

Study reveals positive connection between nature experiences and happiness globally

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The economic and ecological impact of nature on humans have long been established with prevalent environmental issues such as climate change and over-exploitation of natural resources being the first to cross one's mind. On the other hand, much less attention has been paid to the cultural and social values nature brings to humans. Even though natural wonders such as the Great Barrier Reef and the Swiss Alps have been

named some of the top holiday destinations, the intangible benefits people gain from experiencing nature are still difficult to quantify, and such studies typically require resource-intensive surveys and interviews.

In order to evaluate the benefits of nature experiences more efficiently and effectively, a team of researchers from the National University of Singapore (NUS) turned to [social media](#) and artificial intelligence (AI) in a study published in *Scientific Reports* on 5 March 2020.

Led by Associate Professor Roman Carrasco and Dr. Chang Chia-chen from the Department of Biological Sciences at NUS Faculty of Science, the research team analysed over 31,500 photographs across 185 countries on social media with the help of an automated image recognition technology.

"Integrating social media data and AI opens up a unique opportunity for us to carry out unprecedented large-scale global studies such as this to better understand our interactions with nature in our daily lives," said Dr. Chang, Research Fellow at the Department of Biological Sciences at NUS Faculty of Science and first author of the study.

The team's analysis of the photographs uploaded on social media revealed that photographs tagged as #fun, #vacations and #honeymoons are more likely to contain elements of nature such as plants, water and [natural](#) landscape as compared to photographs tagged #daily or #routines. This finding, which is consistent across different countries, provides global evidence of the biophilia hypothesis—humans' innate tendency to seek connection with nature—and implies a positive association between nature and fond memories in memorable events like honeymoons.

The team also found that the amount of nature experiences in a country is linked to the life satisfaction of its residents. Countries which have

more elements of nature in photographs tagged as #fun such as Costa Rica and Finland, for instance, possess higher life national satisfaction scores according to scores reported in the World Happiness Report 2019. Collectively, the findings suggest the importance of nature in contributing to emotional happiness, relaxation and life satisfaction in communities worldwide.

Assoc Prof Carrasco said, "Our study brings to light the cultural and social values that nature brings to humans. It further emphasises the importance of preserving our natural environment for the loss of nature may mean more than losing quantifiable economic and ecological benefits; it could also mean losing the background to our fondest memories."

"Our next step is therefore to establish how nature experiences may benefit human well-being such as how it improves our satisfaction in life, hence enabling the development of constructive solutions to better environmental conservation," he added.

More information: Chia-chen Chang et al, Social media, nature, and life satisfaction: global evidence of the biophilia hypothesis, *Scientific Reports* (2020). [DOI: 10.1038/s41598-020-60902-w](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-60902-w)

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