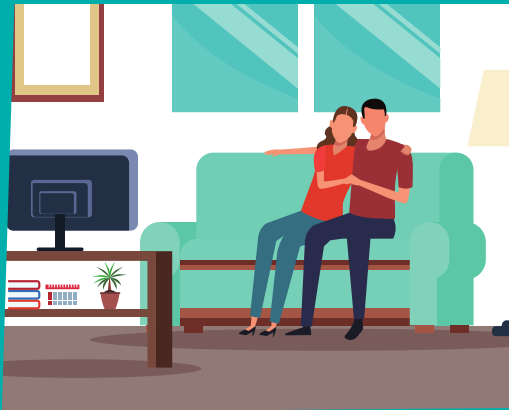


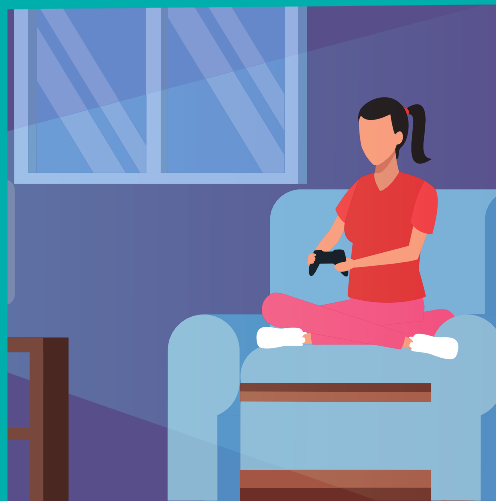
REPORT

# COVID & NATURE CONNECTION

August 2020



REMEMBER THE WILD



## INTRODUCTION

# SUMMARY & KEY RESULTS



## KEY FINDINGS

### PEOPLE ARE VALUING NATURE MORE

Many people are spending more time in nature than they did before lockdown. This is because they have been allowed more time to do so and/or because they are using natural areas to help regulate their mental health. People are also thinking about the natural world more because of COVID-19, with some consuming more nature-related content.

- 47% OF PEOPLE ARE SPENDING MORE TIME IN NATURE
- 75% OF PEOPLE ARE THINKING ABOUT NATURE MORE
- 29% ARE CONSUMING MORE NATURE-RELATED CONTENT
- AT LEAST 38% OF PEOPLE ARE APPRECIATING NATURE MORE
- 82% OF PEOPLE ARE USING NATURE MORE TO MANAGE THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

### ACCESS TO NATURE HAS BEEN REDUCED

Not everyone is spending more time in nature, with many people unable to. This is in part because they do not have adequate opportunities to access nature. People without natural areas on or near to their property are having a hard time.

- 28% OF PEOPLE ARE SPENDING LESS TIME IN NATURE
- 81% OF PEOPLE ARE CRAVING NATURE MORE THAN BEFORE
- AT LEAST 21% OF PEOPLE CAN'T ACCESS NATURE IN WAYS THEY WOULD LIKE
- LOCAL PARKS AND WALKING TRAILS ARE OVERCROWDED

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**DEVELOP & SUPPORT COVID-SAFE PROGRAMS THAT ALLOW VULNERABLE PEOPLE DIRECT ACCESS TO NATURE**



**FACILITATE ACCESS TO NATURE THROUGH INDIRECT MEANS, SUCH AS DIGITAL CONTENT, LIVE CAMS, AND STORY**



**HELP PEOPLE TO BRING NATURE INTO THE HOME, SUCH AS IN THE FORM OF HOUSE PLANTS**



**PRIORITISE LONG-TERM IMPROVEMENTS IN THE DESIGN AND AMOUNT OF GREENSPACE IN URBAN AREAS**



# ABOUT THIS REPORT

**Science continues to demonstrate the far-reaching benefits of nature for our mental and physical wellbeing. Reduced depression, anxiety, and aggression. Improved mood, concentration, immune health and feelings of fulfilment. Plus, the many social benefits that spending time in nature can provide.**

This report details the results of Remember The Wild's COVID-19 and Nature Connection Survey. This survey was conducted during the initial lockdown experienced by Australians in the first half of 2020. The purpose of the survey was to understand how people's relationship with nature had been affected by the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The results provided in this report speak to changes in how much people were able to spend time in nature, as well as changes in how people thought and felt about nature. Recommendations are provided at the end of the report in hopes of directing the efforts of government and NGOs to facilitate greater, and more equal access to nature within our society.

