


## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OLDER PEOPLE AND NATURE: IMPACTS OF TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE ON THE PROMOTION OF WELL-BEING AND QUALITY OF LIFE

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**Francijanes Alves de Sousa Sá<sup>1</sup>, Neila Barbosa Osório<sup>2</sup>, Luiz Sinésio Silva Neto<sup>3</sup>, Leonardo Sampaio Baleeiro Santana<sup>4</sup>, Fernando Afonso Nunes Filho<sup>5</sup>, Nubia Pereira Brito Oliveira<sup>6</sup>, Marlon Santos de Oliveira Brito<sup>7</sup>, Fábio de Sousa Almeida<sup>8</sup> and Ana Karolline Soares Alves<sup>9</sup>**

### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the relationship of older people with nature and the impacts of this interaction on the promotion of well-being and quality of life. To this end, a systematic literature review was carried out in order to identify recent research that analyzed the perceptions of older people in relation to natural environments and the consequences of outdoor activities for the physical, mental and emotional health of this population group. The results showed that contact with nature contributes significantly to the reduction of feelings of loneliness and depression, in addition to favoring the strengthening of social bonds and promoting a renewed sense of belonging and identity. In addition, studies show that older people who maintain a connection with nature tend to have higher levels of subjective happiness and a greater willingness to participate in sustainable practices and environmental conservation. From these findings, it is concluded that nature plays a crucial role in promoting active and healthy aging, and that initiatives aimed at facilitating the access of older people to natural environments are fundamental for the development of public health and well-being policies.

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<sup>1</sup> Master in Education

Federal University of Tocantins ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4290-242X>

E-mail: francijanes2015@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Doctor in Education Federal University of Tocantins ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6346-0288>

E-mail: neilaosorio@uft.edu.br

<sup>3</sup> Doctor in Education Federal University of Tocantins ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3182-7727>

E-mail: luizneto@uft.edu.br

<sup>4</sup> Master in Education Federal University of Tocantins ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2852-7766>

E-mail: leonardosbsantana@gmail.com

<sup>5</sup> Doctor in Education Federal University of Tocantins ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9997-5585>

E-mail: fanfilho@hotmail.com

<sup>6</sup> Master in Education Federal University of Tocantins ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1026-4734>

E-mail: professoranubiabrito@gmail.com

<sup>7</sup> Master in Education Federal University of Tocantins ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5487-2400>

E-mail: marlonoliveirabrito@gmail.com

<sup>8</sup> Specialist in Education Federal University of Tocantins ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-4060-266X>

E-mail: fabioalmeida@uft.edu.br

<sup>9</sup> Specialist in Education Federal University of Tocantins ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7332-8395>

E-mail: cstgestaoambiental2015@gmail.com

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## INTRODUCTION

Nature, in its essence, is the set of elements and processes that make up the physical world, including flora, fauna, natural environments, and atmospheric phenomena. This intrinsic complexity encompasses the totality of ecosystems and their interactions, playing a central role in the maintenance of life and environmental balance. As a scenario for the development of countless species, nature reveals itself not only as a physical space, but as a multifaceted phenomenon, loaded with cultural and existential meanings. In this sense, its importance goes beyond ecological functions, encompassing symbolic aspects that shape the human experience, especially when considering the relationship between aging and contact with natural environments.

With advancing age, individuals go through an aging process that affects multiple aspects of their existence, encompassing physical, emotional, and social transformations. Old age, in itself, is not defined only by losses and limitations; It can also be a period of new meanings and resignifications. However, it is undeniable that this phase brings specific challenges to maintaining well-being. Due to factors such as reduced mobility and changes in the social circle, many older people may experience feelings of isolation and loneliness. From this perspective, interaction with nature emerges as a non-pharmacological strategy for the promotion of integral health, offering opportunities for involvement and recovery of a sense of belonging and purpose.

