

# Research :: Conservation Jobs and Worker Health

## Linking Healthy Environments, Healthy Lifestyles, Healthy People



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### Project Funding:



WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF  
**Natural Resources**



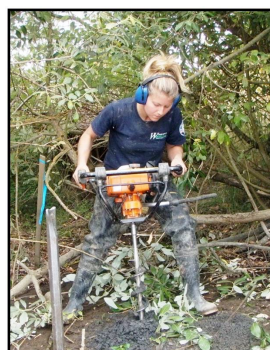
### Conservation Corps Sponsors:



### Project Overview

The research project explored how an outdoor work environment (including urban forest settings) may serve as a path to personal resiliency (through job opportunities, peer engagement, and skill building) and provide healing opportunities.

Washington Conservation Corps (WCC) is an environmental service program for young adults supported by the federal AmeriCorps program. Corps members are 18 to 25 years of age, and participate in service work in small crews to restore natural resource sites. WCC engages approximately 300 people each year, a minority of whom are veterans (who may be older). This study followed a cohort of ~270 WCC members who served for a year from autumn 2013 to autumn 2014.



### Why is This Important?

There is growing interest in the links between healthy environment, healthy lifestyles, and healthy people. Research shows that getting people into the outdoors and bringing the outdoors closer to people may increase physical

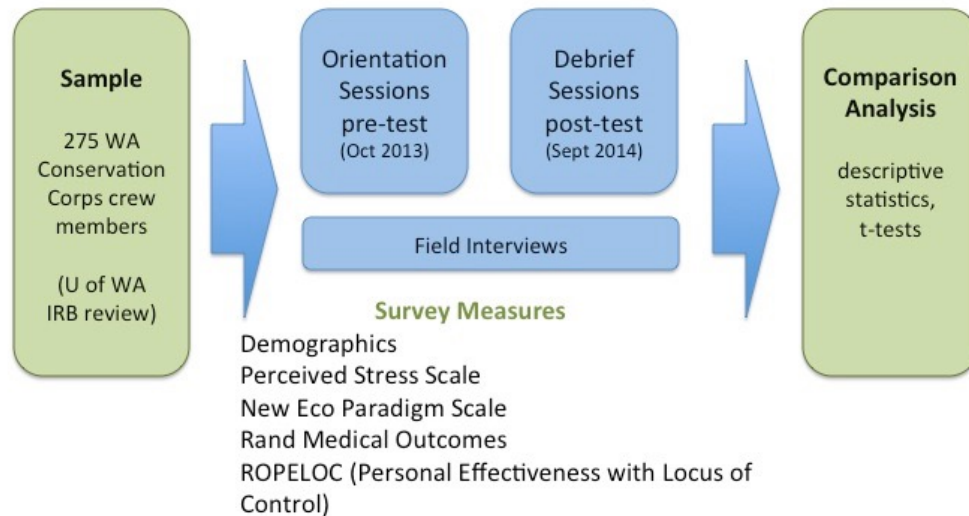
activity, reduce stress, and build social connections - all important public health issues. The scientific evidence concerning nearby nature experiences and human health and well-being spans nearly forty years. Green Cities: Good Health is a research review sponsored by the USDA Forest Service, and can be used by professionals and concerned citizens to access research about the healing capacities of nature: [www.greenhealth.washington.edu](http://www.greenhealth.washington.edu)

### Guiding Questions

This study of young adults and conservation jobs began with several guiding questions. The questions shaped the selection of multiple scientifically validated health and attitude measures, administered at the beginning and end of the WCC members' year of service. Site visits and other qualitative data were collected to add depth and reveal additional insights about corps members' experiences.

- How Does Conservation Work Affect Personal Effectiveness and Stress Recovery?
- How Do Social Interactions Contribute to Stress Recovery and Personal Effectiveness?
- What Individual Traits and Characteristics Are Related to Stress Recovery and Enhanced Personal Effectiveness?

## Study Methods



## Quantitative Findings

- At the beginning of the WCC program most members experienced low perceived stress and were physically very healthy.
- Perceived stress during the employment period lowered. The statistical results suggest that there is a less than one percent chance that WCC members would report less perceived stress on a random basis compared to the beginning of their employment.
- Returning second year members reported better perceived health and higher perceived leadership ability compared to new members.

## Site Visits & Survey Open Text Findings

- Participants mentioned general improvements in their physical and emotional well-being since the beginning of the year (81%).
- “In 10 years, what will you remember about your time with WCC?”
  - Gains in skills and self-efficacy
  - Nature’s beauty and the weather
  - Communication challenges/accomplishments
  - Learning how to work as a team/developing friendships.

## Conclusions & Recommendations

Conservation jobs and service programs serve many good purposes. They help young people learn basic employment skills, provide community services, and help restore key outdoor environments. In this study we wanted to explore potential benefits to corps members in greater depth. In particular, can outdoor jobs promote personal resilience?

Stress and anxiety is a public health concern. Tragic or traumatic situations and events may disrupt people’s lives, but are not the most troubling sources

of stress. Everyday life now presents chronic stressors such as financial strain, complex family interactions, extended commutes, and other persistent situations.

Overall, the corps members entered the work program in quite good health compared to national standards. Their perceived stress was further reduced after a year’s service. One possible outcome of this study might be to introduce outdoor work as a therapeutic activity for young adults, including younger veterans. If so, careful planning of work tasks to align with physical abilities would be important.