



Natural Minds

Lasting Connections



“Look deep into nature, then you will understand everything better.”

– *Albert Einstein*

We know it instinctively – nature is good for our mind, our body, and our spirit. But if you’re one of the thousands of Canadians who struggle with mental illness, the obstacles to enjoying the pleasures found in our natural world can be daunting.

That’s where Toronto and Region Conservation’s (TRCA), *Natural Minds – Lasting Connections*, can help. Creating healthy, sustainable communities includes looking after nature and improving the health and well-being of people. TRCA not only looks after our watersheds, but also the people living in them. This program is a tangible example, one that reaches into our communities to help those who might not otherwise be able to do so on their own.

With generous funding by the Ontario Trillium Foundation, TRCA education staff created the *Natural Minds – Lasting Connections* pilot program in 2016 to encourage individuals living with mental illness to connect with nature and each other.

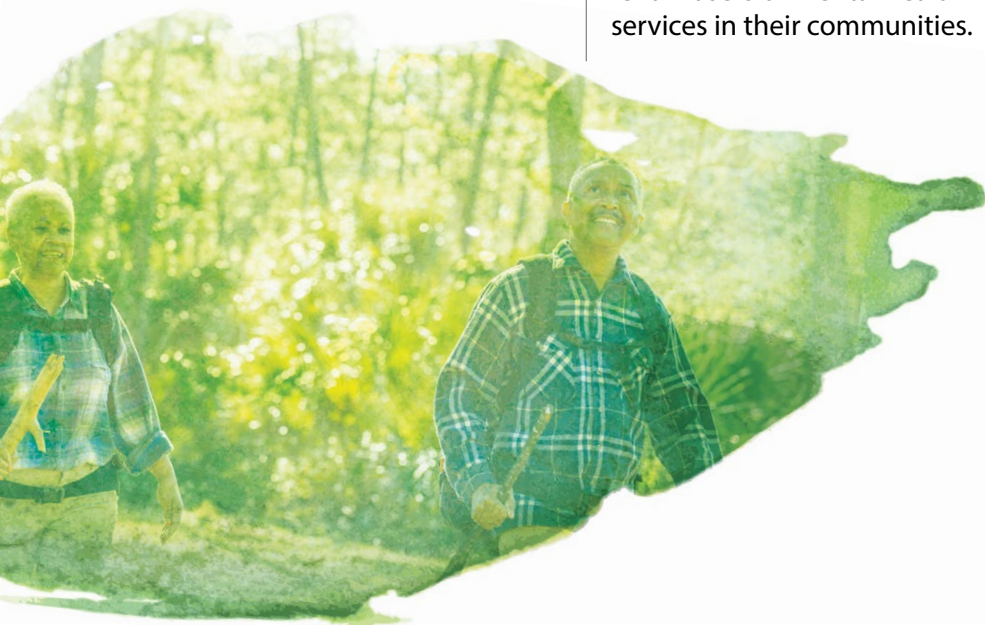
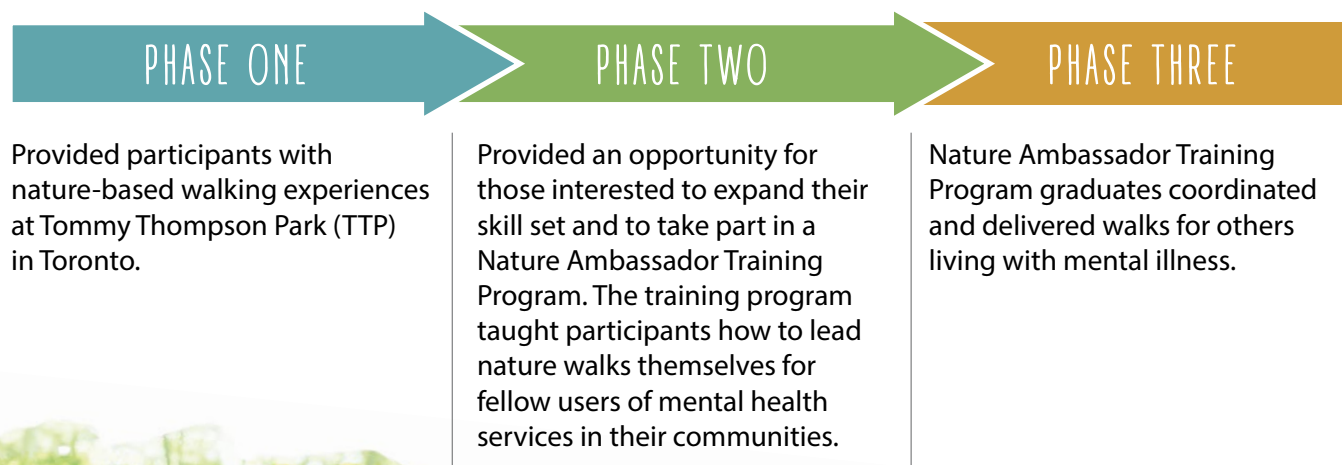
IDENTIFYING THE NEED

