

The healing effects of marine tourism and life satisfaction

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly shifted the global priorities toward personal wellness, catalyzing the rapid growth of wellness tourism. Despite the growing significance of nature-based wellness, the specific relationship between marine tourism and life satisfaction remains under-researched in tourism studies. To bridge this research gap, the present paper investigates the link between marine tourism and life satisfaction by reviewing the literature published between 2020 and 2025, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. This research found that the marine environment helps in reducing stress levels, which improves the psychological and cognitive well-being of individuals. The findings of this study revealed that the marine environment helps in reducing stress levels, which improves the psychological and cognitive well-being of individuals. The study also revealed that surfing and diving, which are aspects of marine tourism, enhance physical and social well-being, which are significant predictors of long-term life satisfaction. The study revealed that marine tourism acts as a significant therapeutic tool in addressing societal problems, such as burnout and mental health disorders. Consequently, this research emphasizes the importance of integrating maritime resources into wellness frameworks to improve the general quality of life.

Keywords: Marine tourism; Healing; Life satisfaction; Physiological restoration; Cognitive restoration; Sense of accomplishment and belonging; Literature review

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis fundamentally reshaped the global health and wellness landscape, extending its impact far beyond mere lifestyle disruptions. The transition from a global emergency to a prolific wellness tourism market has repositioned personal well-being as a primary contemporary priority. According to recent data from the *2025 Global Wellness Economy Monitor*, the wellness sector has experienced a twofold expansion since 2013, culminating in a record valuation of \$6.8 trillion by 2024 [1]. Notably, every segment within this industry has surpassed pre-pandemic levels. Looking ahead, the sector is anticipated to maintain a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 7.6%, with market projections estimating a total value of \$9.8 trillion by 2029 [1].

This intensified societal interest in "healing" has catalyzed a rise in the consumption of restorative experiences. Beyond being a recreational pursuit, tourism is now recognized as a vital instrument for enhancing individuals' quality of life [2]. Moving past passive relaxation, travel functions as a therapeutic tool capable of addressing modern challenges such as aging populations, rapid urbanization, and the increasing prevalence of mental health disorders [2, 3]. However, despite this shift, the specific therapeutic advantages of tourism for diverse populations remain largely overlooked [2], and scholarly attention on healing tourism in the marine context remains fragmented and scarce [3].

Global enthusiasm for nature-based wellness and recreation has catalyzed the growth of the marine healing sector. By integrating maritime resources with healthcare and leisure, this industry is generating significant economic value and new employment [3]. Nevertheless, empirical investigation into the nexus between marine environments and human

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well-being remains insufficient [3, 4]. Recent findings indicate that well-being is largely shaped by the quality of the natural environment, an individual's internal affinity for nature, and the sense of place formed through direct experience [4].

Marine tourism is defined by water-centric pursuits such as sailing, cruising, and nautical sports [5]. While often categorized as a subset of nature-based tourism [6], scholars argue that it remains undervalued and lacks a universally accepted definition [7]. In this context, the purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between the healing effects of marine tourism and life satisfaction by synthesizing existing literature. By examining empirical evidence from the post-COVID-19 pandemic, this study intends to clarify the role of marine environments as a critical resource for psychological restoration.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Importance of Marine Tourism as a Psychological Buffer Post-Pandemic

The importance of the marine environment in defining marine tourism should be emphasized by the fact that the latter often finds its place as a specialized form of nature-based tourism [6]. The lack of a standard definition at regional or international levels points to the fact that the importance of marine tourism was never adequately researched and was largely undervalued [7].

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point in the recognition of the importance of the therapeutic benefits offered by the marine environment. According to Severin et al. (2021), the presence of access to the coastline acted as a key psychological buffer, protecting against the negative effects of lockdown-induced anxiety and alienation [8]. The importance of this finding lies in the fact that this was not merely a luxury but rather a necessity to ensure the maintenance of quality of life in the face of global crises [8].

