Wild Waters: Community and Nature in the Depths of Cold-water Swimming

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Abstract

This ethnographic study examines the practice of cold-water wild swimming among university students in St. Andrews, Scotland, to explore the activity's social, affective, and ecological dimensions. Drawing on participant observation and semi-structured interviews, my research looks at how swimmers construct meaning around their experiences beyond commonly cited health benefits. Through employing theoretical frameworks including embodied mutuality, indigenous epistemologies, and critiques of the nature-culture binary, the study highlights how cold-water immersion fosters community, environmental consciousness, and reorients participants' perceptions of self and nature. My findings suggest that the shared physical and emotional intensity of wild swimming generates social bonds and a sense of spiritual renewal, while also challenging dominant Western paradigms that separate humans from the natural world. The research also highlights how wild swimming acts as a site of ecological attunement and grassroots environmental activism. Overall, this study contributes to anthropological understandings of embodiment, relationality, and human-environment interdependence in contemporary leisure practices.

Stripping Down and Dipping In

First swim - *"hopping down the old concrete steps"*:

10 times stronger than a hit of cocaine. That, minus the crash afterwards, is what the rush of cold-water swimming is described to feel like. Down at St. Andrews' Castle Sands on a calm morning, 9AM, my first participant observation fieldwork swim commenced. Hopping down the concrete steps I took in the scenery, asking Olive various questions as we made our descent. It was just the two of us, and the minimal wind and tranquil surface of the water allowed for conversation to flow undisturbed. Pausing at a large rock, Olive placed her bag down and began to remove her warm layers, laying them out in a specific way with her towel folded just to the side. I imitated her movements, following the same process as she explained that having everything ready to put back on after ensures you will warm up more quickly. The uneven surface of stones pressed awkwardly against my

feet as we creeped to the shoreline. Olive waded straight in, totally calm. Okay it can't be that cold then, right? I stepped in up to my knee and gasped as the water reached my thigh, the cold burn instantly humbling me. Olive laughed as I struggled to find my bearings. Water rippled and flowed around me as beams of sunlight broke through the cloudy sky, bouncing off the green hues of the seawater. Once I finally reached Olive, she counted us down to glide in and paddle. I gasped for air as we went under, the deep cold shocking my system. Icy jabs permeated my skin with each stroke and kick through the water. After 30 seconds we swam back to shore and trudged out. I felt significantly warmer as we emerged from the water, a subtle buzz beginning to hum through my body. I felt amazing. Energy continued to build in me as we redressed, chatting away and scheduling a coffee date so I could ask her some more questions. Then I headed home, feeling a new excitement to find out more about this adrenaline inducing activity.

St. Andrews is a town with a rich history of swimming in the North Sea – students were first noted to be keen swimmers in the 20th century (Betz, 2022) – making it the perfect location to access people who enjoy swimming regularly. I met interviewees through asking around my social circles about people who cold-water swim frequently and met even more through them. I ended up interviewing eight female university students over about a two-week period. I chose to work with these women as they wild-swim regularly, with many participating in other water-based activities, such as surfing. Although not as diverse a pool of participants as I perhaps would have initially wanted due to time constraints, going to the same university, knowing a lot of the same people, and being of a similar age and gender, all facilitated connection and mutual understanding between myself and the participants. This reality provided a foundation of relatability and therefore trust, arguably inciting more truthful answers from participants. Additionally, this all-female demographic is actually reflective of recent national (UK) statistics which highlight that a higher percentage of women participate in 'wild' swimming regularly (Outdoor Swimmer, 2022).

Most interviews were conducted on land in various coffee shops, study rooms and park benches, facilitating relaxed conversation and easing my notetaking process, which would have been slightly more challenging while submerged in the North Sea. Participants were made aware of their rights within the study and their ability to withdraw at any point in the process, however none chose to do so. I made use of a notebook and pen for all interviews, and a recording device for about half, after realising I was struggling to note things down at times. Questions were of a preprepared nature, however, as the swimmers' stories unfolded, follow up questions sparked by curiosity were integrated into the interviews accordingly. Additionally, it was during my interviews with participants that I realised how important my partaking in the activity had been, to build trust between myself and participants, and in facilitating my understanding of their stories and insightful points of view.

