



Insight Department:  
**The Health Benefits of  
Being Near Water**

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Topic paper  
June 2021

# Welcome

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Scotland's visitors have enjoyed our coasts and waters through time. From our stunning beaches and coastlines to our inland waterfalls, lochs, rivers and canals, Scotland's bountiful supply means that you are never far from being able to access our waters and coasts and enjoy their benefits.

One indelible mark the COVID-19 pandemic has left us with is the impact on our mental health. Recent research from VisitScotland looking at the reasons for taking a break in the latter half of 2020 found that, around quarter of UK resident respondents are motivated to take a holiday or short break to “protect their mental health” from the impact of Covid. The research also showed half of respondents (defining reasons for a holiday) were looking to get away from it all and have a change of environment as well as connecting with nature and the outdoors.

Our Insight paper [The Emotional Benefits of Tourism and the role of travel in the pandemic recovery](#) explores the long-established relationship between tourism and wellbeing and considers the emotional and mental benefits of travel.

**In this paper, we dig further and take a deep dive to look specifically at the benefits of being near water and look at the opportunities for Scotland to help a nation's mental health.**

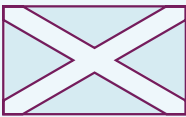


# Scotland's Coastal Assets

Scotland has over 11,000 miles of coastline, 137 miles of canals, 31,460 freshwater lochs and several navigable rivers, alongside the 118 inhabited islands.

And our coastline and waters attract visitors each year who come to enjoy Scotland's waters and coastal assets.

## Key Facts



Scotland's residents made over 1.3 million trips to our coastal destinations in 2019



Visitors from North West England took 215,000 coastal trips to Scotland (2017-2019 average)

Throughout the Covid pandemic, interest in coastal destinations has been high



Just under 14.5 million visits were made to tourism attractions in Scotland's marine regions in 2019

Source: GBTS, VAM 2019

Explore these key facts in more detail and the appeal of Scotland's coastal destination for visitors in our Insight Topic Paper [Seas the Day!](#) Here we explore the lure of Scotland's coast for UK holidaymakers and discuss how visiting Scotland's coasts is a highly motivating factor for consumers considering a trip. However, interest has not always translated into engagement at levels reflected in the enthusiasm for the coastal experience. The challenge is to convert interest into engagement and visits.

**In this paper we explore the growing evidence of the benefits of being near water, and how Scotland's coastal assets can align with improved mental health and the recovery from the Covid pandemic.**



# The Health Benefits of Blue Space

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The general debate around the benefits of ‘green spaces’ on human living is generally well known but there is also a growing body of evidence which highlights the benefits to people of being near water, ‘blue spaces’ as such, whether this is being near the sea and oceans, or rivers, waterfalls and canals.

There are numerous studies and programs that are investigating what the beach does to our brain, how living in close proximity to water can impact us in urban areas and how water can improve happiness and wellbeing, and importantly as we continue to face the impact of the global Covid-19 pandemic, how water can improve our mental health.

For example, well known author [Dr Wallace J Nicholls](#) emphasises that connection to the edge of water can help us reduce toxic stress. And that’s just for starters.

[BlueHealth](#), is a pan European research initiative that investigates the link between urban blue spaces, climate and health. Their work helps planners and designers to deliver health promoting urban design and several of their research studies have uncovered links between waters and a greater sense of wellbeing.

The BlueHealth research projects are also referenced within the latest 2021 exhibition at the [Scottish Fisheries Museum](#) called [By The Seaside: Heritage, Healing and New Horizons](#) which explores the positive impact of blue space on human health.

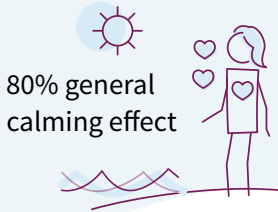
According to a report by the Environment Agency, [‘The Social Benefits of Blue Space, a Systematic Review’ \(October, 2020\)](#) rivers, lakes and coastal waters were found to provide a range of social and health benefits including evidence that people can feel happier when they are in proximity of blue space and that coastal environments are associated with the opportunity for restorative experiences.

