



Meaning and design of nature for the urban built environment

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The importance of nature for human well-being: A cultural geographer's perspective on nature and the city

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Recent work in the social science of nature will be briefly reviewed, referring particularly to the inseparability of non-human and human aspects of nature, the problems of treating humans as a form of “ecological disturbance”, the importance of treating nature as having multiple meanings and the potential that lies in accepting the social agency of non-human nature. This will be followed by an equally brief outline of recent work in the culture of nature which focuses on how humans know and interact with the natural world. This theoretical material will be used to underpin a discussion of recent New Zealand, European and North American geographical and sociological research which helps us interpret the connections between nature and human well-being in the city. These relate in a variety of ways to human engagement with nature in search of recreational enjoyment, ecological restoration, the solution of environmental problems; individual and collective identity, and sense of place. Case study material will be drawn first from research into the meaning of urban open space and the recreational significance of domestic gardening. A recent social study of participation in ecological restoration in Christchurch (Travis Wetland) and Timaru (Otipua Wetland) will be discussed, followed by an interpretation of citizens’ reactions to the loss of private open space and vegetation in processes of urban infill. Some thoughts about how these cases relate to questions of identity and sense of place will be canvassed. The paper will conclude with a few remarks about the potential for social science to contribute to the development of an urban ecology agenda in Aotearoa/New Zealand.