Restoring ‘Love of Life’ Through Outdoor Adventures: A Biophilic Approach

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Abstract

This study, through the concept of biophilia, examines how we can restore a ‘love of life’ in a world often characterised by rationalisation, destruction, and alienation from self and nature. Specifically, we observe how outdoor adventures during travels might contribute to the development of biophilic feelings. To this end, we employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to analyse the narratives from nine participants in the UK, Germany, and Serbia. The findings suggest that adventure activities in the outdoors foster the development of meaningful relationships with the self, other humans and non-human nature, all contributing to the enhancement of eudaimonic wellbeing. The study adds to the tourism literature by arguing that more biophilic and ecological approaches, hitherto underutilised in studying the benefits of tourism from a positive psychology perspective, might serve as a lens through which to explore meaningful social transformation in times of polycrises.

Keywords: Love, Biophilia, Positive Psychology, Wellbeing, Eudaimonia, Outdoor adventures

1. Introduction

This paper aims to explore how the ‘love of life’ might be restored through shared adventures in the Great Outdoors. In our individualistic, alienated, fast-paced, and often-times meaningless world, people increasingly turn to searching for meaning through shared tourism experiences away from the ordinary (Matteucci, Volic & Filep, 2022; Pearce, Filep & Ross, 2010; Shahvali et al., 2021, 2023; Sheldon, 2020; Soica, 2016). Dominant capitalist socioeconomic structures prioritise profit over environmental and social wellbeing, often leading to isolation, disconnection from nature, and weakened social bonds, all of which contribute to a rise in mental health issues (Barbiero, 2021; Steger et al., 2006). Coupled with urgent environmental crises, the curious search for a sense of purpose, significance, meaning, and connection has therefore become ever more urgent. The outdoors has long offered an antidote to the alienation many experience and serves as a powerful counterbalance to the disenchantment of modern life (Farkic, Cai, & Isailovic, 2024). It allows people to slow down, engage with others, and reconnect with the natural world, and build a sense of community and belonging often absent in urban, fast-paced environments (Pomfret, Sand & May, 2023). To this end, tourism in the outdoors opens possibilities for new understandings of how we might recognise the power of the collective and restore the sense of love and meaning in a world that often feels devoid of both.

Positive psychology, defined by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) as the study of what makes life worth living, has offered a useful framework through which to explore meaningfulness, happiness, and wellbeing in, or through, tourism (Pearce et al., 2010). Broadly, it explores wellbeing through both eudaimonic and hedonic dimensions, seeking to understand the factors and conditions that contribute to pleasure, happiness, growth, and flourishing (Alizadeh & Filep, 2023; Camara et al., 2022; Kozak 2023; Vada et al. 2020). In

the context of outdoor adventure tourism, previous studies have explored the wellbeing benefits of outdoor adventure pursuits, which not only promote physical health but also cultivate deep emotional bonds among people. For example, Farkic, Filep and Taylor (2020) explain how slow adventures, defined as outdoor activities undertaken at a slower pace in wild nature, allow for the generation of deep and meaningful experiences that are central to fostering psychological wellbeing, while contributing to a sense of purpose, belonging, and fulfilment in life. Shared outdoor pursuits have multiple eudaimonic benefits, often leading to heightened feelings of trust, mutual support, and a sense of community (Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013). The natural settings in which adventure activities take place might also evoke awe and wonder, creating a sense of connection to something larger than oneself. This is not only embodied in the sense of transcendence, deeper appreciation, and care for the environment (Moscardo, 2023; Piff et al., 2015), but also in a broader sense of purpose and meaning in life (Alizadeh & Filep, 2023; Brooks, Wallace, & Williams, 2006).

