

The Therapeutic Value of the Sea and its Impact on Health and Wellbeing

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Abstract

This review paper synthesises the multiple theories and examines the important relationship that the sea and the coast have on the health and wellbeing of people. Through an analysis of the theories of 'therapeutic landscapes' and 'attention restoration theory', this study contributes to a better understanding of how much the contact with the sea can enable individuals to enjoy better psychological health from both international and local research. This paper also explores how the coastal environment has the potential to promote health through its connection with nature, through social interaction and through one's nostalgic memories. Moreover, the coastal environment and the blue spaces are so valuable for people that when such spaces are lost, individuals feel a deep emotional loss. This study suggests the need for greater acknowledgment of people's appreciation, emotions and shared connections with the sea since it enables them to experience multiple ways of increasing health and wellbeing. Therefore, it is important to recognise the valued therapeutic landscapes that different groups of individuals experience by the sea, and emphasise the need in preserving and protecting these natural spaces due to their universal benefits.

Keywords: *Therapeutic landscapes, sea, health and wellbeing, Attention Restoration*

Introduction

There is an established belief that the sea and the coastal environment have beneficial attributes for health and wellbeing (Kearns et al. 2014), however few studies analyse this connection. This paper will draw evidence from various theories and studies in order to emphasise how important coastal environments are for the health and wellbeing of people, and the need to preserve and protect blue spaces. It will focus on the beneficial aspects of the sea and how it can improve the health and wellbeing of individuals.

Water is considered as one of the most important aesthetical elements that can provide beneficial aspects to health (Kaplan, Kaplan 1989). However, it is only in recent years that studies are focusing their attention on this aspect. Indeed, Lianyong

and Eagles (2009) criticise researchers about why they do not always recognise the importance of ‘waterscapes’ as environmental attributes for health. Studies such as those of Gesler (2003) and Foley (2011) have highlighted that the ‘blue space’ which is highly important for people's health and wellbeing since being close to the coast has significant effects on their physical and mental health (Bauman et al. 1999; Witten et al. 2008).

Apart from the water elements, rock structures too have always been considered for their natural beauty, for their symbolic importance and for their value to people (Curtis 2010). Studies have emphasised that attractive landscapes are able to provide solace and improve one's health and wellbeing (Abraham et al. 2010). Therefore when people are in the presence of rocky landforms near the sea they are likely to experience a connection with the place and are likely to enjoy better health and wellbeing. Indeed, Wheeler et al. (2012) and White et al. (2013) found that the closer people live to the sea, the more they are likely to enjoy self-reported health and wellbeing.

Understanding Wellbeing and the Sea

The WHO (1948) defined health as ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’. Gatrell (2002) argues that the WHO concept is too idealistic and if taken literally it would be unattainable. He explains that good health is contingent on the availability of personal and societal resources which would help the individual achieve his/her personal potential. This links to other definitions of wellbeing which can be described as a positive feeling about life, most particularly in relation to self-evaluation and the main motivation for living (Cummins 2010). However when relating the sea to health the WHO (2006) recognises swimming as something of concern linked to risk and safety. Therefore there is little recognition that the sea can attribute to the improvement of health and wellbeing. Thus this study together with other studies from the field of health geography tries to counterbalance the idea of risk, by emphasising the important role of the coast as it provides elements that can be beneficial for the health and wellbeing of individuals. This study makes use of Foley and Kirstemann's (2015, p.158) definition to understand that blue coastal spaces are *‘health-enabling places and spaces, where water is at the centre of a range of environments with identifiable potential for the promotion of human wellbeing’* (p. 158).

The Therapeutic Value of the Sea

Gesler's concept of therapeutic landscapes emerged from the studies that focused on the places known for ‘healing’ such as Lourdes in France and Bath in UK (Gesler

1996; Gesler 2003). However, this concept started to move from places of holy springs, wells and baths to places that can provide a daily therapeutic effect due to the contact with water, through rivers, lakes or the sea (Foley 2011; Bell 2015). This theory helps in increasing our knowledge and appreciation of how a place can promote health and wellbeing through the natural environment as it can provide significant effects on the body and mind of individuals (Satariano 2016; Satariano 2019). Gesler (2003, p. 1) interprets a 'therapeutic' place according to its possibility in developing, '*physical, mental, spiritual, emotional and social healing*'.

When individuals engage in environments that have a reputation of beauty and are experienced in a positive manner, such spaces are given value and importance and are thus places that contribute to health (deVerteuil et al. 2007; Curtis 2010). Therapeutic landscapes have been described in physiological terms matching with the idea that place can act as a facilitator that can relieve individuals from physical symptoms and assist in reducing stress (Gesler 1992; Kearns, Collins 2000).

Indeed, in their studies (Bell et al. 2015; Foley 2010, 2015; White et al. 2010; Satariano 2016, 2019) found that several individuals benefit greatly from their interaction with the sea. Some individuals benefit physically through exercise such as walking and running along the coast. Others enjoy the experience of embodiment and immersion in the sea providing them with a deep connection with the elements of water (Foley 2010). While some find swimming as highly beneficial, historically swimming has been recognized as an activity that provides relief to chronic diseases such as rheumatism, arthritis and skin diseases (Foley 2010).

