

HEALTH & WELLNESS

Heart Healthy in the Great Outdoors

Mary Beth Sallee

Can spending time outdoors be therapeutic? Can a hike in the woods or paddling a kayak down the river help combat heart disease?

The answer is yes.

Ecotherapy, also referred to as green therapy or nature therapy, is an emerging area of study that explains how one's health benefits from the great outdoors. Ecotherapy can include gardening and farming, reading a book outside, or participating in activities such as hiking, biking, and kayaking.

Various studies have proven that ecotherapy can have a positive effect on both physical and mental health. In return, physical and mental health can both directly and indirectly affect heart health.

Physical health includes not only eating healthy foods, but also

exercising.

"Being physically active is a major step to-



Hiking in the back country of Mammoth Cave National Park. Photo Credit: Rachele Wright.

ward good heart health," stated an article on the

John Hopkins Medicine website. "It's one of your most effective tools for strengthening the heart

muscle, keeping your weight under control and warding off the artery damage from high cholesterol, high blood sugar, and high blood pressure that can lead to heart attack or stroke."

The outdoors offer many great ways to exercise, including hiking or biking on trails, going for a walk or run, and even kayaking.

Although many know that exercise and physical health affects the heart, what many may not know is that one's mental health condition can also affect heart health.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), people who experience anxiety, depression, and stress over extended periods of time may also experience negative cardiac activity, including increased heart rate and increased

blood pressure.

However, the Frontiers in Psychology website stated that there is "...growing evidence to suggest that exposure to natural environments can be associated with mental health benefits."

In other words, ecotherapy, or being closer to nature, has been associated with lower levels of stress and, in some cases, have been known to reduce anxiety and depression. Therefore, better mental health means better heart health.

Throughout the Commonwealth, there are many activities that can get you outdoors and on the move, especially in southcentral Kentucky. And if you're searching for information about trails for outdoor activities, look no further than Cave Country Trails (CCT).

According to the CCT website, "The vision of Cave Country Trails is to create a regional network of biking, hiking, equestrian, and water trails to connect communities and make the Mammoth Cave Area and South Central Kentucky a more attractive outdoor destination and place to live..."

Last year in 2021, Cave Country Trails hosted the CCT Challenges of 2021.



Mountain biking at Nolin River Lake State Park. Photo credit: Kentucky Department of Tourism.

"We ran four month-long challenges during April, June, August, and October," said Rachele Wright, CCT Project Director. "We had 279 trail users to enter. This included cyclists, hikers, paddlers, bikers, and horseback riders."

The challenge featured trails in all four counties that make up the Cave Country Trails region: Hart, Barren, Edmonson, and Warren. CCT gave away over \$2,000 worth of

prizes through all four challenges.

Wright stated that future plans for another CCT Challenge are forthcoming.

For more information about Cave Country Trails, visit the website at www.cavecountrytrails.com.

As with any exercise plan or activity or for additional information about heart health, consult your physician.



Paddling and overnight camping on the Green River. Photo credit: Jeff Bruce.

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