mentioned this topic. This suggests that being out in nature gives participants a break from the rules and roles that normally consume everyday life for adults with disabilities and their caregivers.

The sample of participants who were tested after the nature excursions was very small, but their responses suggest a decrease in depression symptoms. Responses from the quality of life questionnaire suggest that after being in nature, participants had a stronger sense of the importance of health, helping, love, friends, and community. Measures of general wellbeing like health satisfaction and love satisfaction showed strong improvements.

**Conclusions**

Although the number of participants surveyed after being in nature was small, the results suggest important findings. There appears to be a promising relationship between inclusive nature experiences and depression, as well as satisfaction with health, love, relationships, helping, and community.

Inclusion in nature for both caregivers and adults with disability holds promise as an intervention that can support mental wellbeing and a reimagining of oneself in the physical environment. This study suggests that sensory, emotional, and physical experiences are enhanced in an inclusive nature experience. Indicators of wellbeing such as depression, relationships with others, and perception of health also show potential for improvement with inclusive nature interventions. These findings could support the development of inclusive nature programs for those at risk of depression or other threats to their wellbeing.

While our work intentionally combined the results of people with disabilities and their caregivers in the name of inclusivity, exploring the helper-helped relationship is a complex and potentially rich area of study. Follow-up work should address how nature experiences affect caregivers and people with disabilities differently, as well as how these experiences affect the dynamic of the helper-helped relationship.

**Lessons Learned**

The lessons learned from our study highlight the value of collaborative practice between the sectors of Parks and Health. In particular, the findings highlight areas for further intervention development targeting those with sensory impairment and relationship disharmony. The study also revealed that shorter questionnaires and additional supports would make gathering feedback after activities easier. This project has laid the foundation for ongoing nature and mental wellbeing studies. The current findings and ideas for future projects are gathering international interest, which suggests this type of intervention has widespread appeal.

The full report can be found at [www.mentalhealthresearch.ca](http://www.mentalhealthresearch.ca)
References

Bowler, D.E., Knight, T.M., Pullin, A.S. (2009). The value of contact with nature for health promotion: how the evidence has been reviewed. Centre for Evidence-Based Conservation, School of the Environment and Natural Resources, Bangor University.


About the Author:

Principal Investigator, Sonya L. Jakubec, PhD (candidate) is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Health and Community Studies at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Alberta, where she teaches about mental health nursing, research for health and community practice, and supportive environments for mental health. She is a community health researcher who explores supportive environments for mental health, and physical, social, and policy strategies for mental health promotion. Her current research, alongside Alberta Parks and a variety of community partners, is concerned with professional, community, and policy supports for recreation for those with serious and persistent mental illness and addictions, as well as inclusion in nature and parks for adults with disabilities and those at end of life. Together with Don Carruthers Den Hoed, Sonya is exploring the people, places, and policies necessary to bring mental health care outside, termed “nursing in nature”.

Grant holder, Don Carruthers Den Hoed, PhD (candidate) is a graduate student in the Interdisciplinary Graduate Program at the University of Calgary and is the Public Engagement and Inclusion Team Lead for Alberta Parks, Kananaskis Region. His previous Master’s Degree examined the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in parks and informed Alberta Parks’ Inclusion Plan. His current interdisciplinary PhD work is co-housed in Environmental Design, Education, Social Work, and Medicine, and aims for a better understanding of the effects of experiencing nature in parks, public lands, and special sites on health, connection to nature, and stewardship. He is also an Adjunct Professor in the School of Nursing and Midwifery at Mount Royal University.