

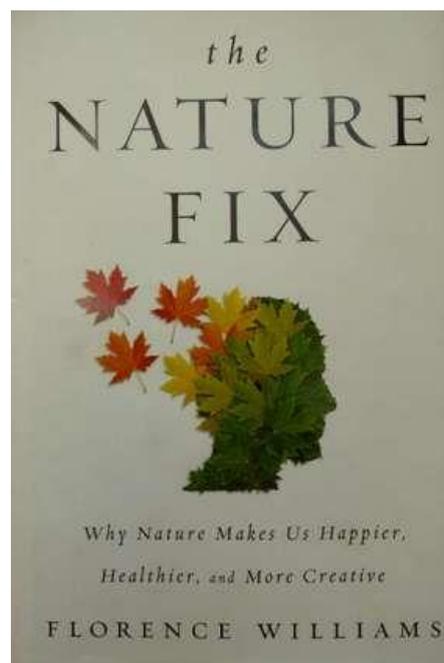
Book Review: The Nature Fix

By Stefanie Rudolph (blogging at www.lifeinplants.com , where a longer version of this first appeared)

We all need our regular fix of nature. It's just the dosage, or perhaps the effective dose, which may vary slightly. Florence Williams, in her book *the Nature Fix. Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative* backs up with research what most people will long have felt to be true. Indeed, as she points out with a look back into history, people have sung the praise of nature and harnessed its powers to clear the mind and provide inspiration for thousands of years.

But for the first time ever more people now live in cities than in rural areas. What consequences does that have for Homo sapiens? Does it have any at all? And if so, should we be worried? Should we make any changes to our ways of life, our urban environments to make amends? Does it really matter we left behind "life in the woods", so to speak, and our ancestors' connection with nature? Is it just a matter of getting used to the urban, with nature just a romantic notion and not *really* essential to the day-to-day life – apart from providing food, oxygen and the like, of course – for most of us?

Referencing Richard Louv and what he termed *nature deficit disorder*, the thesis of Williams' book is: "We don't experience natural environments enough [anymore] to realize how restored they can make us feel, nor are we aware that they make us healthier, more creative, more empathic and more apt to engage with the world and each other."



Louv likewise coined the term 'nature neurons' - "to highlight the essential link between our nervous system and the natural world they evolved in." So is that link ignored? Ultimately, Williams says, this is the aspiration of her book: "to find the best science behind our nature-primed neurons and to share it." And that's just what she does: seeking out and tracking down scientist across the globe who are studying the effects of nature on humans – from various different angles, starting points, cultural backgrounds and with varying intentions.

Starting out with *how* it affects humans – from those who, in the interest of economy, want to

make workers' more efficient, focused and creative to those with a more holistic approach. She then determines to find out *how much* nature we need and what kind: is it enough to have a poster on the wall, have a window with a view of some greenery, take a walk in nature via virtual reality? Do you need to have access to the real thing? And what constitutes the real thing, i.e. how wild does it have to/ how "tame" can it be? And how long does it take for nature to work its magic? Three seconds? Three minutes? Three weeks?

The book is divided into five parts. Most main chapters have two or three subchapters, each dealing with a different strand of her quest. It's a theme: Williams travels somewhere, talks to the scientists about their approach and research, and if they are doing a study she'll not just report on these but will have the setup tested on herself, strapped into all sorts of devices to measure brain activity, heart rate, etc..

Early on, for instance, she familiarizes herself with the Japanese and Korean practice of forest bathing (and the reasoning behind it). I also especially loved the description of how in one experimental setup she "immersed" herself in "nature" via walking on a treadmill and wearing a virtual reality headset! (The outcome? It simply made her feel dizzy and sick.)

For other chapters she accompanies undergraduate students on a track in a desert area, children with ADHD on a rock climbing session or a group of army veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder on a five day trip down a wilderness river – always in order to witness what effect nature has on these people.

In *the Nature Fix* Williams references and quotes from a long list of people: from philosophers to neuroscientists, from literary writers to reformers of education, Eastern and Western, past and present. If I have one small niggle it's that I feel sure there are many more Northern and central European voices and studies that could have been included here as people there have such a longstanding tradition and love affair with, not to say quasi-religious approach to, nature and woods in particular. Williams does acknowledge that, especially in her chapter on Finland. As mentioned above, she has travelled widely in her search and if, as an American, she has concentrated on American voices and scientists to frame her quest, I shouldn't fault her for that.

For those keen to make a difference, a great many interesting, valuable and sometimes surprising findings are scattered throughout the book - snippets of information which can provide advice or guidance. While much of it seems science simply backing up what common sense suggests (or at least what many people who love nature will have expected and felt to be true all along), you will still learn a lot.

This then, is what I consider the book's greatest strength: Bringing together so many voices, theories, approaches and findings regarding the effects of nature on humans. If you are coming new to the subject, you will find pointers galore where to go for further study. At the very least, this book provides you with ammunition to fight the cause for nature, for conservation, for using it in therapy, for greening the urban environment: black on white, scientifically proven, much of it cutting edge.

It's heartening to see that what once was a trickle of studies has, across the world, become a little wave. I'm looking forward to it swelling further and hopefully make a true impact across many fields. Oh, and if I may suggest one thing to the publishers: For the next edition of *The Nature Fix* PLEASE include an index, it would make finding names, theories etc. again so much easier.