



# Natural environment influencing people's affinity for solitude

Sunwoo Lee<sup>a,\*</sup>, David Scott<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Faculty of Physical Culture, Palacký University in Olomouc, 115 Trida Miru, 77111 Olomouc, Czechia

<sup>b</sup> Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences, Texas A&M University, 2261 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843-2261, United States



## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 14 April 2016

Received in revised form

18 November 2016

Accepted 29 November 2016

Available online 15 December 2016

### Keywords:

Affinity for solitude

Natural environment

Natural environment experiences

Wilderness solitude

## ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationships between people's affinity for solitude and solitude preference in natural environments to determine whether solitude experienced in natural environments is an outcome of people's affinity for solitude or vice versa. Data was collected from college students to measure their affinity for solitude and solitude preference in natural environments. We tested two competing hypotheses by examining the standardized estimates of path coefficients between latent factors. Results indicated that the measure of affinity for solitude was not a significant predictor of solitude preference in the natural environments; while solitude preference in the natural environments contributed to the formation of affinity for solitude,  $\beta = 0.269$ ,  $SE = 0.062$ ,  $t\text{-value} = 5.891$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Study findings will benefit landscaping and local park management by providing useful information about how people view and use natural environments as a place for being alone.

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## 1. Introduction

The current study sought to explore how people's affinity for solitude is related to their preference for solitude in natural environments. *Affinity for solitude* refers to as people's interest in being alone or a greater preference for being alone over being with others. *Solitude preference in natural environments* is referred to as an inclination to be alone or a strong sense of solitude demonstrated when people are surrounded by nature (e.g., park and wildland). This leads us to two possible scenarios. First, people's desire to be in nature may spring from their strong affinity for solitude. People who are involved in solitude are more likely to tend to develop a commitment to the natural environment as an appropriate condition to pursue their affinity for solitude. Second, spending time alone in nature may strengthen people's appreciation of solitude. In this case, a deep sense of nature contributes to quality time spent in solitude, so that people may expand their solitude preference in different environments.

There can be no question that natural environment experience is highly correlated with seeking solitude. Studies show that some visitors to wilderness areas seek peaceful, less crowded, and undisturbed natural environments expecting quality solitude experience (Cheung and Wells, 2004; Dawson et al., 1997; De Ruyck et al., 1995; Stewart and Carpenter, 1989; White and Hendee, 2000). At

the same time, when people feel close to nature, they tend to pursue and experience a sense of solitude or isolation (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 1995; Pohl et al., 2000; Scherl, 1989). Immersing oneself in natural environments facilitates an atmosphere that allows people to physically or emotionally detach themselves from daily social obligations and stressful life events (Borrie and Roggenbuck, 2001; Hinds and Sparks, 2008; Hollenhorst et al., 1994; Hollenhorst and Jones, 2001; Nielsen and Nilsson, 2007; Pohl et al., 2000; Sonntag-Öström et al., 2015).

A review of Hammitt's early studies of wilderness solitude provides a rationale for our study. Hammitt (1982) defined wilderness solitude as "a form of privacy in a specific environmental setting where individuals experience an acceptable degree of control and choice over the type and amount of information they must process" (p. 492). Four hierarchical dimensions of wilderness solitude were initially identified: natural environment (physical surroundings to accomplish wilderness solitude); cognitive freedom (a freedom to control actions and interaction with others); intimacy (a feeling afforded by a small group of chosen people, such as friends or family); and individualism (an escape from social expectations and obligations in everyday lives and observation from others). In a continued effort to develop wilderness solitude, Hammitt and Brown (1984) developed five different functions of wilderness privacy: "emotional release," "personal autonomy," "reflective thought," "limited communication (personal distance)," and "limited communication (intimacy)." Among those five factors of wilderness privacy, "emotional release" and "resting the mind from anxiety and mental fatigue" were most important among wilderness users.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [sunwoo.lee@upol.cz](mailto:sunwoo.lee@upol.cz) (S. Lee), [dscott@tamu.edu](mailto:dscott@tamu.edu) (D. Scott).

Findings from Hammitt et al. support our contention that people's desire for solitude is integral to wilderness experiences (e.g., Hammitt and Rutlin, 1995; Shafer and Hammitt, 1995).

