

Putting a dollar value on conservation

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The economic and social benefits of greening urban areas are being explored in a multi-disciplinary project at Victoria University of Wellington.

Leading the project, with support from Wellington City Council, is Dr Wayne Linklater, the Director of the Centre for Biodiversity and Restoration Ecology and senior lecturer in ecology and biodiversity at Victoria's School of Biological Sciences.

He says the project consists of two main themes.

The first is living with nature—how to strike a balance between making [urban areas](#) better places for wildlife to live, and managing some of the negative effects of living more closely with wildlife.

The project's other main theme is how biodiversity in urban areas can have a positive impact on peoples' health and, subsequently, the wider economy.

Dr Linklater says the project seeks to transform the idea of conservation from being a charity in which only a minority is interested, to something that can garner wider backing and increased support from government.

"We know that having biodiversity in cities is good for conservation—we want to show how it's also good for people, and to put a dollar value on it.

"Having people engaged with nature and providing green-spaces for them to enjoy has clear benefits for mental well-being."

As part of the project, Victoria Conservation Biology masters student Julie Whitburn has been using the Wellington City Council's free plants programme to explore the impact of increased greenery and participation in local planting on peoples' well-being.

Through a postal survey, Julie surveyed over 400 households in 20 neighbourhoods across 15 suburbs in Wellington, using internationally approved assessments of well-being.

"Quite significantly, she has been able to demonstrate strong associations between living in a greener neighbourhood and peoples' [mental health](#)," says Dr Linklater.

He says there is also a correlation between the amount of biodiversity in

an area and the ranking that place has on the New Zealand Deprivation Index and on residents' mental health, with less green neighbourhoods scoring lower on the index and having poorer mental health.

"There is a strong health justification for better environmental design and management of neighbourhoods," says Dr Linklater.

The project lends itself to a multi-disciplinary approach—already the researchers have collaborated with Victoria senior psychology lecturer, Dr Taciano Milfont and the work is complementary to research being done towards more resilient cities in Victoria's School of Architecture and on sustainable cities in Victoria's School of Geography, Environment and Earth Sciences.

"We are also interested in bringing health authorities on board to get testing underway—surveying neighbourhoods with a high deprivation index, greening those areas—preferably by engaging the residents in planting—and then going back in a few years to measure the difference in health benefits," says Dr Linklater.

"If we can improve mental health by, say, 20 percent, what does that mean in terms of less demand on the health system, and dollar savings to the economy?"

Dr Linklater believes there are very real economic gains to be had—but the key will be to persuade the Government to invest in this area.

"We need to convince economists and accountants by quantifying the impact of green space, so that this work can have an influence on policy."

Provided by Victoria University

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