



Occupational engagement as a constraint on restoration during leisure time in forest settings

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Professional forestry involvement reduced the restorative quality of forest visits.
- Less restoration for forest professionals than for non-forest professionals.
- Profession mediates through diminished sense of getting a break from everyday life.

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ABSTRACT

Abundant evidence affirms that contact with nature can promote physical and mental health, but the relationship appears to be contingent on multiple factors. We address the possibility that having paid work related to a natural environment constrains the psychological restoration that can be realized in such environments. Using data from a cross-sectional survey administered to a national probability sample of Swiss adults ($N = 1678$), we tested a multiple-mediator regression model in which having an occupational relationship to forests is assumed to affect the degree to which a person reports experiencing restoration with visits to forests, as mediated by experiences of being away and fascination and by familiarity with the forest. The results indicate that having a forest profession was associated with greater familiarity, which was in turn associated with greater reported restoration. At the same time, however, this positive indirect association was more than offset by a lower sense of being away during forest visits, which was itself a positive predictor of reported restoration. Fascination did predict reported restoration, but it was not associated with forest profession. The pattern of associations held after adjustment for different characteristics, like age, gender, level of employment, and intensity of forest visitation. The results illustrate that the restorative value of nature experience is contingent on occupational engagement with the natural environment, and they indicate some pathways through which occupational engagement can affect restoration. Landscape professionals can use these results to articulate more nuanced arguments regarding access to natural environments for restoration purposes.

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1. Introduction

Many people believe that spending time in a natural environment helps to maintain or improve their health. Abundant evidence does affirm that contact with nature can promote physical and mental health, but the relationship between nature experience and health is not a simple one. Rather, the strength and direction of the relationship between nature experience and health appear to be

contingent on multiple factors. In the present paper, we consider how the benefits of contact with nature can vary with one such factor, a characteristic which can be ascribed to individuals but which also reflects on the sociocultural context in which they live. Specifically, we address the possibility that having paid work related to a natural environment will constrain the psychological restoration that can be realized in such an environment with activities performed during leisure time.

1.1. Nature and health: the role of restoration

Interest in nature as a health resource seems to be growing rapidly, driven by several major trends. Global population growth;

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rapid urbanization in many regions of the world, accompanied by loss of access to natural areas; recognition of the harm done by human activities to environmental quality and the integrity of ecological systems across all geographical scales; the rise of stress-related diseases as major causes of disability and death in many countries – these and other trends have prompted many people to consider how contact with seemingly natural environments can positively affect physical and mental health (Hartig et al., 2011).

Interest in nature and health in turn has driven research in several areas. These include the “mechanisms” through which single or discrete instances of contact with nature can produce intermediate benefits that are relevant to health over time (e.g., Berman, Jonides, & Kaplan, 2008; Berto, 2005; Hartig, Evans, Jamner, Davis, & Gärling, 2003); the operation of those mechanisms over time (e.g., Korpela and Ylén, 2009; Kuo & Sullivan, 2001; Thompson et al., 2012); and the relationships between contact with nature and diverse aspects of health that emerge given the operation of those mechanisms over time, typically in the residential context (e.g., De Vries, Verheij, Groenewegen, & Spreeuwenberg, 2003; Hartig & Fransson, 2009; Maas, Verheij, Groenewegen, de Vries, & Spreeuwenberg, 2006; Mitchell & Popham, 2007; Stigsdotter et al., 2010). Researchers have also considered how variations in the characteristics of residential and recreational green spaces and natural areas translate into more or less beneficial change (e.g., Grahn & Stigsdotter, 2003; Hansmann, Hug, & Seeland, 2007; Martens, Gutscher, & Bauer, 2011; Nordh, Alalouch, & Hartig, 2011), as well as the ways in which contact with nature can serve therapeutic goals in a wide range of health care contexts (e.g., Gonzalez, Hartig, Patil, Martinsen, & Kirkevold, 2010; Raanaas, Patil, & Hartig, 2012; Ulrich, 1984). The volume of research in these areas has expanded rapidly over recent years, and this has spurred efforts to organize, integrate and critically evaluate the work done (e.g., Bowler, Buyung-Ali, Knight, & Pullin, 2010; Lee & Maheswaran, 2010), to disseminate it to members of different academic and professional disciplines that could make use of the findings (e.g., Frumkin, 2001; Maller, Townsend, Pryor, Brown, & St. Leger, 2006; Nilsson et al., 2011), and to bring it to the attention of the general public (e.g., Louv, 2005; Selhub & Logan, 2012).

