

CAMPUS & COMMUNITY**Nature as a refuge in unsettling times**

Even before the pandemic, campus initiatives like NatureRx@Penn and the 30x30 Challenge encouraged time outside. These efforts are continuing, now that restorative outlets are more important than ever.



Spending time in nature has proven calming effects. Though not everyone can currently access campus green spaces like the scenic Kaskey Park, there are many other ways to safely interact with nature even while adhering to social distancing practices. (Image: Eric Sucar)

In pre-pandemic times, Moriah Hall (’22), associate director of the Master in Public Health Program (<https://www.publichealth.med.upenn.edu/>) at the Perelman School of Medicine (<https://www.med.upenn.edu/>), spent a lot of time being active outside. A runner, she typically commuted to work by bike and took her dog, Sasha, for daily walks. Like everyone, she has had to make changes to this routine in recent weeks.

“When our office shut because of the pandemic, I was very thoughtful about how I should maintain these activities that are part of my day that keep me feeling a little bit more like myself,” she says.



Social distancing may mean missing the spring blooms on campus, though even looking at photos of nature online can provide stress relief. (Image: Steven Minicola)

She's found many outlets, exploring the less-trafficked green spaces near her home in Graduate Hospital.

"I run over the South Street Bridge either to the Woodlands (<http://woodlandsphila.org/>)—it's not been too busy there and is such a beautiful outdoor space—or sometimes I run on the Crescent (<https://www.schuylkillbanks.org/projects/grays-ferry-crescent>) trail, which is a little gem. Just finding places in the city that are a little less known has been huge, and it's been doing so much for me."

This recognition that time in nature can improve well-being was what undergirded the creation of campus initiatives including NatureRx@Penn (<http://www.publichealth.med.upenn.edu/cphi/nature-rx-at-penn.html>), a program Hall is helping lead that "prescribes" time in nature, and the Sustainability Office's (<https://www.sustainability.upenn.edu/>) 30x30 Challenge (<https://www.sustainability.upenn.edu/participate/penn-community/30x30-challeng>), which encourages participants to spend 30 minutes outside every day in April.

Though the pandemic and associated closures and distancing have necessitated canceling in-person events associated with these programs, there's hardly been a more important time to seek the calming forces of nature, according to the faculty and staff who created and champion these efforts.



Spending so much time at home has given Penn landscape planner Chloe Cerwinka more time to enjoy the nature and beauty in her own backyard. (Image: Chloe Cerwinka)

“I feel like nature in general often gets taken for granted,” says Chloe Cerwinka, the landscape planner in Facilities and Real Estate Services (<https://www.facilitie>) who led the proposal for NatureRx, which emerged from last year’s “Your Big Idea” Penn Wellness (<https://www.wellnessatpenn.com/>) challenge. “This crisis is pointing out that nature is not a luxury. It’s essential for public health and well-being.”

It’s not just personal experience that supports the positive ramifications of time outside; scientific research does too. “We have science that shows that being in open space and nature reduces cortisol levels and slows your breathing down,” says Jennifer Pinto-Martin (<http://www.cphi.upenn.edu/cphi/jennifer-pinto-martin-phd-mp.html>) of the School of Nursing, executive director of the Center for Public Health Initiatives (<http://www.cphi.upenn.edu/>) and an epidemiologist. “There is physiological data that is very supportive of these benefits.”

Pinto-Martin was chair of Penn’s Faculty Senate (<https://provost.upenn.edu/facultysenate>) last year and instrumental in launching the Your Big Idea challenge, which charged University staff, students, and faculty to develop concrete proposals for programs to benefit the well-being of the community. More than 450 ideas were proposed; NatureRx@Penn was one of three (<https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/prescribing-nature-well-being>) winning ideas, along with the Penn Park Farm (<http://www.cphi.upenn.edu/cphi/Penn-Food->

and-Wellness-Collaborative.html), currently under construction, and Weekly Themed Wellness Walks (<https://www.med.upenn.edu/cphi/Weekly-Themed-Wellness-Walks.html>), which launched earlier this year and drew good crowds until also being canceled for the semester.



On foot and by bike, Jennifer Pinto–Martin has been exploring new areas of the city during the pandemic. On one run, she chanced upon a rainbow. (Image: Jennifer Pinto–Martin)

Cerwinka worked with Hall, Sustainability’s Elizabeth Main, Pinto-Martin, and dozens more campus partners to flesh out the plan for NatureRx. Inspired by other initiatives at places like Cornell University (<https://naturerx.cornell.edu/>) and even in the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia clinics (<https://www.chop.edu/news/cho>) in the Philadelphia area, the program extends the “prescribing pad” to anyone on campus who comes into contact with someone they think could benefit from the stress-relieving effects of the outdoors.

“It’s this simple but evidence-backed idea: It’s just about getting out in nature,” says Cerwinka. “There’s nothing you have to do. You can just spend 10 minutes walking around outside, and that’s going to have a restorative impact on you.”

The NatureRx team had just had a vibrant kickoff meeting in February and were beginning to spread the word and to think about ways to evaluate the program when the pandemic began to influence Penn’s

operations.



NatureRx@Penn

Research shows spending time in nature is good for your health and well-being!

To fill this prescription:

Spend quality time outside: Exercising outdoors is great, but you can also benefit from lying in the sunshine, meditating beneath a tree, watching a bird or butterfly, enjoying a sunset, listening to the wind, etc. Notice how time outside influences your thoughts and mood.

Recommended dosage:

Once a week 2-3 times/week 4-5 times/week 6-7 times/week

FIND NATURE NOW:



Scanning this code
will take you to
green space near
campus.