The relationship between human beings and nature is marked by a history of interdependence and transformation. Since time immemorial, the natural environment has served as a source of resources and inspiration, influencing subsistence practices, forms of social organization, and even philosophical conceptions. However, as society has evolved to a more urban and industrialized model, the connection with nature has progressively diminished, especially in large cities, where access to green areas is limited. On the other hand, authors such as Aldo Leopold, in his seminal work "A Sandy County Almanac", defend an environmental ethic that values conservation and respect for nature, highlighting that this bond must be rescued as an intergenerational responsibility, particularly important for the older generations.

For the elderly population, contact with natural environments can provide a space conducive to the cultivation of emotional and physical well-being. This type of involvement, which includes everything from walks in parks to more passive activities such as gardening, has been widely studied in the field of environmental gerontology. According to Kaplan and

Kaplan (1989), exposure to natural scenarios plays a relevant role in reducing stress and increasing the feeling of vitality. This effect is due, in part, to the ability of natural environments to promote a form of relaxed attention, different from the intense sensory and cognitive stimulation common in urban environments, which contributes to a faster recovery of the state of emotional balance.

In a context of active and healthy aging, it is essential that public policies and social interventions consider the importance of accessible natural environments for the elderly. The creation of urban green spaces and the promotion of outdoor activities adapted to the needs of older people can favor not only social interaction, but also the maintenance of positive mental health. This is because nature, with its beauty and dynamism, can act as an agent for rescuing affective memories and pleasurable sensory experiences, reinforcing a feeling of continuity and identity over time.

Engaging with nature can also mitigate the effects of loneliness and depression, conditions often associated with aging. For older people, interaction with natural environments serves as a space for contemplation and reconnection with themselves. Wildlife observation, perception of seasonal changes, and tactile contact with plants are examples of activities that favor a mindfulness experience, bringing the individual to the present moment and promoting a state of serenity. These experiences can be particularly valuable in contexts of significant loss, helping to transform the perception of aging from a process marked by decay to an experience of new forms of personal and spiritual growth.

In addition to the direct benefits for mental and physical health, nature offers fertile ground for the cultivation of social relationships. Outdoor spaces can be a place for meeting and interaction, making it easier to build support networks and form new friendships. Engaging in collective activities, such as walking groups and garden clubs, provides an opportunity for older people to share their experiences, establish new connections, and strengthen their sense of community. Thus, contact with nature, by promoting inclusion and social participation, becomes a crucial component for aging with quality of life.

Finally, it is essential to recognize the value of nature in the lives of older people as an element of promoting well-being and quality of life. However, this requires careful planning and a holistic view that takes into account the particularities of this age group. Initiatives that seek to integrate contact with natural environments into the daily practices of older people need to be inclusive, respecting their physical limitations and offering easy access to these spaces. Only in this way will it be possible to ensure that nature, in its

essence, continues to play a significant and enriching role in the life trajectory of the elderly, strengthening their health, autonomy and dignity.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted for the elaboration of this study was based on a systematic bibliographic review, which follows a rigorous research protocol and selection of academic sources. This type of methodological approach aims to synthesize the existing knowledge on the subject, identifying, evaluating, and interpreting the evidence available in the scientific literature. To ensure the relevance and quality of the results, the guidelines of the PRISMA method (*Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses*) were followed, which establishes specific criteria for conducting systematic reviews. The application of this method allows a comprehensive and critical view of the current state of knowledge, providing a solid basis for understanding the phenomenon studied.

The data collection process involved searching in recognized academic databases, such as *Scielo and Google Scholar*. The search was carried out using keywords and descriptors that reflect the central concepts of the theme in question, such as "nature and well-being", "elderly and natural environments" and "therapeutic benefits of nature in the elderly". To ensure that the search was comprehensive and accurate, *Boolean operators* (*AND, OR*) and specific filters were used, such as year of publication, type of document (articles, reviews), and languages (Portuguese and English).