Nature has been claimed to foster biophilia, defined as "our innate tendency to focus upon life and life-like forms and, in some instances, to affiliate with them emotionally" (Wilson 2002, p. 134). This idea captures the deep, evolutionary connection that humans have had with nature, suggesting that our wellbeing and psychological health are closely tied to our interaction with the natural world (Meltzer et al., 2020). Despite this concept having the potential to more deeply understand the wellbeing effects of relationships that we develop with other living beings, it is surprising how little it has been problematised in the tourism context. Only a handful of studies have examined how biophilic design in indoor environments, such as hotels and other commercial tourism establishments, can enhance wellbeing by incorporating natural elements (Song et al., 2022) or its effect on customer experiential values (Lee et al., 2023). This study therefore mobilises the concept of biophilia to explore how outdoor adventures can help restore meaningful connections through an emotional and affective affiliation with other life-like forms, which in this study we broadly refer to as 'love'. In following Wilson's (1984) proposition that love emerges through manifold relationships – whether with oneself, others, or nature – we argue, for many it may be central to a meaningful and purposeful life, while holding the immense transformative potential to bring about positive societal change and contribute to wellbeing in times of planetary crisis.

2. Literature review

2.1 Eudaimonic wellbeing and outdoor adventure

The philosophical roots of positive psychology lie in Aristotle's conceptualisation of *daimon,* denoting 'the search for the true self', shaped through self-development and self-realisation of the individual (Ryff & Singer, 2008). Its origins can be traced back to mid-20th century humanistic psychology, which discusses human potential, self-actualisation, and personal growth as core dimensions of eudaimonic wellbeing. Thinkers such as Erich Fromm (1964), Carl Rogers (1961), and Abraham Maslow (1954) were pivotal in laying the foundation for positive psychology. Fromm, for example, focused on the concept of love and human connection as central to psychological wellbeing, advocating for a balanced life rooted in care

and compassion. Rogers emphasised the importance of unconditional positive regard and self-actualisation, while Maslow introduced the concept of a hierarchy of needs, also culminating in self-actualisation. Together, their works shifted the focus of psychology from pathology and dysfunction to the study of positive human experiences and wellbeing, which later influenced the development of positive psychology and, subsequently, positive tourism (Filep, Laing, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2016).

Within tourism, the focus has more recently shifted from researching satisfaction and hedonic pleasures gained from tourism activities towards the pursuit of eudaimonic wellbeing, understood as the realisation of human potential and personal growth and transformation through engagement in meaningful tourism activities (Alizadeh & Filep, 2023; Ewert et al., 2020; Filep, Moyle, & Skavronskaya, 2022; Filep & Laing, 2019; Park & Ahn, 2022). The hedonic approach to wellbeing has traditionally focused on creating pleasurable, memorable moments and avoiding discomfort, with an emphasis on wellbeing immediately obtained during and/or immediately after the activity. Such experiences are typically associated with positive emotions such as happiness, a sense of joy, excitement, and contentment (Filep 2016; Huta & Ryan, 2010). As Kozak (2023) notes, tourists are frequently motivated by the desire for pleasurable and relaxing moments, making hedonic experiences a strong factor in their travel decisions.

Eudaimonic wellbeing, however, has not yet been sufficiently explored within the tourism literature (Alizadeh & Filep, 2023). Researchers have explained that challenging tourism activities, for example, mountaineering or white water rafting might contribute to inner growth and self-development. Such experiences may enable long-term effects even if the process involves short-term discomfort or negative emotions (Kozak, 2023; Smith, 2023). Being actively engaged in activities through which they can find their true self, tourists are more likely to achieve self-actualisation and a sense of agency, giving their lives greater significance, meaning, and purpose. While both hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of wellbeing form the basis of positive psychological experiences in tourism, we recognise that it is the eudaimonic dimension that offers us a promising lens through which to explore how outdoor adventures can foster deep meaningful connections that extend beyond human interactions, to include love for oneself, others and, equally importantly, the love for the world of which we are part.

Within outdoor adventure tourism, despite the effects of participants' engagement in physically and mentally challenging activities being sufficiently explored (Houge Mackenzie, Hodge, & Filep, 2021), insights into the processes of construction of wellbeing experiences are still limited. Recent research, however, has been useful in suggesting that a wellbeing framework can broaden our understanding of outdoor adventure activities' motivations and outcomes by reporting the eudaimonic benefits (Houge Mackenzie & Brymer, 2020). For example, as participants experience physical and mental challenges through engagement in activities, they develop a heightened sense of self-efficacy and confidence in their abilities, leading to the development of self-love (Câmara et al., 2022). Accomplishment and meaning are integral to these experiences, with achievement pursued for its own sake, reflecting an intrinsic drive for competence acquisition and willingness to learn, develop, and grow (Pomfret et al., 2023). Furthermore, engaging in slower outdoor adventure activities also

