

Feeling Nature: How Technology Reveals Our Universal Connection to Urban Green Spaces

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“The bushes and the alley corners would all be drenched in a vibrant chorus of birdsongs. The whole scene is exhilarating, exuding the mysterious vibes of a major orchestra.”

In “Conductor”; *Wild Wise Weird* [1]



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Despite living in an increasingly urbanized and indoor-oriented world, our connection to nature remains strong. A recent study published in *npj Urban Sustainability* reveals that this connection—known as biophilia [2]—is not only deeply rooted but also universally experienced across cultures and climates [3].

In the study, researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Delft University of Technology combined visual artificial intelligence (visual AI) with survey data to understand how people perceive nature in cities. They analyzed Google Street View images from eight cities—each representing a distinct global biome, from Singapore’s tropical forest to Dubai’s desert—using a machine learning model trained to detect 25 nature-related visual elements such as trees, skies, rivers, and animals [3].

Surprisingly, while natural features were present in all cityscapes (termed biophilic settings, or BS), people often failed to recognize them (biophilic perceptions, or BP) fully. For example, trees and the sky were among the most positively perceived elements across all cities, yet their presence was consistently underestimated. This suggests that while nature is around us, we may have become less attentive to it—supporting but also challenging the concept of “plant blindness,” which suggests human inability to notice plants in everyday life [4].

The study’s results also showed that eye contact with nature-based elements, more than man-made ones, evokes positive emotional responses regardless of location or gender. These findings demonstrate that the psychological benefits of nature—like feelings of calm, safety, and beauty—are globally consistent.

This research underscores the universal human need for nature, even in dense urban environments. By combining AI with human perception, the study offers a powerful tool for city planners to design spaces that reconnect people with nature. It highlights the essential role of the nature-human nexus in creating healthier, more sustainable cities [5].

References

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