When you're outside,
hashtag #NatureRxPenn
on any social platform!

For more information: bit.ly/naturerx_penn

NATURE IS THE BEST NURTURE

Many studies show significant health gains for those in contact with nature, including the eight domains of Wellness at Penn.



The NatureRX team at Penn had been ramping up efforts to spread word about their program before campus largely closed down. (Image: Courtesy of NatureRx@Penn)

“We were full steam ahead; people were giving out the prescriptions,” says Hall, “then we’ve all kind of taken to our homes. But we don’t see why we can’t continue to promote the program and the concept in a virtual world where we really believe that there’s a way to be outside safely.”

Now that non-essential staff, faculty, and of course students are spending most of their time at home, dispersed around the country and the globe, however, the NatureRx and Sustainability teams are sharing strategies to do just that.

Through emails to the staff Eco-Reps and participants in the 30x30 Challenge, for example, Main has been sharing a variety of ways to maintain appropriate social distancing while still reaping nature’s benefits. “We’re trying to be understanding of the fact that, especially in an urban area, there is a huge density of people who are vying for the same green space,” says Main. “But with some flexibility we think there are ways that people can feel safe and also have interactions with nature.”

Among the team’s suggestions for ways to safely get your “nature fix”:

- Grow something, whether in a pot on a windowsill or a garden plot
- Move your yoga or Pilates workout outside
- Dine alfresco
- Take a photo of a plant or animal and use iNaturalist or another app to try to identify it
- Enjoy a walk, run, or bike ride
- Participate in the Philadelphia City Nature Challenge, which runs April 24-27
- Visit a National Park online
- Open a window while working to enjoy the view and fresh air



Tending houseplants can provide a relaxing way to connect with nature, especially for those in urban areas or apartments. (Image: Elizabeth Main)

Philadelphia benefits from abundant green spaces, the team points out. A study out last year (<https://www.tpl.org/city/philadelphia-pennsylvania>) showed that 95% of city residents live within a 10-minute walk of a park. Penn's campus itself contains 100 acres of green space. While Cerwinka has been enjoying more time in her yard and exploring nearby woods, Pinto-Martin has been biking in less traveled areas like the Laurel Hill Cemetery and appreciating runs on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, now far less trafficked by cars.

For those times when going outside isn't a safe possibility, the NatureRx team and key partners including Kaskey Park (<https://www.bio.upenn.edu/biopond>) (the BioPond (<https://www.facebook.com/upennbiopond/>)) and the Morris Arboretum (<http://www.morrisarboretum.org/>), have been sharing videos and photos online and on social media (<https://www.instagram.com/morrisarboretum/>), using the hashtag #NatureRxPenn, that showcase natural beauty, such as a meditative video of the Arboretum's Fernery waterfall (<https://www.facebook.com/fire.phenix/videos/4327958600562821/>), or a slideshow of flowers blooming ([https://www.facebook.com/upennbiopond/posts/2650537041724130?__xts__\[o\]=68.ARAjBEPuQ-Tax4DEEgqnW2Ysq4lWx6jplCy7wRdes1oDrVVR5wf6HMPQNFbfo2trLteHQwijKQ6wx5AyYkpQ2lCaj_ttNW TyoH9CM1bj7Jo62vAaouVtmLeR-XP4yO6Jf7OkUROxhcE6Uhn755srmTayHEDIVEu-jxdU67LbHjway7Yi9kDCJISTn8vvptvD-nqfdZNRkELcNMTXPfQEhzoAzkqAXNHYjKRX-9WkoZfSoYMBmTNN3AnpI7AvVajrEUdpn7WbJb4GTTpAeDph5AlOmfr-](https://www.facebook.com/upennbiopond/posts/2650537041724130?__xts__[o]=68.ARAjBEPuQ-Tax4DEEgqnW2Ysq4lWx6jplCy7wRdes1oDrVVR5wf6HMPQNFbfo2trLteHQwijKQ6wx5AyYkpQ2lCaj_ttNW TyoH9CM1bj7Jo62vAaouVtmLeR-XP4yO6Jf7OkUROxhcE6Uhn755srmTayHEDIVEu-jxdU67LbHjway7Yi9kDCJISTn8vvptvD-nqfdZNRkELcNMTXPfQEhzoAzkqAXNHYjKRX-9WkoZfSoYMBmTNN3AnpI7AvVajrEUdpn7WbJb4GTTpAeDph5AlOmfr-)

P_ojq6hMnOVddRLLZKqKLBdlFNe2lnEMGosUowaO_G1HWC-8GS1vwN1BoFP1_peEryF5nLysn36H96bUf_EHaGDGLq8pGhiEM3PP8ZBfVYFIhYmlcF7cJ-HyVodE_Uvl5mKxPY78TstiEzX9dftk&__tn__=-R) on campus that many people may be missing the chance to see in person this year.

While it's hard to speak about silver linings in the context of a global health emergency, there's a hope that all the people seeking refuge on trails, in gardens, in parks, and small patches of green in their neighborhoods will continue to find solace in nature, even when they have other ways of finding entertainment and diversion.

And when that time comes, the NatureRx team remains committed and enthusiastic, not only ready to pick up where they left off but with a lot of momentum gained from the time away. "We are carrying on with energy and enthusiasm, even absent being on campus," says Pinto-Martin. "We can't wait to return and be able to engage in person."



When it's safe to do so, the NatureRx team looks forward to returning to campus with energy and momentum to help community members find solace in nature. (Image: Eric Sucar)

CREDITS

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Writer

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SUBTOPICS

Facilities and Real Estate, Sustainability, Public Health

SCHOOLS

Perelman School of Medicine