2.2. The Restorative Potential of Marine Tourism and Life Satisfaction

The concept of "Blue Space," referring to water environments, has been identified as a key environmental factor in environmental psychology and tourism studies. Recently, research conducted by Pasanen et al. (2020) used a large-scale panel data set from eighteen countries to verify the positive relationship between visiting environments near the coast and alleviating psychological distress and promoting subjective well-being [9]. While green environments such as forests and parks have been identified as providing a restorative environment, the marine environment provides a unique restorative environment through a combination of the visual stimulus of vastness, auditory stimulus of waves, and aerosol-rich air, which enhances the restoration of the human mind [9]. This is because it provides a relaxed environment and a chance to disengage from daily stressors and connect with nature. This restorative experience has been found to be related to higher levels of life satisfaction and positive emotions [10, 11].

In addition, marine leisure activities such as sailing, surfing, and diving significantly influence life satisfaction and subjective well-being through leisure satisfaction, service quality, and other dimensions. According to research conducted by McDougall et al. (2022), marine-based activities provide a chance to connect with others [12]. Similarly, recent qualitative research has shown that sailing has a positive influence on individuals' lives, such as socializing with others and overcoming issues in their lives [13]. This has been identified as an important factor in life fulfillment. In other words, marine tourism could provide a useful healing tool for individuals to enhance their quality of life beyond simple relaxation.

3. Methodology

To investigate the multi-dimensional impact of marine healing on life satisfaction, this study employed a systematic review methodology. A systematic search for primary literature was executed across several interdisciplinary databases, including ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, PubMed, and Taylor & Francis Online. The research focused on peer-reviewed articles published primarily between 2020 and 2025, prioritizing the "post-2020" era to encapsulate the paradigmatic shift in "Blue Space" valuation following the global health crisis. The search utilized a combination of Boolean operators (AND, OR) with the following keywords: "Marine tourism" OR "Coastal recreation", "Blue Space" AND "Therapeutic/healing effects", "Subjective well-being" OR "Life satisfaction".

Rigorous selection criteria were applied to maintain the scholarly integrity of the review. The final selection was filtered based on three fundamental pillars: Contextual relevance, methodological Robustness, and Contemporary Timeliness.

Contextual relevance is that articles were required to demonstrate a direct nexus between coastal/marine environments and metrics of psychological health or life fulfillment. Methodological robustness is the priority assigned to empirical works utilizing quantitative (e.g., longitudinal panels, large-scale surveys), qualitative (e.g., semi-structured interviews), or meta-analytical approaches. Contemporary timeliness is that special emphasis was placed on recent publications (2020–2025) post COVID-19 to account for the evolving social demand for nature-based healing interventions.

4. Results

The systematic search yielded a robust collection of studies that emphasize the multidimensional benefits of marine environments. A total of 25 academic journals were collected on the effects of marine tourism after the COVID-19 pandemic. From the initial pool of identified records, ten key peer-reviewed articles were selected for final synthesis according to methodological rigor and relevance to the nexus of marine tourism and life satisfaction. The literature consistently indicates that the blue spaces offer a higher restorative potential compared to urban or inland green spaces, particularly in the post-pandemic context [8, 16].

Table 1 summarizes the key studies identified through the systematic review process, focusing on the field of marine healing and its impact on life satisfaction.