It is estimated that one in five Canadians are affected annually by mental illness¹. Connectedness to nature can be helpful in promoting mental well-being². Programs encouraging Torontonians with mental illness to strengthen their nature connections by spending time in natural environments, and drawing attention to their relationship with those environments, are limited³. As such, not everyone's needs are being met. A further gap that remains is one of empowering individuals in Toronto who live with mental illness to become part of the movement of helping others with mental illness connect to nature. *Natural Minds – Lasting Connections* endeavored towards filling that gap⁴.

PEACE OF MIND

The overarching aim of the program was to promote leadership, connection to community and nature, and provide relaxing nature-based experiences for individuals living with mental illness, thus reducing social isolation.

The program took place in three phases:



"I'm different out here than at Queen and Sherbourne... a good different."

- Anan, Nature Walk Participant

¹ Smetanin et al. (2011) The life and economic impact of major mental illnesses in Canada: 2011-2041. Prepared for the Mental Health Commission of Canada. Toronto: RiskAnalytics. Available at http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/sites/default/files/MHCC_Report_Base_Case_FINAL_ENG_0_0.pdf

² Elizabeth Lines, The Nurture of Nature: Natural Settings and Their Mental Health Benefits Literature Review. Minding Our Bodies – a Canadian Mental Health Association Project, March 2013. Available at http://www.mindingourbodies.ca/about_the_project/literature_reviews/the_nurture_of_nature

³ See Appendix A for existing programs

⁴ See Appendix B for a map of program reach

NATURE WALKS

PHASE ONE

The nature-based excursions were opportunities for individuals to enjoy a leisurely walk in an accessible urban wilderness park, with a guide and community peers. The walks included interpretation of the nature around us and encouraged connectedness both between participants and with the natural environment. The excursions were designed to last about two hours, but this varied. The intention was to provide relaxing and nature-connected experiences which inspire participants to recognize the positive impacts of spending time in nature.

The nature walks were met with great success. Participants expressed how different they felt while in the park compared to how they feel when among the city's concrete spaces. By the end of walks, many participants were visibly more relaxed and talkative with the walk leader and each other than they had been at the beginning. The mental health service agency staff shared very positive feedback on the effects they noticed as well.

Read about one of our nature walks with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) clients [here](#).

LESSONS LEARNED:

- Include more mindfulness practice on walks.
- Recognize the challenge in reconciling the amount of time participants will initially commit to an unknown experience (i.e. participants won't attend a walk marketed at 3 hours) with the reality of time needed for significant nature connection development.
- Introduce the walk as a relaxing experience in which adjustments can be made as needed (walking pace, breaks, etc.). Check in with participants to be aware of their immediate needs.
- Small group sizes encourage meaningful nature connectedness moments.
- Learn the names of participants early to build connections and relationships.

"It was noticeably therapeutic, but also inspiring and motivating for clients."

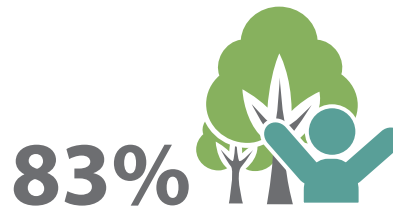
- Craig Currah, CAMH Partial Hospitalization Program



Before-and-after nature walk surveys revealed the following:



of walk participants were experiencing a guided nature walk for the first time



of participants expressed excitement at participating on the nature walk



of walk participants indicated that they were likely to visit Tommy Thompson Park again



of participants indicated that they would discuss the nature walk with a friend or family member



of participants showed an increase in the likelihood they would invite someone else along next time they visit a park

“Participant feedback about the experience was extremely positive. Participants shared that our group should go on such walks more often.”