## ABOUT REMEMBER THE WILD

Remember The Wild is Australia's first nature connection charity. We seek to bring experiences of the natural world back into our lives, for the benefit of both the environment and ourselves. Dedicated to improving public access to nature, we reconnect communities with the local environment and help people remember why the wild matters.

## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "NATURE"?

The term "nature" was not explicitly defined in our survey, allowing respondents to interpret the word for themselves. However, some questions did refer to specific categories of natural environments, such as parks and gardens. Generally, respondents possessed broad ideas around what "nature" is, including wilderness areas, nearby parks, backyard and balcony gardens, local wildlife, and natural phenomena such as sunsets and sunrises within their definitions.

## SUMMARY STATISTICS

A total of 359 people responded to our survey, with 302 of those respondents choosing to answer the optional, qualitative question. Respondents were well-distributed across age classes, with the majority falling between 25 and 45 years of age. In regard to gender, 77% of respondents identified as female.

## METHODS

This survey was distributed online and accepted responses for 34 days from the 4th of May to the 7th of June, 2020. The survey was advertised through Remember The Wild's social media accounts and online newsletters, and was shared with our professional networks for further distribution. The survey consisted of ten questions aimed at understanding how a respondent's relationship with nature had been influenced by the lockdown. One of these questions was optional and required a written response to the prompt: "How has COVID influenced your relationship with nature overall?" Qualitative responses were analysed using an inductive approach, aiming to identify consistent themes in the written answers of respondents.

## LIMITATIONS & CONSIDERATIONS

One limitation of our study is that our survey was distributed primarily through our existing audiences and networks. As Remember The Wild is a nature connection charity, we can assume that the majority of responses to our survey came from people who already possessed strong inclinations towards the natural world. Despite this, however, our results imply that COVID-19 has changed the way people interact with, and contemplate nature, though it should be noted that our study is a snapshot in time and reflects people's experiences from May to June, 2020.

An additional limitation is that the majority of our respondents are likely to be of a relatively wealthy, Caucasian demographic. Assuming this, we must be cautious about extrapolating our results to the broader Australian public. For one thing, we might predict that the experiences of some sections of our society would be vastly less positive than our results indicate. We might assume that the inequalities we have uncovered in this survey are just scratching the surface of the reality that is out there in our communities.

Finally, an unfortunate limitation of our survey was that we did not collect postcode data from respondents. Based on our method of distribution and the references in our qualitative data, we are confident that the majority of our respondents reside in Victoria. Nevertheless, we acknowledge this is a weakness in our study.

REPORT BY CHRISTOPHER MCCORMACK,  
REMEMBER THE WILD





KEY FINDING #1

# PEOPLE VALUE NATURE MORE

## ONCE PEOPLE CAN SPEND MORE TIME IN NATURE - THEY DO

Nearly half of the respondents to our survey reported that they were spending more time in nature since lockdown began. Sixty-four percent of respondents were studying or working from home, while another 21% were unemployed or retired. This, along with numerous qualitative responses, indicates that the initial disruption caused by COVID-19 was providing people with more opportunity to spend time in nature than usual. It is evident from the responses to this survey that people

value time in natural environments - be they the backyard or local bushland - and will actively seek out such opportunities once enabled to do so. Additionally, it is clear that a strong motivation for spending time in nature relates to mental health and wellbeing, particularly since lockdown began. Having been allowed the time to interact more with the natural world in a deliberate manner, respondents reported increased appreciation for it, and remarked that they were noticing and paying attention to elements of nature that they had not previously. This appreciation and need for natural environments also manifested for some in an increased consumption of nature-related content.

# 47%

**OF PEOPLE  
ARE SPENDING  
MORE TIME IN NATURE**

### PEOPLE HAVE BEEN THINKING ABOUT NATURE MORE DURING LOCKDOWN

#### CONTEMPLATION

**75%** Agreed that they are thinking about the natural environment more than before

#### MEDIATED NATURE

**29%** Said that they are watching, reading, and listening to nature-based content more than before

### PEOPLE ARE APPRECIATING NATURE MORE BECAUSE OF LOCKDOWN

#### APPRECIATION

**38%** Volunteered that they appreciate nature more than before

#### WELLBEING

**82%** Agreed that time in nature has become a way to help them relax and feel good, more so than before

PEOPLE VALUE NATURE MORE

# A CLOSER LOOK



## PEOPLE ARE GETTING TO KNOW LOCAL NATURE MORE



More time at home has allowed people more time to get to know nature in their area. Seven percent of written responses volunteered that they were experiencing more of their local parks and trails, as well as observing more local wildlife. This has been augmented by a desire to spend time outdoors for reasons related to mental health and wellbeing.

