Wilderness and Wellbeing: Exploring mechanisms to wellbeing for older people through nature adventure activity

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Recent research acknowledging that physical activities in natural environments – including associated emotional components – can make a contribution to positive health and wellbeing (e.g. Buckley, 2020);

Growing inclusion of engagement with the natural environment within mental health policies & social prescribing;

Increased interest nationally and internationally in wilderness-based therapies

BUT

How does this work and why? Many unanswered questions!
Exploratory in-depth pilot study (N=12) to explore:

• **Why** do people engage with the wilderness?
• **What** are the impacts and how have they evolved over time?
• **How** does engaging with wilderness impact on mental and physical wellbeing and sense of self? i.e.
• **What** are the mechanisms through which this wellbeing is realised?
• **What** kinds of nature-adventure activities work for whom? (location, activities, social etc)
• **What** sustains engagement?
How do older people engaged in nature-adventure define wilderness?

• No ‘real’ wilderness left in UK (perhaps parts of Scottish Highlands) but ‘less manicured, ‘unmanaged’ landscape’ – often mountainous or seascapes;

• No, or limited, human impact, ‘back country’ ...away from civilisation, modern conveniences and a long way form help;

• Characteristics of quiet, beauty, outside and remote, devoid of people; habitat for wildlife;

• A feeling or emotion – wonder, fear, terror, excitement, challenge, sense of alone-ness

BUT

Needs to be linked to adventure, risk and fun.
Routes into (what triggers engagement with nature-activity).

- Formative childhood/youth experiences (parents, community groups – scouts/guides, school/college/university groups, etc.);

- Work/voluntary related (armed forces, Duke of Edinburgh’s Scheme);

- Partners, neighbours or friends;

- ‘Critical moments’ in the lifecourse, e.g. moving home, retirement; life change, health scare/awakening etc.
Bob moved to the Lakes 30 years ago, found previous place of residence (a smallish city) become too ‘urban’. Nature-activities include mountain-biking, cycling, mountaineering, skiing and windsurfing – although he hasn’t done the latter for many years. While windsurfing was his ‘first love’ he changed to mountain biking some years ago as he got fed up having to wait for ‘the right’ conditions to windsurf. Mountain biking, [he says] can be done anytime, wet conditions only enhance ‘the challenge’.

‘Bob’ loves the ‘challenge’ and adrenaline rush he gets from nature-activities. Maintains specific types of nature-activities, e.g. mountain biking, windsurfing and mountaineering good for his mental health, especially when experiencing a period of anxiety and depression. They require both mental and physical engagement in ways that leave no room for him to focus on his anxiety and depression. He compared this to walking and road biking which, while having their own wellbeing benefits, didn’t require the same combination of mental concentration and physical engagement. Rather, he noted, these types of activities allowed him the ‘mental head-space’ to work through ‘knotty issues’ that he was unable to resolve ‘in the office’.

Says would not have gained the same benefits from exercising in a gym, where body becomes physically exhausted, but there is no mental stimulation. Sitting, painting or doing less physical activities in wilderness would also not have the same impact because he feels the dual physical/mental capacities are not fully engaged in the same way.
Ageing and nature-adventure activity

- Activity as enhancing and enabling in later life
  - Even now I quite like climbing with friends my own age because I can look at challenges that I have physically and come up with solutions for someone else who is probably in the same boat as me.
  - I think a lot of the people that stick with it, they are getting some mental filip, a kick, there is some positive impact on their mental health.

- Recognising and dealing with non-completion
  - You do spend a lot of time analysing ... well maybe I haven’t eaten properly, maybe I haven’t trained enough, instead of just accepting; you can’t do everything well, you can’t. It's dealing with that failure - well I don’t think you should call it failure - but you’ve got to deal with the fact that you haven’t completed something when you’ve gone out to do that.

- Coping with the challenge of the ageing body
  - So I do go climbing but I will do the easier stuff now because I haven’t got the strength to do the harder stuff. Plus I’ve lost my head for confidence at height again...I find it physically harder now I’m older; I have to face it.
  - I’ve been doing it for a long time now. So as you get older you’re relying less on your strength and more on technique.
Preference for nature-activities can change over the lifecourse

- ...getting into swimming I’ve noticed a lot of older women get into swimming. It seems to suit our bodies quite well and is much less damaging

- ...It’s nice to think that’s the challenge; what am I going to do next and how do I keep up to that level whilst still recognising that some of these youngsters come past me on their bikes when I’m out riding, it's no use me getting upset about that, I can accept that because they are younger and they are fitter (and I wouldn't necessarily say healthier because I would like to think I am healthy), but it's recognising the age difference isn’t it and what comes with ageing.
A ROUTE INTO WILDERNESS facilitates awareness of positive interactions of ACTIVITY and PLACE. People experience how to use it for themselves, grab hold of the positive potential and get hooked.

PROBLEMS/CONFLICTS/WORRIES/STRIFE
- Relationships
- Teenagers
- Job
- Deadlines
- Debt
- Unemployment
- Poverty
- Pollution
- Politics
- Society
- Crime
- Illness
- COVID-19
- Existential threats, etc.

CHOICES of (or Preferred level of) ENGAGEMENT (ABSORPTION)

ATTITUDE or BELIEFS about AGEING drive all of these

“Increased sensory present moment focus increases wellbeing” for some, but for everyone WELLBEING is determined by their ability to achieve their preferred level of engagement/absorption PLUS the qualities of nature that afford their experience and sensations.

PLACE is MOST IMPORTANT as it AFFORDS these other CHOICES