When I started my fieldwork, I candidly was not sure what direction to take the study in. I suppose I initially wanted to understand why people take part in wild swimming and go so consistently and frequently for reasons other than the health benefits, and that is ultimately what I found out, while also drastically shifting my personal perceptions of the activity, community, nature, and self. Thus, this ethnography explores why people engage in wild swimming beyond its well-known health benefits, such as energy and mental clarity. It seeks to understand how the broader aspects of the activity

– such as the environment, preparation, and the act of swimming itself – cultivate community, friendships, and a connection to nature. This study will examine how cold-water swimming in Scotland, especially in St. Andrews, fosters these relationships and environmental consciousness through an anthropological lens, ultimately suggesting ways to leverage these connections for ocean conservation and challenging the nature-culture binary. Throughout, I will make use of anthropological concepts such as nature-culture, embodied mutuality, anthropological understandings of cosmopolitanism and anthropological understandings of Indigenous epistemologies to assist in my argument and subsequent analysis of results. The term 'wild swimming' here will always assume the characteristic of taking place in cold-water for the purpose of this ethnography due to the location in which fieldwork has taken place.

Coldness, Community and Connection

Swimming in cold-natural spaces offers a unique means of forging connections among individuals. Unlike other social activities, the shared embodied experience coupled with positive language of encouragement fosters friendships and human connection more rapidly. Swimmers emphasised how experiencing the "same adrenaline rush" and feelings of "intensity and excitement" in addition to the shared challenge of the swim and sense of accomplishment can create a sense of community and belonging amongst participants. Neal et al. have described this as "embodied mutuality" in which doing the same activity with people can generate "exchange and connection" (2019: 80). The shared physical rush of adrenaline in anticipation of entering the cold-water which creates these intense feelings can thus be understood in this sense. Flora described the activity, especially full head submersion, during morning swims as being close to a spiritual experience – as if she and her friends are being "reborn" for the day. The described "spiritual experience" can perhaps be understood along these lines of embodied experience in which an "experience is a coincidental mix of sensory influences from the surroundings and phenomena, sensory influences from our inner visceral sensory experiences, and personal memories and experiences" (Hellmann, 2022; Schilhab, 2018 in Barrable., Wünsche, and Touloumakos 2023: 4). Thus, this neatly illustrates how the physical sensation of cold-water swimming interacts with participants' emotional states, creating those profound feelings of community connection.

"You can do it!": those who swim in groups all described the overwhelmingly positive and supportive nature of swimming in a group. Everyone pushes each other to go in, "hyping each other up" with words of encouragement. Here, the cold-water is a vital dimension in fostering these community connections as it adds an extremely challenging aspect to the swim. Thus, positive reinforcements and support through language from other swimmers is important in ensuring successful participation. Emphasis placed on this encouragement by participants reminded me of Malinowski's concept of "the language tool" in which magical language induces action in things (Malinowski, 1948). In the context of the swimming group, language doesn't merely convey information; it actively works to build and maintain social bonds and facilitate collective action. It's akin to "magical language," where words do not just describe reality but are used to influence and transform it, creating a shared experience that enables individuals to overcome the physical challenge of cold-water swimming. Moreover, Bates and Moles discuss how "becoming a swimmer is a practice that re-orientates social and spatial ties, through

the search for water to swim in and the support and friendship offered by other swimmers in and around the water" (2022: 888), thus further highlighting how swimming in a group has fostered growth in existing and new dual and community relationships for these women.

However, the activity also fosters connection long after people have left the water as well. Isla was one of two swimmers who actually prefers to swim alone; however, she describes how she feels a connection to the swimming community but also the St. Andrews community from swimming even if she's not taking part with a group. She talks about seeing the ladies' swim groups with their matching swimsuits and hats and how she has even connected with people at social events if they've both recently been for swims, discussing things such as the temperature of the water. Wild swimming's ability to connect people thus transcends temporal boundaries as people can have the same physical, emotional and mental experiences even if it is done separately. Isla describes this experience to me as the sea itself being the connecter between people, even if they're not together or in the water at the same time.

