



Unlocking nature's secrets

Description

Smartphones and other digital devices are fine for the workplace, but promote stress, especially when you're trying to socialise, relax, and recuperate ready for the next challenge. So leave your smartphone at home (or in the office) when you go for a relaxing stroll.

The only academic study I've found to date that supports this warning is a circumspective 2012 [press release](#) from a conference run by the British Psychological Society, and repeated in many online [news reports](#).

People are ready to believe that green vegetables, education and marriage are good for you, and so is a walk in the countryside. But urbanised citizens also incline readily to negative reflections on advanced technologies (e.g. smartphones). As a species we are bound to be wary of what's new and untested, but our ambivalent attitude to smartphones also reflects a long-standing antipathy between the natural and the artificial.

I've been reading the classic 1991 academic article by environmental psychologist Roger Ulrich and his team on the benefits of being outdoors. They outline some of the possible reasons for our tendency to enjoy natural environments, and to find them restorative, pleasurable, and mood altering (in a positive way). They don't talk about mobile phones, but I'll try and relate their arguments to the challenge posed for walkers who keep their phones close at hand.



The simple and the familiar

Some theorists favour the view that the natural world is much simpler than the artificial worlds of cities and high-tech equipment.

It's not just that many people therefore *prefer* the countryside – people also find it helps them recover from stress. Being in a less complicated environment for a time allows us to catch up and recover from the stress of our overly complicated lives.

Ulrich says, "natural settings may tend to have lower levels of complexity and other arousal properties than urban environments", arousal theory implies that nature should have comparatively restorative influences on stress. So we are less able to recover from stressful situations in complex urban environments.

Of course, what constitutes a simple environment depends on your experience and point of view. It's really about *familiarity*. A visitor has to spend more time thinking things through when in an unfamiliar settings. Unfamiliar (urban) environments require more "cognitive effort," and so don't provide respite and time for recovery.

The evolutionary variant of this argument reminds us that human beings evolved on prairies and in woodlands. We therefore have an inbuilt affinity with environments that look as though they offer accessible food, water, and safety: i.e. not supermarkets, but meadows, lakes, and groves of trees. Natural selection favoured populations with a tendency to seek out such places, i.e. those who find natural environments enjoyable.

Another line of argument states that the natural world has endless capacity to reward our inbuilt curiosity and fascination, but without demanding action, at least as long as we are fed and watered and not in danger from predators – hence the argument that natural environments provide a source of [soft fascination](#).

Cultural conditioning

But Ulrich also refers briefly to arguments based on the idea of “cultural conditioning” : “contemporary Western cultures tend to condition their inhabitants to revere nature and dislike cities” (p.205). We revere the natural against the technical.

They don’t articulate in their article reasons such cultural conditioning might take hold, but Ulrich and co would presumably draw on similar biological arguments. We are biologically wired to develop and sustain cultural biases in favour of the natural.

But an appeal to “culture” already alerts us to the power of language, not least the establishment of [oppositions](#) such as nature/city and natural/artificial “” and invites discussion about the way discourses about environment are set up and sustained.

Ulrich doesn’t discuss this, but those inclined to [Jacques Derrida](#)’s philosophy might note that every appeal we make to the existence of nature in the raw is already imbued with artifice, i.e. technologies. Apart from the language we use to describe nature, we see landscapes through the lens of so many paintings, photographs and works of literature, mediated, enhanced, promoted and filtered. Needless to say, when we are out and about we wear clothing, hiking boots and carry guidebooks in nylon backpacks, and carry mobile phones.

Whether or not mobile phones make life in the countryside simpler, and therefore help sustain its restorative benefits, they do offer *familiarity*. They provide the opportunity for sociability. They offer a further potential for *walking with* someone. There’s comfort and safety in virtual numbers. Smartphones also have the potential to enhance curiosity and fascination by virtue of all that information at our fingertips. They are part of what it is to occupy a world both familiar and strange, that’s sociable, linguistically rich and stacked to the gunnels with information. Read more about curiosity [here](#) “!

Bibliography

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- Ulrich, R.S., R.F. Simons, B.D. Losito, E. Fiorito, M.A. Miles, and M. Zelson. 1991. Stress recovery during exposure to natural and urban environments. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, (11)201-230.
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Notes

- Also see blog posts [Humanities in the wild](#), [Wet and wild](#), [The benefits of walking](#), [In meditative mood](#), [A nation addicted to smartphones](#), [The brain in the city](#), [Gathered round the hearth](#), and [Soft fascination](#).
- According to Larry Rosen, “If you are going to use nature as a restorative cure for technologically-induced brain overload, it is best to remove all technology from the scene” (p.206). Rosen, Larry D. 2012. *iDisorder: Understanding Our Obsession with Technology and Overcoming its Hold on Us*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan. I’ve used this quote [before](#).
- See Willis et. al. on the sociable aspects of outdoor activities such as geocaching.

Category

1. Architecture

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1. mobility
2. mood
3. natural environments
4. smartphones
5. walking

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