



Nature and Wildlife Experiences: Feelings of Well-being and Restoration

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Overview

- Aims of the research
- Very brief introduction to the study group / methods
- Feelings of well-being on tour and at home
- Psychological benefits of experiences in nature
- Sustenance / bottom-up spillover into other life domains
- Conclusions and further research

Introducing the context

- A wide spectrum of tourist-wildlife opportunities exist (Orams 1996)
- An assumed growing demand met by a burgeoning supply of opportunities (UNEP 2006).
- Not an homogeneous market.
- There are various typologies of wildlife tourist from the 'serious' to the 'casual' and from the 'generalist' to the 'specialist'
- However, it is distinct from other nature-based tourism insofar as the main aim is to visit a destination in order to see and gain an understanding of the local fauna and/or flora.

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Aims of the research

- The experiential and the psychological benefits of wildlife tourism have not been adequately explored.
- Therefore the intention of this research was to provide a deeper understanding of what it means to enjoy wildlife experiences, namely:
 - ▶ the content of what is enjoyed,
 - ▶ the process through which people attend to and perceive wildlife and
 - ▶ the emotional responses it provokes.
- ▶ Not looking for well-being but it emerged as a strong and recurring theme.

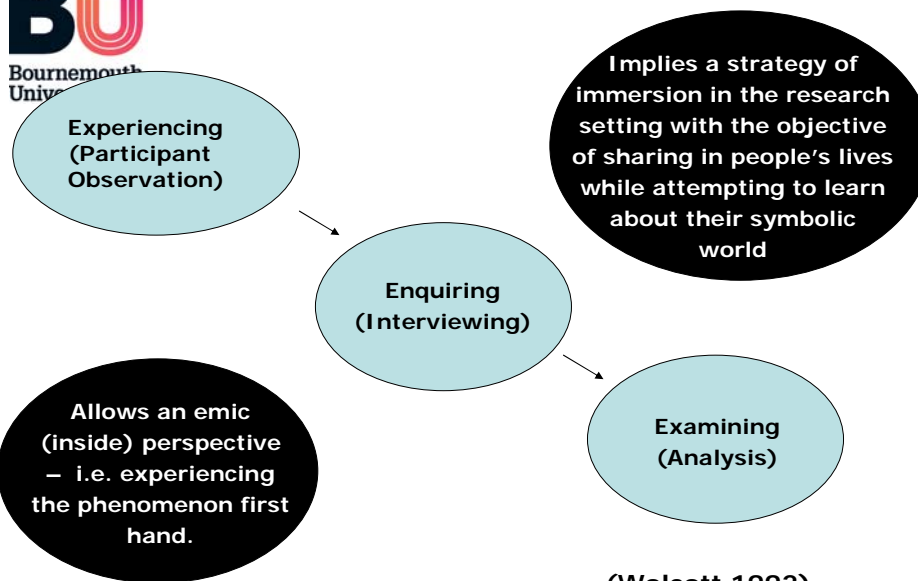
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Choosing the approach

- It follows that some exploration of emotions and connectivity to nature be in a qualitative subjective manner which is grounded in language and experience (Jardine 1998).
- The philosophy behind the research is that: **there are multiple realities of an experience yet within these are commonalities which may be exposed and extrapolated and potentially quantified at a later date.**

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The three stages of ethnography



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During two organised wildlife holidays:

1. The Autumn migration in Andalucia (which also included moths, plants and butterflies as well as birds) and,
2. A bird and whale-watching expedition in Baja California, Sea of Cortez (also included other land and marine mammals)

Enabled insight across the dedicated wildlife-tourism product spectrum from birding to general naturalist holidays (Curtin and Wilkes 2005).

Both observations were overt. Data represents two field journals (observations + reflections), photographs and 20 in-depth narrative interviews with participants.

**The Migration in
Andalucia, Southern
Spain**



**On tour with
'The Travelling
Naturalist'**



**Baja California
(Little Galapagos)**



Participant profile

- Aged 35+, high proportion of retired or older participants with post-secondary education and higher than average incomes.
- Also fit the notion of serious leisure participants (Stebbins 1992) in that they display:
 1. perseverance in the activity;
 2. 'career' or experience development;
 3. evidence of knowledge, training and development of skills;
 4. durable benefits such as a sense of accomplishment, enhancing social image and facilitating social interaction;
 5. a unique 'ethos' or social world and idioculture, and finally,
 6. a tendency to identify with the chosen pursuit (social identification).



Findings

Wonderment and connection

Wonderment is an aroused state of cognition. There are three perspectives to this state of wonderment, namely:

- its beauty,
- nature's design and,
- a feeling of being somehow connected.

“Just the absolute wonder of wildlife, the beauty of it, that's about all you can say, you know, it's just there and it seems so fundamental to everything, you know, we are part of it and it's wonderful to see that these things exist and the wonder of it all stays with you” (Joe, Baja).

In the existential, humanistic school of psychology Chawla (2002) would argue that there is a 'silent intuition' of the union of self and other, individual and world: an at-one-ness with nature.