However, there are some limitations in this seminal contribution of wilderness solitude studies. First, wilderness literature has been weighted towards correlational studies so there is insufficient data about causal directionality between people's affinity for solitude and solitude preference in natural environments. We still have meager understanding of how people's preference for being alone in natural environments is linked to their views of solitude more generally. Also, there may be a *less* straightforward equivalence between *wilderness* experience and people's general affinity for solitude. In many urbanized societies, for example, people are unable to attain solitude in remote setting such as wildland (Pergams and Zaradic, 2008; Walker and Virden, 2005). Also, due to the historical and philosophical meaning of wilderness, people tend to view wilderness experience as deep and intense (e.g., spirituality). Therefore, enjoyment of wildlife and a general affinity for solitude are hard to apply to those who have a less opportunity for remote settings. Moreover, it is important to note that lack of access to natural environments does not necessarily mean that those who live in urban area are less likely to demonstrate their affinity for solitude. According to Nielsen and Nilsson (2007), many people highly appreciate nature-oriented landscape, such as forest setting and woodland, as resources in relation to quality time in solitude. In this respect, this study does not specify the natural environments as "wilderness-oriented." Rather, natural environments are accessible to people on a daily basis (e.g., city parks) and provide a ready means by which people can experience solitude.

We also note that people's solitude experiences differ according to how they emotionally, socially, culturally, and physically engage themselves in being alone (Burger, 1995; Leary et al., 2003). Long et al. identified different solitude experiences and the most affected environments concerning solitude experiences (e.g., Long et al., 2003; More et al., 2003). The majority of people who achieved positive experiences of solitude reported they were at home or within intimate indoor environments. However, many people reported the natural environment as a place where they sought solitude and the solitude experiences involved positive and spiritual qualities. Findings reported by Long et al. are important because they link positive solitude experiences with the natural environments. Long et al., however, lacked an explanation of whether people's preference for solitude in natural environments is an outcome of their affinity for solitude or whether their interest in solitude drives them to more seek out natural environments.

Literature is clear that people's interest in natural environments is linked to their affinity for solitude. What is not known is whether solitude experienced in natural environments is an outcome of people's affinity for solitude or shapes people's affinity for solitude more generally. Building on this idea, we test two competing hypotheses. On the one hand, we suggest that a general affinity for solitude motivates people to enjoy natural environments because these places afford opportunities for being alone. On the other hand, we suggest that preference for solitude in natural environments leads people to develop an affinity for solitude. This second hypothesis suggests that positive solitude experiences in nature may lead people to develop an appreciation of solitude time in general. In order to simplify our investigation, we deemphasized other variables thought to be related to solitude preferences (e.g., personality). If we could determine more precisely how people's affinity for solitude and preferences for solitude in the natural environments are casually related, we will be able to better understand how people view and use natural environments (e.g., visiting urban park) as a place for being alone. This, in turn, should be applied in practice, such as urban landscaping and local park management, to

provide more opportunities for a quality solitude experience in the natural environments.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Data collection and sample

Data was collected from college students attending three different universities in the United States in 2012. A self-administered questionnaire and a consent form were developed using online survey software (Qualtrics Survey Software). A total of 395 college students—305 (77%) from Texas A&M University, and 90 (23%) from North Carolina State University and East Carolina University—completed the online survey in exchange for class credit. Forty-one percent (162) were male and 59% (233) were female. Of the sample, the majority was in their early 20s (Mean = 22.1, SD = 3.48). The vast majority of respondents (87%) reported they were White. Among respondents, 12% considered themselves Hispanic or Latino. Of the respondents, 85% reported living with others, including roommates and family members. In contrast, 12% of respondents reported they lived alone. Over half (57%) of those surveyed were single (not in a relationship) and 36% of respondents reported they were single but in a relationship.

### 2.2. Measurement

To measure people's affinity for solitude, a total of 4 items, borrowed and appropriated from Burger's Preference for Solitude Scale (Burger, 1995), were used (e.g., "I often have a strong desire to get away by myself"). In order to measure people's preference for solitude in natural environments (e.g., "I like being alone in a completely natural environment"), we adapted 5 items from Long's study (2003) which explored different solitude experiences in natural environments. All items were measured using a Likert scale that ranged from 1 "strongly disagree" to 7 "strongly agree."

### 2.3. Data analysis

In order to provide an understanding of the relationships between study variables, we examined the correlations between measured variables and latent factors. The reliability and validity of the measurement model was tested employing Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). This study took advantage of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the two competing hypotheses by examining the statistically significant standardized estimates of path coefficients among latent factors (Kline, 2005). We also detected the goodness-of-fit indices (e.g., Satorra-Bentler  $\chi^2$ , RMSEA, CFI, and NFI) to determine if the hypothesized measurement model fits to the sample data (Bentler, 1990). The results allow us to identify the sequential relationship between the latent factors whether preference for solitude in the natural environment is an antecedent of people's affinity for solitude or vice versa. Data was analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 16.0) and SPSS Amos 18.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Measurement test

According to the results, the measurement scales of affinity for solitude and preference for solitude in the natural environments were highly reliable and valid. Table 1 provides the descriptive analysis of the measured indicators and internal consistency of the study constructs. The measured items were significant, with the t-value ranging from 4.442 to 20.703. The Cronbach's alpha value

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