

Mental well-being

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It has long been known that physical activity positively affects both physical and psychological well-being. Recent research is showing that there is also a synergistic effect of physical activity in natural environments – what is being called ‘green exercise’ – on an individual’s sense of well-being. This work is helping to define more clearly the value of providing urban green spaces – including of course wetlands such as rivers, lakes and reservoirs, coastal areas – as a contribution to finding solutions for our deteriorating lifestyles and rising stress levels in urban areas. Green exercise – such as cycling, walking, boating, fishing, nature conservation in urban green spaces – has been shown to consume calories AND bring significant improvements in self-esteem and mood measures, as well as leading to significant reductions in blood pressure.

While a major concern in the developing world is undernutrition and the chronic diseases associated with this, in the developed world there is now an increasing focus on the health effects of overnutrition and poor nutrition in

combination with physical inactivity. This is a particular problem in urban areas. Urbanisation has grown dramatically in the last 25 years, increasing from 37% to 49% of the world’s population over this period. And the urban centres are increasing in size – now almost 20% of the world’s population lives in cities of one million or more, and ever more concentrated in coastal areas.

It is estimated that as many as 1.9 million deaths globally per year may be attributable to physical inactivity. Related to this inactivity are poor eating habits resulting in rising levels of obesity and the physical health problems associated with this – such as type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, etc. At least 300 million adults are considered obese today (and over one billion are overweight), and it’s particularly worrying that obesity rates are fast rising in the developing world as well as in the richer nations. As to the developed world, in the World Health Organisation’s European region, for example, obesity is currently responsible for 2-8% of health costs and 10-13% of deaths in different parts of the region, and this data is replicated elsewhere as well.

In addition to the challenge of overnutrition and inactivity, the WHO has warned that depression and depression-related illness could become the greatest source of ill-health by 2020. In the United Kingdom, for example, it has been estimated that mental ill health affects one in six people, costing the National Health Service £12.5 billion and the economy £23.1 billion. Although it is hard to find an agreed definition of mental health, it is normally accepted that mental health, in the context above, is broader than a lack of mental disorders.

But even without the evidence from scientific studies, there cannot be many ‘urbanites’ who do not experience the inner sense of calm and relaxation through visiting green spaces – and who are not moved by the beauty and tranquility of most wetlands!