Nature Heals: A Research Roundtable Meeting Summary

October 1-2, 2015

Dr. Jean Larson
Hosted by Center for Spirituality and Healing and Minnesota Landscape Arboretum
**Background and Purpose** On October 1-2, 2015, a group of leading researchers in the field of Nature-Based Therapeutics convened in Minnesota to discuss their collective research on the relationship between nature, human health and wellbeing. The Nature Heals Research Roundtable presented an opportunity for experts to synthesis research to date and to have open dialogue about the existing gaps, methods, measures and future opportunities. Specifically, the experts considered critical issues currently raised in the literature related to crossover between five modalities and used this unique opportunity to start identifying key questions/ideas that could be answered through future research. The Nature Heals Research Roundtable represents another step in the evolution of attention and research related to Nature-Based Therapeutics at the University of Minnesota.

**Overview** Although research examining the relationship between nature and human health began in the 1980s, focus on how together the five modalities (restorative landscapes, therapeutic horticulture, green exercise, animal assisted interactions and care farming) make for greater impact has been relatively sparse. The intention of the first day was to provide an opportunity for the five experts to give presentations in their respective area of study followed by questions from audience. The second day, a small group of around fifty people from research and practice generated deeper insight into the needs/gaps/themes of five areas.

Following opening remarks, and groups self selected (10-12 per group) into their areas of interest. “Ice-breaker” activities convened with staff from the University of Minnesota’s Nature-Based Therapeutic Services to give participants an experience of the work. Afterwards, Dr. Jean Larson presented a summary of how the Nature-Based Therapeutics is distributed between program delivery at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum and academics with the Center for Spirituality and Healing.

After the “icebreaker” session, participants were asked to consider what insights and/or understanding they had pertaining to the experts presentation the prior day; and as a small group, what issues seemed to rise to the surface and how best to address them with future research. The following includes the presenter’s mural from previous day and summary points from conversation.
Joe Sempik, Social and Therapeutic Horticulture

- **Methods:** people are doing the work from a variety of areas; needs to be more training with consistent message; the work encompasses not only gardening but farming and academics
- **Cross-pollination:** publications need to be submitted in journals outside garden/farming and more in health promotion
- **Research:** more research into the return on investment in order for public policy to change; language needs to move into “care” and away from intervention
- **Population:** Children – focus on school gardens for all children
Terry Hartig, Restorative Landscapes

- Methods: more cultural sensitivity and the role it plays in moderating the human-nature experience; more attention paid to access issues/equity issues; what makes people sick and what makes people well; move into an integrated approach and away from dichotomous (nature vs urban)
- Cross Pollination – sensitive to language and the work of restorative landscapes is not the same as therapeutic horticulture or therapeutic landscape; Restorative landscapes is about promoting health
- Research – more attention to the causal mechanisms that are affecting the outcomes of research; using standard metrics is sacrificing unique qualities of tools of researchers
Cindy Wilson, Animal Assisted Interaction

- Methods – emphasis on the animals doing the work
- Cross Pollination – look for multidisciplinary teams to assist in projects
- Research – quantitative research is essential for field to move forward; mixed methods is best of both worlds and the field needs to integrate the qualitative with quantitative; need more definition to the field
- Population – ignite students to field with new innovative ways to program and many people with variety of skills at the table
Sara Warber, Green Exercise

- Methods – Provider prescriptions to support the work; consider the person and their definition of nature
- Cross Pollination – work with urban designers on establishing green spaces throughout the landscape instead of hard-to-reach nature outside urban limits; build for 8-80 years old will work for most everyone
- Research – what is value of water in terms of blue (green) exercise; how do you identify the value of nature/water? how does society articulate its relationship to these spaces or aspects? Examine the built environment vs. natural environments as it pertains to play (wild verses playground); design bottom up that is, define the public life society values and create that environment; gross national happiness and how it relates to green exercise and play spaces
- Population – learn from the indigenous people and their relationship with nature to heal collective wounds
Care Farming

- Methods – Arboretum a breeding ground for mixing methods – those with intentional interactions with plants/animals with those farming practices focused on production; focus on mixed methods so as to not miss subtle aspects of care/benefit
- Cross Pollination – moving care farms into urban design
- Research – what is the best setting for Care Farms? City or Farmlands? Need for Intergenerational work mixing people and generations
- Populations – focus on care farming application for people with dementia; deliberate, productive based environments will support the “dignity of risk” needs e.g. between falling at farm vs. stagnating in care center
**Conclusion** The Nature Heals Research Roundtable presented a unique opportunity to bring together researchers and practitioners to examine their shared experiences and begin “brain-storming” on the questions that remain unanswered. The result of the convening was a starting point for more discussion and refinement of these ideas to be converted into a cohesive Nature-Based Therapeutic research agenda. This agenda would be utilized to encourage researchers to examine this area and facilitate the increased attention that NBT, and the need for integrated Nature-Based services, are receiving.

Discussions such as those facilitated by the Nature Heals Research Roundtable help to raise the important questions that improve the ability of researchers and practitioners understand and address our need for nature in human health and wellbeing.