







# Green Time

**EXPLORING THE BENEFITS  
OF OUTDOOR FITNESS**

by Hilary Moreno

The average American spends almost 90% of their day inside according to a National Human Activity Pattern Survey by Neil E. Klepeis et al. Whether inside a building or a car, we are sheltered from the natural world but at what cost? Current research is offering a more complete picture of the far-reaching health benefits, both mentally and physically, of spending a greater amount of time outside. Campuses, realizing the importance of helping students stay healthy and active, are looking for ways to promote green time as a natural and easily accessible addition to their outdoor spaces.



## Why Outside?

Sadly, I spend about 90% of my weekdays inside, but this past weekend I was at a lake in northern Tennessee at a triathlon. The morning was cold and the lake was covered in low-lying fog, the birds just beginning to find their songs, and the colors shifted from quiet blue-gray to brilliant streaks of sunrise colors.

Nothing makes me stop and appreciate my life quite like getting outside. Nothing forces me into the present moment in the same nurturing way. It calms my mind and restarts me when nothing else does.

Generations of humans were hunter-gatherers and relied heavily on the outdoors for sustenance and survival. Now that we spend 90% of our day inside, Gladwell et al. in *The Great Outdoors: How a Green Exercise Environment Can Benefit All* notes that we are no longer mentally or physically stimulated in the same way. Gladwell suggests, "We are all born with an emotional affiliation for other living organisms, i.e. nature loving, which may mean as part of our genetic makeup we are innately predisposed to desire nature contact, and thus

maybe green exercise should be used to facilitate physical activity to improve health." We have become detached from nature and that loss may be more harmful to our health than we realize.

Gladwell et al. notes that in Japan, Scandinavia, and the Netherlands easy access to green space has been shown to improve mental health, quality of life, and increased longevity, and that's not even necessarily adding exercise to the mix—it's just the overall benefit of spending more time in nature.

## Added Benefits of Green Fitness

Decades worth of research has proven the health benefits of regular physical activity, so why should it matter if you're in a gym or on a trail? Multiple studies argue that people who exercise outdoors are more likely to repeat that behavior and for a longer amount of time than when they are participating in the same activity inside. In addition, Gladwell et al. found that green fitness has been shown to reduce stress levels, restore mental fatigue, improve overall mood and self-esteem, and increase the enjoyment of physical activity on a regular basis.

Akers et al. in *Visual Color Perception in Green Exercise: Positive Effects on Mood and Perceived Exertion* observe that visual and cognitive input from nature may be enough to distract us from difficult physical tasks such as exercise. They state, "It is likely that promoting attention to an external pleasant and green environment reduces awareness of physiologic sensations and negative emotions, thus minimizing the perception of effort and making exercise seem easier." Inside a gym, however, the same effort is perceived as more strenuous.

Furthermore, exposure to sunlight means a greater synthesis of vitamin D in the body. Allison Abel with Greenfield Outdoor Fitness notes that a 2018 meta-analysis of studies documenting the positive health benefits of time spent in the outdoors included decreased heart rate, diastolic blood pressure, and incidence of type II diabetes as some of the key benefits. Just as importantly, an ongoing deficiency of vitamin D can lead to fatigue, depression, muscle pain, obesity, hypertension, osteoporosis, neurodegenerative diseases and possibly some forms of cancer.

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## Attraction vs Promotion

Universities have multiple options for creating inviting green spaces, and potential students and parents are paying attention to the overall visual and physical environment of on-campus life. By offering outdoor fitness options that are accessible all hours of the day, every day of the year, campuses are opening up unstructured opportunities for students and faculty to engage in multiple levels of physical activity at any point in their day.

An off-shoot benefit of incorporating outdoor fitness facilities on to a campus is that seeing people participate in exercise in an open and welcoming environment can be a motivating factor for others passing by.

There's a sense of community and social interaction in outdoor fitness that adds to the positivity, enjoyment, and escapism of exercising in a green space. Participants are more likely to exert a higher level of energy, spend more time being active, and experience lower levels of stress than their gym-bound counterparts.



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## Leverage-based Fitness Benefits

Abel addresses the fact that outdoor fitness options can be a safer choice for regular workouts especially for students who may have limited experience with an indoor gym environment or a sense of how much resistance or weight is appropriate for their individual abilities. The resistance setting for leverage-based fitness equipment is defined by the percentage of the student's body weight—as opposed to how much a student thinks they can handle—thereby greatly reducing the possibility of injury. Able concludes, "It's a simple introduction to physical training, and once they are comfortable and build up their overall strength, they can progress to activities on more complex and challenging fitness units."

## Why Invest in Outdoor Equipment?

Investing in outdoor fitness equipment may allow already existent, but tightly-scheduled athletic space to be available for additional classes and team practices that are better suited for the indoor environment. In addition, there is no need for climate control or for staff to be present—it's self-sufficient in many ways.

There are multiple obstacles, real and perceived, that potential gym users face when considering their exercise

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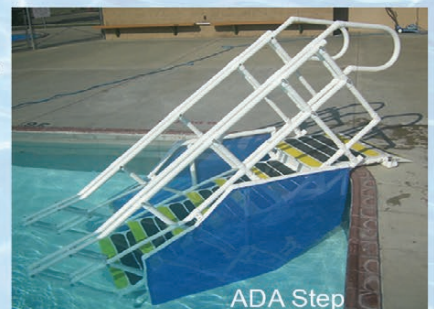
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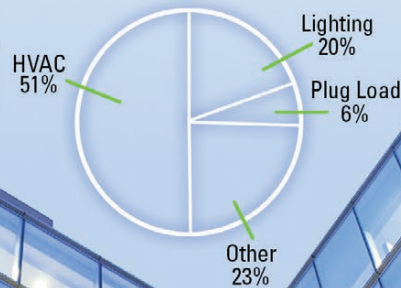
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options. Abel explains, "These include the indoor environment (which those with no experience often find intimidating), the idea of exercising alone, lack of knowledge of how to use the machines, and fear of injury." Here's where the unique nature of green fitness is able to overcome some of these obstacles for hesitant students.

### Overcoming Fitness Obstacles

Abel asserts that the outdoor environment—with wide-open space and the absence of wall-to-wall mirrors—generates an atmosphere that novice users may find more comfortable.

Additionally, an outdoor fitness area promotes socialization "due to both its casual outdoor setting and because it's better positioned to attract diverse demographics." Typically, green fitness areas are more enticing to a wider genre of users such as older adults and individuals with varying physical abilities. Many outdoor fitness areas also offer wheelchair accessible equipment. Plus, outdoor machines are generally simpler and more intuitive to operate. And finally, the majority of green fitness machines feature body-weight leverage systems which can minimize the possibility of injury.

Due to the flexibility of which machines to include, outdoor equipment can be easily adapted to any size area whether it's tucked in between dorms or spread out beside practice fields. Offering green fitness equipment in close proximity to pre-existing sports areas provides additional opportunities for college athletes to warm up before games and practices without having to take time switching from one location to another.

On a broader scale, Abel believes if the campus allows the equipment to be available to the surrounding community, the fitness area can have a far-reaching positive impact on overall community health as well as connecting the on-campus students and local residents. Creating a campus environment that promotes and invites a healthy, active green lifestyle not only supports current students and faculty, but could be a deciding factor for potential incoming students as well.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Hilary Moreno is an alum of Birmingham-Southern College. Currently, she is the Creative Director and a staff writer for Flaherty Media.



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