allows for immersion in the natural environment and a deeper appreciation and care for nature and fellow human beings (Farkic & Taylor, 2019; Vada et al., 2023). Simultaneously, the shared challenges and potential resolutions experienced during adventures contribute to developing strong bonds among participants (Shahvali et al., 2024; Aron et al., 2022). Such shared experiences facilitate a sense of community and belonging, reinforcing positive relationships, and consequently lead to enhanced psychological wellbeing (Farkic et al., 2020; Shahvali et al., 2023; Vada, Prentice & Scott, 2020).

Positive psychology, in emphasising the importance of developing positive relationships as a foundation for processes of transformation, is therefore critical in understanding the eudaimonic outcomes of outdoor experiences (Filep & Laing, 2018; Seligman, 2011). Nature here serves not merely as a passive scenic backdrop for activities but also as a space that prompts active engagement and the meaningful convergence of humans and the environment. Outdoor activities can create opportunities for human and non-human interactions and bonding through collective challenges, leading to a deeper understanding, emotional connections, and the development of trust and companionship among participants (Câmara et al., 2022; Kozak, 2023). The companionate form of love, rooted in deep connection, mutual commitment, and the ability to rely on one another during outdoor adventures, can also lead to even greater life satisfaction than passionate love among people (Christou, 2018). Moreover, the emergence of reciprocal altruism and care for the other and the understanding that the natural environment serves as an enabler of these qualities might point to a broader concept – one that moves positive psychology beyond the development of positive human relationships to making profound connections with nature and non-human lifeforms. Such a holistic understanding brings us to biophilia, a concept we found to be an appropriate theoretical lens through which to explore the development of relationships and ultimately, the 'love of life' through outdoor adventures.

2.2. Biophilia: the 'love of life'

The term biophilia, broadly denoting humanity's innate love for nature and other living beings, is derived from two Greek words: *bios* (life) and *philia* (love). It was coined independently by two thinkers: psychologist Erich Fromm and environmental psychologist Edward O. Wilson. Fromm (1956), in his exploration of human potential and fulfilment, defined love as an active and intentional practice of development of meaningful relationships rather than merely an emotion or feeling. It is a skill that requires knowledge, effort, and dedication to develop. He categorised love into various forms, including romantic love, brotherly love, self-love, and love for God, emphasising that genuine love involves a deep understanding of oneself and others. In critiquing contemporary society's view of love, which often focuses on possessiveness and dependence, Fromm advocated for a more altruistic and giving approach, which he believed leads to human fulfilment and happiness. To this end, Fromm used the term biophilia to describe a love of life and all that is alive, contrasting it with necrophilia, a fixation on death and destruction, which he saw as a psychological tendency in individuals and societies prone to authoritarianism and destructiveness. While

discussing tensions between these two notions, Fromm urged for cultivating love, empathy, and ethical responsibility in order to foster a more humane and just world.

Wilson (2002) likewise posited that humanity needs a vision of an ecological, expanding and unending future, and to achieve that, we need to (begin to) think differently about ourselves and the world we occupy. Wilson (1984) framed biophilia as an evolutionarily adaptive trait, reflecting humanity's natural inclination to pay attention to life and all living forms, and in certain cases, to form emotional connections with them. He popularised the concept by proposing the biophilia hypothesis which suggests that people derive psychological benefits from being in proximity to nature while highlighting that maintaining a strong relationship with nature leads to human wellbeing. The assumption is that through establishing deep relationships with other life forms, people might find a sense of belonging, meaning and fulfilment, which are considered prerequisites of eudaimonic wellbeing (Ross, Witt, & Jones, 2018). Wilson proposed that the biophilic instinct is expressed through *attention* - the capacity to be fascinated by natural stimuli, and through *affiliation* - the ability to empathise with various forms of life, thereby sustaining an emotional affinity with the world and all living beings. Barbiero (2021), like Fromm (1956) explained however that affiliation is more intentional and requires a willingness to desire a relationship with another non-human being, while fascination is an involuntary response to the natural stimuli.