'Wild' Spaces, 'Wild' Swimming, 'Wild' People

Almost all of the women highlighted developing more of a connection to nature and consciousness of environmental concerns throughout their swimming journeys. Here I will argue that such sentiments suggest a break in Western notions of human relationality to nature. Indigenous knowledges offer different – from a Western-centric orientation – perspectives and understandings of our connection to and positionality within nature and the environment. Darya says she feels so much appreciation, gratitude, and love towards the community found at the beaches and the spaces and places that they are, and that for her drives a want to protect them and conserve them: "it inspires you to want to protect it more, makes you more cautious of how we're impacting it and the role humans play in nature and what our relationship looks like with it" and how she has "come to understand how we are in nature and our place in nature; we are not separate from it in these wild spaces that exist just outside of our doorstep, we are a part of them". This conception of nature through cold-water swimming practices flips Western-centric perspectives of the nature-culture binary on its head, by articulating a more integrated view of human-environment interactions. This integrated perspective aligns with Indigenous knowledge systems, which often do not recognize a strict separation between nature and culture. Indigenous epistemologies tend to view humans as participants in a broader ecological system, where every element is connected. The critique provided by anthropologists like Carpena-Méndez, Virtanen, and Williamson (2022) regarding the Western dichotomy of nature and culture further elaborates on this point. They argue that "imaginaries of linear progress and the nature-culture binary produce forms of rationality that privilege monocultural, Eurocentric scientific knowledge premised on notions of objective truth, mechanistic efficiency and productivity (see Apffel-Marglin and Marglin 1996; Santos and Aguiló 2019) [...] which has resulted in the environmental devastation we experience at a global level" (Carpena-Méndez, Virtanen & Williamson, 2022: 310).

Exploring the concept of 'wild' in the context of 'wild swimming' reveals the deep cultural layers and biases embedded in our understanding of nature. The term 'wild' itself, as suggested by thinkers like Bert Spinks and Eric Shelton, is a gradient and a social construct

that often excludes humans from the landscape, assuming 'wilderness' to be populated only by non-human fauna and flora (In the Name of Wild, 2022). Yet, the binary between the human world and the natural world dissolves in many intriguing ways when closely examined. Swimmers describe wild swimming as not just a physical activity but a dynamic interaction with a powerful, living world, challenging the traditional notion of wilderness as absence and embracing 'wildness' as a presence – an evolving kinship with the changing land. This experience reflects Johnson Washington's and Kristen Tanche's views that 'wild' is a complex term, culturally laden and difficult to translate across languages, indicating that nature and culture are not separate but overlapping layers (In the Name of Wild, 2022). 'Wildness' then becomes not about separation but about a relation, a feeling, and an atmosphere that does not rely on a dichotomy between nature and culture. Thus, when swimmers feel a deep connection to nature, they are engaging with this powerful, interconnected environment, suggesting that we are not outside the idea of wilderness but a fundamental part of its nuanced expression. This perspective resonates with Indigenous views of interconnectedness and challenges the Western notion of 'wild', prompting us to reconsider our place within, not apart from, the natural world.

Talise emphasises the respect she has gained for nature through wild swimming. She discusses her heightened sensitivity to the planet and environmental issues and how she has become more attuned to the strength of nature and dangers of the sea in the sense of being aware of its power and the danger it holds, while also being grateful that we can "experience it". Capaldi et al discuss how "many people are not as connected to nature as they could be and this has implications, not only for the wellbeing of the environment, but also for the wellbeing of individuals (2015: 3). Thus, wild swimming reinforces the awareness in people of the strength of nature and the power it holds. Having respect and knowledge of the power nature holds is important to ensure we understand that it will retaliate in unprecedented ways if we don't recognise our positionality in protecting it.

This is reflected in Davis' (2011) argument where, to address ecopsychologists' fears that people are destroying nature and ourselves in the process, he proposes re-establishing connection with nature: to establish a transpersonal understanding of the relationship between humans and nature, it may be required to first conceptualise nature as an expanded, more inclusive self (Davis, 2011: 39 in Sam, 2020: 38). Isla echoes this sentiment, discussing how "we think of nature as separate" but that our bodies are connected to each other, and as women they are connected to the moon and tide so how can we not be intertwined with nature? Indigenous knowledges reflect these swimmers' understandings of human-nature interconnectedness as such perspectives view knowledge as arising from a belief in the interconnectedness of all life. This approach emphasises acting responsibly and respectfully towards every aspect of life by "being a good relative, in order to enhance possibilities for human-ecological continuance and regeneration" (Carpena-Méndez, Virtanen & Williamson, 2022: 312). Building upon insights from Davis, Isla, and Indigenous knowledge, this discussion points towards a paradigm shift in environmental action. By viewing nature as an extension of ourselves, we foster a sense of kinship that motivates sustainable practices prioritising ecological resilience. This holistic approach integrates human activities with natural systems, arguably promoting environmental health and offering a viable solution to global environmental crises.

