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# CONSERVING WELLBEING: A HEALTHY CONSERVATION APPROACH?

Zoe Bullivant & Liz Mallabon

## BACKGROUND

- Increasing anthropogenic domination of ecosystems, including in the conservation sector, is resulting in the depauperation of natural systems<sup>1,2</sup>.
- Conservation goals reflect the contemporary societal definition of nature.
- Current conservation strategies are not working as they do not sufficiently address Western society's perceived dualism with the natural environment.
- Therefore, to achieve conservation goals, a cultural perception shift from seeking biological solutions to exploring anthropological solutions needs to occur<sup>3</sup>.

## THE PROJECT

This study investigates the success of transdisciplinary collaborations and action-oriented education in promoting positive environmental attitudes and behaviours. The collaboration followed Wiltshire Wildlife Trust's Adult Wellbeing Programme which "promotes nature-based outdoor activities as a therapeutic measure to prevent ill-health and support mental health recovery"<sup>4</sup>.

The study followed 34 participants with mild-moderate mental health diagnoses. At the start of the study period, these participants had been engaged for 0-140 weeks.

The trust describes that their weekly four-hour activities are based around SLaM's six ways to wellbeing (Figure 1).



## PROJECT AIM

The aim of this study was to identify whether conservation outcomes could be achieved through a therapeutic programme. This was measured through participant, wellbeing, connection with nature and development of environmentally responsible attitudes/behaviour.

## METHODS

Adopting a mixed-methods approach to mitigate researcher bias, this study employed three key research methods; surveys, interviews and a focus group:

### Surveys:

- Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS); a validated 14-item scale to measure personal mental wellbeing over time completed fortnightly from programme beginning.
- Connection with Nature Scale; a specifically designed 9-item scale to measure participants' perceived level of appreciation, empathy, relatedness, responsibility and self-worth<sup>6,7,8</sup>, completed at the end of research block.

*Analysed using two-tailed Spearman's rank correlation tests*

### Active, semi-structured interviews:

- To obtain in-depth perspectives of the effects of the programme on participants' behaviours, attitudes, connections, understanding and wellbeing.

*Analysed using constant-comparison coding and theming analysis*

### Focus Group:

- To elucidate, expand and validate researcher findings, a focus group of participants was carried out, exploring definitions, meanings and relevance of terms, phrases and codes.

*Findings informed the overall recommendations and discussion of the research*

## FINDINGS

### BELONGING & SHARED EXPERIENCES

Personal wellbeing can only be understood when co-constituted socially<sup>9</sup>.

Exemplified through participants "taking [my] kids out to do what we've done", the sharing of experience forms a fundamental part of emotional processing and therapy.

Important social connections were found with the natural environment.

Participants drew parallels between the current ecological crisis' and their own mental-health diagnoses. This inclusion of the environment as "a part of the group" reflects ecological health philosophies and encouraged increased environmentally responsible behaviours.

### Nature:

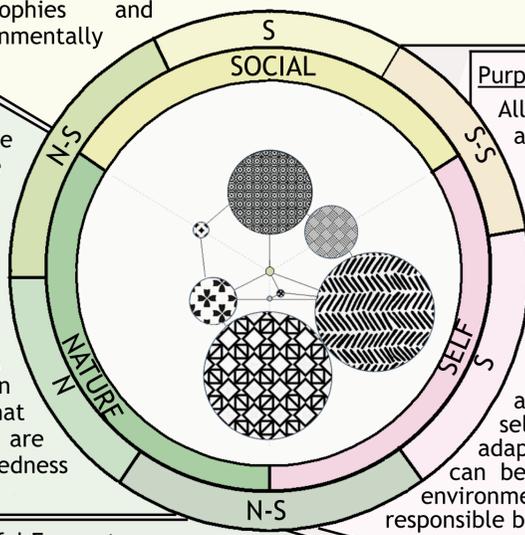
"Since we learnt about the plight of the bees, I have bought and planted specific plants - I can see the changes already" - p2

Importantly, this learning wasn't merely the transfer of knowledge but the development of understanding which is often based upon emotions. Suggesting that emotion-based activities are significant nature connectedness pathway in and of themselves.

### Mindful Encounters:

Transcendence from a passive observer to being actively engaged in mindful encounters has been identified as important in participants developing closer relationships with their surroundings.

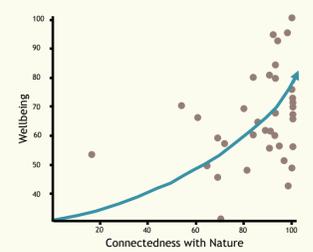
Findings of this research suggest that mindful encounters, such as "turn[ing] up half an hour early everyday just to appreciate [the surroundings]" partnered with the development of affinity and application of knowledge can result in values and belief changes. This change in values can in turn inspire behavioural changes, as illustrated by participant 5 "changing the way [they] think and the way [they] want to live".



### Purpose/ Meaning:

All participants' wellbeing increased after their first session and continued to rise over the course of their participation. For some participants perceived, "purpose" or "meaning" gained from the programme was the driving factor behind this improvement.

Supporting past research<sup>7,11</sup>, for some participants, a sense of "purpose" increased their self-worth and sense of identity. Importantly, low self-worth has been found to result in low adaptive ability<sup>12</sup>, if a positive sense of self can be developed from working in a natural environmental context, more environmentally responsible behaviours and values could develop.



## IMPLICATIONS/CONCLUSIONS

Key findings indicate a **significant correlation** between wellbeing and nature connection, which was further supported by the qualitative data that indicated a relationship between individual's **self-belief and their engagement** with environmentally responsible behaviour.

Findings noted that participants nature connection sat within a **continuum of engagement**.

Interest → Understanding → Affection → Connection → Engagement → Protection

This model allows for **natural variation** in participant personalities and illustrates that it is a journey that may take time and different forms of understanding to develop developed a heightened sense of awareness and appreciation of the natural world.

These results obtained from a programme which didn't consciously work towards these outcomes.

Recommendations for the future would be for practitioner and planners to be **aware** of the psychological and ecological benefits of **experience and community**, experiment with including them in your planning. To researchers, future study sits in designing a programme specifically designed to boost participant connection with nature, to see if this would achieve similar positive findings.

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Special thank you to the truly inspirational participants of the WWT wellbeing programme: I wish you all the best of luck, wherever your life takes you.