

Well-being and the environment – research questions & connections

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Concepts of well-being and its connection with environmental and landscape features provide a wealth of information for popular phrases including “exercising outside is better for you than going to the gym,” “having a nice view from your hospital bed will aid recovery” and “living in a greener environment will make you happier.” Providing evidence for these statements and analysing what the real relationships are is an ongoing challenge. There is a need to define what is actually meant by well-being and what methodologies are available to test impacts of environmental factors on people’s quality of life. Thinking about the different disciplinary perspectives will be important in answering calls such as:

- Living With Environmental Change (NERC/cross council programme)
- Ecosystem Services and Poverty Alleviation (NERC/cross council-sector)
- Process, Environment and Sustainability (EPSRC)
- Towards next generation healthcare (EPSRC)
- RCUK Global Uncertainties Programme: Security for all in a changing World

For further discussion, an attempt below has been made to categorise some of the obvious relationships. A table is provided at the end to summarise the types of well-being mentioned.

Landscape, natural beauty & scenery connected to psychological well-being

A bulk of literature exists about people’s mental health and state of relaxation when looking at natural landscape images or when being outside in areas of parkland, gardens or the ‘wilderness.’ One idea at the extreme of this theory is that of “solastalgia¹,” where a person or group of people feel a deep loss and grief when the environment in their community is dramatically changed through such actions as strip mining or a natural disaster. Disciplines involved: Landscape studies, psychology, public health, geography

Crime free, clean and affluent areas connected to subjective well-being

People are expected to be more satisfied with their life and happier if they feel safe and secure in well kept, tidy and pleasant business or residential area. A few studies have revealed that greener environments lead to higher property values in areas of high urban density. These areas create more confidence in being desirable places to be and people feel happier if they live within these rather than a more down trodden part of town. The National Economics Foundation (NEF) recognised this concept in its ‘one planet living²’ publication where the emphasis was on better environment, better quality of life rather than any concept focusing on excessive consumption behaviour. Disciplines involved: economics, planning, sociology, criminology

Physical well-being connected to green spaces

The physical health of a person has been reported to increase with greater contact with nature. Notions of ‘outdoor gyms’ have inspired people to take up running, cycling and pursuits like yoga by doing them in forests and public parks. The NHS and the Sustainable Development Commission have got a catch phrase ‘The Natural Health Service³’ to tackle

¹ Solastalgia has its origins in the concepts of nostalgia, solace and desolation. Was coined by Glenn Albrecht at the University of Newcastle Australia. Other articles at

<http://www.worldchanging.com/archives//007906.html>

² <http://www.wwf.org.uk/filelibrary/pdf/wellbeing.pdf>

³ <http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications/downloads/HF6-final.pdf>

issues such as recovery from surgery, dementia, work-related stress and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Both the young and the elderly appear to be particularly amenable to the benefits of development and recovery using elements from the outdoors. Disciplines involved: landscape, medicine, public health, ageing studies

Ecosystem Services connected to objective well-being measures

A cross council programme on Ecosystem Services and Poverty Alleviation (ESPA) is currently active and consistently refers to human well-being within its objectives. Ecosystem Services include those that provide resources such as fuel wood; regulate systems that control the climate and air quality; support soil production and nutrient cycling; and also provide cultural and inspirational elements that define 'our sense of place.' These aspects affect every country no matter what level they are at on the socio-economic scales and issues cross between those relevant to objective well-being and those analysed by the subjective well-being framework. Disciplines involved: geography, development studies, environmental sciences, sociology, anthropology, mathematics, politics

Green issues and ideals connected to subjective well-being

DEFRA commissioned some work to be done on the relationship between sustainable development and the potential impacts on well-being. It highlighted that in some cases people's immediate happiness diminishes if their consumption patterns are curbed. For example, increased green tax on fuels and polluting cars hinders those buying cars as status symbols etc. Issues about inter-generational well-being and that between different geographical locations were also highlighted as important. Disciplines involved: sociology, planning, landscape, politics, development studies, economics.

Key research points:

- The theory concerning the interactions between environment and well-being are quite well established but undisputed evidence to support certain claims is still unavailable from the published literature
- ^{4*} There is a need to better understand what qualities of the landscape are important or relevant for different people's health, wellbeing and quality of life
- * There is value in developing a broader view of how studies from different fields, and their underlying theories and frameworks, can coherently build on one another
- An area of interest to make comparisons is age. Older people and children both benefit from being outside whilst interacting with their environment

Well-being type	Description
Objective	Well-being is achieved if a large amount of variables listed are available to the individual. E.g. Human Development Index
Subjective	Well-being is achieved if an individual feels positive about their life e.g. life satisfaction
Psychological	Mental health

^{4*} From Catherine Ward Thompson et al (2007) openspace.

http://www.openspace.eca.ac.uk/conference2007/PDF/Summary_Paper_CWT_31_Aug_07.AB_edit.pdf