- Desmond Lee, *Getting in Touch* program



TRAINING

PHASE TWO

The Nature Ambassador Training Program took place over the course of six sessions with a group of 10 successful applicants. The training offered knowledge of Toronto's flora and fauna, mindfulness of participants' safety (including Standard First Aid certification), considerations of route planning, and other factors involved with conducting a nature walk⁵. Training was facilitated by TRCA education staff.

The training program was received extremely well from the idea phase through delivery. During the program, participants were motivated to learn and to use their new knowledge to teach others.

As the training neared completion, half of the participants were actively taking next steps to lead their own nature walks. As part of the program, each participant was to lead a walk with a friend, peer, or family member, during which some nature interpretation was to be included. Participant feedback from leading their initial walks included: struggling to remember details they had learned, observing positive changes in family members' moods, recognizing the importance of a pre-walk site visit, and noticing how talking points on the walk increased people's attention to their surroundings.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- **Group size matters:** 10 trainees was ideal, allowing for comfortable sharing of information, whole-group mindfulness moments, and relationship building
- **Training and resources build confidence:** Providing trainees with resources and first aid instruction was helpful in ensuring that they were equipped with reference materials for educating others and feeling empowered as certified first aiders
- **Expertise is appreciated:** It would be beneficial to bring in an expert in the field of mindfulness and wellness for mental health
- **Open dialogue counts:** More conversation around mental illness would have helped in creating an open space for dialogue
- **Repetition is important:** The impact of medication on memory needs to be considered in planning training – repeating learnings is beneficial
- **Practice builds confidence:** Participant time spent practicing speaking in front of the group and providing interpretation should be increased
- **More research, more pilots, more time:** This would allow for more follow-up with participants to promote ongoing involvement in leading groups, especially given the intermission of cold-weather seasons during which fewer people have interest in getting outside.

"The Nature Ambassador Training Program opens doorways to not only heal ourselves, but to help others heal as well."

- Rob, Nature Ambassador Training Graduate



⁵ See Appendix C for a how-to guide on planning a nature walk

GRADUATES DELIVER WALKS

PHASE THREE

The final phase of the program was largely participant-led. After training, graduates would arrange for walks in a Toronto greenspace, whether in TTP, High Park, or any of Toronto's beautiful ravines. The program graduate would be responsible for scheduling, advertising, and facilitating their walks. These participant-led walks would provide ongoing opportunities for others living with mental illness to engage in local natural spaces.

This phase involved the most variability. Every individual in the training program brought with them a unique position of experience, knowledge, motivation, health concerns, and community connections. Along with the excitement of creating something of one's own, participants faced unpredictable aspects of taking on this new initiative:

- lack of time to devote to organizing walks given other aspects of their lives
- confidence to carry out steps involved without getting overwhelmed
- upswings and downturns in motivation
- agency staff perception (i.e., in some cases participants felt they were undervalued as they were looking to establish a walking group with a particular agency)

LESSONS LEARNED:

- Connecting with agency staff in order to establish opportunities for graduates to lead nature walks within that agency is helpful in ensuring options for practicing new knowledge and skills.
- The degree of support needed is unique to each participant and is best assessed and reacted to on an ongoing basis throughout this phase of the program.
- Establishing a group scenario as an outcome of the training could be helpful with sustaining nature walk delivery (e.g., a "Nature Ambassador Team/Network" whose members support each other in carrying out walks).



A PARTICIPANT'S STORY – Wangaari's Journey

I've always cherished my time in nature, but haven't known a lot about specific plants and animals. I've been motivated to be an active member of my local community, but as I live with anxiety and depression, when I'm over-worked, the ensuing cycle of mind impacting work and work impacting mind gets overwhelming. When I found out about the Nature Ambassador Training Program, I jumped at it. This course looked like a great opportunity to move forward with community engagement in a way that would allow for my own mental health to improve at the same time.

The program made my summer that much better. Having opportunities to touch and feel the nature around me so closely, learning about biodiversity, galls, scat, leaves, and more, was thrilling for me. I felt like a kid again and it lifted me up when some other things in my life were challenging. The staff embodied that which the training was preparing us to be – caring, informed, prepared yet flexible, engaging, and encouraging. It was also such a pleasure to connect with kind and gentle people in the course. And lastly, it was really meaningful to be gifted with books and other resources for not only enhancing our training but also our lives beyond as Nature Ambassadors.

