

‘Finally people could see the importance of nature to our health’

**Agnes van den Berg, environmental psychologist**

22.04.

04 On April 22, 2004, the first congress on nature and health took place.



Nature has a calming effect on us, as many would agree. And yet, until recently, policymakers and nature organisations paid little attention to the benefits people gain from experiencing nature. Thanks in part to Agnes van den Berg’s extensive research and lobbying efforts, the topic is now on the political agenda.

by Laurien Holtjer

> Our mood improves measurably when we’re out in nature. ‘Even a quick glance at greenery through your window can have a positive influence on your mood’, says Agnes van den Berg. Her own view is of a few bright red artificial begonias on her window sill. ‘The restorative effect of nature can be divided into phases, from superficial to profound. Short contact restores acute stress. An artificial plant can have that effect as well.’

In recent years, this environmental psychologist has shown in several experiments that nature is good for people. Besides improving mood, nature also has a positive effect on stress: the number of stress hormones in the saliva diminishes. ‘Sick people are found to recuperate more quickly if they have a view of natural elements’, says Van den Berg. ‘And nature has positive effects on children with problems such as ADHD, phobias and poor self-confidence.’

However, Van den Berg remembers – as if it were just

yesterday – that at the end of the 1990s, she had to go all out to convince governments, nature organisations and research colleagues of the importance of nature for health. That was until Natuurmonumenten held an invitational congress on the topic of nature and health in the Beurs van Berlage in Amsterdam. The organisation asked Van den Berg, a pioneer in this field in the Netherlands, to help decide on the programme. This was the ‘long-awaited icing on the cake’ for her, after years of studying the importance of nature for human health.

Van den Berg began her research on perceptions of natural landscapes in 1993; in 1999 she received her PhD. ‘It struck me back then that nature experiences were increasingly seen as a luxury that one could do without. Public green spaces were often the first to go when building new neighbourhoods. Ecologists did manage to secure money for the preservation and development of species, but isn’t it strange that the top priority is animal conservation, while the importance of nature for humans wasn’t even being discussed until very recently?’ wonders Van den Berg. ‘Nature is very important for people, yet this aspect is poorly promoted. That struck me as true societal poverty.’

In 1997 she realised that the research had to change direction. ‘I had just started working for Alterra when it dawned on me that the key to the solution was to demonstrate the health benefits of nature scientifically.’ This idea



was sparked by meeting Terry Hartig, an American environmental psychologist who did research on the restorative effects of nature on human stress. In the Netherlands, research on healthy emotions experienced while out in nature was primarily descriptive: people tell what they feel and experience when in nature. 'That's completely different from controlled experiments in which you measure effects.'

Since ancient times, humans have been attributing healing effects to nature. 'The ancient Greeks, for example, built hospitals in natural environments because contact with nature was thought to promote the healing process. Yet still there was barely any well-controlled research on the health benefits of nature for humans. Most people do think that nature is healthy, but that also inhibits the research: it seems so obvious. Because there is no well-controlled research, people don't take their feelings seriously. It's a vicious circle. Only hard evidence could give the importance of nature for humans a permanent place in society and politics.'

At first, her research plans met with the usual resistance among both colleagues and politicians. Due in part to misperceptions, she didn't get research funding. 'The subject matter appeals to many people, including extremists who believe that nature is a panacea. This became painfully evident during the very first workshop on this topic organised by the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality in 1999', tells Van den Berg. A high-ranking official at LNV, who did believe in the relationship between nature and health, had got the subject onto the agenda. 'In the meantime, word was spreading that nature was good. LNV capitalised on that with this workshop without realising how vulnerable the topic was. A man showed up there – painfully thin, because he believed that he could live on sunlight – and made a plea to dispense with consumer society and go back to nature. At lunchtime, he took off his clothes and jumped, nude, into the pond. It gave the day a vague, 'new-agey' tint. It was a slap in the Ministry's face back then, because LNV didn't want to be associated with this angle.'

