

# Mindful Nature Connection & Climate Change

Volume 1 | Issue 1  
November 2021

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Exploring the relationship between individuals and their environment. Considering mindful nature connection as a sustainable practice to integrate with conservation and outdoor education to enhance and support reciprocal relationships for human & environmental wellbeing in a rapidly changing environment.

## What's the issue?

### Climate Change & Wellbeing

Current research on human wellbeing is particularly important given the relationship between experiencing and comprehending climate change and its impacts. There are essentially two ways climate change can affect mental health. One is the psychological response to directly experiencing a climate event. The other is through indirect exposure by watching or reading about a traumatic event. Both can affect mental health before, during, and after an event. Symptoms can range from anxiety, depression, PTSD, phobia, sleep disruption, attachment disorders, substance abuse and other psychological conditions to everyday living adjustments of coping and adapting to severe change along with a loss of sense of place. "Eco-anxiety" which involves the worried anticipation of future events is also rising.

As natural disasters increase in severity and frequency it is reasonable that impacts to human health and wellbeing will increase as well. While these conditions are uncomfortable and raise concerns, it's also important to acknowledge these emotional states are beyond superficial mental anguish.

Based on the reality of the situation, fear, stress, and grief are genuine and appropriate responses to real crises. Therefore, it will become increasingly important for us all to learn how to process these emotional states in a healthy and supportive way.

Exposure to the direct effects of climate change can make people more likely to accept it, but psychological factors, worldviews, and ideologies can complicate matters. Helping people understand climate's impacts on our wellbeing can be one way to increase willingness to take action in response to climate change. However, exposure to intellectual learning about climate change, its threats to humans and the environment is not enough. Especially during a time when many people feel less intimately connected to the natural world. This disconnection serves as one of the root causes of human and environmental dis-ease and therefore, reconnection can serve as a cure toward human and environmental wellbeing.

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## Where to from here?

### Ways to Wellbeing

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Wellbeing is more than the absence of injury or disease, it's also about human flourishing and resilience supported by a healthy mind and body in connection with a healthy community and network of social relationships. The wellbeing of a society depends on a healthy ecosystem, access to natural environments, and regular contact with nature which is essential for improving emotional, physical, and spiritual health and wellbeing.

In New Zealand, honouring a holistic view of health and wellbeing (Hauora) from a te ao Māori worldview includes the following four pillars that are built upon the foundation of the land, or whenua:

- taha tinana - physical wellbeing
- taha hinengaro - mental & emotional wellbeing
- taha wairua - spiritual wellbeing
- taha whānau - family & social wellbeing

Caring for our mental health in a changing climate will best involve a combination of supportive social connections and an increased connection to the natural environment. Embracing a socio-ecological approach will create and support better mental and emotional health outcomes. Fostering healthy relationships with nature will also have ecological benefits by increasing people's awareness of the importance of the environment and inspire actions to care for natural spaces well beyond their recreational pursuits.

Supporting ourselves and others through climate change will also involve acknowledging, sharing, and feeling our feelings which will vary greatly as different things will break people's hearts in different ways. So our task going forward is to learn how to hold space for people to process grief and intense emotions which may involve active listening so that people feel seen and heard while also acknowledging the feelings are normal and ok to feel, even if they hurt and are difficult. Feeling supported in community is also helpful, to grieve together rather than in isolation can lessen the burden of pain and loss. Connecting with communities for support is also very healing and empowering, whether coming together to share stories and common grief or to engage in collective action, all are helpful for processing and healing trauma, anxiety and other conditions. Author Joanna Macy offers a three-part framework for how we can best live through the “great turning” or the great unravelling:

- 1.) **Take Action** – that nourishes you and decreases burnout
- 2.) **Do Something** - to create the world you want to live in
- 3.) **Raise Your Consciousness** - get more information, do a consciousness practice like meditation, or spend mindful time in nature



## Nature Connection, Mindfulness & Environmental Stewardship/Kaitiakitanga

Nature is healing and spending time in natural environments can boost feelings of connectedness and increase mood states. Nature connection can help us build connections and restore balance in our lives and communities. Nature can also help us heal from grief, trauma, loss, depression, and other mental and physical health issues. In addition to helping us heal and feel better, we also depend on nature for food, energy, health, recreation, and identity.



We influence our environment through our interactions, management and use of natural resources. The benefits we get from nature enhance the narratives we embrace, which can highlight barriers, connections, or opportunities for change depending on which story we tell and what we decide to value. As societies have become more disconnected from nature, our human and environmental health have both suffered. Therefore it has become critically important to reconnect and balance the anthropocentric view of ecosystem services—the benefits nature provides to people—with the reality that we are also part of nature.

Being part of nature, we are also in service to our environment, rather than simply being served by it. Given the current state of the world, it is critically important that environmental stewardship and related management decisions include consideration of our place within the environment and help support human reconnection to the natural world.

Honouring the reciprocal nature of this relationship, helps us understand that the natural world needs our attention and care too. As the climate changes in many ways we cannot control, it can be beneficial to invest our time, energy, effort and work in healing ourselves and the environment. There are many ways for us to participate in supporting both. A few examples include conservation, restoration, environmental advocacy, sustainability, and outdoor education.

Increasing nature connection can influence our feelings and emotions towards the natural world, informing our relationship and whether we consider ourselves a part of it. Exposure to natural environments has a positive effect on human health and wellbeing. However, simple contact alone doesn't always promote a deep connection to nature, the quality of the interaction matters, and mindfulness is widely recognised as an effective pathway for quality connection. Mindfulness may enhance the effect of nature exposure through non-judgmental awareness and acceptance of thoughts and feelings. The practice of mindfulness can help people become less self-centered to broaden their focus and awareness to their surroundings which helps facilitate a deeper nature connection experience. Since this practice is relatively simple and affordable (or free), it holds great promise as a path to wellbeing while also promoting an increase in concern and care for the natural world.

Mindful nature-based therapies can serve as an antidote to the disconnection between humans and our ecological home. Full-body engagement and sensory awareness of our inner and outer landscapes can help us restore our relationships, establish deeper bonds, and heighten our sense of belonging. Nurturing nature as medicine can help us find balance and transform our connection to nature into a healing experience.

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