I learned a lot in this program. Two especially valuable pieces were the notion of "interpretation" - seeing and sharing nature in a new way – and mindfulness. I have long practiced mindfulness in my life, but it was eye-opening to see how to integrate it into walking groups.

At this point, I am leading walks with someone I met in the course. They're going well, but I'd love to be able to lead more. Unfortunately, a significant barrier to be able to do this is money - continuously having to look for work keeps me from being able to devote the time I'd like to lead more walks. For now I will simply have to cherish the walks that we can make happen!



PROGRAM SUPPLEMENTS

Additional program components were incorporated into this pilot year, which extended from the original program outline. These were valuable lessons learned and will be considered for future program iterations.

STAFF TRAINING

Due to interest from mental health service agency staff, a one-day Nature Ambassador Training was conducted in late summer. The goal was to offer an introduction to nature interpretation and mindfulness practice on walks in Toronto greenspaces. Overall this session was received well, but by increasing the training to two days, it would allow for more in-depth concept-coverage and more time to practice skills of nature interpretation.

PRESENTATIONS

As weather was cooling in late fall / early winter, there was still interest in connecting with nature. Given that individuals were generally not very likely to attend an outdoor nature walk, it was decided to "bring nature in". As such, 40-60 minute presentations were conducted in a variety of agency spaces. The presentations entailed a slideshow of flora and fauna found in Toronto, coupled with numerous specimens of animal pelts, animal skulls, and plants to engage people through hands-on experiences. Each presentation was tailored to the agency's geographic location in that local greenspaces were highlighted, including their proximity to the agency, encouraging participants to visit these parks.

Presentations were received very well by participants and staff and provided for a level of physical accessibility that can be challenging when conducting walks. They also provided positive social opportunities as participants shared their own experiences relating to presentation content of plants, animals, and parks.

Natural Minds – Lasting Connections Program Stats

134 total hours walked

612 people engaged in social activities

Collaborated with 11 mental health service agencies

NEXT STEPS

The *Natural Minds – Lasting Connections* pilot program served as an excellent starting point for TRCA's role in developing connectedness between people living with mental illness both with others and their local greenspaces. Overall, program interest was high from both a participant and agency staff perspective and walks are still being conducted by training graduates beyond the program's official end date.

Strategies are being explored for growing the *Natural Minds – Lasting Connections* program. We hope to continue to offer nature walks through mental health service agencies in order to encourage their members and staff to independently seek out experiences in greenspaces. In addition, we will continue to investigate opportunities for facilitating training programs for agency staff and for individuals living with mental illness. A significant development within this pilot program was the extensive network that has been established and nurtured enabling collaborations on future initiatives.

We thank the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) for their belief in this initiative and their significant financial support. Without the funding provided by OTF, this pilot program would not have come to fruition.



For further information on *Natural Minds – Lasting Connections* or if you'd like to be involved in future initiatives, contact Raja Raudsepp at rraudsepp@trca.on.ca.

"The Nature Ambassador program is sparking further action in the movement of walking groups and connecting people with the nature we are a part of."

- Althea, Wellness Facilitator
Nature Ambassador Training Graduate



APPENDIX A

Agencies combining mental health with walking and nature

Many mental health service agencies organize walking groups, with a focus on exercise, which may at times include walking in natural spaces. Some agencies also engage in periodic outings which may include excursions to natural environments. The following agencies, however, specifically provide opportunities for strengthening connections to nature:

Mood Walks

“Mood Walks is a province-wide initiative that promotes physical activity in nature, or “green exercise,” as a way to improve both physical and mental health. Led by the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario, in partnership with Hike Ontario and Conservation Ontario, Mood Walks provides training and support for community mental health agencies, social service organizations and other community partners to launch educational hiking programs, connect with local resources, find volunteers, and explore nearby trails and green spaces.” – www.moodwalks.ca