A common theme in much of this work is psychological restoration, which refers to the processes through which people recover adaptive resources that have become depleted in efforts to meet everyday demands. The need for restoration arises regularly, and while the particulars of restoration needs vary across socio-cultural contexts depending on the kinds of demands faced, a person will unavoidably deplete some adaptive resources on a regular basis. A person who cannot renew depleted resources may not be able to cope effectively with the new demands that quickly come along. Over time, therefore, inadequate restoration can undermine mental and physical health (Hartig, 2007). How to ensure adequate restoration is accordingly a matter of practical importance. Practitioners in environmental planning, public health and other fields recognized this fact long ago, leading to a range of nature-based strategies for supporting psychological restoration, from gardens in health care facilities to national parks (e.g., Hartig et al., 2011). The more recent research has sought to provide a more substantial empirical foundation for such applications, so that they might be more widely and effectively implemented.

Much of the recent research on restorative values of nature experience has been guided by theories concerned respectively with psychophysiological stress reduction (Ulrich, 1983; Ulrich et al., 1991) and directed attention restoration (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 1995). Although they are commonly addressed as separate processes, this is not necessarily the case, and the possibility of a theoretical integration has been noted (Hartig & Evans, 1993). Steps towards this end have been made with a view to the relationship between the respective antecedents, stress and

directed attention fatigue (Kaplan, 1995) and the relationship between the two processes (Hartig, Böök, Garvill, Olsson, & Gärling, 1996; Hartig et al., 2003). For present purposes, it is not necessary to distinguish between the two processes. Rather, here we simply wish to point out that, as described in theory, stress reduction and attention restoration have common features; they are both thought to proceed when a person gains psychological distance from the depleting circumstances and becomes engaged in a positive or pleasant fashion by the given environment. Natural environments are thought to afford these components of restorative experience to a high degree relative to other environments, as indicated by many studies of the reasons why people go to forests and other natural environments during their leisure time (e.g., Knopf, 1987).

The restorative environment concept is however inherently relational; that is, an environment is restorative in relation to the environment in which the person experienced the demands that gave rise to the need for restoration. This is no less true for natural environments than for other environments; however, it is a fact that receives relatively little attention in research on nature and restoration, which instead focuses primarily on natural environments as they support restoration. Nature, however, does impose demands, and activities that people pursue in natural environments can also engender restoration needs. To understand nature as a restorative environment, it is therefore necessary to consider the circumstances through which a person comes into a natural environment and the activities that a person pursues there. That natural environments are so commonly considered as restorative environments reflects the fact that, within the sociocultural contexts in which the research has been pursued, people typically go to natural environments during leisure time to pursue recreational activities. The means of production today are such that, in the more economically developed countries where research on nature and health is pursued, a relatively small proportion of the population works for a living in agriculture, forestry, fishing, or other pursuits that would bring them into natural environments. This line of reasoning brings us to the primary concern of the present study: people whose work relates to natural environments may experience less restoration during visits to such environments during their leisure time.

1.2. Constrained restoration and its plausible causes

The issue can be framed as a case of constrained restoration. The constraint of restoration occurs when circumstances hinder the complete or sufficiently rapid renewal of depleted resources (Hartig, Catalano, & Ong, 2007; Hartig, Kylin, & Johansson, 2007). Restoration can be constrained when circumstances limit access to environments of comparatively high restorative quality, as when cold summer weather hinders people from enjoying preferred outdoor activities (Hartig, Catalano, et al., 2007). Restoration can also be constrained by a reduction of restorative quality in an environment that could be relied on for restoration. The reduction of restorative quality can come about in one or both of two general ways. First, change in the environment or the set of activities performed in the environment may make it harder for a person to achieve psychological distance from demands, as when paid work enters the home (Hartig, Kylin, et al., 2007). This kind of change stands as an environmental complement to the concept of detachment from work that currently receives considerable attention from work and organizational psychologists (e.g., Sonnentag, 2012). Second, the environment may become less interesting or less engaging for the person, as when a person has come to know it thoroughly. Note however that high familiarity does not necessarily mean a complete lack of restorative quality; a familiar environment may be safe and reassuring, if not always fascinating (Korpela &

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