Speculative Seawater

Stefan Helmreich's idea of water as a "theory machine" further supports such arguments and is reflective of sentiments voiced by these swimmers. His concept can be related to the nature–culture binary by examining how water blurs the lines between what is considered natural and what is considered cultural (2011). This perspective challenges traditional divisions where nature is seen as purely biological or physical and culture as solely human–made or socially constructed. By analysing water's role in various scientific and cultural frameworks, Helmreich suggests that water itself acts as an agent that transforms and is transformed by both natural and cultural forces, thereby questioning the validity of strictly separating nature from culture (2011). This concept encourages a more integrated view of the environment where the interactions between nature and culture are seen as fluid and dynamic. This perspective resonates with the experiences of wild swimmers who feel a profound connection to nature, challenging the notion of 'wild' as separate from human. These experiences prompt us to reconsider our part in the natural world, potentially shifting beliefs and fostering community action.

Can this understanding of a connection to nature facilitate discussion and action surrounding wild swimming? The community culture of swimming is the perfect location to spread the word. As discussed previously, this culture exemplifies how communal activities can foster environmental awareness and action. Swimmers Darya, Maya, Talise and Mira discussed their participation in events such as "dip a day for surfers against sewage" where they went wild swimming every day in the month of October of last year (2023). Such events exemplify the community efforts to address environmental concerns through the practice of wild swimming. Helmreich's framework here would see water not just as a physical substance but as a medium through which cultural values (like sustainable development) are expressed and enacted. The swimmers' participation in events like "dip a day for surfers against sewage" showcases how water–based activities can be platforms for environmental activism, reflecting Helmreich's view of water as a dynamic participant in cultural and scientific frameworks.

Additionally, as Indigenous pedagogies emphasise ethical and collective relationships, the shared experience of swimming not only promotes a sense of community but also a broader environmental consciousness. For example, wild swimmers like Flora describe feelings of tranquillity and a deep connection to others through shared immersion in the sea, suggesting that local practices can influence global perceptions and responsibilities. This underlines the potential of integrating community–driven activities into broader environmental and social strategies, highlighting the transformative power of such engagements in fostering a cosmopolitan ethos of collective responsibility and environmental care. Neal's analysis of Singh echoes this, where he argues that "the proximities and interdependencies of bodies in a shared space engaged in shared activities give rise to a wider 'being together' as well as the ways in which, 'contrary to the assumption that beliefs drive actions [···] actions often lead to new beliefs'" (Singh, 2013: 190 in Neal, 2019: 80). Thus, the action of wild swimming in groups can drive changes in collective belief surrounding human–nature connectedness and environmental awareness.

Drying off and Warming Up

Final Dip – *"reflective water, reflective thoughts"*:

Here is a photo from the other day when I went swimming with my friend Henry. This final dip offered me space for reflection upon this experience and my learning over the past few months. Two older ladies, probably in their late 50s, were also getting ready to take a dip. They spoke about how the cold-water helps with their aches and pains and told me about the times of year that are the coldest – apparently, I had picked the coldest period in which to conduct my fieldwork. This interaction made me wish I had had more time to expand my participant demographic and create a more wholistic picture of cold-water swimming in St. Andrews. Nonetheless, much was still learned about how the activity can alter people's perspectives of nature, community, and self.

Cold-water swimming is an activity unique to Scotland and St. Andrews, presenting a novel experience to many participants, especially those from warmer regions, including southern England. Initially, the idea of swimming in cold-water may seem unappealing, as it contradicts the common perception of swimming as a relaxing activity conducted in warm, supervised environments. However, the culture of wild swimming and its benefits have shifted this perspective. Having moved to Scotland from a warm country in my early teens, I never considered swimming in cold-water during summer, assuming it would be an unpleasant experience. Yet, my fieldwork has transformed my understanding of nature, the essence of swimming, and our connection to the wild, turning what once seemed strange into something familiar.

Through participant observation and engaging conversations, I witnessed first-hand the vibrant community that thrives around this challenging yet rewarding pursuit. The intense, shared experience of cold-water immersion not only forges strong bonds among swimmers but also fosters a profound connection with the natural environment. Moreover, the act of wild swimming has reshaped my understanding of the human-nature relationship. It challenges the traditional dichotomy of nature versus culture, revealing a symbiotic interaction where both elements are intertwined. The courage and camaraderie displayed by the swimmers, coupled with their increased drive to engage in protecting these natural spaces, underscore the potential of community-based practices in fostering sustainable ecological attitudes. In conclusion, this ethnography has not only broadened my academic horizons but also enriched my personal perspective. It underscores the transformative power of immersive fieldwork and the profound insights that arise from truly engaging with one's subject matter. This study leaves me with a reinforced belief in the value of ethnographic research as a conduit for understanding complex human and environmental relationships in a rapidly changing world.

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