Despite its roots in humanistic psychology and Erich Fromm's (1964) work on love and fulfillment, biophilia remains underexplored in positive tourism research. More broadly, Chon, Bauer, and McKercher (2003) explored the intersection of sexual encounters, intimacy, and tourism, while Singh (2019) conceptualised love beyond romance, encompassing emotional connections to places, self, and nature. Shahvali et al. (2021; 2023) examined how tourism experiences contribute to cohesion and flexibility in relationships, while Coffey et al. (2024) identified romantic passion in travel as a longing for union with the other. Filep and Matteucci (2020) framed love dualistically as companionship (friendship/kinship) and passion (romance/sexual connection), calling for further research on the process of falling in love. Filep et al. (2022) further argued that tourism fosters not only romantic bonds but also connections with family, friends, and social groups. Likewise, Christou (2018) examined *agapic* love as a transcendent, altruistic force, extending beyond human interactions to a deep passion for one's work, commitment to hospitality, and care for the natural environment. These plural perspectives point to the need for a more nuanced engagement with biophilia in tourism studies, recognising love as a multidimensional concept that is shaped by human and more-than-human relationships.

We concur with the authors studying love that it is a complex yet rather subjective concept, the definition of which depends on context and is influenced by societal, individual, organisational, or cultural factors. Nonetheless, what is evident is that embodied interactions within diverse tourism and leisure spaces (whether social or physical) are conducive to creating meaningful experiences through the development of relationships, consequently positively impacting people's wellbeing and potentially contributing to societal change. Here, we are inspired by Nussbaum (2013), who argued that for a society to flourish and for justice to be achieved, it must cultivate emotions like love, compassion, and empathy, which help

foster social bonds and commitment to the common good. Similarly, Johnson (2014) sees love as a relational and restorative force, claiming that we can achieve social justice and social change only by deeply caring and loving the other. Therefore, in our response to Filep and Matteucci's (2020) call for further exploration into how people experience the act of falling in love within tourism, we found the concept of biophilia to be a productive framework to explore the development of relationships through outdoor adventures, as they might further lead to enhanced wellbeing and, ultimately, bring about positive societal change.

It is evident that eudaimonic wellbeing largely intersects with biophilia through its recognition of the intrinsic connections and relationships humans make with one another and with the world around them. However, despite studies taking positive psychology approaches to the exploration of the tourist experience having shown that nature contributes to eudaimonic outcomes, they have thus far remained rather human-centric. While the natural environment has been recognised as a key contributor to human wellbeing, positive psychology seems to maintain the Aristotelian hierarchical structures embodied in the concept of *Scala Naturae*. It still focuses on the 'extraction' of wellbeing benefits from nature for human health and wellbeing, rather than considering wellbeing benefits for non-human nature with which humans are affiliated and on which they depend. Here we saw potential in biophilia, which takes a somewhat more monist approach in proposing that all sentient beings are equal and interconnected and should benefit from one another through symbiotic life. Such a view of the world might further sensitise us to the necessity and urgency of restoring love, empathy and care not only for humans but also for all living beings - especially in a world increasingly driven by greed, dominance, hatred and self-destruction.

3. Methodology

Positive psychology research has been traditionally grounded in a positivist framework, making significant contributions to our understanding of human wellbeing. However, there remain opportunities to explore more fully the complexities and nuances of the construction of wellbeing experience through post-positivist and interpretivist approaches (Chang et al., 2024; Vada et al., 2023). Moreover, tourism researchers adopting this approach have often remained primarily conceptual (Filep et al., 2022; Filep & Laing, 2018; Houge Mackenzie et al., 2021) and have insufficiently represented qualitative insights that capture the depth of the human experience, warranting the need for more diverse philosophical and methodological approaches (Farkic et al., 2020). To extend the existing body of literature, we here adopt an interpretivist phenomenological approach to examine how adventure participants make sense of their lived experiences in the outdoors, which in turn lead to enhanced wellbeing (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010).