Table 1 Key empirical studies

Researcher	Topic	Methodology	Key impact on life satisfaction
Hooyberg et al. (2020)	Ocean health and residential proximity	Large-scale household data (Belgium)	Living near or visiting the coast improves perceived health, acting as a buffer for life satisfaction.
Georgiou et al. (2021)	Mechanisms of Impact of Blue Spaces on Human Health	Literature Review	Blue spaces promote physical activity and increase restoration.
Sevinc & Güzel (2021)	Sailing and its relationship with life satisfaction	15 sailors' interviews	Sailing has a positive influence on individuals' lives, such as socializing with others and overcoming issues in their lives
McDougal et al. (2022)	Blue space exposure, health and well-being	A nationwide online panel survey (n=1392) (Scotland)	Frequently visiting rivers and canals was associated with higher mental well-being. Living near lakes, rivers or canals was not associated with better general health or mental well-being.
Poulsen et al. (2022)	Factors associated with visiting freshwater blue space	Survey (40 small towns in central and northeast Pennsylvania, USA)	Visit frequency was related to perceived stress but not mental health.
Shim et al. (2023)	Therapeutic potential and healthcare applications of marine therapy	Review with meta-analysis	Marine therapy is promising for treating chronic skin issues, easing musculoskeletal discomfort, and increasing the quality of life in patients with musculoskeletal pain.
Próchniak & Próchniak (2023)	Adventure recreation and the wellbeing	Survey (n=248, Poland)	Hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing was positively predicted by adventure recreation associated with water risks
Grace et al. (2024)	Health and wellbeing (dis)benefits of accessing inland blue spaces over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic	In-depth semi-structured interviews (central and southern Scotland)	Inland blue space provided therapeutic outcomes for individuals during the pandemic.

Wright et al. (2024)	Blue space and well-being	Semi-structured online and telephone interviews with nineteen adults (United Kingdom)	Blue spaces were described as having the potential to reset the mind, emotions, and body.
Guan et al. (2025)	Role of Blue Space in Enhancing Mental Health and Well-Being Among Older Adults	Systematic Review	Positive associations between blue space proximity, quantity, and improved mental health outcomes in older adults.

The content analysis of the selected literature reveals three primary pathways through which marine tourism enhances life satisfaction: Physiological restoration, cognitive restoration, and sense of accomplishment and belonging (see Figure 1).

4.1. Physiological restoration

Research (e.g., Hooyberg et al., 2020) has shown that the human body reacts to the coastal environment by lowering the levels of cortisol and blood pressure. This helps the body achieve a state of physical relaxation, a precursor for the experience of well-being [14]. When a person interacts with the "Blue Spaces" of the coastal environment, there is a change from the sympathetic nervous system's dominance (fight response associated with stress) to the parasympathetic nervous system [14, 15]. This change is characterized by a decrease in the variability of heart rate, blood pressure, and a significant decrease in salivary cortisol [14, 15]. This helps the body achieve a state of physical relaxation, a precursor for the experience of well-being [16]. When a person benefits from repeated physiological relief through the experience of marine tourism, this could help the individual experience an improvement in their overall state of health, a precursor to the experience of long-lasting life satisfaction.

4.2. Cognitive restoration

Marine soft fascination helps in the restoration of directed attention and the mitigation of mental fatigue in accordance with the Attention Restoration Theory (ART), which argues that the restoration of the depleted mental energies through the demands of contemporary living can be achieved through the experience of nature or natural scenes [9, 17]. In the contemporary living environment, there are demands made on directed attention, and this causes mental fatigue. However, in the maritime environment, there exist "soft fascination" experiences, which involve sensory inputs that are aesthetically pleasing and do not demand any considerable cognitive effort, for instance, the sound of the waves or the horizon of the sea. This cognitive restoration helps the individual recover from mental burnout [17]. The existing literature indicates that the restoration process helps the individual improve their emotional regulation and cognitive problem-solving skills in daily life, thus improving their subjective well-being [18, 19]. A recent systematic review has shown positive associations between blue space and quantity and the improvement in the mental health outcomes of older adults [20].

4.3. Sense of accomplishment and belonging

Recent studies (e.g., McDougall et al., 2022) argue that active immersion (e.g., surfing, diving) and shared experiences at sea generate a lasting sense of accomplishment and belonging, which are strong predictors of life fulfillment. For instance, Sevinc and Güzel (2021) showed that sailing has a significant impact on social interaction with others and the tackling of life challenges through engagement with nature [13]. Moreover, Próchniak and Próchniak (2023) found that adventure recreation with water-related risks has a positive predictive effect on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being in young Polish adults [21].

