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Nature makes us kinder, more social

Rich Heffern | Nov. 3, 2009 NCR Today

In a set of recent experiments, researchers at the University of Rochester in New York monitored the effects of natural versus artificial environments, and found that nature makes us kinder and more caring.

"Previous studies have shown the health benefits of nature range from more rapid healing to stress reduction to improved mental performance and vitality," says Richard Ryan, professor of psychology, psychiatry and education at the University of Rochester, and co-author of the study, published in the journal Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin.

"Now we've found nature brings out more social feelings, more value for community and close relationships. People are more caring when they're around nature," he says.

The effect doesn't necessarily hinge on daily hikes through fields and woods as much as it does paying attention to the natural elements we encounter every day. "It's about stopping and smelling the roses as opposed to passing them by while thinking of your next meeting," says Ryan.

Nature's psychological power is so profound, in fact, that even paying attention to a painting of roses or a potted fern can make a different in a person's attitude. In three of the experiments, people were shown images on a 19-inch computer screen, with half viewing buildings, roads and cityscapes, and the other half viewing landscapes, lakes and deserts.

In a fourth study, participants worked in a room with or without a few house plants. In all cases, those who were exposed to natural elements -- digital or otherwise -- rated close relationships and community as more important than they had before the study.

"There was a change toward the social direction for people who were around plants and a movement away for people who didn't have plants," Ryan explained. "Human artifacts like city scenes led people to be less social. And being in a room with no natural elements had the same effect."

Ryan says he hopes his research, which involved 370 participants, will make a difference when it comes to city planning, health care settings and workplace environments.

"There's a real value in having green space," he says, adding that it well serves the community.

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