

Nurturing Peace of Mind

by **SHAELYN SAMPSON** /// Hike NS volunteer
and **KAREN MCKENDRY** /// EAC Staff

photos: Kenomee Trails Society

“In every walk with Nature one receives more than one seeks.”

- John Muir



How do you feel after a stroll in the forest? Relaxed? Empowered? More ready to handle life's challenges?

The vast body of research documenting the physical health benefits of time in nature has been popularized in the past few years, including in books by Richard Louv that have described for the layperson both the detriments of disconnecting from nature (“nature deficit disorder”), and the path to renewed health (more “vitamin N,” where N = nature). Time in nature has been proven to reduce physiological signs of stress, and risk of heart disease and diabetes. But it has demonstrated mental health benefits too, including reducing risk of suicide, aiding with post-traumatic distress, and helping to cope with upsetting life events. Many of these mental health boosts are amplified when hikers hike in groups.

Enter the Mood Walks project. Mood Walks comes to Nova Scotia from Ontario, and was based on knowledge that getting outside is good for mental health. The Ontario project piqued the interest of Janet Barlow, Executive Director of Hike Nova Scotia, and Alex Whynot, a medical student at Dalhousie University. The pair brought together a team of local hiking, outdoors, conservation and mental health enthusiasts, whose goal is to replicate the Ontario version, with the knowledge that “green exercise,” such as hiking, walking or urban poling, has healing properties. EAC’s Wilderness Team saw a fit as well: the more people that are exposed to positive experiences in nature, the more they’ll learn to love it, the more they’ll likely act to protect it. All agencies involved in the project will be encouraged to hike in current or potential parks and other protected areas.

Mood Walks (in Nova Scotia) will provide youth, widely defined as 15 to 29 years old, who are likely to be at a higher risk for mental health struggles, with an opportunity they may not otherwise have: to hike, and, in doing so, benefit from the physical activity and exposure to nature. Hike leaders will go through training to provide safe and enjoyable hikes, while youth participants will have a hands-on Learn to Hike session. Before and after the hikes, participants will be asked about how their mood over the past week, and for self-reflections on their hiking experience. The participating agencies will return results, opinions, struggles and successes back to Hike Nova Scotia.

Several youth-supporting agencies are confirmed to lead regular guided hikes with their youth clientele. The hikes will take place in Halifax and the surrounding area, focusing on terrains and lengths that encourage the beginner hiker, and are accessible by transit.

This series of guided hikes are only open to clients of the participating youth-supporting agencies. But don’t let that stop you from accessing the benefits of hiking in nature for yourself! Discover guided hikes near you via the Hike Nova Scotia website, your local hiking club, or join EAC on our next Biodiverse-city hike. Happy trails!

Shaelyn is a 23 year old Haligonian (Kjijpuktuk, Mi’kmaq Territory) living and working in Dartmouth. She has worked in mental health advocacy for four years now in various capacities and is an avid hiker, gardener and event coordinator.