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Getting back to Mother Nature for Mental Health Awareness Week 2016

As New Zealand businesses marked World Mental Health Day today (*Editors: Monday August 10 2016*) with a nationwide 'lockout' of its employees, the Department of Conservation and Healthy Families Far North are advocating that all people make more time to enjoy the outdoors in the interests of better health and wellbeing each and every day.

An annual initiative endorsed by the Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand, Mental Health Awareness Week this year will feature events around the country based on the theme of connecting with nature.

At 12pm today, businesses encouraged their employees to down their tools and head outside for an hour of natural goodness. According to the foundation, up to 50% of New Zealanders will experience a mental health problem in their lifetime and depression is set to overcome heart diseases as the biggest global health burden by 2020.

Mental Health Foundation chief executive Shaun Robinson says New Zealanders are leading more sedentary lifestyles, sleeping less, working more and experiencing increasing levels of debt which are all adding up to a quagmire of challenges with repercussions on mental health and wellbeing. He adds that combatting the onset of mental health issues, such as connecting to nature, is easier than people may perceive.

"There are simple things we can all do. Connecting with nature doesn't mean you have to make a daily trip to a national park or forest. Nature is the daisies growing through the cracks in the footpath, the trees on your walk to work, the sky outside your window – it's everywhere, and we need to spend more time connecting with it," he says.

Kaitaia-based Department of Conservation community ranger Shayne Storey couldn't agree more. However, Far North residents are extremely fortunate in being able to access a multitude of high quality walking tracks set in extremely picturesque settings across Northland; there are approximately 23 easy walking tracks of one hour or less in duration in the Far North District alone.



“There is a perception that in order to access these tracks you need to be incredibly fit, own an expensive pair of hiking boots and so forth. But this just isn't the case,” she says.

Kerikeri-based Department of Conservation community ranger Helen Ough Dealy adds that although the department hasn't undertaken official research, she is aware of tracks and reserves being used for everything from walking meditation groups to Tai Chi practice.

“And, if you're exercising in the bush then you're getting the benefits of those positive endorphins being released plus the benefits of nature. It's good for the soul,” Shayne adds.

Healthy Families Far North manager Shirleyanne Brown says her team regularly connect with nature as part of its philosophical approach to its work.

“We played a significant role in organising the recent *Pipiwharaura*: *Healthy Nature, Healthy People* walk held at Lake Ngatu, but we have also held walking team meetings at the Taumarumaru Scenic Reserve and 90-Mile Beach waterfront. Good health and wellbeing is intrinsically linked with our environment and we take the opportunity to build our team capacity while embracing the best that nature has to offer whenever we can,” she says.

Mental Health Awareness Week officially runs from Monday 10 October to Sunday 16 October. For more information, visit www.mhaw.nz; for more information on Far North Department of Conservation parks and recreation, visit <http://www.doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/>.