

Public forests and public health: the emerging evidence base for the role of woodlands in promoting physical and psychological wellbeing

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Biography

Ted Wilson is passionate about forest conservation and the role of nature in human wellbeing. He has extensive experience of sustainable forestry throughout the temperate and boreal regions of Europe and North America, and has worked in a variety of roles across the public, private and voluntary sectors. Ted holds a BScF (Forest Science) from the Faculty of Forestry, University of New Brunswick, a BMedSci (Clinical Sciences) from the Medical School, University of Sheffield, and is a Professional Biologist (MSB). He has held academic appointments at the Faculty of Forestry, University of Toronto, Canada, and the National School of Forestry, Newton Rigg, England, and published widely in both the forest and health sciences. Ted leads an environmental education programme called *"The Nature of Cumbria"* that reaches out to the local community. He is a member of the Forestry Commission Regional Advisory Committee for Northwest England, a Governor of the Cumbria Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, and a member of the International Editorial Board, *Arboricultural Journal: International Journal of Urban Forestry*.

Abstract

Trees and forests are known to provide many benefits to human health and wellbeing: moderating and protecting the natural environment; as "natural pharmacies" for drug discovery and development; and as venues for healthy living and recreation. In this presentation we will review some of the evidence and research that is leading to specific health messages and interventions. Especially important in western societies, such as Britain, is the value of forest visits for physical health, psychological restoration and reduced levels of stress. It is recognised that these potential benefits may be gained from both conventional forest settings, and urban woodlands that conform to certain design principles. However, forests may also harbour risks to human health, some obvious and visible, others less so. For this reason, forestry and health professionals need to work closely on both environmental education and communication to ensure visitors can enjoy positive engagement with woodlands. The presentation concludes by addressing some of the future challenges and research priorities, including health equalities. Work is required to strengthen our evidence base for specific health interventions, and improve awareness of the potential benefits of forests among public health policy-makers and medical practitioners. New approaches across sectors and disciplines may seem daunting, but the rewards will be great in terms of human health and wellbeing, a strengthened relationship with nature, and a shared vision for a sustainable future.