



# 'I Need the Sea and the Sea Needs Me': Symbiotic coastal policy narratives for human wellbeing and sustainability in the UK

Catherine Kelly

University of Greenwich, Department of Marketing, Events and Tourism, Queen Anne Court, Park Row, Greenwich, London SE10 9LS, UK

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## ABSTRACT

The human desire to be near coastal waters is an innate aspect of both human settlement choices and leisure behaviour. Emerging research agendas in the general field of 'wellbeing' focus on outdoor wellness, advocating the health and psychological benefits of nature. This presence of and engagement with coastal landscapes and water, or 'Blue Space' is a positive indicator in wellbeing, learning, outdoor activity and pro-environmental behaviour amongst the wider population. Simultaneously, the global marine policy agenda continues its commitment to coastal conservation and sustainability. To date, wellbeing, and marine policy agendas have mostly been segregated. This paper advocates a combined, integrative approach to policy that incorporates symbiotic sustainability-wellbeing narratives, proofing, and monitoring for the long term successful management of the coastal environment. Starting with the proposition that the sea needs humans, and humans need the sea, this research argues that valuing the coast and sea through its learning and wellbeing benefits can encourage pro-environmental and pro-sustainability attitudes. Little has been done to explore how the wellbeing benefits and emotional meaning people have felt through interacting with coastal environments can be harnessed for greater engagement and education around marine conservation. It challenges the mainstream discourse on marine conservation which often relies on people valuing the sea intrinsically from an altruistic and moral perspective. Primary research is presented on UK coastal learning and outdoor wellbeing programmes. Framing the coast as a therapeutic landscape with potential for simultaneously meeting human needs and marine needs, allows for inclusive policy decision making.

## 1. Introduction

'I see the sea and sea sees me' is a popular childhood rhyme in the UK and Ireland, usually shouted out enthusiastically at the end of a hot car journey where a vision of water appears in the front window on a family outing to the coast. This paper applies this simple rhyme to the human condition of *needing* the sea- for their own wellbeing, and the sea needing human beings, - to look after and conserve it. This research proposes that valuing the coast, through increased personal wellbeing, the creation of emotional meaning or place-attachment, and/or through outdoor play and learning, will potentially increase future sustainable marine attitudes and pro-environmental behaviour. Rather than examining a top-down approach to policy, this research advocates custodianship based on the individual benefits of increased personal wellbeing among adults, and learning-animation amongst children. The role and potential of coastal education and activities (with deliberate or secondary wellbeing outcomes) is explored. Different pedagogic and wellbeing practices at the coast are explored with a preliminary analysis of their sustainability effects and potential.

In particular, the aims of this piece are to (a) to show how marine sustainability and wellbeing policy imperatives often have common objectives and outcomes, and to discuss the symbiotic relationships between coastal environmental sustainability and individual human/community wellbeing; (b) to present a case study of Brighton (home to the UK's most recently designated UNESCO biosphere) to elicit examples of how both coastal learning, engagement and coastal wellbeing are being experienced and practiced at a local level; (c) to make policy suggestions on the future integration of marine and wellbeing policy agendas with human-encounter narratives at the core.

## 2. Marine and wellbeing policy contexts and concerns

The overlapping commonalities of both the marine and wellbeing agendas centre around the core values of *care* (of the self, or of the sea), protection, and sustainability. The focus here is not to summarise the full scope of national coastal or national wellbeing policies, but rather to explore how an approach situated in the individualised or collectivised human wellbeing narrative can inform positive engagement

E-mail address: [c.kelly@gre.ac.uk](mailto:c.kelly@gre.ac.uk).

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with coastal agendas.

### 2.1. Marine and coastal policy issues

Currently, the protection and utilisation of marine waters for environmental sustainability and coastal spaces for economic and social benefits remain key tenets of British marine policy. Contemporary marine conservation policy commitments include for example, protecting 10% of its coastal and marine areas, through the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) (Directive 2008/56/EU) by 2020. The ongoing creation and monitoring of a network of MCZs (Marine Conservation Zones) -which also form part of the UK's Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and establishing marine plans around the UK's coast by 2021 [1].

Reviewing core marine strategy and planning documentation shows that wellbeing is emerging as a factor for consideration. For example, the MMO's, (Marine Management Organisation, UK) 2017 marine planning database' [2] suggests that wellbeing is gradually appearing more frequently in planning and strategy documentation around the country. Excerpts from the collated data include, for example -encouraging domestic tourism through identifying the contribution of natural seascape, historic heritage, access to open space and recreation opportunities is crucial to improving communities health and wellbeing; and further extracts also note this relationship between leisure, recreation, coastal tourism and health and wellbeing benefits [2]. Whilst marine policy itself is broad and far ranging, the key concerns in this work relates to coastal zone management, bathing water, the aesthetics of coastal landscapes, habitat and coastal leisure space conservation.

