

*How do people see nature? Perceptions of naturalness in designed urban green spaces.*

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There is a large and growing amount of evidence of the benefits for people of spending time in nature, particularly in terms of mental well-being. Now most of the world's population lives in towns and cities, many people access 'nature' in designed urban green spaces, parks, and gardens with varying degrees of naturalness. Some are highly manicured with very orderly blocks of plants and single layers of trees. Others are wild looking and more 'natural' with multi-layered woodlands and mixed meadow-like flowers. Parks and gardens are designed and maintained to provide spaces for people and to support wildlife, yet we do not know what the public think about parks with these different levels of naturalness. In order to inform policymakers and practitioners delivering urban nature for people, we investigated this.

We chose 31 areas of woodland, shrub and herbaceous planting with three different levels of naturalness in public parks and institutional gardens. We then invited people walking there to complete a self-guided questionnaire assessing their thoughts on how natural they thought the planting was, its relative attractiveness, tidiness, wildlife value for plants and insects, whether it made them feel mentally calm to walk there and their thoughts on how connected they felt to nature. We asked them to provide information on themselves, such as age and ethnicity. We were interested in how opinions related to both the characteristics of the planting and the people themselves. We found that people recognised the different levels of naturalness, although they thought the middle level was the most natural. Planting they thought was natural was also considered attractive, good for mental well-being, rich in plants and insects, yet it was not viewed as tidy. Women and people who considered themselves nature-connected perceived higher levels of naturalness. More educated participants perceived lower

levels of naturalness overall. Our findings show that to create attractive places supportive of human well-being, policymakers and practitioners need not place too much emphasis on intense levels of maintenance, as naturalness is viewed positively. This is important knowledge in times of widespread austerity.



*Monk's Wood, Fairland's Valley Park, Stevenage (author's photo).*

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