

Outdoor Swimming Research Forum 2024 - Presentations

Thursday 12th Sep 2024 - Windermere Jetty Museum

Speakers	Presentations
Taylor Butler-Eldridge PhD Researcher Human Geography University of Exeter	1. Swimming with Care at Windermere <p>Windermere, in the Lake District National Park, attracts regular outdoor swimming practice, often motivated by exercise, competition, socialisation, joy, and perceptions of restorative well-being. However, swimmers at Windermere also negotiate environmental health risks, notably concerning algal blooms, wastewater, plastic pollution, and biosecurity. These risks can often generate notions and needs for care - among swimmers, their communities, and <i>with</i> these shared spaces. But how does 'taking care' look and feel? Who is responsible? And can practices of care be both beneficial and detrimental? To illustrate the complexities of swimming with care at Windermere, this presentation reflects on a co-produced zine by Taylor Butler-Eldridge, Bethan Thorsby, and the 'swim-along' interview responses of 40 swimmers and dippers during a 12-month wet ethnographic enquiry. This zine and presentation stories the social and environmental tensions of swimming 'for' human wellness alongside accounts and representations of ill-health at Windermere - highlighting senses of ambivalence, adaptation, and avoidance within the regular swimming communities.</p>
Ronan Foley Associate Professor Geography Maynooth University	2. Trace, Place & Space: Swimming as a salutogenic practice <p>Within geographies of health and wellbeing, there is renewed interest in how health-enabling spaces and places are assembled, maintained and reproduced through occupation and practice. With a specific interest in blue space practices, this paper utilises the concept of <i>trace</i> to consider embodied, emotional and experiential dimensions of swimming. The work is informed by oral testimonies and swim-along interviews from different Irish blue spaces including, lakes, rivers and seas. The swim-along interviews incorporated the use of action cameras and a spatial video app, Ubipix, that captured and recorded the specific traces of the swims. In better understanding how trace works to promote health and wellbeing, three examples from the research are suggested. Firstly, embodied traces operating between the body and the water containing both clear and blurred, even unhealthy examples. Secondly, emotional traces, both immediate and recurring, providing an affective connection between and across senses in the water, and thirdly, experiential traces, identifiable through memory, family, place histories and individual and collective immersions in the water. Each trace frames swimming as a practice that is salutogenic. <i>Salutogenesis</i>, a central concept in health promotion, considers the idea of health as a braided stream, where 'upstream' health works best across the lifecourse with control, coherence and meaning as key components. Tracing swimmers and their swims uncovers these key components as they emerge in immersions in all kinds of waters, marine, riverine and lacustrine.</p>
Heather Massey Senior Lecturer Extreme Environments Laboratory, School of Sport, Health & Exercise Sciences University of Plymouth Hannah Denton Counselling Psychologist Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust	3. OUTSIDE: OUTdoor Swimming as a nature-based Intervention for DEpression; a feasibility randomised controlled trial <p>Background: Many people say outdoor swimming improves their mental health. Research to date indicates benefits people with depression, but it is not conclusive.</p> <p>Aim: To establish if it is feasible to conduct a full-scale randomised controlled trial (RCT), evaluating if outdoor swimming helps people with depression and is good value for money.</p> <p>Methods: 87 adults living with mild to moderate symptoms of depression provided written informed consent to participate in this ethically approved study (NRES 22/LO/0268). Participants were allocated randomly to an introductory outdoor swimming course (8 one-hour sessions), as well as their usual care, or to receive their usual care only. Online survey data were collected; at baseline, immediately post intervention and at follow-up 8 weeks later, assessing depression, anxiety, wellbeing, health related quality of life and use of health care resources. Participants completed surveys. Focus groups were also conducted to provide feedback about the participant journey through the study.</p>

