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Nature videos made violent prisoners more peaceful

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Prisons are about as devoid of nature as places can get.

The intensive management unit's IMU-E cellblock at the Snake River Correctional Institution in Oregon has concrete walls, metal furniture and maximum security cells marked by a single bed, toilet and thick metal door. The 48 men in the isolation unit for inmates convicted of heinous crimes and troublemakers removed from the general population were prone to fights and other shows of aggression, not to mention lots of verbal conflict with prison staff.

Then the staff decided to try a different behavior modification technique: nature videos with scenes of blue oceans, evergreen forests, majestic mountains and fluffy cloud footage shot from airplanes.

The results, according to a new study, were dramatic.

"We found that inmates who watched nature videos committed 26 percent fewer violent infractions," study author and clinical psychotherapist Patricia H. Hasbach said in a statement. It was "a substantial reduction in real-world conditions, since nearly all such events result in injuries to inmates or officers."

<http://triblive.com/usworld/nation/10919412-74/videos-inmates-nature>

Hasbach, who presented the study Friday at the American Psychological Association's annual convention, conducted written surveys of the inmates. They said they liked videos with beaches, jungles and forest. In interviews, they went on about the animals, colors and, not surprisingly, open spaces, Hasbach said.

The study had flaws. No one knows how honest the inmate responses were. The presence of the researchers — mostly women — could have lifted inmates' spirits. As the yearlong study wore on, researchers noticed a 10 to 20 percent decline in video viewing, possibly because there was a limited number of available videos and they were getting old.

The experiment started on a lark. A sergeant at Snake River saw a TED talk by Nalini Nadkarni, a University of Utah professor who guided the Sustainability in Prisons Project for the state of Washington's corrections facilities. The sergeant shared the idea with his superiors, who reached out to Nadkarni, who assembled the team behind the Oregon study.

Together they created a pilot program, the Nature Imagery in Prisons Project, in 2013. The researchers found 38 videos, and the staff placed them in an indoor fitness room that inmates visit four to five times a week for about an hour as part of an exercise allotment. They could work out or watch videos or do both. The room was painted light blue to improve the viewing.

The inmates said the videos helped them feel calmer, gave them something to talk about when their families came to visit and improved their relationships and communication with prison staff. And staffers said pretty much the same.

Staffers started allowing inmates time in what became known as the Blue Room to watch nature videos when someone appeared agitated or on edge.

The study quotes one inmate who had watched a mountain video. He said the scene was where he would go "if I were out of here." His family visited, and "I tell my kids, 'We're going camping when I get out of here.' It makes me think about my stuff."