

News story – press release

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A touch of ‘farm therapy’ is antidote to modern lives, say scientists

Are you tired, tense and stressed after a busy week? New research released today by LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming) shows that spending a few hours visiting a farm could be an antidote for busy, stressed out lives. A trip to a farm also brings people closer to nature as well as encouraging environmentally responsible behaviour.

Scientists from the University of Essex analysed the psychological effects and attitudes of groups of farm visitors aged 18-84 and found that after spending a few hours on a farm, 95 per cent were less tired, 91 per cent were less tense and 55 per cent felt revitalised.

Most visitors experienced a closer connection with nature, which is known to improve mental and physical health¹²³ and more than half said they were more likely to buy food produced to high animal welfare and environmental standards as a result of visiting the farm.

The findings come ahead of Open Farm Sunday on 1 June (www.farmsunday.org), a day when hundreds of farms nationwide are opening their farms to the public with accompanied tours, demonstrations and fun activities.

The study was led by Professor Jules Pretty, a leading expert on ‘biophilia’ (man’s love of nature) in the UK. “There is growing evidence to show that exposure to green space and woodlands is good for you and this study clearly shows that spending as little as two hours on a farm benefits a person’s wellbeing and enables them to connect with nature.

“In particular, stressed out 30-somethings and over-worked men who are looking to recharge their batteries might be advised to ditch the gym work-out or snooze on the sofa and get out

¹ Pretty J, Griffin M, Peacock J, Hine R, Sellens M and South N, A countryside for Health and Well-Being: The Physical and Mental Health Benefits of Green Exercise Report for the CRN, February 2005

² de Vries S, Verheij RA and Groenewegen PP. (2001) Nature and Health The Relation between health and green space in people’s living environment. Euro Leisure-congress Netherlands. (Submitted to Environment and Planning.)

³ Ulrich RS, Simons RF, Losito BD, Fiorito E, Miles MA, Zelson M.. Stress recovery during exposure to natural and urban environments. Journal of environmental psychology 1991; 11: 201-203.

into the countryside and onto a farm instead. Younger people who are brought up in cities can also benefit their health and their awareness of environmental issues by getting close to nature on a farm,” said Professor Jules Pretty, head of Biological Sciences at the University of Essex in Colchester.

The participants were asked to complete an internationally recognised mood questionnaire and mood improvements in each of the six designated states were revealed. Anger and hostility levels decreased for 70% of visitors, feelings of confusion and depression both decreased for 80% of visitors, vigour increased for 55% of visitors, tension and anxiety levels decreased for 91% and nearly all visitors (97%) saw a reduction in fatigue.

One of the most striking findings was the invigorating effects of a farm visit on people over 30 and male visitors. After visiting the farm, those aged over 30 and men experienced a statistically significant⁴ increase in energy levels or vigour .

Eighty per cent of people in the UK live in urban areas⁵ and getting out into the countryside can be one of the easiest ways of connecting with nature, particularly amongst younger adults. Previous research⁶ conducted for LEAF, revealed that 29 per cent of adults (and 42 per cent of adults aged 16-24 years old) have never been on a working farm and for those that have, the experience is a distant memory as 31 per cent haven't visited a farm within the last four years.

Caroline Drummond, Chief Executive of Linking Environment And Farming said: “Open Farm Sunday provides a great opportunity to get out into the countryside and to learn more about the role today's farmers play in caring for our green spaces and wildlife, as well producing food. Over 2,500 British farmers have signed up to LEAF's farming scheme which integrates modern farming with conservation, so that natural meadows, hedgerows and ponds on farm land are protected or renovated to provide a home for wild plants and animals.”

⁴ P<0.05

⁵ National Statistics 'Focus on people and migration 2005 – the UK's major urban area' Graham Pointer

⁶ The research was undertaken by the Oxford Partnership as part of a TNS face to face omnibus survey which interviewed over 1,073 adults in England, Scotland and Wales during April 2007. Results are weighted in order to be nationally representative of the Great British population.

