



NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS FOR URBAN POPULATIONS NC-4902



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Healthy Human Habitat: The Role of Trees and Natural Environments

Trees, landscaped grounds and streets, parks and greenways not only improve the appearance and the environmental quality of an area, they can have an impact on critical social issues such as health care, education, crime and safety, economic development, and social disenfranchisement. A growing body of research verifies and illuminates this critical connection between a green landscape and human well-being. Important benefits can be realized passively by living, working, or playing in a greener environment and actively through involvement with trees and vegetation such as community tree planting projects. A window view of trees in a lawn, a walk through the park, and other types of passive encounters with the natural world have been shown to provide the restful breaks needed to recuperate from mental fatigue.



Recent research found that low-income children who move to greener residential settings show a significant increase in mental functioning. In another investigation, residents in low to moderate cost rental units also reported greater well-being with views of trees from their windows. These and other findings indicate that **urban nature is more than an amenity. It is a key component of healthy human habitat, one whose low cost is amply repaid with significant social and psychological benefits** that can be accrued in schools, residential areas, public housing, hospitals, prisons, and other settings. Active involvement with urban nature through community tree planting and gardening projects can have significant impacts in many communities. For distressed neighborhoods, research findings show this can be especially important by providing a means to greater empowerment and other positive social change. However, empowerment and other social benefits are not a given from urban greening projects.

Recent research suggests the following guidelines for practitioners and policy makers interested in empowerment outcomes: **Foster open and inclusive decision-making in greening projects.** Any project that feels forced on a group—even by a well-meaning neighbor—is unlikely to generate significant social benefits. Empowerment is an ongoing developmental process. Therefore, **timing is key** to empowerment outcomes. Gains from active involvement in greening projects can be very helpful at a certain point in this development, but too early or too late the empowerment benefits might not be realized. **Foster the next step.** Assisting local residents in their search for other projects and activities through which they can improve their community can facilitate the ongoing empowerment process. Urban landscapes play a key role in enhancing quality of life. Green landscapes and programs fostering active involvement in urban greening can be a significant part of the solution to social issues faced by communities large and small, creating a habitat where humans, too, can grow and thrive.