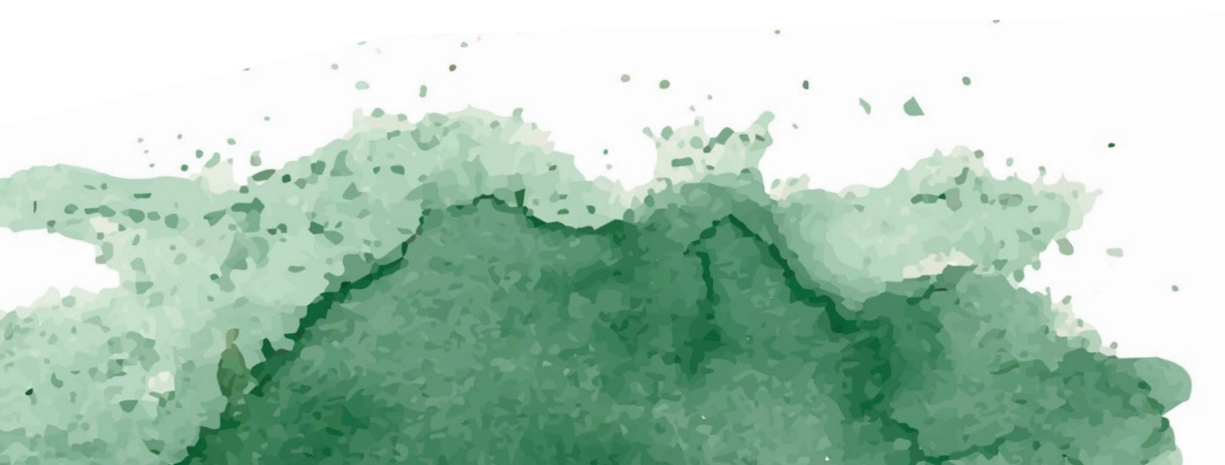
Street to Trail

“Street to Trail Association (S2T) provides outdoor hiking, camping and cycling opportunities for Toronto’s homeless, so they can experience the beauty and therapeutic calmness of nature. S2T believes that getting troubled people away from the city to participate in a positive environment with nature can increase their self-confidence, overcome addictions, find new, meaningful relationships and rediscover lost feelings of peace and hope. Participants are provided with training, food and connected to outreach programs while re-discovering a path of physical existence.” - www.charityintelligence.ca

Note: In 2016, Street to Trail Association staff shifted their focus to establishing Wild Ones Wilderness, organizing wilderness walks at a more local level.

Parkdale Walking Group

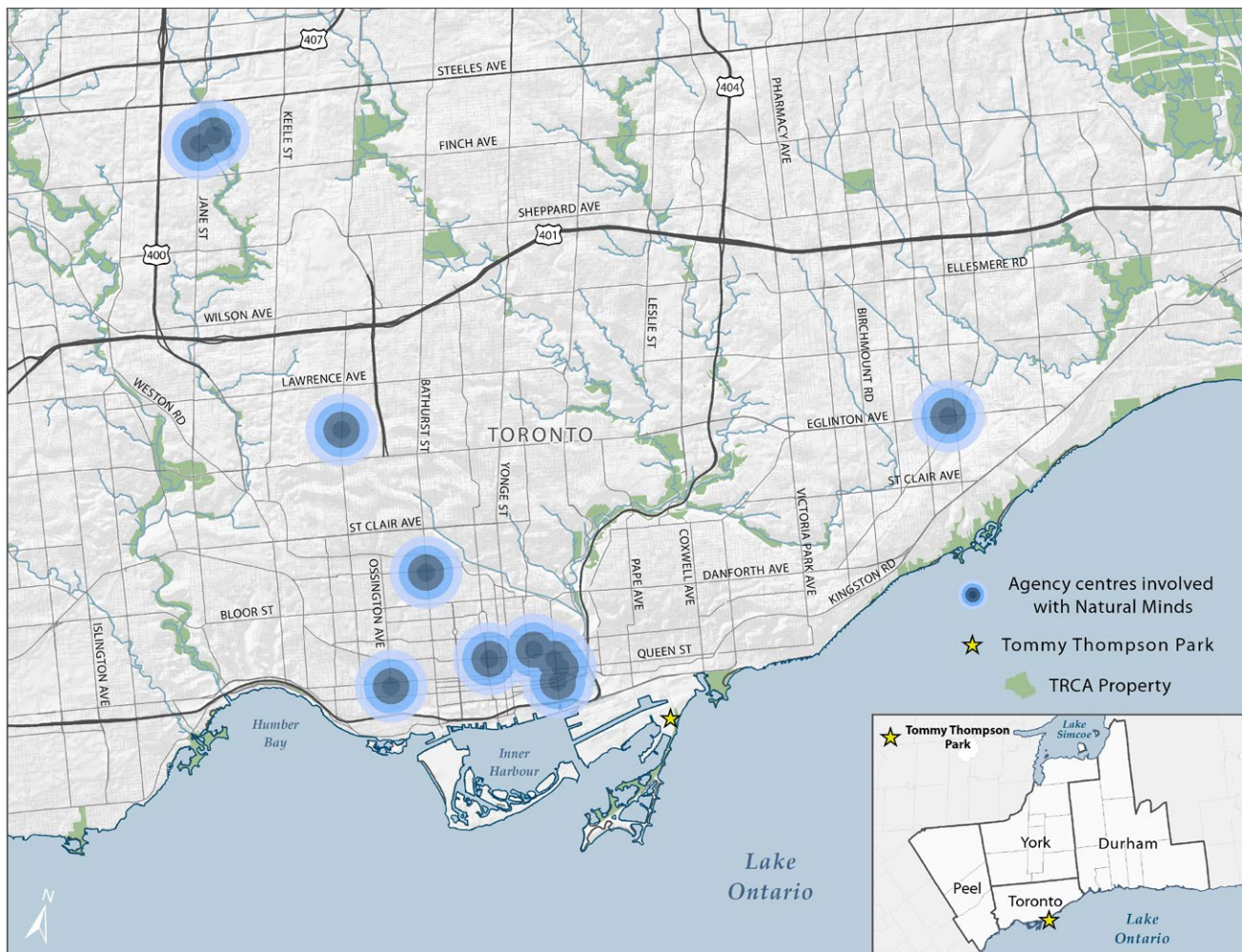
Parkdale Walking Group was founded in 2015 as a peer support initiative, delivering weekly walks until May of that year. The initiative recommenced in October 2016 fueled by requests from the community, the opportunity to rest before restarting, the Nature Ambassador Training Program, and a new co-facilitator coming on board. www.parkdalewalkinggroup.wordpress.com



