

# **Cultures of Nature and Well-Being: Connecting Mental Health and Ecology through Literature**

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Why does being in “nature” make us feel good? In this first cultural history of nature and well-being, I draw from literature, psychology, and art history to explore why nature has been seen as integral to the “good life” since antiquity, and how medicine, politics, and business are now trying to measure and commodify the relationship between ecology and human health. My book will interweave cultural history, literary analysis, and lyrical memoir, homing in on the artists and writers and philosophers who have shaped modern understandings of the connection between the living world and the mind, from the pastoral philosophers of Ancient Greece and Rome, to the Romantic poets who thought the best education was a “natural” one. The connection between wilderness and wellness is nowadays often taken for granted. My research, however, uncovers its conflicted, controversial, and often revolutionary historical roots. It sheds new light on the history of outdoor healing, from the hospital gardens of the Victorian lunatic asylum to twenty-first-century campaigns for a “natural health service” to rival the NHS. As our global climate and local weather patterns change, and societies ask deeper and more searching questions about the connection between people, planetary systems, and place, my research asks profound and provocative questions about our emotional and ethical relations with local ecologies and the Earth.

My research looks closely at British and North American history and literature, and also homes in on writers and thinkers from the French Enlightenment, German Romanticism, the European open-air sanatoria movement, and the Japanese Shinrin-yoku forest bathing revolution. Chapters are organized by theme to make this fascinating, rich, and often paradoxical topic both digestible and thought provoking.

My research methodology is firmly located in the environmental humanities; it aims to bring envhums in dialogue with critical health humanities and new historicist methods used in literary and cultural scholarship. We use the terms “nature” and “well-being” without thinking, but what, I ask, do we really mean by “nature,” and how does it relate to different ways of being, including “being well”? Looking back to Ancient Greek philosophies of eudaimonia and the “good life,” and forward to modern psychology’s attempt to pinpoint the science of happiness, my research tells the interwoven story of how nature and well-being have been cultured and connected. It explores the Romantic ideal of Nature, which emerged at the same moment as the philosophies of mind that would lay the foundations for modern psychology. Looking to literature, from the sacred springs of ancient Arcadia to Shakespeare’s Forest of Arden, and the recent rise of Eco-recovery memoir, I unpick the tangled relationship between nature and culture, asking whether a “return to nature” is really possible and why we think we have become separated from nature, ecology, and the Earth.