Despite the scepticism and the associations with tree-huggers, Van den Berg succeeded at the end of the nineties in providing, without financing, the first scientific evidence in the Netherlands for the calming effects of nature. Research done by a student intern did the trick. After that, Van den Berg finally got the chance to probe the topic further. In order to convince everyone of the positive health effects of nature, and to give the topic a more authoritative

status, she collaborated with the Health Council of the Netherlands on a booklet containing concrete facts: '*Van buiten word je beter*' ('Being outside makes you better'). Its publication in 2001, as an appendix to Alterra's annual report, made the difference. 'All of a sudden things started to move. The next year, the Ministries of Health (VWS), Agriculture (LNV), and Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (VROM) petitioned the Health Council for advice. In 2004 they concluded that there had been very little research, but that what had been done was only positive.'

When Natuurmonumenten then chose the relationship between health and nature as the theme for their annual invitational meeting, the topic had finally 'landed'. Van den Berg: 'As I walked down the stairs of the Beurs van Berlage where the meeting was being held, I realised that what I had thought up in the office could have such an effect on society. And that there was no turning back.'

Still, Van den Berg's spirits sank that day when Natuurmonumenten's chairman gave a speech featuring the question: 'Nature is healthy for people; but how healthy is nature itself?' He ignored the subject of human well-being altogether, going on instead about the importance of protecting natural values and biodiversity. 'I heard only that, first and foremost, we must make sure that the goals for nature are met. Sure, that's important, but then we're talking at a whole different level. Functions such as the stimulation of activity, social contacts and stress reduction have very little to do with those goals. That day in 2004 made me realise that the theme of nature and health ranks high in politics and in society, yet at the same time it is vulnerable: it's easy to interpret it according to one's own opinion.' She has observed, for example, that nature conservation organisations cite the positive effects of nature mainly as an argument for the protection of large-scale nature areas farther away from the city, while she believes that the biggest benefits are to be gained in and around cities.

This is why Van den Berg is keen on more scientific evidence. 'It would, for instance, be very valuable to know how nature influences the brain. Look at ADHD: children are given Ritalin. It's an accepted medication because we know how it works. Nature therapy might also work, but as long as we don't know exactly how, it won't be acknowledged as a treatment. With my research, I want to do justice to the deep and important meaning of nature for people; that motivates and inspires me. If we know which natural elements have what effects and how that works, then there

is less room for personal interpretation of research results.'

In the meantime, many projects have been set up. According to Van den Berg, one worthwhile initiative is the *Natuursprong* project, run by the National Forest Service (Staatsbosbeheer), the National Youth Foundation 'Jantje Beton', and the Netherlands Institute for Sport and Physical Activity (NISB). This project takes underprivileged children into nature after school. 'Children who take care of nature learn social behaviour and learn about how

the world works; they explore their boundaries and learn that they can fall. That can't be done in little once-a-week outings to the heather. Children learn to value nature when they spend time every day playing in the garden and exploring nearby woods and fields.'

She regrets that there aren't many of those kinds of spots in urban areas. 'Why don't we leave a bit more room around the houses, so that children can roam around? The connection with nature is mainly formed at a young age. After that, you'll have missed your chance.'



Stills from the television programme *Eén Vandaag*. This episode (29 April, 2008) featured out-of-school care centre 'Struin' in Nijmegen, where children are kept busy outdoors every day, rain or shine.

> Agnes van den Berg and her young daughter, Vivian. In her daughter's development, she continually sees affirmation of all sorts of information from her research on the importance of nature for children. 'Having a child yields insight and inspiration [for my work], but the reverse is also true: my research inspires me in raising Vivian.' Her research was one factor in Van den Berg's decision to move to a house with a large garden, just outside the city, so that her daughter could have daily contact with nature.



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Netherlands  
Zuid-Kennemerland  
National Park  
18.10.2009  
15:00 h