

In times of crisis: Effect of the Belgian coast on well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has led to multiple disruptions of our normal daily lives. One of these disruptions resulted in a restricted access to the Belgian coast during the first-wave lockdown, due to governmental measures restraining circulation. In that period, this study evaluated whether access and visits to the coast were positively associated with well-being. We assessed the emotions of awe and nostalgia as potential mediators between coastal visits and well-being.

The sudden COVID-19 lockdown served as a unique ad hoc opportunity to study the potential beneficial effect of exposure to the coast on mental health. A total of 687 Flemish adults took part in an online survey that was launched April 22nd until June 8th 2020. Questions on participants' sociodemographic situation, visit frequency to outdoor spaces, emotions felt during these visits, and experiential and eudaimonic well-being were included. Participants were divided in two groups: coastal residents (having access to the coast during the lockdown) or inland residents (having no access to the coast during the lockdown). Coastal residents were further divided according to their visit frequency to the coast: once a week or less, more than once a week, or every day.

A multivariate analysis of covariance revealed a significant difference in well-being between coastal and inland residents after controlling for covariates ($p = .007$). More specifically, coastal residents experienced less boredom and worry and were happier than inland residents (-9.14% and $+5.5\%$ in estimated marginal means, respectively). Coastal visit frequency was not found to be positively associated with well-being ($p = .126$). Awe and nostalgia were not more frequently experienced at the coast than in other environments; however a negative correlation was found between coast-induced awe and boredom ($r = -.32$, $p = .003$).

The study suggests that exposure to the Belgian coast works as a buffer against negative psychological consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby confirming its importance for well-being even in times of crisis. The emotion of awe triggered by the coast could be a protective factor against boredom. Policy-makers should consider making use of the coast to potentially build resilience in mental health for future crises.

Keywords: Coast; Well-being; COVID-19; Awe; Nostalgia