Planning and policy narratives are thus beginning to include wellbeing alongside the more traditional marine concerns, but there is scope for further integration especially as regional marine plans are developed in the future. An embedded Ecosystems Approach (EA) that emphasises ways that coastal habitats can deliver wellbeing that people value, is a strong policy premise moving forward [3].

### 2.2. Wellbeing policy issues

A myriad of wellbeing debates, measures and definitions exist in both academic and emerging policy literature [4]. Its definitional complexity lies in the elusive nature of what the word 'wellbeing' itself actually incorporates [4b]. There is relative consensus among researchers that optimum human wellbeing comes from a balance between wellness in the body, the mind and the spirit. However, the concept of wellbeing clearly means different things in different contexts and in different countries. Put most simply perhaps, it refers to the status of an individual or population where there is an absence of illness, and concurrently implies *proactive* strategies for staying physically, psychologically and/or spiritually 'well'. Wellbeing can be measured using scientific health indicators, or indeed self-reported perceptual measures. Subjective wellbeing (or personal wellbeing) asks people directly how they think and feel about their own wellbeing, and includes aspects such as life satisfaction (wellbeing evaluation), positive emotions (hedonic wellbeing), and whether their life is meaningful (eudemonic wellbeing) [5]. Of additional interest is how subjective wellbeing measures can be applied to public policy, taking into account human desire fulfilment and valuation approaches [5b] Improving subjective wellbeing (SWB) is a worthy goal in its own right but it can also improve other related outcomes such as physical health, getting into work and productivity.

Objective wellbeing is based on assumptions about basic human needs and rights, including aspects such as adequate food, physical health, education, safety etc. Objective wellbeing can be measured through self-report (e.g., asking people whether they have a specific health condition), or through more objective measures (e.g., mortality rates and life expectancy). UK Department of Health findings [5] show

that wellbeing adds years to life and improves recovery from illness; is associated with positive health behaviours in adults and children; influences the wellbeing and mental health of those close to us; may ultimately reduce the healthcare burden; and that parents' mental health and wellbeing are strongly associated with their children's. Policy responsibility for wellbeing often sits within public health governance, although Wales has taken a national approach to creating a holistic approach through its Wellbeing for Future Generations (Wales) Act, in 2015 [5c]. This paper's focus is more on how wellbeing can be activated as a motivation for pro-sustainable behaviours, rather than a review of overall policy. For the purpose of this research, a subjective wellbeing approach will be taken - where personal perceptions of wellbeing, - emotional, psychological and physical in particular, are explored in connection with coastal places and the sea itself.

Wellbeing has much scope for improvement for most Western nations. The UK performs below average globally for mental wellbeing indicators (20th of 27 nations) and for child self-reported health (24th of 38) [6]. This is a poor outlook and may increase pressure on future psychological and health services. A commonly used approach [7] developed by the New Economics Foundation (UK) to frame how wellbeing can be achieved or worked towards is the 'Five Ways To Wellbeing' concept [7], specifically: 1. Connect; 2. Be Active; 3. Take Notice; 4. Keep Learning, and 5. Give. These 5 elements can be applied to coastal engagement on many levels and could form a useful framework for connecting wellbeing and marine policy. *Connecting* with others or with oneself by the sea for psycho-social outcomes; - *physical activity* for water and land based sports/activities; *learning* about the coast as a human and natural environment, and *giving* time and expertise to help look after the marine environment through organised or voluntary efforts are applied elements of this approach. Framing applied policy narratives via these 5 elements could potentially increase levels of wellbeing, whilst simultaneously increasing engagement with sustainable behaviours and attitudes towards marine and coastal spaces.

Indeed, the strong overlaps between both areas of marine policy and wellbeing policy are evident, with a common core ethos of care-giving, of paying attention, of education or growth, of sustainable behaviour (of the self, and in relation to the environment), of legacy and of community action. It behoves all sectors, not just public health, to contribute to future well-societies. In the same way, wellbeing advocacy has the power to activate more engaged marine and coastal custodianship through concepts of emotional and place attachment, environmental connectedness and therapeutic landscapes (see following sections).

### 2.3. Coastal wellbeing

Beyond the policy contexts of both marine environments and general wellbeing, further reference can be made to outdoor/nature based wellbeing, and more specifically, to coastal wellbeing. That is, wellbeing improvement directly related to being near (living or visiting) the sea, or partaking in activities in or by the sea. As a growing body of work is beginning to show (Section 3), humans place high emotional value on coastal places and experiences, for themselves, their families and their psychological as well as physical health. Still more research suggests that the physical health and mental wellbeing of people in developed countries is better when they have access to "natural" green-space environments such as woodlands, parks and gardens [8,9]. A recent investigation using English Census data extended these findings to coastal proximity [10].

Historically, specific blue spaces [11] have gained long-standing reputations for healing, including 'sacred' springs, holy wells, and coastal areas [12,12b,13]. Blue spaces are environments defined by the presence of water and include inland and coastal aquatic environments [14,15].

These have been described in previous studies as 'therapeutic landscapes'; landscapes where the physical and built environments,

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