Phenomenology, with its emphasis on individual perception and interpretation, was productive in the current study in capturing the richness and complexity of the emotional, social, and existential aspects of outdoor adventure experiences. This approach not only allowed us to uncover how participants perceived and understood their experiences but also to elucidate the various ways in which love, conceptualised as biophilic feelings, was

constructed through the formation of diverse relationships. Heidegger's (2010 [1927]) phenomenological philosophy has shaped the development of research methods that facilitate the understanding and description of lived experiences, revealing their underlying meanings. His hermeneutic method, which he referred to as existential understanding, was particularly helpful in interpreting the lived experiences of our participants, allowing us to understand how different forms of relationships were developed during shared adventures in the outdoors (Chen et al., 2020).

This study was based on purposive sampling as we aimed to recruit participants who recently had the experience of undertaking an adventure activity during their holiday. Reflexivity played a crucial role in the research process, as our positionalities influenced how we approached the participants and interpreted the collected data. Our positions as members of sports clubs, the Adventure Tourism Research Association, and lecturers in adventure (tourism) management, combined with our ethnic backgrounds as British, German, and Serbian, enabled us to contact participants directly and more easily in our native languages, and motivate them to participate in research. Being embedded in the adventure tourism community allowed us to more easily establish rapport with participants, but it also meant that our own biases and assumptions could shape our understanding of their experiences. Acknowledging these influences helped us remain aware of our perspectives and strive for a more nuanced interpretation of the data, ultimately enriching the analysis through double hermeneutics (Nizza, Farr, & Smith, 2021). This approach ensures that researchers are not passive observers but active interpreters, whose own backgrounds and contexts shape how they understand and present participants' realities. We therefore engaged in a two-stage understanding: first, we interpreted participants' experiences from their perspectives, followed by the re-interpretation of those insights within the broader theoretical and positional understandings.

Rather than aiming for a large sample size that would allow for generalisations, our focus was on gathering rich, detailed accounts of personal and reflective outdoor stories. To this end, we draw on the data from pseudonymised interviews conducted via MS Teams and Zoom with nine[1] participants residing in the UK, Germany, and Serbia (Table 1). Seeking to understand how biophilic feelings are developed through engagement in outdoor adventures, in the first stage we encouraged the participants to reflect on the meaningful moments during those activities, focusing on themes such as mental and physical challenges, community building, or making intimate connections with the environment. They were most commonly speaking about how outdoor adventures affect them, and how through them, they develop relationships with self, others and the natural environment.

[1] These nine interviews are part of a larger study on the relationship between outdoor adventure participation and wellbeing, comprising 40 interviews conducted in 2023. The sample includes 15 participants each from Serbia, Germany, and the UK, balanced by gender and age.

Table 1. Participants' profiles

	Pseudonym	Country of residence	Age	Who they travel with	Activities undertaken
1	Tom	England	60	Friends and clients	Hiking, mountaineering, climbing
2	Louise	England	30	Husband	Hiking, trail running
3	Hans	Germany	56	Partner., friends	Long-distance running, cycling, hiking
4	Lukas	Germany	43	Family, friends	Surfing
5	Klara	Germany	48	Family, friends	Icelandic horse riding and alpine hiking
6	Peter	Germany	56	Family and friends	Hiking and downhill skiing
7	Bojan	Serbia	39	Friends	Biking, hiking, camping
8	Jana	Serbia	41	As part of a guided tour	Hiking, trekking, canyoning
9	Stefan	Serbia	44	Family	Stand-up paddling, hiking

In the second stage post-interviews, all authors analysed and thematised the empirical material, and agreed that the delineation of the various relationships that emerged from the participants' narratives might serve as a productive analytical framework. Structuring our analysis in this way, we could effectively illustrate how outdoor adventures facilitate not only intra- and interpersonal relationships but also a profound appreciation for and affiliation with non-human nature. Consequently, we present our findings across three broad themes: *Love of self, Love of other humans,* and *Love of non-human nature.* In the ensuing section, we highlight and interpret the voices of some participants whose stories we found particularly illustrative.