Next, the selection of studies was carried out in two stages: reading of titles and abstracts, followed by the full analysis of the texts that proved to be relevant. In the first stage, the focus was to eliminate duplicate articles and those whose scope was not directly related to the proposed theme. In the second stage, the selected studies were evaluated for methodological quality, following criteria such as clarity of objectives, consistency in data collection and analysis methods, and relevance of the results to the research question. In this way, the screening allowed a refinement of the bibliographic sources, resulting in a final corpus composed only of articles of high impact and relevance.

After selecting the sources, the data analysis was conducted using the content analysis technique, in order to identify thematic categories and recurring patterns in the results of the reviewed research. To this end, a detailed and systematic reading of the texts was carried out, with coding of the relevant passages that addressed the benefits of nature

for the physical and mental health of the elderly. This information was then organized into synoptic tables, making it easier to visualize the convergences and divergences between the studies, as well as to identify gaps and areas that require further investigation.

The synthesis of the results allowed the construction of a general overview of the theme, highlighting both the positive aspects of the interaction of the elderly with natural environments and the methodological and contextual limitations present in the studies analyzed. The adoption of a systematic literature review enabled a deep understanding of the subject, by bringing together different perspectives and empirical evidence, consolidating integrated knowledge directed to future research and practical interventions. In this way, the methodology used in this study not only guarantees the scientific validity of the conclusions presented, but also contributes to the advancement of the research field.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After applying all the filters and analyzing the results, it was possible to verify that only 7 articles fully met the inclusion criteria and the themes previously established for the study, as detailed in Chart 1.

Table 1 - Selected articles

Authors	Objective	Methodology
da Fonseca Viscardi et al. (2018)	To examine the opinions of 11 older adults about socio-environmental factors associated with outdoor adventure activities.	Descriptive and exploratory character, using a qualitative approach for data analysis.
da Fonseca Viscardi, dos Santos, Mazo and Marinho (2018)	Explore the perceptions of older people involved in a university extension program on adventure activities in nature.	The research was carried out in the field, with a qualitative approach, through the application of two semi-structured interviews, carried out before and after a practical intervention that included activities such as stand up paddle and trails. For data analysis, the content analysis technique was used.
by Oliveira Marques and Higuchi (2024)	To analyze the levels of coexistence with nature among the elderly in the metropolitan region of Manaus-AM, taking into account that those who live in the Amazon have a close relationship with the natural environment.	A semi-structured interview was used, consisting of open and closed questions and a scale of coexistence with nature. Participants were 62 elderly people aged between 60 and 83 years (23 women and 36 men).
Marques (2023)	To evaluate the levels of coexistence with nature among older people in the metropolitan region of Manaus-AM	A semi-structured interview was used with open and closed questions and scales of coexistence with

	(including Manaus, Iranduba, Manacapuru, Careiro Castanho and Novo Airão) and to investigate how these levels affect subjective well-being, measured by happiness.	nature and subjective happiness. Participants were 62 elderly people aged between 60 and 83 years (23 women and 36 men). The answers were recorded, transcribed and entered into Excel and SPSS spreadsheets for analysis. The closed questions were submitted to Content Analysis (Bardin), while the others were analyzed with descriptive statistics in Excel and SSA (Smallest Space Analysis) in SPSS.
Rodrigues (2019)	Analyze how "green exercise", defined as physical activities that promote interaction with nature, can help mitigate the negative effects of aging and improve essential aspects of coexistence.	The phenomenological approach was adopted, specifically the Situated Phenomenon method, which allows the evaluation of the experiences of the elderly as participants and protagonists of the research.
Santana and dos Santos (2005)	To describe the poetics of the elderly about the aging process, identifying opportunities for innovation in the practice of gerontological nursing from the understanding of their imaginary.	The sociopoetic method and its analytical device were adopted, the research group (GP), using the research technique Experience of Geomythical Places, with the guiding question: "if aging were a geomythical place, what would it be like?". The research was carried out at UnATI/UERJ between 2003 and 2004, analyzing the data produced by 28 elderly people from the GP, in collaboration with the researcher, through the sociopoetic study of child/surrealist inspiration.
Dias (2006)	To analyze the participation and emotions of the elderly in adventure activities in nature, identifying the meaning of these experiences for this population, the factors that motivate adherence, the values associated with these experiences and the main difficulties faced.	The research was conducted in two stages: the first consisted of a literature review on the topics covered, while the second involved an exploratory research with structured interviews. The sample was composed of 15 elderly people, over 60 years old, of both sexes, who regularly practice these activities offered by ecotourism companies in Brotas/SP.

