

Location, location, location: How nature affects the way we make decisions

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We make decisions which value the future more when we're exposed to nature say scientists. Image Credit:photoloni

Research published in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society B* today has revealed that being exposed to natural environments could significantly impact the choices we make, encouraging us to make decisions which value our longer-term futures more.

The team, led by Professor Van der Wal, say that humans have evolved a preference for rewards that are delivered immediately compared to those

which are delivered later. Scientists call this 'discounting' the future; we often make short-sighted decisions or are reluctant to make choices which delay rewards, even if the reward would be bigger if it were postponed.

Previous scientific studies have shown that exposure to nature can both increase self-control and also improve our valuations of the future. With much of the world's population now living in urban environments access to [natural environments](#) is out of reach for many. The scientists behind this study, from VU University Amsterdam, wanted to determine whether natural environments would improve our abilities to make decisions which value the future more.

Using a series of three experiments the scientists exposed volunteers to photos of [natural landscapes](#) or natural environments in Amsterdam. Another group of volunteers were given photographs of urban locations and walked around the Amsterdam Zuidas- a built up area of the city. After immersing themselves in their respective environments the volunteers played 'temporal discounting' games where they were asked to choose between small, immediate cash rewards or larger but delayed rewards.

The scientists found that volunteers exposed to nature were more likely to choose the postponed money-rewards which were greater in value. Their 'discount' rates, a statistical measure of the preference of the volunteers to choose immediate rewards, were 10-16% lower than their [volunteers](#) who were exposed to [urban environments](#).

The scientists think that we might be more inclined to make longer-sighted decisions when exposed to nature because we perceive there to be more abundant resources and less competition than is apparent in urban locations. The scientists suggest that this means people in natural environments 'live slower', placing more value on the future, whilst those

in cities 'live faster' and might prefer immediate gratification.

Many of the problems the modern world faces, such as overpopulation and resource exploitation, seem to be the result of decision-makers adopting 'short-term' strategies, say the researchers. They conclude that to motivate more long-term decisions from a global urban population it might be important to 'find ways to unleash people's innate affiliation to other living organisms'.

More information: Do natural landscapes reduce future discounting in humans? Arianne J. van der Wal, Hannah M. Schade, Lydia Krabbendam and Mark van Vugt, *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, 2013.

Provided by The Royal Society

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