



Wellbeing through Nature

PROGRAM COORDINATOR

Sally Holliday

CEO

Karissa Preuss



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We acknowledge the Ngunawal people, the traditional custodians of the ACT and region. We recognise and respect their continuing connection to land, waters and community, and ongoing leadership in caring for Ngunawal country.



ABOUT

The Wellbeing through Nature program is an initiative of Landcare ACT, which builds on the knowledge of long-term Landcarers that caring for the environment is also good for their own health and sense of wellness.

Funding for the 2 year pilot project was provided by ACT Government through the 2021 *Health Promotions Grants* program.

The Wellbeing through Nature program was underpinned by a large and growing body of international research showing that actively and purposefully connecting with nature is good for mental health, wellbeing, and social connectedness.

The program had three key objectives:

- Improve the mental health of individuals living with complex mental health challenges
- Improve the social connectedness of individuals from priority populations; and
- Expand the reach of nature-based activities, to improve community mental health and social connectedness, beyond the life of the program.



**OVER 100 EVENTS
WERE HELD DURING
THE TWO YEARS OF
THE PROGRAM**

KEY ACTIVITIES

We designed activities which engage our priority populations;

- young people,
- culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people,
- older people,
- Aboriginal people,
- people who identify as LGBTQIA+, and
- people with a lived experience of mental health challenges.

Activities are grounded in mindfulness and self-reflection with a deliberate emphasis on slowing down, activating the senses and consciously noticing your surroundings

Over 100 events were held during the two years of the program.

Activities have included:



Guided nature walks and cultural walks



Propagation and planting workshops



Adventurous volunteering activities



"Froggy Fun" evenings and Nature Art activities



- Reflections in Nature Series - a 6 week series for participants with lived experience of mental ill-health and other chronic health conditions
- Guided Walks - Mindful Meanders, Frogs by Night, cultural walks exploring Ngunnawal connections to Country with elder Wally Bell.
- Come and Try Days - a chance to try Landcare and learn about local groups
- Adventurous Volunteering for Youth - environmental volunteering for young people with an emphasis on physical activity and teamwork
- Propagation Workshops
- Habitat Restoration Plantings - rewilding urban areas, rural dams project
- Therapeutic Horticulture Activities - sustainable foraged floristry, flower pressing
- Pride Grows - LGBTQIA+ community
- Deepen Your Nature Connection Course - a 5 week series exploring the myriad benefits and applications of nature connection with a view to cultivating a personal practice and facilitating opportunities for others
- Shared calendar - hosted by Landcare ACT. All the Landcare and Environmental Volunteering opportunities from across the region in one place. Easy to navigate and filter according to preferences.
- Canberra Festival of Nature - celebrating Canberra's natural beauty for the duration of spring

OUTCOMES

The Wellbeing through Nature program has achieved its objectives of:

Improving mental health of 300 individuals with complex mental health
Although we did not undertake preliminary screening for the program based on pre-existing conditions, many attendees have reported experiencing social anxiety, depression and PTSD prior to taking part in the program.

Repeat attendance has been high - a core group has formed. Some participants have attended over 20 activities across the 2 year period, stating that nature connection has been a significant part of their recovery journey and ongoing wellness practice.

The Wellbeing through Nature Program has identified and removed structural barriers to engagement in Landcare for focus population groups. For example, Canberra's LGBTQIA+ community has been supported by Landcare ACT in partnership with Meridian ACT, Diversity ACT and ACT NRM to form "Pride Grows." This group has been very popular, with over 50 attendees at annual planting events.



OUTCOMES

Landcare ACT has improved the social connectedness of at least 500 individuals. With over 1000 attendances at key events, over 600 of these can be attributed to unique attendees

101 CORE ACTIVITIES **1304** ATTENDANCES

50 Guided Walks

38 Conservation Activities

8 Therapeutic Horticulture Activities

5 Deepening Nature Connection Sessions



OUTCOMES

Landcare ACT has increased the capacity of existing conservation care groups to support mental health and social connectedness.

Early on in the pilot program, Landcare ACT held a community consultation/think tank session entitled “Cultivating a Community of Belonging” involving catchment groups, member groups, program participants and community partners. Together, we identified barriers to engagement in environmental volunteering and how we could collaborate to remove these. Glenn from Companion House facilitated a discussion around the experience of new migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. We also discussed barriers for the LGBTQIA+ community.

ACT Environmental Volunteers Conference - session on Nature Connection and a panel on attracting, engaging/supporting, and retaining volunteers. Landcare ACT also provided assistance to Landcare Groups to hold Come and Try Days. These events were well attended and resulted in new memberships.

“Friends of Aranda Bushland (FoAB) were very pleased to host a Come and Try day. We did a variety of activities including monitoring vegetation, and concluded with an interpretative walk. It was enjoyed by the participants, several subsequently joined FoAB. We look forward to meeting them again at our regular work parties.”

- Ian Falconer, Convenor Friends of Aranda Bushland

After participating in the Wellbeing program, volunteers report joining Landcare groups and other associated groups such as ACT for Bees, Greening Australia and citizen science programs like Canberra Nature Map.



PARTNERSHIPS

We have collaborated with program partners focussed on the provision of mental health support, such as Wellways' Step Up Step Down program, and Headspace's Youth Advisory committees.