	<p>Results: 79% of participants completed four or more sessions of the swim course. Although not powered to detect differences there were medium effects indicating reductions in symptoms of depression (Mean \pm standard deviation, Baseline Swim 11 ± 5.3, Usual care 10 ± 5.2, post intervention swim 6.7 ± 4.8, usual care 9.7 ± 4.7 $d=0.71$) and anxiety (Baseline Swim 8.4 ± 4.6, Usual care 9.1 ± 5.6, post intervention swim 4.5 ± 3.4, usual care 8.5 ± 5.5, $d=0.74$) in the intervention group compared with control respectively. Reductions in health resource use in the intervention group was also found (reduction of one treatment session and reduced medication use). Focus groups showed that participants found the experience of swimming positive and provided helpful guidance for the design of the full-scale trial.</p> <p>Conclusion: It is feasible to conduct a full-scale RCT to test if an outdoor swimming course (in addition to usual care) would be helpful for people in recovery from symptoms of depression.</p>
Rebecca Olive Vice-Chancellor's Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Urban Research Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University	<p>4. I move the water and the water moves me: Swimming in ecologies</p> <p>Research about swimming has tended to focus on sensual experiences of being in water or the health and wellbeing benefits swimming facilitates. But paddling out into open water – ocean, river, lake, dam – puts us in encounter with all kinds of animals, plants, minerals, chemicals, histories, climates, technologies, and ancestors. Our more-than-human encounters are often framed by swimmers in terms of wonder or awe, but the encounters we have in the water also come with risks. To swim is to accept ourselves as part of a complex ecology and that our immersion in these environments leaves us vulnerable and lacking in control.</p> <p>Recent swimming fieldwork has immersed me in risky and challenging aspects of more-than-human research through my encounters with waves, cold temperatures, sharks, debris, jellyfish, and pollution. From stinging tentacles to sharp rocks and branches, to itchy skin and the threat of shark bite, swimming encounters have many possible sensations and outcomes beyond stoke and awe.</p> <p>Thinking about experiences of relationality, vulnerability and accretion and drawing on the work of ecofeminists, this discussion will explore how sports and physical activities like ocean swimming act as ‘world making’ practices that bring people, ecologies, technologies, geographies, and histories into relation.</p>
Elitsa Penkova PhD Researcher European Centre for Environment & Human Health University of Exeter	<p>5. Is antimicrobial resistance in rivers a public health risk?</p> <p>The role of natural environments in the spread of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) to the public remains poorly understood. Freshwater environments, in particular, are subject to environmental release, maintenance and mixing of AMR bacteria associated with mobile genetic elements (Taylor et al., 2011, Nnadozie and Odume, 2019). In addition, the discharge and accumulation of various sources of pollution, including antimicrobials and biocides, have been argued to contribute to the emergence and evolution of AMR in aquatic environments (O'Flaherty and Cummins, 2017). Human recreational activities in these areas, such as ‘wild swimming’ (swimming in waters not designated for bathing) which is seeing a rise in popularity amongst the public (Gascon et al., 2017, Bates and Moles, 2022), increase the risk of exposure to waterborne bacteria, thereby increasing the risk of AMR transmission. It is therefore critical to understand the risks posed to human health by the presence of AMR bacteria in freshwater environments. The current study aims to investigate the association between freshwater swimming in the UK and the acquisition of antibiotic resistance by the gut microbiome. The research involves sequencing bacterial diversity from faecal samples to assess the links between gut diversity, exposure to contaminated freshwater environments and colonisation by antimicrobial resistance determinants.</p>

