

Title

Effect of the Belgian coast on human wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Background/Aims

Exposure to natural green spaces has a positive effect on wellbeing, with recent studies showing similar results for blue spaces, such as the coast. The context and measures enforced due to the COVID-19 pandemic allowed us to further investigate this effect during a time of important stress and restriction of circulation. We therefore aimed to look at whether having access to the coast and visiting it during the lockdown had a positive effect on wellbeing.

Methods

A total of 687 participants took part in an online survey that was launched end of April until beginning of June 2020. The survey was presented in national media during the lockdown instated by Belgium and was destined for Belgian adults. Questions on participants' sociodemographic situation, visit frequency to outdoor spaces, emotions felt during these visits, and experiential and eudemonic wellbeing were included. Two different hypotheses were tested: (1) those who had access to the coast during the lockdown have higher levels of wellbeing than those who did not;

(2) frequent visits to the coast are associated with higher wellbeing, in comparison to other types of environments.

Results and Conclusions

Results show support for the first hypothesis as those who had access to the coast reported higher levels of happiness (mean difference of 4.8%) and lower levels of rumination (mean difference of 5.7%) than those who did not have access. Weekly or more frequent visits to the coast were not associated with higher wellbeing. However, we did find a significant interaction effect with visits to green spaces, such that weekly or more frequent visits to the coast and green spaces combined were significantly linked with higher levels of wellbeing (e.g., a mean difference of +3,73% in eudemonic wellbeing).

In conclusion, having access to the coast benefited wellbeing during the lockdown for the COVID-19 pandemic. Weekly or more visits to the coast were significantly associated with higher wellbeing, only if there were weekly or more visits to green spaces as well. This study confirms the importance of nature for wellbeing even in times of crisis, and understanding its impact can help policy-makers develop appropriate measures to prevent further strain on mental health.