Partnerships - Advocacy, Health and Community Services

- Wellways
- Communities at Work
- ACT Mental Health Consumer Network
- Diversity ACT
- Meridian ACT
- Woden Community Services
- Headspace
- Companion House
- Multicultural Hub
- Volunteering ACT
- ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS)
- ACT Youth Advisory Council
- Canberra Interfaith Forum
- Canberra Theosophy Society
- The Griffin Society
- University of the 3rd Age (U3A)
- Suburban Land Agency - Mingle Whitlam and Mingle Taylor

Partnerships - Environment-based

- Catchment Groups - Ginninderra Catchment Group, Molonglo Conservation Group, Southern ACT Catchment Group
- Frogwatch
- Waterwatch
- Friends of Grasslands (FOG)
- ACT Parks and Conservation Service
- ACT Natural Resource Management - Connecting Nature, Connecting People Project
- ACT for Bees and other Pollinators
- ACT Urban Woodland Rescue
- Greening Australia
- Woodlands and Wetlands Trust
- Ginninderry Conservation Trust
- Australian National Botanic Gardens
- National Arboretum
- Nature Fix
- Nature Art Lab
- Upper Murrumbidgee Demonstration Reach (UMDR)
- Canberra First Garden Club
- Australian National University Landscaping Team

END-POINT EVALUATION

EXTERNAL RESEARCH CONDUCTED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA

RESEARCHERS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA HAVE EVALUATED FEEDBACK FROM 61 PARTICIPANTS WHO ATTENDED A TOTAL OF 191 SESSIONS



MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS

90% reported that the program was good for their mental health

QUALITY OF LIFE

88% agreed that the program improved their quality of life

SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

85% felt that the program helped them feel more connected to others



"Fresh air, exercise, enjoying nature, learning about places in Canberra I'd never been to before, learning new ways to de-stress by tuning into nature, learning to appreciate nature and the need to protect it, feeling much better after each activity than when I arrived, meeting new people of varied backgrounds.

And, last but definitely not least, learned so much more about First Nations people and cultures, in particular, the Ngunnawal people, who inhabited Canberra before white people did"

NATURE CONNECTION

WITH OUR PARTNERS NATUREFIX

Nature Connection is not simply contact with nature. Rather it is the nature of the contact that really counts. Our emotional and psychological connections with nature are key. Connecting with nature in an embodied, mindful, present way is part of a chain reaction.

With this in mind, the Wellbeing through Nature Program has intentionally fostered curious, embodied inquiry. Guided walks have been all about slowing down the pace in which we encounter our surroundings, activating the senses, giving mindful attention to the little details through soft focus, and amplifying moments of awe and wonder by sharing our experiences with others. Participants have also been encouraged to look to nature for wisdom and insight, for example relating one's own life journey to the resilience of an elder tree.

Since personal and planetary health are interlinked and mutually dependent, we can't take people out of the equation - much as humans may be the cause of significant environmental problems, they must also be part of the solution. Time in nature and traditional education alone are not enough to catalyse change. Rather appreciation of nature is linked to greater awareness and in turn, action!



*It's not just **contact** with **nature**
It's the **nature** of the **contact***

REFLECTIONS



Before the onset of the Wellbeing through Nature program, anecdotal reports from Landcarers indicated that acts of environmental stewardship improved their personal wellbeing. Indeed, this was the seed idea driving the Wellbeing through Nature program. As it turns out, the reverse flow is also true.

Extensive global research (particularly metastudies - studies of studies) demonstrate that on their own, traditional environmental education or simply spending time in nature is not enough to promote pro-conservation or sustainability oriented behaviours. Instead, supporting Nature Connection is one of the most significant actions to increase these behaviours.

When faced with large-scale challenges like climate change and species loss, working alongside others toward a shared purpose is a powerful antidote to eco-grief, overwhelm and loneliness, shifting us out of paralysis and into collective action. Communing with others in nature has been a key part of this program.

Existing environmental volunteers and conservationists are at real risk of burnout. It's necessary to carve out time and space to recharge our personal energy, not just give tirelessly to the cause. Landcare ACT has facilitated opportunities for Landcarers to nourish their own wellbeing through nature-appreciation workshops such as nature journaling with Nature Art Lab where the focus was less about "doing" and more about being, noticing and appreciating.

NEXT STEPS



Over this two year program, the Landcare ACT team and extended Environmental Conservation Community have built up a deeper collective understanding of the value of nature connection for personal and planetary health.

As an organisation we are now better equipped to share this with on-ground volunteers, and provide the skills and training needed to embed these principles across the network.

Landcare ACT will continue to offer opportunities for nature engagement and connection.

- Landcare ACT has received two small Environment grants to support roving Landcare groups, Pride Grows (for LGBTQIA+ community and allies and a group especially for young people aged 15 - 30 years).
- We have secured an ACTEW AGL community grant to support women to engage in nature connection and environmental volunteering.
- We will continue to promote our shared calendar to support the community to engage with nature connection and conservation activities
- We will continue to facilitate monthly guided nature connection walks

THANK YOU



ACT
Government

Our thanks to the ACT Government for making this project possible



Thank you to Dr James Neill and Hannah Black at the University of Canberra



mental health | disability | rehabilitation

Thank you to Lachlan Atyeo and the staff at Wellways



Special thanks to Wally Bell for his guidance and support



Finally, thank you to our partners, and to everyone who attended a Wellbeing through Nature event.