And research programme [Seas, Oceans and Public Health in Europe](#) has gathered evidence on the benefits of the seas and oceans. They have championed the development of the ‘Tourism and Citizen Science’ program and have published a series of fact sheets for tourism operators to highlight the many ways in which oceans and seas can contribute to health and wellbeing.



### Ways Being Near Water Can Benefit Health and Wellbeing

In 2021, to support the Year of Coasts and Waters (YCW), VisitScotland commissioned YouGov plc to investigate UK consumer attitudes. The research found that many UK adults feel that being near water has a number of benefits to their health and wellbeing. Only 4% did not think being near water could benefit their health and wellbeing, females and older age groups were more likely to feel there are benefits.



Source: YouGov plc May 2021 (see Appendix)

**69%** UK adults also agreed that being by the sea melts my troubles away

**48%** agreed if I can't see water, I really start to miss it

**63%** agreed that time spent near water is the secret to happiness!

Features of Being Near Water

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Tend to Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Net Agree
I enjoy the sound of the sea	57%	35%	2%	1%	<b>92%</b>
I find spending time by water relaxing	45%	45%	4%	1%	<b>90%</b>
The sound of water in nature such as waterfalls and rivers can have a calming impact on me	47%	43%	4%	1%	<b>90%</b>
Sea air makes me sleep better	32%	41%	8%	2%	<b>73%</b>
Being by the sea melts my troubles away	22%	47%	15%	3%	<b>69%</b>
Time spent near water is the secret to happiness	20%	43%	15%	3%	<b>63%</b>
If I can't see water, I really start to miss it	16%	32%	30%	11%	<b>48%</b>

Source: YouGov plc May 2021 (see Appendix)

The benefits of blue spaces identified by numerous academic and research studies and programmes, coupled with the perceived benefits to UK adults of being near water, highlights an opportunity for all those involved in the tourism industry to understand these benefits and how we can bring these into the holiday experience.

Overall the recognised benefits of being near water are numerous and include:

- Alleviates stress – being near water is known to ‘melt your troubles away’. The sound of water can have a calming affect
- Strengthen immune systems - Increase white blood cell count/lengthen your life
- Sleep better – breathing in fresh air can help sleep
- Connect with nature
- Experience greater happiness
- Being near water is synonymous with having fun – think picnics on the beach, paddling and rock pooling

# Business Response to Blue Space

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If we combine the emotional and benefits of tourism with the impact of water on our wellbeing, we have a strong proposition to put to consumers in the post Covid-19 era, when the nation's mental health has taken a battering. Scotland is superbly placed to offer abundant opportunities to connect with our coasts and waters, whether this is within a rural or urban setting. Visitors can enjoy the health benefits of being near water, alongside the wider emotional benefits of a holiday or short break away.

Ideas tourism businesses can consider:

Learn more about the **benefits of blue space on people and on our wellbeing** (see Appendix for some sources for further reading)

Consider **highlighting to customers the benefits of blue waters** in your communications and consider any ways you can bring connections with water into your business proposition

Know the **blue spaces in your local area**, whether you are in a rural or urban location. Think about canal, coastal or river walks, water-based activities near you, coastal wildlife opportunities, beach locations or stunning coastal viewing points



## Celebrating our Coasts and Waters

2020 was designated Scotland's Year of Coasts and Waters (YCW). The Covid-19 pandemic impacted much of the planned activity but a decision was made in May 2020 to extend the year into 2021.

# Appendix

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## Data Sources:

Great Britain Tourism Survey (GBTS), 2019

Moffat Centre Visitor Attraction Monitor (VAM), 2019

VisitScotland Covid-19 UK/Scotland Consumer Tracking Reports, 2020/2021

YouGov plc Consumer Omnibus for VisitScotland, May 2021

Total sample size was 2103 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 19th - 20th May 2021. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+).

## Sources For Further Reading:

Tourism and Citizen Science, SOPHIE 2020

[Citizen Science Final Report - Sophie \(sophie2020.eu\)](#)

Survey Report Citizens, Health and the Sea SOPHIE 2020

[Survey Report: Citizens, Health and the Sea - Sophie \(sophie2020.eu\)](#)

Evidence – The Social Benefits of Blue Space: A Systematic Review, Environment Agency 2020

[Social benefits of blue space - report.pdf](#)





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June 2021  
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