Source: authorship, 2024

The results presented by the studies by da Fonseca Viscardi et al. (2018) and da Fonseca Viscardi, dos Santos, Mazo and Marinho (2018) reinforce the importance of activities in natural environments for the promotion of social relationships and well-being among older people. In the first study, it was possible to observe that the practical



interventions allowed the formation of new social connections, both between the participants and with the instructors, evidencing the integrating role of nature. In addition, reflection on environmental issues demonstrated a high level of awareness, with mentions of specific environmental problems, such as deforestation and pollution, and broader concerns, such as environmental conservation. This scenario suggests that practical experiences in contact with the environment not only promote well-being, but also contribute to a more critical ecological awareness.

On the other hand, the study by da Fonseca Viscardi, dos Santos, Mazo and Marinho (2018) highlights the positive impact of adventure activities in nature on the perception and self-esteem of older people. Initially, the participants had feelings of apprehension and curiosity, which were transformed into feelings of satisfaction, pride and joy after the practices. These results indicate that, despite initial insecurities, performing challenging and stimulating activities provides a strong sense of personal fulfillment, which, in turn, can contribute to the self-confidence of the elderly.

However, these results also point to the need for greater dissemination and clarification about the possibility of including this age group in adventure activities, in addition to the training of professionals to serve this public in a safe and effective way.

The results of Oliveira Marques and Higuchi (2024) and Marques (2023) also corroborate the relevance of nature in the lives of the elderly, even when they live in urban areas. Most of the elderly people interviewed reported having a high level of Connection with Nature (NC), which reflects a deep identification with the natural environment, regardless of physical proximity to green areas. Marques (2023), in particular, identified that this perception of proximity to nature is directly related to higher rates of subjective happiness. This indicates that even in urban contexts, where access to natural spaces may be limited, older people who maintain a symbolic bond with nature tend to experience greater well-being.

However, the study also revealed that older people who declared themselves less happy are those who showed less concern about environmental problems, suggesting that the lack of satisfaction with life can negatively impact the motivation for environmental engagement. In this sense, Marques' (2023) findings bring a relevant aspect to public policies and social interventions. The promotion of an urban environment that enables older people to maintain a symbolic and practical relationship with nature, such as the creation of community gardens and environmental education programs, can be an essential factor for



the subjective well-being of this group. Additionally, the study suggests that subjective happiness does not directly influence the type of environmental concern, but rather the intensity of that feeling. This opens space for reflection on how interventions that promote the happiness and emotional well-being of older people could, indirectly, foster a more active environmental awareness.

The study by Rodrigues (2019) complements this discussion by highlighting the importance of green exercise — physical activities performed in natural environments — as a potential strategy for public policies aimed at the well-being of older people. According to the author, these practices promote benefits not only for the physical and mental health of individuals, but also for the preservation and enhancement of urban green spaces. In this context, the implementation of policies that encourage the regular practice of green exercise can contribute to the creation of a healthier and more socially inclusive environment for the elderly, in addition to strengthening the bond between the elderly public and nature.

The imaginary of the elderly, as explored by Santana and dos Santos (2005), also reveals a more subjective dimension of the relationship with nature. The research points out that older people see nature as a space of integration with the cosmos, transcending the concern with physical death and emphasizing the continuity of life. This perspective suggests that contact with nature is not only a source of immediate well-being, but also a means of reevaluating one's own existence and finding new meanings for old age. The promotion of this perception of interrelationship with nature, according to the authors, can be a transforming factor in gerontology, encouraging nursing practices that consider not only the physical aspects, but also the spiritual and emotional needs of the elderly.

