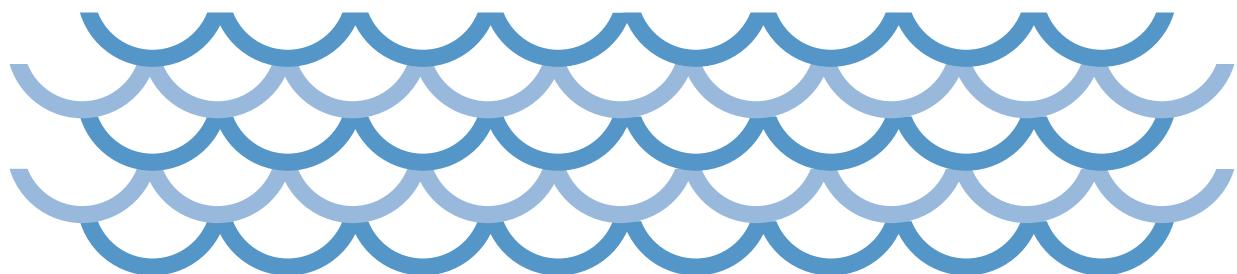
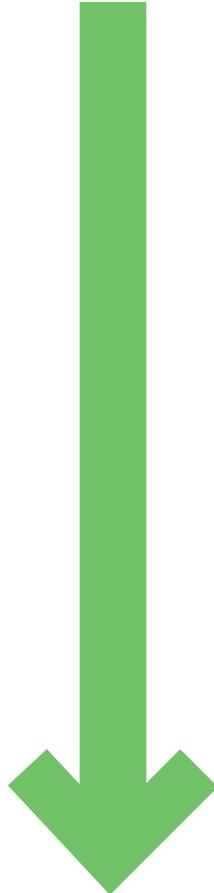




Understanding
Society

Beyond Greenspace

Using the British Household Panel Survey
(BHPS) and Understanding Society to explore
the relationship between nature and well-being



Whether it's a stroll on the beach or a picnic in the park, nature provides us with a place for physical activity and a chance to gather our thoughts away from the stresses of daily life. Or does it?

An increased focus on the nation's happiness and its impact on our health has thrown a spotlight on the role of the great outdoors. Hard hit by the economic crisis, the Government needs to find new ways to deliver well-being to society. The natural environment could be a key resource to do so cost-effectively.

Existing research about improving well-being is often mixed and contradictory. There are important gaps such as the need for a precise definition of 'natural environment' or 'greenspace' and of a more accurate understanding of nature's impact on our health and well-being.

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC's) Secondary Data Analysis Initiative (SDAI), and managed by a team of researchers at the University of Exeter, Beyond Greenspace is seeking to close this gap. The comprehensive programme of research links ecological, socioeconomic and health data. The team expects this analysis to help decision makers at a national and local level better understand the value of nature so they can target resources effectively and improve people's environment and lives.

Key Findings

The study is at an early stage and is yet to produce any major findings. However, some preliminary research has been published. The team used data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) - now incorporated into Understanding Society - to investigate relationships between residence near the coast and measures of well-being.

After adjusting and controlling for a number of factors (including local greenspace), the research found:

- individuals reported significantly better health when they lived nearer the coast
- the effects were present for both general and mental health

- the positive effect on general health of living within 5km of the coast (compared to 5–50km) was around a fifth of the effect of being employed versus unemployed, and a tenth of the effect of not having a work-limiting health condition
- the health benefits of living less than 5km (compared to more than 5km) from the sea are comparable to living in an area with 40% more greenspace
- individual effects were small but may be important at the community level.

The research project

The project uses a range of secondary data sets including the Census, BHPS and Understanding Society. Its principal aim is to improve our understanding of the relationships between natural environments and health by looking at, for example:

1. Whether living close to different types and qualities of greenspace (eg. woodland, coast, grassland) impacts on human health and well-being
2. How impact is different in towns and cities compared with the countryside
3. If a rural or urban context, socio-economic status and gender might result in different impacts

The researchers will explore these links at a national level and use a case study to focus on local environmental data, which is only available on a smaller scale. They will also create an ecological indicator dataset suitable for further linkage with population data.

