



Boys enjoy the outdoors in late October at Devil's Hopyard State Park.

Open Spaces Lead to Healthier Bodies and Minds

Editor's Note: In this "Values of Our Land" series, we look at different benefits of open space and land preservation and their effects on people, the environment, and the community.

Many a road leading to good health begins at an open space or a natural place.

Studies in proof of that abound, showing personal well-being — both short term and long term — is enhanced by exposure to nature.

"Escaping the noise and the unnatural (structures) of suburbanized and urbanized areas for the natural environment has an impact on health," said Russell Melmed, director of Chatham Health District, which serves East Haddam and five other nearby towns.

"Communities with open spaces are healthier," said Melmed, who worked for a decade as an epidemiologist in Connecticut before taking his current job almost five years ago. "That's shown by longevity and life expectancy (data). And chronic disease rates are lower" where people have easy access to the natural outdoors. "That cuts across the educational and economic levels" of residents.

Reflecting on the value of conserved land, Joene Hendry, president of East Haddam Land Trust (EHLT), said, "During the pandemic, we saw a marked increase in the use of our hiking trails. As people searched for safe, outdoor activities, they realized that trails offered excellent and safe recreational opportunities but also offered places to refresh and renew one's spirit during very difficult times."

Today — along with the Town of East Haddam, The Nature Conservancy, the Eightmile River Wild and Scenic Watershed, and Connecticut State Parks — the independent, nonprofit EHLT works to preserve the natural environment. The land trust acquires undeveloped property in town for public benefit. It currently protects in perpetuity more than 700 acres in preserves and through property easements. Fifteen preserves have marked hiking trails. Others have paths. All are open to townspeople and others.

“More and more research,” Hendry said, “backs up what outdoor enthusiasts have experienced for years, that the proximity of natural spaces — parks, walking and hiking trails, conserved woodlands and meadows — is beneficial to the health and well-being of the people living nearby and of those who spend time in these natural spaces.”

At Nathan Hale-Ray Middle School, Assistant Principal Bridget Erlandson said administrators and teachers alike recognize the need for nature in nurturing students’ focus, behavior, and learning.

“It’s vitally important for kids to be outside,” Erlandson said. The school property includes more than seven miles of biking and hiking trails, she said, and the principal there has worked hard to ensure that students of all grades — from fourth through eighth — get outside every day, whether for play or study, or just for reading and absorbing sunlight and fresh air.

Erlandson is current president of the town’s Little League. She was a softball player as a student at Nathan Hale-Ray High School and a softball coach when she taught there for 15 years. Today, she and her family raise cattle on a farm that once belonged to her grandparents.

“Kids should be outside and engaging in free play, too,” she said. “(It’s) unstructured time, when they’re monitoring themselves and making their own decisions ... and being explorers and investigating. All of that is what we need our kids to be doing. It’s what we need our adults to be doing, too.”

At the East Haddam Senior Center, Director Brad Parker said the outdoor walking track gets heavy use by seniors.

Parker was the long-time director of the town’s Parks and Recreation Department, and, in fact, helped to create it. Every week, he tries to take several walks at different spots in town or nearby. Making sure that East Haddam preserves its open spaces is critical to the town’s character and appeal, he said. Even when he’s travelled, Parker added, he has tried to remain “rural,” shying away from spending much time in cities.

“Living in the town that we live in, obviously there’s a lot of open land and hiking trails and places to do outdoor activities,” he said. “I think all that is great. I can’t imagine living in an area where you couldn’t do that.”

At Chatham Health District, Melmed advocates even for seemingly simple time outdoors, spent in non-strenuous activities such as “forest bathing” or “tree bathing.” It’s the Japanese practice of therapeutic relaxation by being amid trees while calmly observing nature. *Shinrin-yoku* can help both adults and children “de-stress.”

“Sometimes,” Melmed said, “just going to a natural place and sitting under a tree can make all the difference.”

###

Studies Show Bonuses from Time Outdoors

A summary of various studies from University of California-Davis Health released in 2023 highlights three major benefits derived from time spent in nature:

- Improved thinking and other mental abilities, largely because people usually begin to relax. This increases feelings of pleasure and can help in concentration and focus, according to studies in the National Library of Medicine.
- Improved physical wellness, as shown in reduced cortisol levels, muscle tension, and demands on the cardiovascular system. Being out in nature can lead to lower rates of heart disease.
- Improved mental health as exemplified by a study in Denmark that examined 900,000 people born between 1985 and 2003. It found that children living in neighborhoods with more green space had a reduced risk of mental disorders later in life.

###