In turn, the study by Dias (2006) deepens the understanding of the reasons that lead elderly people to engage in activities in natural environments. The results indicate that initial adherence is often motivated by external influences, such as encouragement from family and friends, but also by curiosity and the search for new experiences. As older people engage in these practices, they report significant changes in self-image and self-esteem, which highlights the role of natural activities in the resignification of identity in old age. However, the difficulties for full participation, such as displacement and associated costs, represent important barriers to be overcome by public policies and support programs.

In addition, the emotions reported by the elderly before, during and after natural practices are indicative of the positive transformations provided by these activities. Before

the experiences, feelings of anxiety and insecurity were predominant, but during and after the experiences, these were replaced by feelings of pleasure and satisfaction. This result reinforces the idea that overcoming fears and living new experiences are crucial elements for promoting active and healthy aging.

The view of Santana and dos Santos (2005) on the integration between nature and the cosmos also suggests that therapeutic practices for the elderly should go beyond physical interventions and consider contact with nature as a central element in the construction of meaning and purpose in life. In this context, active aging programs that include nature as a therapeutic resource not only promote physical and mental health, but also contribute to fuller aging and a greater sense of belonging to the environment.

## **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The present systematic review showed that the relationship between the elderly and nature is multifaceted, encompassing aspects of physical, mental and emotional health, as well as dimensions of identity and belonging. The studies analyzed reveal that interaction with natural environments can provide significant benefits for the well-being of older people, promoting an improvement in quality of life and contributing to a more active and healthy aging. Nature, therefore, emerges as an integrating element, capable of positively impacting different areas of the lives of older people, from the promotion of physical activities to the strengthening of social bonds and the development of greater environmental awareness.

It was possible to observe that the participation of elderly people in outdoor activities and in natural environments promoted significant transformations in the way these individuals perceive themselves and relate to the world around them. Such activities, ranging from walks in parks to adventure and gardening practices, not only stimulate physical health, but also expand the sense of belonging and personal fulfillment. Contact with nature proved to be a powerful means of resignification in old age, offering participants new ways of facing the physical limitations and challenges of this phase of life.

Another relevant point highlighted in the reviewed studies was the deep connection of older people with the environment, even in urban contexts. Most participants reported a feeling of closeness to nature and an identification with the natural elements, regardless of where they reside. This data reinforces the importance of thinking about public policies and social projects that consider the creation and preservation of green spaces in urban areas,

allowing this symbolic and practical relationship to be maintained, contributing to the health and well-being of the elderly.

The results also pointed to some challenges and limitations in the implementation of practices that encourage the contact of older people with nature. Factors such as lack of accessibility, associated costs, and lack of trained professionals to work with this specific audience were identified as important barriers. Thus, it is essential that future initiatives take into account these limitations and seek ways to make natural activities more accessible and inclusive for the elderly population, creating a safe and welcoming environment for all.

The relationship of older people with nature has also revealed a significant affective and spiritual dimension, as seen in some studies, where nature is perceived as a space of renewal and connection with the cosmos. This perspective emphasizes the need to integrate approaches that consider not only the physical aspects of aging, but also the emotional and spiritual factors, promoting comprehensive care that values the complete experience of older people. In this sense, nature stands out as a therapeutic and transformative resource, capable of providing well-being and meaning in life.

Therefore, based on the results presented, it can be stated that valuing the relationship of the elderly with nature should be one of the pillars of public health and gerontology practices. It is essential to promote activities that encourage frequent contact with natural environments, whether in urban or rural spaces, and that respect the specificities and limitations of this population. In addition, it is important that professionals and caregivers are trained to explore the potential of nature as a tool for promoting health and well-being, developing strategies that involve not only the physical dimension, but also the social, emotional and spiritual aspects of older people.

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