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One minute we are looking at all the blows, the next flukes, and the next they are all gone as they dive and surface in time with each other despite the fact that they are spread over such a large area.

- *"I feel very relaxed and at awe with everything: one of those truly happy moments when you are totally unconcerned with the trivia" (Marie, Baja). "I have a feeling of being really alive, of being connected somehow" (Dawn, Baja).*

"It is sort of a feeling that you have.... a kind of real sense of wellbeing and positive rush of being really really happy (Tanya, Baja).

- Responses have resonance with peak experiences and "moments of highest happiness and fulfilment" Maslow (1964:73)

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Peak and flow experiences

(Maslow 1968; Csizszentmihalyi 1990)

- *Embodied experiences – swimming with the sea lions*
- *Back on the boat and sometime later, I ask Sophie what it was about swimming with Sea lions which was so fantastic. She thinks for a moment and said she was so glad that she had braved the cold water. It wasn't to be missed: "it takes you completely out of yourself". Yes, I agreed, so it does.*
- *"I'm not a terribly spiritual person but I live my life on the principle that happiness is lots of little things and so it is the same on a wildlife tours; it's all the little unexpected wonderful things that can happen and yes it does make you feel privileged and happy and very uplifted" (Michelle, Baja).*

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Meaningful experiences of nature at home

"I think seeing things happening in the wild, it might not be animals necessarily, but when you see primroses beginning to come out and other things, it makes you feel so much better" (Penny, DWT).

"After a busy day or stressful day at work, it's wonderful to work out in your garden and just unwind. Just touching the soil and being actively involved in doing something outdoors in nature lifts you" (Sophie, Baja).

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Meaningful experiences of nature at home

"When you have not been sleeping and you wake up very early and you hear the dawn chorus and you hear the birds, you can suddenly in seconds feel uplifted because all your life you are depressed about something.

"I think nature can make you feel good in that sense so it can be uplifting for you" (Rebecca, Andalucía).

"Wildlife has the ability to break into your day completely unannounced; that is so important to me and it's just utterly thrilling when that happens. And it could be anything. In the middle of the night for example, you are fast asleep and then is an owl hooting and suddenly you are awake" (David, Andalucía).

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Meaningful experiences of nature at home

“There’s a lovely part where I cycle over the bridge by the river. It’s somewhere that I’ve always remembered: a whole avenue of horse chestnut trees and I love watching them change, first sign of autumn, first flowers, first conifers.”

It’s quite interesting how conscious I am of them and how connected I feel to them. It’s like the first birds to sing in the morning and the first swallows to arrive in spring” (Mark, Andalucía).

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Nature and human well-being

Price (1999:252) suggests that “nature is a ‘refuge from modern life; a reprieve from irony and self-awareness”.

- Psychological restoration in nature / ART (Kaplan, 1995)
- The Biophilia Hypothesis – an innate emotional need for contact with the natural environment (Wilson, 1984)
- “Cultural beliefs and practices and physical environments that stray too far from that in which we evolved may compromise our psychological well-being”. (Gullone 2000, p311)
- ‘Affluenza’, depression / mental disorders resulting from modern consumerism (James 2007)

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Wildlife experiences are important for well-being because they allow:

- Transcendancy - a state of being or existence above and beyond the limits of material experience or awareness of the self
- ▶ A depth of concentration that prevents the intrusion of unwanted thoughts into consciousness
- ▶ A loss of time perception





Nature as sustenance

Evidence of a potential bottom-up spillover effect from natural experiences into other QoL domains (see Sirgy 2002).

"Not in the sense that you become euphoric and kind of go round with a smile on your face all the time but nature gives you that sort of contentedness it is like it's sustaining you in a sense"...(Peter, Andalucía)

"I mean I like going away but also I like home but I think the reason I want to go home is because you have been nourished. I know it sounds corny but it is like nourishment for me. Something to sustain me for when I go home and until my next trip" (Tanya, Baja).

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This research suggests that wildlife experiences, whether on holiday (or at home), has the potential to:

Provide fulfilment, a heightened sense of wonder and awe

Can allow participants time to reconnect with themselves and the world around them.

Allows time for contemplation, can halt time and sustain them beyond the immediate experience of hum drum life.

And is important for sustenance, mental health and well-being.

Thus also fitting Kaplan and Kaplan's (1989) Attention Restoration Theory

ART says there are four components present in a restorative environment:

1. **Being away (Escape)** - a psychological distance from routine mental contents
 2. **Extent** - Orderly and understandable components
 3. **Fascination** - Effortless attention, absorption
 4. **Compatibility** - Person's inclinations match demands of environment
- ❖ Restoration is something which lets you reframe the situation causing stress, with absorbing stimuli, giving a feeling of escape, and that watching wildlife / nature tends to offer all of these things.

And so, to further research...

- We now need to explore the importance of wildlife to perceived quality of life and well-being to a wider, random sample.
- How much do experiences in nature figure in people's personal strategies to enhance subjective well-being?
- How far reaching is the bottom-up spillover effect?
- Could there be horizontal spillover too?
- How do demographic and personality factors alter the findings – i.e. are there differences between urban / rural; male / female; age and life cycle populations?