The University of Essex study revealed that older visitors (the over 30s) were found to have a significantly higher connection with nature (3.72) before the farm visit and young adults (under 30s) had the lowest 'connectedness to nature' scores to start with, but experienced the greatest increases after visiting the farm.

Participants' attitudes about farming were also measured prior and after their farm visit by asking them what services they thought farms provide – 75 per cent named landscape features, 67 per cent wildlife biodiversity and 54 per cent health. The findings show that there is a growing recognition of services (other than providing a source of food), particularly amongst the under 30 year old group, 55 per cent of whose perceptions had changed for the better.

Some of the quotes given were: “Animals are not just for petting – there's more to it” and “I hadn't really thought about the positive nature conservation by farmers” “It's about supporting wildlife” “It will make me buy British, or at least look for local produce”

After spending time on the farm, visitors said they were more likely to buy food from a British, British seasonal, local or quality standard scheme of some kind such as the LEAF Marque or Freedom Foods. The 'food produced to high animal welfare and environmental standards' option saw the biggest change with 64% of farm visitors saying they were more likely to buy such food.

A trip onto a farm can mean many things to many people and participants were asked what they enjoyed most about their farm visit. Four themes emerged - scenery and fresh air, the farm walk, contact with farm animals and the tractor ride which formed part of the visit.

Comments included “A good walk through the fields”, “The fresh air”, “Time to reflect on what a farm actually does – importance of farms and of wildlife”, “Seeing my son enjoy himself feeding orphaned lambs”

To find out more about LEAF and Open Farm Sunday call 02476 413911 or visit www.farmsunday.org

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For further information and images, or to arrange an interview with a local farmer contact:

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Editors notes research and methodology

- The research was conducted by the Centre for Environment and Society, Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Essex
- 71 men and women aged 18-84 (average age of 35) took part in the research
- Participants took part in three farm visits in April 2008 - two to an arable/conservation farm in Coleshill, Birmingham and an arable/sheep farm in Tewkesbury, Worcs.
- The visits lasted from 2-5 hours, depending on how long the participants wished to stay on the farm
- A composite questionnaire, which included a range of qualitative and quantitative elements was given to the participants before and after their farm visits.
- This included the internationally recognised Profile Mood of States questionnaire and a simplified version of the Connectedness of Nature Scale.
- Professor Jules Pretty is Head of the Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Essex. He is a Fellow of the Institute of the Biology and the Royal Society of Arts, Deputy-Chair of the government's Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE), and has served on advisory committees for DEFRA, DFID, the Cabinet Office and DTI. He received a 1997 international award from the Indian Ecological Society, was appointed A D White Professor-at-Large by Cornell University from 2001, and received an OBE in 2006 for services to sustainable agriculture.

Editors' notes about LEAF and Open Farm Sunday

- LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming) www.leafuk.org is a national charity that helps farmers produce good quality food with care for the environment, whilst working with their local community
- An increasing number of farmers are signing up to the LEAF scheme which integrates modern farming know-how with conservation
- Food carrying the LEAF marque logo indicates that it has been grown by farmers who are committed to looking after the countryside and the environment

- Open Farm Sunday on 1st June provides a great opportunity for the public to get a behind-the-scenes look at life on a farm and the nature it sustains
- The Event is organised by LEAF and hundreds of farmers are taking part by inviting the public to visit their farm where there will be nature trails, talks, tastings and demonstrations
- Visitors will be able to learn how farmers are encouraging natural plant species to thrive alongside crops and can get a close up look at farm animals and wildlife
- Open Farm Sunday principle sponsors include: Countryside Council for Wales, CLAAS, DEFRA, Farmers Weekly, Frontier Agriculture Ltd, HGCA, LEAF Marque, McDonald's, Natural England, National Farmers Union, National Grid, Produce World, RSPB, Scottish Natural Heritage and Waitrose