

“Oh I Do Like To Be Beside The Seaside”: A Field Study on the Psychological Benefits of Going to the Coast

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Introduction

Nature has been found to be restorative in numerous ways, for example for health, attention and mood. However, nature is often examined in a very broad way without considering the varying types of natural environment. Recent reports (e.g. UK National Ecosystem Assessment, 2011) and psychological literature have indicated that water is an important element (Völker & Kistemann, 2011; White, Smith, Humphryes, Pahl, Snelling & Depledge, 2010). Studies have shown that psychological benefits increase with the amount of blue space (White et al., 2011). However, ecological validity can be low as the work is typically carried out in the laboratory using a fairly homogeneous sample such as students. More research is therefore needed that examines psychological effects within a more water-based environment and with a broader general public sample.

With over 20,000 km of coastline, the UK is spoilt with many blue space environments. Over 35% of this coastline is an intertidal area where solid rock predominates (rocky shores), which has numerous biological functions as well as being a popular destination for visitors. Consequently, this study examined before-after effects of a visit to the coast on current visitors.

Methodology

A before-after survey approach was used. Current visitors ($n = 121+$) to two sites from June to August 2011 were asked to complete two short surveys, one before they entered the shore and one as they left. Both surveys examined affect (via positive and negative affect and flow) and marine awareness towards rocky shores. A novel measure was also used during the after-survey that examined each individual activity performed,

whereby participants described every activity they did during their visit and rated their mood and arousal based on the Circumplex Model of Affect for each one. Data collection is on-going.

Results & Discussion

Even though visitors were found to arrive in a positive mood, preliminary analysis has found that visitors leave the coast with significantly heightened positive mood. It has also been found that marine awareness towards the biology and ecology of a rocky shore increases with this simple leisurely visit to the coast. The specific activities carried out on the coast were also seen to have different impacts on affect.

The preliminary findings clearly support the laboratory studies indicating that blue-space environments are psychologically beneficial. These findings show that specific environments need to be examined in both a controlled laboratory as well as in the field, and that blue-space may be a key ingredient in the beneficial effects of nature.

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References

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