4. Findings

4.1 Love of self

Understanding ourselves is usually deeply intertwined with the human instinct to connect with nature and derive meaning from this connection. Nature often facilitates personal development and self-actualisation as it provides a space for introspection, challenge, and transformation, the key components of self-construction and identity formation (Jenkins, 2008). Adventure activities contribute to these processes as they sometimes present unpredictable challenges that push individuals to confront their limits and explore their potential. The novelty and unpredictability of the outcome offer opportunities for tourists to face their fears, expand their emotional and physical capacity, and foster self-reflection and inner growth (Bosangit, Hibbert, & McCabe, 2015). Myers (2010, p.118) notes that such experiences might, in turn, allow them to understand "who they are or equally who they are not and also who they'd like to be". Many of our participants could not imagine themselves without outdoor activities, at home or on holiday. This was reported by Klara, a passionate Icelandic horse rider and alpine hiker:

> With outdoor activities, I can tackle everything that I otherwise don't manage in everyday life. I can try out everything, push my limits, or [accept them] - at least I see

> where they are. Oh yes, it gives me everything. [...]. I wouldn't have any ideas about how to fill my life without that.

Similarly, Louise reported that the outdoors "plays a big part in my identity. It's just part of who I am". Biophilia holds that nature acts as a mirror through which individuals can explore their inner selves, pushing boundaries, testing their limits, and developing resilience. Away from the demands of everyday life, people get to freely live and explore themselves (Harper, 2016). As Shahvali et al. (2023, p. 14) explained, activities in the outdoors may result in "lived experiences of internal novelty often accompanied by stronger positive emotions as opposed to external novelty of an activity environment such as viewing a beautiful scenery for the first time". As they encounter and often overcome these internal and external challenges, people develop a deeper connection and understanding of themselves. This process of self-discovery is also connected to the construction of love of self (Câmara et al., 2022) and is in line with the biophilic perspective that attention to how engagement with outdoor activities triggers positive changes may lead to nurturing and knowing ourselves (Wilson, 1984). It is thus evident how love for activities in nature extends to some level of emotional affiliation with oneself. During their hiking trips, the participants often wild camp, which opens yet another dimension of knowing themselves, as Bojan articulated:

> [Once] I spent two nights in a tent in total wilderness [..]. Afterwards, I felt like high on drugs [and] I realised what nature does to us [...]. In these moments you experience everything, fears, beauty, everything flows through your body, and that reflects on some other things; it gives answers to you [and] prepares you for other challenges in life, making decisions, etc.

This quote illustrates how immersion in nature enables a deep connection with the self, triggering both self-awareness and personal transformation through embodied experiences (Pomfret et al., 2023). It evokes a heightened state of awareness and attention, akin to a euphoric or altered state, like being 'high on drugs', which explains the emotional and physical intensity of adventuring outdoors. The biophilic attention to how 'everything flows through your body' suggests that the participant felt interconnected with the environment, and in turn, this engagement facilitated introspection and connection with oneself, and increased self-confidence. Bojan's reference to nature providing 'answers' and preparing him for future challenges points to the development of resilience and self-reliance, reflecting a form of love of self where confronting fears, embracing beauty, and allowing the full spectrum of emotions to surface opens possibilities for a deeper understanding of and the development of a positive relationship with the self; potentially leading to inner transformation and finding meaning and purpose in the broader context of life (Sheldon, 2020).

4.2 Love of other humans

While humans possess an innate tendency for development and growth, this is primarily achieved through making connections with others (Aron et al., 2022). These relationships allow individuals to adopt and broaden their knowledge, perspectives and identities, and construct meaning in life. Over time, relationships habituate leading to a reduction in novelty

and growth, however, new empirical data indicates that vacations and outdoors serve as effective means of providing opportunities for novelty, which eventually connects and keeps people together (Coffey et al., 2024, Shahvali et al., 2023). Previous studies taking a positive psychology approach have also shown that adventure activities facilitate a strong sense of community through connecting and reconnecting with other participants, leading to the development of a collective identity, shared beliefs, and common values (Farkic et al., 2020; Houge Mackenzie et al., 2021). Our participants also emphasised the joy of sharing these experiences with others, noting that the experience would not be the same if done solo. This points to the significance of building a sense of belonging within the group, such as the shared experience of climbing a mountain. Jana, who lives a rather busy life in the Serbian capital, reflected on her trek in Nepal with a group of strangers:

> I realised that when we were climbing the peak, we arrived near but I was exhausted and couldn't be bothered to go further. The group climbed it, it was only half an hour away, they were later encouraging me to still go and do it, but then I realised that it didn't matter, without the group it wouldn't be the same. I didn't hike to win the peak. It is nice to be alone and to have time for yourself, but it is much better to share it with others.