Active participation could create a "flow state" that refers to a psychological condition where an individual is fully engaged in a task that is challenging yet rewarding [22]. This leads to the formation of a sense of place and relational identity where the sea acts as the domain of social bonding and self-actualization [22]. Unlike the temporary relief obtained through passive relaxation, the flow experience and the social bonding obtained through active participation in marine tourism can create a spillover effect. This could create a psychological condition of subjective well-being and a sense of accomplishment; thus, create a deep and long-term feeling of life fulfillment.

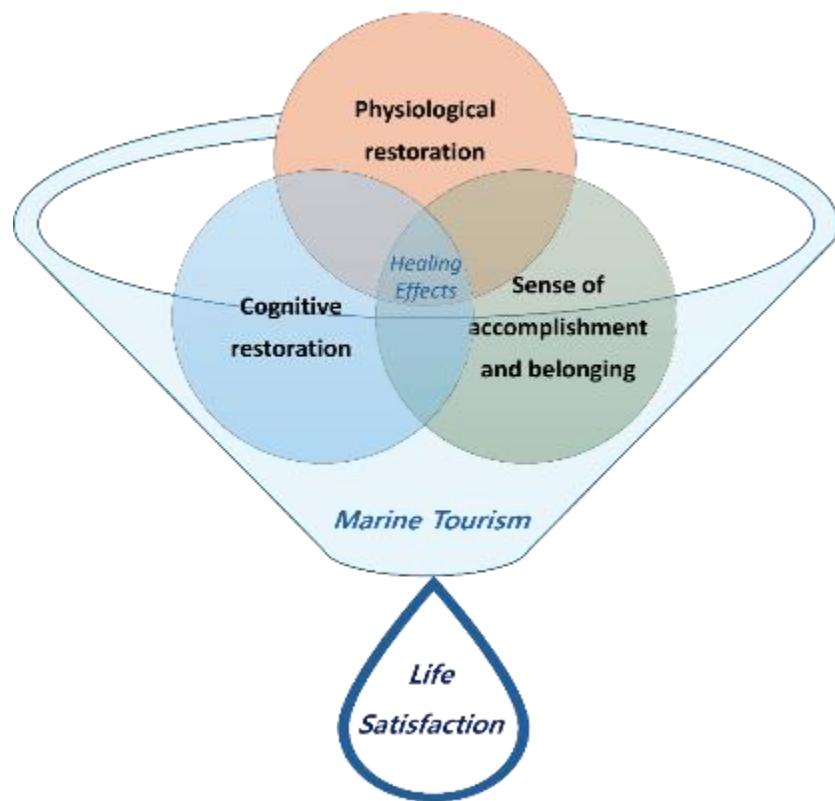


Figure 1 Key healing effects of marine tourism

5. Conclusion

This study has systematically reviewed the relationship between the healing effects of marine tourism on life satisfaction after the COVID-19 pandemic. Research findings reveal that the marine environments have better restorative experience with physiological resets, cognitive restoration through soft fascination, and emotional flourishing with active engagement. Theoretically, the present study fills the existing research gap by suggesting a comprehensive framework in which the Blue Space effect acts as a psychological buffer, especially in post-pandemic urban environments characterized by cognitive fatigue and social isolation [8-21]. It contributes to the existing literature by moving beyond the economic valuation of marine tourism to the individual health and quality of life.

The present research, despite its importance, has some limitations, such as the dominance of cross-sectional studies and a narrow representation of the sample in literature. The future studies need to be longitudinal in design to examine the duration of the spill-over effects of the marine tourism experience. Also, diverse samples and methodologies used in the studies will validate the findings.

In conclusion, the present study shows that marine tourism significantly contributes to the enhancement of the quality of life by promoting psychological, physical, and social well-being. The policy implications of the present study suggest that there is a need to develop sustainable marine tourism programs and equitable access to marine resources, thus recognizing the ocean as a public health resource to promote global happiness.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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