

## Podcasts that celebrate the healing power of nature

Two new series explore the effects of the natural world on our minds and brains



Sarah Allely field recording at Kingfisher Pool in Heathcote National Park © James Stuart

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In 2015, the Sydney-based journalist and audio producer Sarah Allely was hit by a car while riding her bike. The accident left her with a mild traumatic brain injury that caused headaches and meant she couldn't read or write. She found herself overwhelmed by everyday noise and stimulus, from traffic and music to the sound of her children playing. Most frustrating, she says, was "the sensation of not being able to think or focus or understand [and] the pressure building". Slowly, though, she began to find respite outside and away from the tumult of home and the city.

In the new six-part series [\*Brain on Nature\*](#), Allely documents her recovery: we hear of her initial pain and anxiety, her conversations with doctors and the observations of friends and family, including her young daughter who poignantly describes her sense of loneliness in the aftermath of the accident. We listen in as she finds refuge in her garden and starts to venture further afield, going on bushwalks and heading to the coast.

While the first episode focuses on the accident and the days that follow, the second sees Allely learning to live with her heightened sensitivity and starting to piece together the impact of going outdoors with the help of assorted experts. She visits a friend, Dalia Nassar, a lecturer in environmental philosophy, who lives near Bondi beach. There, during long periods spent staring at the sea, Allely's pain falls away and she starts to feel the fog lifting. "There's something about our capacities to experience beauty that cohere with nature," Nassar explains. Citing the German

philosopher Immanuel Kant, she notes that to be deprived of nature is to “be missing out on being human”.

There’s a rare intimacy to Allely’s narration, which shifts between an audio diary format (her inability to process new information meant she habitually recorded conversations after the accident) and academic enquiry. More atmospheric still is the sound design by Ariana Martinez, which, in between subtle waves of ambient music, takes the listener deep into everyday noise, from the clattering of a coffee shop to the hubbub of a school playground to the soothing sounds of crashing waves and seagulls (to experience this audio collage in its full glory, headphones are a must). *Brain on Nature* functions both as an illuminating documentary on nature’s capacity to heal the mind and a beautifully crafted piece of sound art that makes you hear the world differently.

For further adventures in the great outdoors, Florence Williams’ series [The Three-Day Effect](#) is a smart science-based investigation into the therapeutic effects of nature. It sees Williams, a science journalist and author, embarking on a series of three-day hikes with vulnerable or traumatised people, from army veterans to survivors of abuse to a stressed city-dwelling writer, and looking at the effects of the natural environment on their mental health.