<p>Maggy Blagrove Founder and Director Open Minds Active CIC</p>	<p>6. Blue Social Prescribing: Removing barriers to access</p> <p>The work of Open Minds Active is focussed on breaking down barriers to those less visible in blue spaces, particularly in urban settings. This presentation talks about how our community led approach empowers participants in our wild swimming for wellbeing initiative.</p> <p>Open Minds Active is a social impact organisation working in and around Bristol in the South-West. Our purpose is to strengthen mental health and wellbeing within communities, widen access and create opportunities for excluded citizens. Our wild swimming for wellbeing is a blue social prescribing project that builds a diverse and inclusive community of people who benefit from connecting with nature and each other in the outdoors to reduce isolation, support wellbeing and foster positive mental health. Now in our 4th year, we were one of the first blue social prescribing project of its kind in the UK and have established a comprehensive 6 week facilitated programme of sessions that empower participants with the knowledge and skills around acclimatisation, swimming in different bodies of water, cold water safety, breathing and mindfulness techniques. Building confidence and friendships is the foundation of our work, enabling people to self-manage and support each other. We run 4 intakes each year, but also offer a year-round weekly drop in, so people can continue to be part of a community and the wider support network. We focus specifically on health inequalities for those living with long term mental and/or physical health conditions from low socio-economic areas and from ethnically diverse backgrounds. We break down barriers to access which can include cultural, lack of transport, lack of money, low confidence, long term disability or illness.</p> <p>Anxiety and Depression rank as the top conditions affecting our population in Bristol, closely followed by painful conditions. We work collaboratively with referral partners and community organisations to prioritise participants from underserved and vulnerable groups in order to reduce social inequalities for those accessing mental and physical health services. We predominantly work with women from low-income backgrounds and around half of those are from the refugee and asylum seeker community. Our staff and volunteers are representative of the communities we serve and understand the barriers to access. For many women of colour whom we support, not being able to swim confidently or in many cases at all was a huge barrier to participation. We therefore set up a learn to swim project alongside to address this issue and this feeds into our wild swimming project each year enabling us to work with a diverse group of women. On our wild swimming for wellbeing initiative, we work with around 80 women each year but our but wider impact that indirectly benefits families and wider communities is 300+.</p>
<p>Damian Stevenson Strategic Lead Research and Insights Black Swimming Association</p>	<p>7. An introduction to the Black Swimming Association's ground-breaking research</p> <p>This presentation is an overview of the BSA's work since we began just over 4 years ago, focusing on our research and the evaluation of our delivery programmes.</p> <p>We have found that many ethnically diverse communities face complex and multi-faceted barriers to engaging in swimming and broader aquatic activities. Our research aims to break down the myths and stereotypes, providing a platform for positive discussion about inclusion and what 'equity of access' looks like, based on community engagement programmes that work.</p> <p>This presentation isn't (just) about swimming. It's about the broader family of aquatic activities and how people from underserved communities can be welcomed into these activities with the right support and engagement. It's about providing positive experiences to help overcome misconceptions of whether this is something "for people like me".</p> <p>I will highlight why the focus should be on being safe in and around the water, building trusted relationships with communities to achieve incredible outcomes. It should also be about having fun and reframing what aquatic activity means to communities.</p>

