

SESSION DESCRIPTION

ID: T9

Healing nature: Exploring the multiple dimensions of Nature-Based Therapies from the Ecosystem Services perspective

Hosts:

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Abstract:

The central theme of the European ESP Conference 2026, “Advancing ecosystem services knowledge for achieving a nature-and people-positive Europe”, underscores the connection between ecosystem services, nature and people. Indeed, nature, through the diverse values and roles of ecosystem services, plays a vital role in enhancing human wellbeing.

Ecosystems, among other benefits, can serve as restorative spaces, where people with different conditions and realities experience a range of health improvements. Indeed, ecosystems are increasingly recognized as therapeutic sites where individuals can build and maintain various resilience resources. Recent evidences demonstrated how nature contact can support people with different medical conditions by promoting psychological health, physical health and wellbeing (Adewuyi et al., 2023; Gascon et al., 2017; Triguero-Mas et al., 2015). Moreover, contact with nature can help people improve aspects of their biological, psychological and social resilience (White et al., 2023).

In this context, nature-based therapy (e.g. forest bathing, horticultural therapy, surf therapy, green exercise, nature-based social prescribing) represents a relatively novel approach that involves the intentional use of nature for improving human health, whether for preventive or treatment purposes. In recent years, many research projects have focused on disentangling how nature can be used for therapeutic outcomes. These studies are generating robust scientific evidence to support the establishment of this emerging human activity, with findings focusing on direct health outcomes, indirect environmental and social outcomes, and sustainability of the activity from environmental, social and economic perspectives.

The concept of nature-based therapy is highly related to that of ecosystem services. While most of the studies in this area explore the activity from a psychological and medical perspective - focusing on nature's health-promoting effect- other disciplines can provide complementary scientific evidence. As such, environmental and economic studies focusing on the diverse values of nature, as well as the benefits derived from cultural ecosystem services, can help to disentangle and better understand the advantages of nature contact.

Goals and objectives of the session:

In this session, we aim to synthesize key findings related to the therapeutic use of ecosystems and associated services. We invite contributions that elucidate how exposure to different ecosystems (e.g. urban parks, coastal and marine environments, blue inland spaces, agricultural landscapes) can aid in the prevention and treatment of different health conditions, by delivering physical and mental health benefits. We also call for contributions that investigate outcomes beyond health, including social and environmental impacts (positive and negative) associated with nature-based therapies.

We especially welcome contributions that (i) focus on the environmental aspects of therapeutic spaces (e.g. differences between green and blue spaces, focus on specific environmental elements or

components, role of environmental quality); (ii) studies that extend beyond health-related outcomes (e.g. studies exploring environmental, social or economic aspects of NbTs); (iii) studies that explore synergistic benefits of nature-based therapies (e.g. effects on social cohesion, community engagement, environmental awareness, pro-environmental behaviors). Interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary studies are especially welcome.

Planned output / Deliverables:

Depending on the contributions received, we will prepare a collaborative review paper for publication

Session format:

2-hour session with 6-8 oral contributions

Voluntary contributions accepted:

Yes, I allow any abstract to be submitted to my session for review

Related to ESP Working Group:

TWG 9 – ES & Public health