

WHY WE NEED FORESTS AND NATIVE VEGETATION FOR OUR HEALTH

FACT SHEET



Our forests and native vegetation like grasslands, wetlands and woodlands are vital to our well-being.

They provide a wide range of benefits to support our health and the environment in which we live. Consequently, destruction of these natural ecosystems through land clearing harms human health. These health impacts are outlined in a related [DEA fact sheet](#).

HEALTHY PEOPLE DEPEND ON TREES

- Trees provide oxygen: it takes about thirty mature trees, on average, to produce the amount of oxygen we each breathe every year (*Nowak et al., 2007*).
- They absorb carbon dioxide, thereby protecting us against climate change. For example, Australia's old growth mountain ash forests are the most carbon dense in the world, holding

carbon in the trees and vegetation, as well as the soil (*Keith et al., 2009*).

- They purify our air, trapping pollutants like nitrogen dioxide and microscopic particles that harm our health.
- They absorb and redistribute water maintaining the water cycle. Trees access water deep in the ground and hold the moisture in their canopies.
- They absorb sunlight and emit heat, creating thermal currents,

that take moisture from the leaves up into the atmosphere where it condenses as rain. When trees are removed, heat is reflected rather than absorbed, which means less moisture evaporates into the atmosphere and, in the long run, less rain falls.

- They increase rainfall and improve water quality, greatly reducing the cost of expensive water treatment when they're part of healthy intact forests surrounding water catchment areas. This is very important for people living in cities as well as rural areas. For example, a major reason that Melbourne has some of the world's best quality drinking water is because of its forest catchments which are largely protected.
- Trees and native plants can prevent soil loss and flooding if left undisturbed.

NATURE'S PANTRY AND MEDICINE CHEST

- Forests and native vegetation are a rich food source.
- They are also a source of bioactive compounds, some of which are important as current and potential future medicines.
- They are important for the survival of pollinators like bees.

Bees and other insects fertilise crops and are therefore essential for production of much of the food we eat.

For example, leptospermum, or 'tea tree' is a critical habitat for bees. Bees can also provide honey which has anti-bacterial properties that are useful in health care such as wound healing (*Wound Practice and Research, 2011*) and soothing night time cough when children have a viral illness (*Cohen et al., 2012*).

HIGH QUALITY GREEN SPACES AS A PRESCRIPTION FOR MENTAL HEALTH

- Spending time in forests can lower stress and lift mood. (Townsend *et al.*, 2010).
- Spending time in a forest lowers blood pressure and the stress hormone cortisol (Mao *et al.*, 2012) as well as stimulating natural killer cells which are important in fighting infection and inflammation in the body (Environmental Health Preventative Medicine, 2010).
- Forests and other natural environments provide a place for us to reconnect with nature and engage in healthy outdoor physical activity.
- For indigenous people, natural landscapes are integral to cultural and spiritual wellbeing.

NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS PROVIDE VALUABLE PLACES FOR EDUCATION AND WORK

- Children benefit from learning in a natural outdoor environment with improvements in social skills, resilience and confidence in addition to academic outcomes (Malone & Waite, 2016).
- Forests and natural environments provide healthy long-term jobs for those working in environmental education, scientific research, health care and tourism.

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