Research on 'attention restoration' also identifies ways of how the natural environment can reduce stress and can enable the improvement of health of individuals at a faster pace (Herzog 1984; Kaplan 1995; Harting, Staats 2003; Velarde et al. 2007). The theory of 'attention restoration' by Kaplan (1995) is well connected to the theory of therapeutic landscapes. This is because this theory highlights that an individual can experience 'directed attention' and 'indirect attention'. During 'directed attention', an individual requires sustained focus on subjects that require attention even though they are not interesting. This therefore may result in tiredness as the individual has to block the attention on interesting subjects but of less importance. On the other hand, 'indirect attention' occurs when an individual's attention is captured, yet little cognitive effort is required. Thus the brain can restore its cognitive resources enabling persons to return to direct attention. This is connected to the important role that nature has and its ability to restore the attention of individuals through the green environment and blue coastal environment.

The Coast as a Place that Provides Attachment and Identity

When people enjoy daily contact with the sea they are likely to develop 'place attachment' which offers a positive, emotional connection with the coastal place.

This deep bond with the coastal area enables individuals to feel a sense of 'place identity' since the coast that they frequently visit has a symbolic importance in their lives, enabling them to experience a sense of relationship with the place (Beery, Wolf-Watz 2014).

Place attachment develops because individuals make a strong connection with its physical, socio-cultural, symbolic and psychological aspects (Relph 1976). Moreover, Fried (1963) also observed that if a person is required to relocate from his place of residence to which he is attached, the individual experiences feelings of grief. Environmental psychologists greatly emphasize the concept of connecting with nature that enables individuals to feel a powerful, transformative experience (Beery, Wolf-Watz 2014). Also due to the collective emotions developed within a place, individuals consider this experience as related to the idea of '*topophilia*' (Tuan 1961), which is defined as love of place. Indeed, besides attachment individuals experience feelings of affection towards a place. Furthermore the daily experiences by the sea as described by studies of Bell et al. (2015) and Satariano (2019) explain how individuals develop increased conservational attitudes and a sense of emotional protection of the place. This results from their feelings of rootedness and their personal values as well as their memories and emotions of the place (Kearns, Collins 2012).

Research on therapeutic landscapes thus emphasises the emotional connection, reputation and experiences of particular places by the sea that are beneficial for health (Milligan et al. 2004; Conradson 2005; English et al. 2008; Laws 2009; Rose 2012; Foley, Kistemann 2015). The emotions that people can experience when in contact with a natural place are highly important for the identity of a person (Davidson, Milligan 2004). Therefore the coastal environment is a therapeutic blue space that can facilitate deep, positive, emotions between people and places (Gastaldo et al. 2004).

The Coast as a Place that Provides a Connection with Nature

The connection with nature is also described in the theory of '*biophilia*' (Wilson 1984) where it is claimed that the relationship of people with nature is intensely profound. Consequently, together with human's innate instincts of breathing and emotions of love or hate towards others, people also developed a love towards nature, including the sea. The sense of '*biophilia*' is further developed since the human being also has a sense of inquisitiveness and a sense of exploration. This therefore explains why the dynamic features of coastal landscapes are considered as eternally beautiful and attractive for people to enjoy.

The Coast as a Place that Restores Mental Health and Wellbeing

An important theory that is related to the emotions and wellbeing of people, through the engagement with the coast and the sea is 'Attention Restoration Theory'. According to this theory the natural settings and the environment have a high concentration of features that are able to enhance and provide solace and rehabilitation to one's psychological wellbeing (Kearns, Collins 2012). The sea and the coastal environment have increasingly emerged as important aspects that can restore attention and re-enable individuals to function and focus better in their daily lives. Satariano (2019) explained that when some of the individuals feel stressed, they seek to spend time near the sea and attribute their contact with the sea as an agent that helps them feel better. In fact, the Attention Restoration Theory is a psycho-evolutionary model which explains that one's contact with nature can help in the recovery from diverse forms of stress (Ulrich et al. 1991; Ashbulby et al. 2013).

The Coast as a Place of Socialisation

The coastal environment, apart from providing individuals with beneficial physical and mental health and wellbeing, can also improve and support people's need for social interaction (Curtis 2010). A large proportion of the literature focusing on therapeutic spaces discusses the 'social' relations which can lead to the formation of places that affect health (Gesler 1993; Milligan et al. 2004; Tonnellier, Curtis 2005; Curtis 2010; Foley 2015). Bell et al. (2015) and Satariano (2019) through narratives, emphasised how much the coastal environment is a place that can provide people with opportunities of social interaction and the formation of social cohesion.