...have taken the opportunity to visit local parks and recreation reserves a little more, partly through having a little more time.

It has made me focus on local nature and get to know my local reserves a lot better. Passing the same plants every day means I'm getting better at identifying them.

Covid has allowed me to stop and enjoy nature in my local parks and trails rather than seeking this enjoyment from well promoted parks located further away.

Many respondents felt that lockdown had given them the opportunity to slow down and pay more attention to their environment. Fourteen percent of qualitative responses mentioned a change in the way they attend to the natural world.

## PEOPLE ARE PAYING MORE ATTENTION TO THE WORLD AROUND THEM

From my bedroom window, I've got to know the haunts and routine of the 5 or so birds who are regulars in my front garden. It's given them some individuality which I never had the chance to experience before.

Having more time I have watched and listened to greater detail and my appreciation for the natural world has deepened to a higher level.

It's allowed me to slow down and appreciate the little things like sunrises and sunsets...



## PEOPLE ARE APPRECIATING THE ROLE NATURE PLAYS IN THEIR WELLBEING



Whether to cope with the stress of job loss, anxieties around health, or the frustration of being cooped up at home, 82% of respondents said they have developed a greater appreciation for the restorative effects of natural environments on mental wellbeing. Twenty percent of written responses also highlighted this as a key driver for why people sought time in nature.

Since I have lost my job due to Covid 19, I have found walks in the local park and seeing the native bird and mammal life really puts me in a much better mood.

I love nature always have always will but this situation has made me realise how much I need nature for my wellbeing.

I've taken to hugging a gum tree I pass on my walks. ...There is a sense of life in nature, of the world continuing and carrying on despite current events. It's soothing and connecting.

People are perceiving improvements in the environments around them. There is a hope that ecosystems and biodiversity are benefiting from the constraints placed on human activity. Five percent of written responses focused on the notion of reduced human impact because of lockdown.

## PEOPLE HOPE THE NATURAL WORLD IS RECOVERING

Glad to see/hear that nature has had some reprieve from human impact, with less pollution and creatures in areas that haven't been for while.

I've noticed the impact of removing cars from the roads on wildlife and air quality and don't want things to go back to how they were.

Hoping the earth is healing whilst we are taking a break.





## KEY FINDING #2

# ACCESS TO NATURE IS REDUCED

## BARRIERS TO NATURE HAVE INCREASED BECAUSE OF LOCKDOWN

While many respondents to our survey said that they were spending more time in nature during lockdown, nearly a third reported the opposite. This was especially true for people between the ages of 25 and 34, and for the small proportion who reported having no backyard, balcony with natural views, or easy access to local nature. Combined with the qualitative data, this indicates that opportunities to spend time in natural environments are not equal across Australian society.

Despite widespread need (81% of people agreed they are craving natural areas more than before), many people do not have adequate opportunity to benefit from natural environments. This is compounded by the fact that those who have access to nature under normal circumstances are finding themselves cut off from these areas, either due to restrictions in movement or because their local areas have become too busy to provide the safe and restorative environments they require. As a result, while lockdown has benefited some by allowing them to enjoy the nature in and around their homes, it has had a severe and potentially enduring impact on others.

**28%**  
**OF PEOPLE  
ARE SPENDING  
LESS TIME IN NATURE**

## PEOPLE HAVE BEEN NEEDING NATURE MORE DURING LOCKDOWN

### NEED

**81%** Agreed that they are craving access to natural areas more than before

## SOME PEOPLE'S ACCESS TO NATURE HAS BEEN LIMITED BECAUSE OF LOCKDOWN

### LIMITATION

**21%** Mentioned they were unable to access nature in ways they would like since lockdown occurred

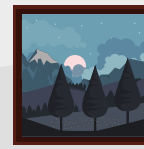


**THE BUSY-NESS OF MY LOCAL TRAILS INDICATES TO ME HOW IMPORTANT NATURAL AREAS ARE FOR OUR COLLECTIVE HEALTH. WE DESPERATELY NEED MORE GREEN SPACES IN THE CITY.**



ACCESS TO NATURE IS REDUCED

# A CLOSER LOOK



## PEOPLE MISS VISITING NATIONAL AND STATE PARKS

Numerous respondents expressed their sadness and frustration at being unable to visit wilderness areas. Of the 21% of written responses that spoke of restricted access to nature, 80% of these referred to travel restrictions. While some people acknowledged this had enabled them to get to know their local area more, most expressed a deep desire to be away from human settlements.



[I'm] feeling desperate to go camping in nature away from people.

