ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION ACTIVITIES AND THE BENEFITS FOR HUMAN HEALTH AND WELLBEING

A report on the wellbeing impacts of North East Bioregional Network ecological restoration activities.

Healthy Landscapes Research Group
The overarching vision for the UN Decade is a world where – for the health and wellbeing of all life on Earth and that of future generations – the relationship between humans and nature has been restored, where the area of healthy ecosystems is increasing, and where ecosystem loss, fragmentation and degradation has been ended.

United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2031) Vision Statement (p4)
At the commencement of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, we conducted a qualitative, descriptive research project to investigate the wellbeing impacts of participating in ecological restoration activities. Designed using complementary principles of appreciative inquiry and health geography, we interviewed 9 people who had participated in Northeast Bioregional Network (NEBN) activities in various roles and 3 health workers employed in the Break O’Day region. Understanding the lived experiences of restoration workers and local health and wellbeing service providers illuminates the complex relationships between ecological restoration activities and health and wellbeing. It also provides important information that can shape future ecological restoration program design and rural community health provision to optimise these health benefits.
A mountain of health and wellbeing benefits for individuals and the community.

People talked about the many and varied health and wellbeing benefits they experienced. These were direct benefits to individuals, as well as ‘upstream’ benefits that resulted in indirect health and wellbeing benefits for people and the broader community.

"It does feel better days off the grog off, for sure. Any alcoholic will tell you that." (NEBN Worker)

Direct benefits to individuals

- Improved physical fitness
- Increased self-esteem, pride and confidence
- Improved mental health
- Hope and positivity!
- Reduced alcohol intake
- Improved friendships + social engagement

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"And so having the means to get people outside and doing something that's constructive, and takes them outside of their normal sphere of reference, I think, a lot of problems are because people don't have something useful to fill their time with ... Being outdoors is good for people's brains. And doing physical work, you know, something that that involves something that makes your puff or pant, we know works as well for depression as most of the drugs that I tend to give people, those sorts of things ... And then you also have just that human interaction that's going on with group work, which is just there's so much good data on how just being in a normal social situation is really good for people." (Health Worker)

**Upstream, indirect factors**
- Employment and training – proving a career pathway in an area of high unemployment
- Education – short courses and on the job learning about the environment and restoration
- A decent income

"To be honest, mate, it was all amazing to be out in amongst the trees, because I suffer from really bad anxiety and depression. So the employment just in itself, but there are people and [the managers'] support through, you know, with my mental health ... But the actual work itself, I didn't realise how good it would be for me to just be out in the bush, you know ... Just amazing... It was just life-changing, really was life changing." (NEBN Worker)
Particular features of NEBN programs foster wellbeing.

These benefits were enabled partly from just being in nature, and from the increased sense of nature connection that ecological restoration work enables. However, there were certain features of the NEBN programs that were identified as distinctly health-enabling:

"Having variety of activities and not working too long hours, and having good pay rates, all those kinds of things tend to create a good environment where people are feeling positive and valued and all that kind of stuff. ... really, the main thing is having ... good supervisors, good pay rates, hours that don't burn people out and a variety of activities."

(NEBN Work Manager)
There are serious health and wellbeing problems in regional and rural communities that are related to environmental degradation, high unemployment, mental ill-health and insufficient mainstream health services. "If we haven’t got healthy environments and good biodiversity, we don’t actually have healthy people communities … there’s that feeling of hopelessness" (Health Worker)

Restoration ecology work can have broad-ranging wellbeing benefits for participants as acknowledged through lived-experience of participants and observations by local health workers. It can contribute to the environmental, social and economic wealth of communities. Drawing on a locality’s natural attributes makes ecological restoration a low-cost, high return activity that enhances individual and community wellbeing.

"Definitely a huge, like a win-win win for, rural communities if it was properly funded because you definitely get health, education and employment benefits out of it as well as improved environment. Like, it just, it’s a perfect fit really if it was properly funded." (NEBN Work Manager)

Ecological restoration, and similar ‘green jobs’ programs, can be designed in ways that restore ecosystems and contribute to individual and community wellbeing. The workplace structure and culture played an important part in optimising the health benefits that come from being in nature. Aligning ecological, social, ethical and economic elements is an important step in ensuring that the work leads to human health and wellbeing benefits.
Recommendations:

1. Ecological restoration activities need to be recognised for the human health and wellbeing benefits they can deliver.

2. ER can provide meaningful work that aligns with the skills and interests of local people in regional and rural communities.

3. Ecological restoration can offer an innovative solution to seemingly intractable problems, at individual and systemic levels in rural areas.

4. Community-level connections between ecological and health service providers to strengthen partnerships.

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