

## The challenges and benefits of outdoor recreation during NZ's coronavirus lockdown

Written by Holly Thorpe, Professor in Sociology of Sport and Physical Culture, University of Waikato

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During New Zealand's four-week lockdown, all sporting facilities, back-country walking trails and parks are closed to stop the spread of coronavirus and avoid injuries.

But New Zealanders have high [participation rates](#) in outdoor sports and for many people, [outdoor recreation activities](#) are part of their coping strategy during times of high stress. Connecting with the [natural environment](#) is an important contributor to their sense of identity, community and belonging.

My research into the benefits of informal sports and outdoor recreation during [war and conflict](#) and following disasters such as the [Christchurch earthquakes](#) has clear parallels with the challenges New Zealanders face during lockdown. This work shows the importance of outdoor activities for people's resilience, as well as the [creative strategies](#) they will deploy as they attempt to rebuild a sense of routine in their lives.

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**Read more:** [\*\*\*The importance of sports in recovery from trauma: lessons from and for Christchurch\*\*\*](#)

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## Clearing up mixed messages about outdoor exercise

At the start of the lockdown period, the government's messages about outdoor activities were mixed. While the prime minister has encouraged people to simply ["stay home"](#) and not leave the neighbourhood when exercising, the [Ministry of Health COVID-19 website](#) clearly states:

As long as you are not unwell, you can leave your house to:

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- access essential services, like buying groceries, or going to a bank or pharmacy
- go to work if you work for an essential service
- go for a walk, or exercise and enjoy nature.

If you do leave your house, you must keep a 2 metre distance from other people at all times. Police may be monitoring people and asking questions of people who are out and about during the Alert Level 4 lockdown to check what they are doing.

The message that people should enjoy outdoor activities within walking distance from their homes highlights the considerable [inequities in access to outdoor recreation](#) . Not everyone is lucky enough to live within walking distance from the beach or a bush reserve. Such inequities will be felt over the coming weeks.

The initial confusion has divided outdoor sports communities. An online poll by [Surfing New Zealand](#) revealed that 58% of surfers believe surfing should be acceptable with social distancing. Many continue to surf despite a ban on using the ocean for recreational purposes.

Some local communities are taking it upon themselves to police such activities. In the name of community protection, threats of verbal, physical or symbolic violence are being posted across digital forums. Many are reporting those [breaching Level 4 restrictions](#) to police.

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**Read more:** [How to stay fit and active at home during the coronavirus self-isolation](#)

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While the debate continues to rage in some [lifestyle sport communities](#) , the majority of New Zealanders have shown they're committed to broader public health goals over their individual needs and desires, and most have been [doing the right thing](#) on social distancing.

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Several national and local sport organisations – including [Fish and Game](#), the [Mountain Safety Council](#),  
[Coastguard](#)

, and

[NZ Water Safety](#)

– have issued statements strongly discouraging hiking, hunting, mountain biking and other outdoor and ocean pursuits.

By now, the government message has become much more consistent, encouraging people not to drive for anything other than essential needs and not to enter the ocean for recreational activities.

### Outdoor recreation boosts recovery and resilience

The benefits of sport and physical activity for [physical health](#) and [mental well-being](#) are well documented. Research also illustrates the value of sport,

[physical activity](#)

and

[play](#)

for resilience during times of high risk or ongoing stress, and the restorative value for those who have experienced

[traumatic events](#)

Evidence further points to the value of [outdoor recreation](#) and participation in nature for supporting mental health during times of stress and trauma.

For Christchurch residents, favourite sporting spaces were destroyed during the earthquake of February 22, 2011. Participants in [my research](#) identified a range of physical, psychological and social benefits of informal outdoor activities, including weight maintenance, stress and anxiety reduction, higher resilience, and a stronger sense of connectedness and belonging.

According to researchers, a disruption of a person's attachment to a place, caused by events such as war or natural disaster, can result in identity discontinuity and [feelings of loss and mourning](#)

After the 2011 earthquakes, many Christchurch residents expressed sadness at the loss of heritage buildings and frequently visited places. For some, their deepest feelings of loss were associated with places of active recreation they had used over years of regular participation. In the current lockdown, many New Zealanders will also feel a sense of loss and longing for the sporting and fitness spaces that are so important to them.

### Getting back to routines

Research shows it is common for people to try to minimise the effects of a major disruption to [everyday routines](#) by trying to restore familiar spaces, routines and timings.

My [case studies](#) from the 2011 Christchurch earthquakes and overseas (New Orleans, Gaza, Afghanistan) have revealed that people were creative in engaging in their sporting activities and this helped them cope with uncertainties and higher stress.

Some Christchurch residents re-appropriated earthquake-damaged spaces. Rather than accepting closures, many worked together to find new ways to access safe spaces for participation. In so doing, these new locations became “therapeutic landscapes”, providing much needed psychological relief, escapism and connection to the physical environment.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and New Zealand's lockdown, the conditions are very different – but the psychological challenges and strategies for resilience may be similar.

Already, we are seeing creative strategies to retain active recreation activities. Some are converting their garages and modifying outdoor spaces for fitness workouts and training circuits. Others are setting up backyard parkour routes for their children.

Following the Christchurch earthquakes, surfers were separated from the ocean for nine months. The current forced time away from the outdoors will likely create renewed appreciation for the special places that give us a sense of identity and connection.

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*Holly Thorpe received funding from a Royal Society of New Zealand Marsden Grant on the role of physical activity in contexts of disaster and conflict.*

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**Read more** <https://theconversation.com/the-challenges-and-benefits-of-outdoor-recreation-during-nzs-coronavirus-lockdown-134892>