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Something Good Happening

Last summer, my son Thomas worked as a counselor at a mountain adventure camp in Virginia. He had a 9-year-old camper with Asperger's syndrome who was always distracted and had trouble relating to the other campers. Thomas took him out on the Shenandoah River in a canoe and things changed dramatically. "He just looked at the next bend of the river and was much more peaceful and attentive. He started asking me about the birds."

We all know that something good happens when people are in nature, but now medical researchers are documenting its effectiveness. One study shows that just a 20-minute walk in nature is equivalent to a dose of Ritalin.

A hundred years ago, doctors worried about diseases caused by germs, but the epidemics of the 21st century are caused by what researchers call a "pandemic of inactivity": obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, Alzheimer's and attention deficit disorder. People are beginning to understand that "sitting is the new smoking"—one study claims that just five hours of sitting is the equivalent of smoking half a pack of cigarettes. Researchers have shown that you can cut your risk of Alzheimer's and dementia through daily aerobic exercise.

Land trusts around the country are helping to reverse this "pandemic of inactivity" by conserving parks and trails close to home. Six Rivers Regional Land Conservancy is helping the Henry Ford Hospital create a walking trail on its campus near Detroit. The Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust is partnering with a medical association and the school district to create a therapeutic garden and health clinic next to a high school with the worst obesity rate in the city. And the Freshwater Land Trust is getting funding to create a trail master plan in a partnership with the Department of Health and community groups in Birmingham, Alabama.

Someday doctors will routinely prescribe a daily dose of nature; parents will demand that schools provide access to nature; and health insurance companies will fund prevention as the lowest-cost way to provide health care.

You can start by encouraging your local department of health and hospital administrators to include nearby nature and trails in their next Community Health Assessment. You may find new friends and new funding for land conservation.



KATHERINE LAMBERT



Rand Wentworth