

Researcher reads hundreds of diary entries to quantify the restorative power of Scotland's lochs and rivers

September 2 2024, by Megan Grace



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In October 2021, a man recreated a walk he first completed 62 years ago by climbing just under 3,000 feet to reach the summit of Beinn Damh on the north-west coast of Scotland. The steep ridge walk provided unobstructed views across Loch Damh and Loch Torridon. The combination of dramatic vistas and poignant nostalgia left him feeling energized and restored.

Later that same year, a woman documented regular walks along the banks of the fast-flowing river Thurso, near Inverness, in search of [otters](#). Over the winter months, sightings of wildlife on the riverbanks alongside cheerful exchanges with other walkers strengthened her connection with her local community.

In the spring of 2022, another man recorded the joy of swimming in a loch at the bottom of his garden in central Scotland: "Water was warm and enticing—took me five minutes to get waist deep—then... off I went for my longest swim of the year (5 mins and I was out). Refreshed and alive!!"

All three of these people took part in my [environmental research project](#) investigating whether Scottish freshwater environments can provide positive mental health outcomes over time. In total, 45 participants from across Scotland took part, with over 700 diary entries recorded between July 2021 and October 2022. Four groups of Scottish adults completed a three-month-long diary at different intervals during this timeframe.

Completed diaries captured firsthand accounts of the benefits of freshwater interactions and created a large database of freshwater experiences: from sailing and swimming to sketching by the water's edge.

This study was one of the first to use diaries to study our relationship with blue spaces. By analyzing these [personal stories](#), experiences and

emotions, my diary study adds to the growing body of research quantifying the [health benefits](#) of spending time in nature.

There were some challenges. Transcribing diary entries was time-consuming and deciphering handwriting was tricky at times. One note about watching [young people](#) partying next to a riverside path intrigued me: "the ducks weren't overly alarmed, just retreated as the ravers headed towards them backwards." Months later, during a discussion with a fellow Ph.D. student, I realized they had been rowing, not raving.

Overall, my results highlight the potential for lakes and rivers to improve people's physical and mental well-being. Diary entries revealed that participants held a strong appreciation of Scotland's freshwater environments and consistently felt they gained restorative health benefits such as calmness and improved concentration levels.

Feeling fresh air and the meditative flow of the water led to a sense of escapism from everyday concerns for many participants. Interestingly, despite the timing of the project coinciding with ever-changing public health policies, COVID was only mentioned in two [diary entries](#). Other research has found that the pandemic led to an [increased appreciation](#) of inland waterways.

Many participants had an [emotional connection](#) to the freshwater environments that they regularly visited. This helped to create a sense of belonging. However, this [emotional attachment](#) also meant that diarists could be adversely affected by [environmental change](#).

Litter, agricultural pollution and timber harvesting regularly contributed to negative freshwater experiences. Investment in the maintenance and upkeep of freshwater environments therefore has the potential to have far-reaching benefits, both in terms of public health outcomes as well as biodiversity levels.

The process of journaling also proved to enhance the restorative effect of visiting Scotland's inland waters, as one person wrote: "this diary has been really helpful charting my progress and patterns, that I may even carry it on myself!"

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