	<p>Our insights focus on removing systemic cultural, attitudinal and behavioural barriers that still exist today. I will demonstrate how the BSA provide opportunities for ethnically diverse communities to engage in aquatic activity, to help find their place in the water.</p>
Svenja Adolphs Professor of English Language and Logistics University of Nottingham Suzanne McGowan Professor / Head of Aquatic Ecology Netherlands Institute of Ecology	<p>8. Blue Space Literacy: the representation of risks and benefits of outdoor swimming</p> <p>The recent surge in popularity of outdoor swimming in natural 'blue spaces', including rivers, lakes, or the sea, has highlighted the role of blue spaces as community assets. However, for many people a lack of integrated information about the risks and benefits of outdoor swimming presents a major barrier to engagement.</p> <p>We have developed a mixed methods approach that combines linguistic analysis of the representation of risks and benefits, with narrative analysis and community feedback on different infographics relating to outdoor swimming to surface multiple perspectives and voices on this topic. In this presentation, we report on the methods and results from a linguistic analysis of news articles (3862 articles, circa 3.3 million words) and open text questions from a public survey of 2010 UK adults, as well as on our community engagement on infographics.</p> <p>We discuss alignment and divergence between the benefits and risks of wild swimming articulated by our survey respondents and those reported in the news. Our study illustrates how interdisciplinary approaches to understanding how people perceive risks and benefits of outdoor swimming can form the basis of designing information that is ultimately more inclusive and adaptable to the needs of different audiences.</p>
Gilly McArthur Cold Water Swim Coach / Mental Health Advocate / Presenter Jonathan Cowie Contributing Editor Outdoor Swimmer Magazine	<p>9. The Ripple Effect: Male Representation, Wellbeing, and Communities in Outdoor Swimming</p> <p>In the past four years, the participation and media representation surrounding outdoor swimming have risen significantly (Outdoor Swimmer, 2024). However, outdoor swimming can often be portrayed as female-dominant activities - generating important questions about male participation.</p> <p>Sadly, male suicide represents around 75% of suicides in the UK - with suicide the biggest killer of men under 50 - and Cumbria being higher than the UK average (ONS, 2023). With more people turning to different waters to improve their physical and mental well-being, it's vital to redress this balance, showing men can and do swim, too.</p> <p>This talk reflects on an unfunded charitable project undertaken in January 2022, led by myself and male swim coach, Jonathan Cowie. The project raised money for a mental health charity, swimming every day with different men in January from across the north of the UK, documenting their stories on Instagram about how their mental health impacted them physically and emotionally.</p> <p>At the end of the project, we set up a local swim group at Windermere called the 'Blue Mind Men'. The group is entering its third year of swimming together, meeting every Sunday. There are around 50 active members, with people travelling across the UK to join our 'Sunday Service'. Members have also formed other social groups and are active in, on, and off the water (e.g. climbing, quiz nights, social evenings, and citizen science on the lake). The group also won a mental health community award in 2023 and has even seen Local MPs and freshwater scientists join for a Sunday swim. Alongside this local impact, these stories have generated a global reach - shared in presentations to commercial organisations, charities, and brands alongside different films, magazines, podcasts, books, social media, and online outputs.</p> <p>We are immensely proud of the project, those who participated, and the evolution of the Blue Mind Men.</p> <p>But there is still a long way to go.</p>

Eva McGrath Research Fellow School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences University of Plymouth	10. Swimming through pregnancy, birth and matrescence <p>There is a knowledge gap around pregnant women's experiences of open water swimming both within the social research sphere and in wider public health. This research presentation takes us through the cycle of conception, pregnancy, birth and matrescence, using the water (icy cold; hold) as a way of making sense of the origins and aftermath of life through birth. Based on an ethnography following 18 women who swam in the sea during their pregnancy in Devon and Cornwall, I share poems, photos and diaries of women who use water to reflect upon the gritty as well as beautiful aspects of their bodies, identities, health and caring responsibilities whilst pregnant and in matrescence. Pregnant women invite us to reflect upon wider conversations and universal concerns about water quality, water conditions, physical and mental health.</p>
Joyce Harper Professor of Reproductive Science Reproductive Health University College London	11. The swimming habits of women who cold water swim and how they feel it affects their menstrual and menopause symptoms <p>Background: This is the first study to ask women who swim about their swimming habits and the effect swimming has on their menstrual and menopause symptoms.</p> <p>Methods: An online survey was advertised for 2 months on social media, concentrating on Facebook groups involved in cold water swimming.</p> <p>Results: 1114 women participated. Most had been swimming for 1-5 years (79.5%), swim in the sea (64.4%), all year around, (89.0%), and mostly wearing skins. They reported that cold water swimming reduced their menstrual symptoms; notably psychological symptoms such as: anxiety (46.7%), mood swings (37.7%) and irritability (37.6%). Perimenopausal women reported a significant improvement in anxiety (46.9%), mood swings (34.5%), low mood (31.1%) and hot flushes (30.3%). Women said they felt it was the physical and mental effects of the cold water that helped their symptoms. For the free text question, five themes were identified about their symptoms: the calming and mood-boosting effect of the water, companionship and community, period improvements, an improvement in hot flushes, and an overall health improvement.</p> <p>Conclusion: Women felt that cold-water swimming had a positive effect on their symptoms. Studies on other forms of exercise to relieve menstrual and perimenopause symptoms may show similar findings.</p>
Sally Sutton Visiting Research Fellow School of Art, Design and Architecture University of Plymouth	12. The Right to the Water: Public Space or Private Asset? <p>The lived experience of many people during the pandemic was characterised by isolation and restraint. Yet, in the UK and elsewhere, the popularity of outdoor swimming surged. This demonstrated both a public need for exercise and the desire to connect with nature. Along with well documented health benefits, the 'wild swimming' phenomena has drawn attention to issues of ownership, water quality, land and water use, public space, and planning. Conflicts over access continue to have profound implications for individuals, local communities, landowners, and policymakers across many sectors. On land, there are long established systems to determine land use, rights, and access. On the water and along its edge, those rights remain complex and archaic. Both are being organically challenged.</p> <p>In this discussion, a comparative analysis, 'mapping' recent high-profile campaigns, investigates recent tensions to examine how and why local waterspaces are appropriated by dominant private and political interests and contested by others. An exploration of power relations, along with the inequalities of spatial production, offers a contemporary view on the political nature of waterspaces, their connections to health, and why swimmers' rights and access to open water have become so contentious.</p>