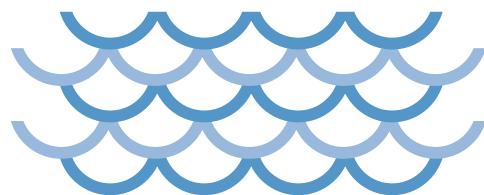
Why Understanding Society/BHPS?

Understanding Society participants (including the incorporated BHPS sample) are asked a range of questions about their health and how satisfied they are with their lives. These include simple questions

Whilst the absolute effects are still relatively small, their potential impact on a large population makes them important (around eight million people in England live within 5km of the coast).

**Dr Ben Wheeler,
Principal Investigator**

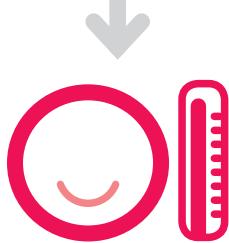
GENERAL HEALTH & LIVING BY THE COAST



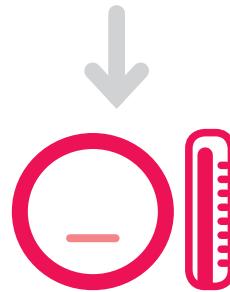
Living within
5km coast



Living further than
5km from coast



Positive effect on
general health



No significant effect
on general health

Individuals report both better general and mental health when they live less than 5km from the coast compared to those who live further away.

that are nevertheless a powerful indicator of someone's health and well-being, such as:

In general would you say your health is excellent, very good, good, fair or poor?

To delve deeper into understanding the links between natural environments and health, the research will also use more specific questions asked in Understanding Society, such as the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12 scale – used to indicate mental distress) and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale. For example:

Have you recently lost sleep over worry? Have you recently felt capable of making decisions about things?

The answers to these questions are used to examine longitudinal trends in relationships between nature and well-being.

Policy implications

A focus on people's life satisfaction, happiness or well-being has been at the heart of the recent political agenda together with a

commitment to be the “greenest government ever”.

Despite declaring in its White Paper that the natural environment underpins our economic prosperity, health and well-being, the Government has been criticised for failing to set out clear plans to deliver its commitment to ensure that government decision-making fully values the services nature provides.

A Commons Select Committee said a culture-shift was needed among policy makers and that more should be done to get all Whitehall departments to fully value nature's benefits. The value of natural capital, the committee said, should be fully reflected in decision-making.

The independent think-tank, NEF (the New Economics Foundation) has also expressed frustration, saying that despite the growing evidence that nature can play a critical role in responding to society's economic and environmental challenges by increasing our resilience and encouraging a more sustainable lifestyle, we are failing to realise its potential.

The UK National Ecosystem Assessment, the Biodiversity Strategy for England and the Localism Act all pay heed to potential links between nature and health, as do campaigns such as Walking for Health (Natural England), and Forestry Commission Scotland's Woods for Health Strategy. The importance of the quality of natural environments is raised in the Accessible Natural Greenspace Standard, but policies tend to reflect the evidence which refers to nature and greenspace in general and generic terms.

This research aims to improve knowledge and evidence to inform better policy at both a local and national level. As more evidence emerges, it could help to effectively target resources and develop interventions or programmes that benefit the environment, society and individuals.

Further information and resources

The research project is being undertaken by a team of researchers at Exeter University in partnership with Natural England, Forest Research and Cornwall Wildlife Trust. You can follow the project's progress on the Beyond Greenspace blog <http://beyondgreenspace.wordpress.com/>

Coastal proximity, health and well-being: Results from a longitudinal panel survey. Health and Place: M.P.White, I.Alcock, B.W.Wheeler and M.H.Depledge. 2013. 23:97-103. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2013.05.006>

If you would like a more detailed briefing on this research or to discuss commissioning research using Understanding Society email info@understandingsociety.ac.uk

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 Understanding Society – UK Household Longitudinal Study

This case study is part of a series aimed at potential users of Understanding Society data, including: policy makers, researchers and people in a position to influence social policy. If you are using data from Understanding Society and would like to profile your work, please email info@understandingsociety.ac.uk



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