APPENDIX B

Map of agencies participating in *Natural Minds – Lasting Connections*

Participants of each agency frequently live local to the agency, although often the reach would extend across the city.



APPENDIX C

Planning a Nature Walk

An example of course content was discussion around steps to take when planning a nature walk. Important factors to consider include those that will impact participation, such as weather, terrain, and distance. The following outlines a few general guidelines and suggestions.

ACTION	TIMELINE	NOTES
PRE-WALK		
Determine Walk Details	At least one to two weeks prior to walk	Decide on the when, where, duration, etc. of your walk.
Site Visit	Within two weeks of the walk	Visit the walk site to determine: a suitable and safe route with alternatives; nearby washroom locations; plants/animal evidence on your route allowing for interpretive moments; spots along the route for conducting mindfulness moments.
Information Sharing	Between one and two weeks prior to walk	Distribute walk information to potential walk participants.
Gather walk supplies	Any time before walk	Collect what you'll need in a backpack to carry along: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - first aid kit - emergency water - interpretive resources (e.g., field guides) - interpretive tools, if available (e.g., magnifying glasses, binoculars) - a map of the area, if available
ON WALK		
Prep participants' re expectations	Beginning of walk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduce tone of walk (casual, periodic stops to explore nature, etc.), washroom locations, terrain - Invite participants to inform you if pace needs adjusting - Invite participants to introduce themselves, if their comfort level allows - Ensure participants are aware of park rules and safety (ie. staying on trails, not picking living plants, etc.)
Maintain awareness of participants' comfort level	During walk	Throughout the walk, consider the intensity of the walk, potential insect phobias participants may have, etc.
Interpretive stops	During walk	<p>Direct participants' attention to animal evidence and plants you may come across; share interpretive knowledge you may hold and/or invite participants to share their observations.</p> <p><i>Remind participants not to handle wildlife if they are not sure what it is; e.g., Poison Ivy or Giant Hogweed can be dangerous if handled.</i></p>
Mindfulness Moments	During walk	Pause during the walk to invite participants to take part in a mindfulness moment, such as deep breathing, intentional listening, etc.
Final debrief	At end of walk	At end of walk, thank participants for taking part. Encourage them to share a meaningful moment or something new they learned with the group, and to continue getting outside!
POST-WALK		
Evaluate your walk	Immediately after walk	Consider what went well on your walk so that you can deliberately repeat your actions. Consider what aspects of the walk you might wish to adapt for future excursions.
Celebrate your success!	Any time during or after your walk!	You just delivered a nature walk! Great work! Give yourself a pat on the back!