<p>Catherine Kelly Senior Lecturer School of Business and Law University of Brighton</p> <p>Caroline Scarles Professor of Technology in Society School of Hospitality and Tourism Management University of Surrey</p>	<p>13. Navigating Meaningful Multi-Stakeholder Engagement in Blue Spaces for Health and Wellbeing</p> <p>The health and wellbeing benefits of blue space leisure and recreation are widely recognised. The positive health impact of weekly swimming is so significant that the projected cost saving to the NHS is £357 million per year (Swim England, 2019). Following COVID-19, there has been a recent upsurge in the numbers of people swimming in blue space (oceans, lakes, quarries, ponds or rivers) as people sought to find escape and exercise in open water spaces as public services, such as indoor and outdoor swimming pools, spa centres, and such, were temporarily closed. Research shows that outdoor swimming and blue space engagement has wellbeing benefits for people with both physical and mental health problems (Massey et al., 2022; Kelly, 2021; White et al., 2018). Engagement with blue space can also promote community-connections, social relationships, happiness and social trust (Costello et al., 2019; Denton and Aranda, 2020; Massey et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the complexities of multi-stakeholder engagement and interest create a complex political, cultural and social landscape within which blue spaces are located, accessed and managed.</p> <p>In this presentation, we share the findings of research and knowledge exchange collaborations with the Environment Agency, and a wide range of community stakeholders, that explores some of the key issues associated with effective provision of, and engagement with, blue spaces. Adopting a range of perspectives from stakeholders, including spaces of creativity, partnership and alternative expression, our presentation critiques the findings of a series of 8 EA qualitative national workshops to reflect on the importance of expertise and knowledge sharing, an understanding of the 'lived experiences' of blue space users and the role that collective blue spaces provide for exercise, recreation, wellbeing and mindful engagement. It also examines civic and creative engagement with blue space custodianship using examples such as civic campaign groups, and arts-based practice and collaboration as further exemplars of human-water care reciprocity. In doing so, we explore key areas of government policy, regulation and legislation and environmental custodianship at local levels. We consider multi-stakeholder use, access, end user experiences, (in)equalities in access, - each of which play a central role in the provision of safe and accessible blue spaces to support human health and wellbeing.</p>
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For any queries regarding these presentations, please contact the lead organiser:

Taylor Butler-Eldridge on tb585@exeter.ac.uk

These presentations will be delivered in-person only. Following consent from our speakers, we intend to video record and publish the presentations on YouTube following the forum.