I kind of took it for granted, until I was told I could not visit my favourite places. I miss them like an old friend.

I miss wild places: urban parks and green spaces are not at all the same as being out in national parks.

While many people are spending more time enjoying natural environments close to home, this has meant urban parks and trails have become busier than usual. As a result, some respondents reported feeling they were no longer able to enjoy these places, either because they were concerned for their health, or because the solace they had sought in them was no longer available.

## PEOPLE ARE FINDING THEIR LOCAL PARKS AND TRAILS CROWDED

Now my time in nature...is inundated with people and it makes me feel anxious... I can't find the peace that I seek.

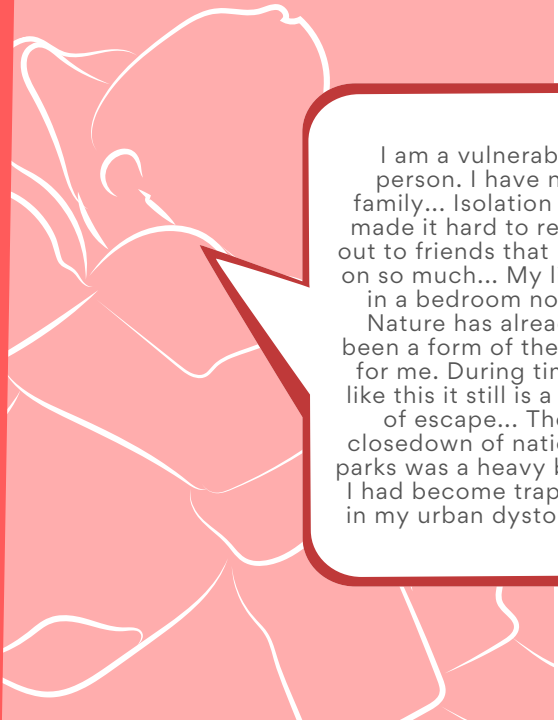
Suddenly people were outside on "my" tracks and "my" beach. Previously it was unusual to see anyone for hours. I stopped going out, there were too many and I started having anxiety attacks.

I spend about the same time in nature. But I find myself more stressed in that space, by the necessity to maintain social distance with other goers.



## PEOPLE WITHOUT ACCESS TO NATURE ARE HAVING A HARD TIME

The majority of our respondents reported that spending more time in nature resulted in improvements to their mental health and wellbeing. However, for those respondents unable to access nature in ways they would like, the impact of lockdown has been devastating. People who would ordinarily seek time in nature to deal with stress or provide momentary escape from difficult living situations are now not able to. This presents a significant welfare issue for individuals experiencing difficulties, particularly as such stresses may have been enhanced by the repercussions of COVID-19.



I am a vulnerable person. I have no family... Isolation has made it hard to reach out to friends that I rely on so much... My life is in a bedroom now. Nature has already been a form of therapy for me. During times like this it still is a way of escape... The closedown of national parks was a heavy blow. I had become trapped in my urban dystopia.

[I] used to drive somewhere green every weekend. Took my elderly Mum out in the car last week to pick up office furniture for the home office and she was really excited to see trees.

I live in a shoebox apartment, I've missed being able to be somewhere I can't see the roads. Honestly found it really difficult I couldn't even go to the botanical gardens.

I crave time with nature but cannot have it. It is distressing not to have access to the outdoors.

I live in an apartment in the center of town, with no balcony or any garden access. It's also far away from parks or green spaces. This lockdown has reinforced my understanding of how incredibly important access to nature is to my mental and physical wellbeing.

# DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of our survey make it clear that people value nature, particularly during times of stress and uncertainty. This is evidenced by the fact that once people can spend more time in nature, they do. The initial lockdown meant more people were spending time at home. This resulted in a lot of people spending more time in natural areas, such as in their backyards gardening, or in local bushland on walking trails. For many, this was fulfilling an existing desire to be in nature, while for others it was motivated by a need to manage their mental health. This desire to spend time in nature was coupled with an increase in the amount people were thinking about the natural world, and for some, an increase in their consumption of nature-related media. A number of people reported that they were attending to nature more, noticing wildlife and realising things about their local environment that had previously eluded them.

While many people took the first lockdown as an opportunity to engage more with natural areas, for some this was not possible. This was particularly the case for people in their mid-twenties and early thirties, perhaps due to differences in living situations associated with age. Respondents who spent less time in nature during restrictions cited a lack of nature at home and nearby nature as prominent issues, and lamented their inability to travel to wilderness areas. Additionally, people who might have spent time in nature chose not to due to the overcrowding of their local areas. This was either due to fear of contagion, or because the perceived value of time in nature was reduced by the presence of higher numbers of people. Those suffering from limited access to nature because of lockdown found the experience extremely distressing.