Therapeutic spaces can be considered as those locations that are able to provide vital opportunities for experiencing a sense of community and involvement in social networks and activities (Milligan et al. 2004; Milligan et al. 2015). In fact, Satariano (2019) and Foley (2015) found that several individuals enjoy spending time near the sea during summer time as it provides them with opportunities of social interaction. Some narrated how much this social interaction enables them to form bonding ties and social networks with family and friends. Being part of a community and experiencing feelings of social cohesion is highly important as this buffers ill-health. The level of bonding that is developed during such interactions, enables individuals to receive support during difficult times. The coast facilitates individuals to form bridging ties with new acquaintances. Thus coastal areas make it possible for people to encounter resource rich individuals who may not be part of the community but still provide them with help. Daily interactions by the sea between friends, relatives and passers-by enable individuals to enjoy positive, social interactions which are highly beneficial for health and wellbeing. In fact persons who spend time near the sea with friends and relatives buffer ill-health through feelings of bonding and social

cohesion (e.g. Kawachi, Berkman 2001; Putnam 2000; Satariano, Curtis 2018), while others who interact with passers-by may buffer feelings of loneliness as well as gain information and knowledge from resource-rich individuals (Bourdieu 1986).

The Therapeutic Elements of the Sea for the People of Low Socio-economic Groups

Wheeler et al. (2012) found that the proximity to the sea has beneficial attributes more pronounced for the socio-economically deprived communities. This also matches with the findings of Satariano (2019) where Maltese deprived inhabitants narrated how the sea can improve their mental health and wellbeing. It was indicated that spending time looking at the sea or walking by the sea can enable individuals to feel better and feel relieved from stress. Moreover, some deprived individuals feel that living near the sea and spending time at the beach provides them with time for relaxation and enjoyment similar to being on holiday (Satariano 2019). Therefore the sea and the coast are highly important elements that can help and improve the health and wellbeing of people of low socioeconomic conditions.

The Coastal Environment as a Place of Nostalgia

Apart from feeling a connection with the place, some groups of people rekindle memories of the coastal place that they enjoyed in the past. In their study Satariano and Gauci (2019) explain how several persons expressed feelings of nostalgia by rekindling memories and narratives of their experiences in Dwejra after the loss of the Azure Window. Nostalgia indeed is an important resource that helps in promoting and maintaining psychological health. According to Wildschut et al. (2006) when something negative occurs individuals revert to nostalgic memories in order to strengthen and restore their wellbeing. People give importance to their nostalgic memories as they are likely to help them experience a positive mood, strengthen a sense of connection and give an existential meaning to life (Routledge et al. 2011). Therefore when people visit a place and renew the memories they experienced in that place in the past, they are using their memories as protective and restorative means for their health and wellbeing.

Fear of Coastal Loss and Solastalgia

The aspect of place attachment and place identity can also be linked to the fact that the coastal environment is dynamic and is always likely to change both due to the natural processes of erosion and deposition and also due to human intervention. This explains why individuals may experience feelings of loss when parts of the coast changes. Indeed, when a coastline or a landform such as the Azure Window in Dwejra

is lost due to storms and erosion or when a part of the coast is taken away for public development, individuals experience solastalgia. Solastalgia is defined as a feeling of *'pain or distress caused by loss of, or inability to derive solace connected to the negatively perceived state of one's home environment'* (Albrecht et al. 2007, p. 496). Solastalgia refers to the negative, psychological consequences of environmental disasters due to climate change or other negative environmental changes. This sense of distress that the inhabitants experience in relation to a coastal landform loss was greatly narrated in the study of Satariano and Gauci (2019) in connection to the loss of the Azure Window in Dwejra as these feelings resembled the loss of an important person in the Maltese community. The expressions of sorrow and grief show that the Maltese appreciate and feel a connection with the coastal space and the memories of the coast that give them solace are important for their wellbeing. In another study Satariano (2019) found how several respondents claimed feelings of solastalgia towards coastal areas that are now occupied by private entities and due to this they cannot relive their memories spent in that part of the coast since it is now occupied. Individuals also expressed solastalgia regarding the decrease in fishing stock and an increase of pollution in the sea.

Indeed these expressed feelings of solastalgia are connected to the theory of emotional geography which explains that individuals can identify and express affection towards a therapeutic place (Rose 2012). These perspectives of nostalgia and solastalgia highlight the importance of drawing attention to the landscapes near the coast and their importance for the health and wellbeing of people.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the better understanding of how the coastal environment is beneficial to the physical and mental health and wellbeing of people. It has increased in knowledge of the varied therapeutic experiences that individuals may feel when in contact with the sea. It has also showed the valuable aspect of natural landscapes and ecological relationships of people and the sea. Drawing from the theories and diverse, local and international studies, this paper has pointed out the attributes that focus on the social, symbolic, physical and emotional aspects that a person can experience when in contact with the sea and the coastal areas. Additionally, it has highlighted the ways individuals perceive, remember and interpret coastal environments and how the sea provides a deep emotional connection that enhances health and wellbeing.

This thus reflects on the UN Agenda 21 (1992) which emphasises the fact that authorities should acknowledge more the important aspects of the sea and its beneficial contribution to health and wellbeing. Therefore there is the need of protection and preservation of the coast and the sea and the need of safeguarding such spaces that can promote positive health and wellbeing for individuals.

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