

Human Nature Contact – Mardie Townsend

At the end of May, physical activity and nutrition experts from all over the country, as well as overseas experts, gathered at the Agencies for Nutrition Action conference in Wellington.

The focus of the conference was on promoting nutrition and physical activity in sustainable ways. It also highlighted that many sectors – such as conservation, education, transport, recreation, social development and local government – are well placed to influence nutrition and physical activity.

An expert in the area of public health, Mardie Townsend from Deakin University, Melbourne showed conference delegates how contact with nature meets an inherent need in people that is part of our genetic make-up.

Dr Townsend has done extensive research on the links between people, health and places. She says the connection between people and nature has only been lost recently.

“The concept started with a Harvard biologist who began to recognise an almost universal affinity between humans and nature. He found that people had evolved in the company of other species and had separated from them only in the last 250 years. He concluded that this separation from the natural world has resulted in many of our ills.”

Dr Townsend told the ANA conference that this separation is a product of the way our society has developed.

“We’ve become obsessed with economics as the measure of success in our society. The human frenetic lifestyle and focus on money, allows little time for the natural world.”

Dr Townsend demonstrated how contact with nature can be used to alleviate health problems, and how lack of access to nature can contribute to health issues.

“In a study called Feel Blue Touch Green, we took people suffering from depression, anxiety and social isolation into nature. They spent time engaging and interacting with the natural world. We then measured their mood and sense of wellbeing and found some dramatic effects. All participants were effusive about the positive impacts that being in nature had had on them.”

Conference attendees were presented with various ways in which the health sector can work to improve people’s contact with the natural world.

“Actions that can be taken include the use of animals and gardens therapeutically. For example, we know that people who garden every day have a 36 percent lower chance of developing dementia. So why not develop active gardening programmes for the residents of nursing and residential homes?

“There’s also evidence that more parks in built-up areas encourage people to be physically active. We need more green spaces to keep our communities healthy, fit and in touch with nature.”

Dr Townsend wants to see the health sector and the environment sector working as partners in the promotion of human health.

“If they work together, it will add strength to the work of both sectors. This means a win for health, a win for the environment and a win for the people.”