It is evident that people need nature. Natural environments offer individuals significant benefits to mental health and emotional wellbeing. However, it is also clear that there is not enough nature to go around. Many people in our communities are unable to access natural environments in ways that would help them cope with the stresses of life. Bringing more nature into the home is one way of addressing this problem. Research has found that nature in the home, such as house plants, can provide significant benefits to residents, improving mood and concentration, and reducing stress and anxiety. This is of particular value to those who do not have backyards or similar spaces to retreat to when needed. The high density living characteristic of cities means that fewer and fewer people have access to greenspace within their property's boundaries. Furthermore, many vulnerable members of our society cannot afford "the Australian dream" of owning their own home with a big backyard. However, the unequal distribution of property is not an excuse for depriving the more vulnerable members of our communities of the natural world. Government and NGOs can help by raising awareness of the importance of indoor nature, as well as developing and supporting programs that help people act on such awareness. Those who have the least access to natural areas in and around their homes, and who are particularly vulnerable to the difficulties presented by societal disruption, should receive priority support.

Where direct access to nature is not possible, mediated experiences of the natural world can also provide people with wellbeing benefits. Audio and/or visual representations of natural environments have been shown to enhance mood and relieve stress. Additionally, stories of the natural world can help people find comfort during troubling times, and empower people who might otherwise be feeling helpless in their present circumstances. To quote one respondent: "My primary access to spending time with nature is visiting my local park, but the anxiety I feel trying to maintain social distancing around people who don't seem to care about it, means I have spent significantly less time outside... I've utilised the animal videos being posted by various zoos, sanctuaries, etc. And watched more videos online than I would have a few months ago."

It is vital that government and NGOs recognise the value of such content in allowing people to connect with the natural world. In an increasingly digital society, mediated experiences of nature should not be seen as a replacement for the real thing, but they do have a valuable role to play in helping people maintain a sense of connection and buffering against the impacts of distressing experiences. For people stuck in inner city apartments, immersive digital experiences of natural landscapes can provide significant relief.

For some members of our society, more targeted methods may be required. This is because some sections of our community are uniquely vulnerable to the impacts of nature deficit disorder, and are characteristically unable to access nature in the ways others can. This includes, but is not limited to: older demographics, people with existing health issues, individuals with reduced mobility, people living in nature-deprived areas or residences, individuals with poor mental health or who have recently experienced trauma, and those who are disproportionately impacted by social and economic disruption. The inequalities experienced by such groups are likely to be increased under scenarios such as lockdown. Given the increasing severity of restrictions and the possibility that major societal disruptions are likely to occur again in the coming decades, it is vital that careful consideration is given to the development of programs that enable vulnerable community members ongoing access to nature. Resources should be directed towards interventions that provide vulnerable people with COVID-safe opportunities to interact with the natural world. The findings of this report suggest that such interventions should prioritise COVID-safe access to state and national parks, as well as opportunities to spend time alone or with immediate family in nature.

In the long term, providing sufficient greenspace should be a high priority for local government as well as private developers, with careful consideration given to the equality of access to such areas. Our study provides just a glimpse of the extent of environmental inequality that exists within our communities. Such inequalities will continue to manifest themselves regardless of COVID-19. Additional consideration needs to be given to the characteristics of greenspace that provide value for people. Natural areas need more than just greenery to provide benefits for the community. As this report demonstrates, a key reason people seek time in nature is to be alone and find solace. The first lockdown resulted in some greenspace becoming crowded, undermining its capacity to deliver benefits to those that need them. The pandemic has therefore revealed the inadequacy of our cities' current designs and extent of greenspace. Ordinarily such areas may appear sufficient, but once people are able to use them to the degree they would like, or experience increased stresses that create a need for them, it is evident we need more greenspace. In particular, we need more spaces that allow people to feel alone, while also safe. Meeting such needs is by no means easy, but doing so is nonetheless crucial to the health and wellbeing of city communities moving forward.

During times of severe disruption and uncertainty, the need for nature's benefits is heightened and more obvious. However, many of the findings illuminated in this report are relevant beyond the pandemic. As a moment in time, COVID-19 provides value in shining a light on the environmental inequalities systemic in our society, as well as revealing just how vital nature is to human health and happiness. The pandemic shows us that nature and the wellbeing benefits people derive from it are an essential service.

**REMEMBER  
THE WILD**