



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

School of Geosciences

Blue Futures: The experience of sea-swimming, the idea of the beach and the seaside as place

Part of *Scotland's Futures*, MA Geography Course

Eric Laurier & Rachel Hunt

Summary

Open water, sea or 'wild swimming' has risen in popularity over the last decade and has increasingly been of interest to scholars interested in therapeutic encounters, nature-based practices and their implications for public health. Using Nairn as a seaside town and its shore as our fieldsite, we will examine Scotland's futures of the sea and the seaside. Through engaging with open-water swimming in particular, we will explore: *health & wellbeing, gender, ageing, caring, community, touch, play, family, memory, race, disability, affect, landscape and bluespace.*

Nairn, a town 15 miles from Inverness on the Moray Firth, has an active sea-swimming community with over 100 locals involved across two Whatsapp groups and numerous others who dip independently. The locals swim throughout the year in sea temperatures ranging from 6.5 °C to 13.5 °C in summer.

Depending on the weather, we will spend between 1 and 2 hours outdoors at the beach. To understand the experience of sea-swimming we encourage you to try a dip in the cold spring sea (for no more than 3 minutes) or at least to roll up your trousers and paddle.

We have hired the local community centre for the day to be our base. The majority of our study will take place there. Working in groups you will listen to and interpret interviews by Eric and Rachel of open-water swimmers undertaken for the purpose of this class activity, for the class.

Learning Objectives

1. Demonstrate the capacity to observe and interpret the dynamism of places by attending to their changing social and cultural characteristics. *Questions of change around swimming, gender, ageing, wellbeing and more in relation to the seaside.*

2. Relate theoretical frameworks within human geography to a field site in order to notice, gather and interpret supporting evidence. *Bring theories of place, landscape, age, care, gender, affect to Nairn's beaches and wider seaside landscape.*
3. Develop collaborative argument-building and communicate research findings thoughtfully and respectfully. *Drawing upon interview materials, groups will document their findings on a poster and present that to the class.*
4. Consider the ethical and practical considerations of fieldwork, including risk, safety, teamwork and time management. *Beaches as sites of vulnerable and exposed bodies. Beaches as dangerous in terms of cold, riptides, foot cuts etc. Working together as a team to respond to questions set by the teaching staff.*

Readings

Bates, C., & Moles, K. (2022). Bobbing in the park: wild swimming, conviviality and belonging. *Leisure Studies*, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2022.2085774>

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Moles, K. (2021). The Social World of Outdoor Swimming: Cultural Practices, Shared Meanings, and Bodily Encounters. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 45(1), 20–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723520928598>

Watson, S. (2019). Liquid passions: bodies, publics and city waters. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 20(7), 960–980. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2017.1404121>

Wheaton, B. & Lucen, L. (2024) Hydrophobia, dis/connection and difference: Understanding Chinese immigrants' fear of coastal swimming in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Health and Place*, 89, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2024.103309>