In this context, the shared adventure became more than a physical experience of climbing; it represented the construction of meaning through connection with others. As Jana further explained,

> …with some [of these people] you develop friendships… you experience more for these 15 days than with people you have known much longer. You share a lot of things together: you laugh, you cry, you are tired, you have diarrhoea, you feel miserable…

The interplay between the ongoing processes of social bonding embedded in the mountains can be linked to the concept of biophilia, where making relationships with people and places become intertwined, reinforcing one another and contributing to finding eudaimonic meaning in life. Nature was not considered just a space for a physical challenge but a communal arena that enabled group members to empathise with, and encourage one another. As Jana explained, conquering the peak didn't matter; what mattered more was sharing this experience with others, and it was precisely this act of sharing that gave meaning to her trekking adventure.

While processes of affiliating with others might happen within a group of like-minded strangers, it also occurs within the familial context, as Stefan explained:

> I enjoy slower adventures, you know, for example, when we are SUP-ing… I like that moment when it's a calmer activity and I can connect with my family. I could tell my son what he should do and you could see both of us on the board. I'm sitting, and he is standing and paddling, and I'm just giving the instructions... […] When we hike, I try to share my knowledge with him and my wife…

Stefan's engagement with his son in slower-paced adventure activities illustrates the potential for such experiences to create moments of intimacy and care. This nurturing dynamic is obvious in the father-son relationship, creating space for emotional closeness and

reinforcing the sense of ‘we’ on vacations (Schänzel, Smith & Weaver, 2013). The natural environment becomes a conduit through which Stefan meaningfully engages with his family members, while also drawing on his natural knowledge to deepen this connection. Such prosocial behaviour is what authors refer to as beneficence, explained as acting in ways that are beneficial to others (Houge Mackenzie & Hodge, 2020). Commitment to family was previously found as an important aspect of love (Filep et al., 2022), while an emphasis on teaching, guiding, and sharing ties into the broader human instinct to affiliate and form caring relationships with others, which is a central tenet of biophilia (Wilson, 1984).

The following quote, however, encapsulates somewhat different dynamics of social interactions and highlights how the natural environment facilitates deeper, more meaningful connections even through non-verbal interactions, as elucidated by Peter, a passionate hiker and downhill skier:

> You walk side by side and let your thoughts flow and have a really nice form of conversation. It doesn’t matter if you run out of things to talk about, you can just be quiet. It's very intense. And you really get closer to each other personally. And you don't just talk about things in one direction, it's a different level of relationship.

The phrase ‘you really get closer to each other personally’ suggests that nature strips away social barriers, offering a different form of affiliation; one that emphasises authenticity in being (together) and mutual understanding. Nature becomes an agent for creating ‘a different level of relationship’, offering a unique space for social relationships to develop more deeply and organically than in more structured settings. Peter described a fluid, natural progression in conversation and interaction, where the physical act of ‘walking side by side’ in nature creates a relaxed environment that allows thoughts to flow. Being in nature can reduce the need for constant verbal communication so pertinent to our busy everyday lives, to instead create comfort in silence. The idea that ‘it doesn’t matter if you run out of things to talk about’ points to the way nature facilitates ease in going beyond surface-level exchanges, allowing silence to become a shared meaningful experience rather than an awkward pause.

4.3 Love of non-human nature

The development of meaningful relationships with non-human nature was primarily emphasised in participants’ narratives around sensory engagement with and belonging to the environment; a process termed affiliation in biophilic terms (Kaplan, 1995). By slowing down and being deeply physically and emotionally connected, participants described feeling grounded, which in some cases led to transcendental experiences. The weather and natural elements helped them make sense of their outdoor experiences and express how the sensory interactions with them positively affected them. Literature consistently identifies the embodiment in nature as beneficial for wellbeing, with some evidence suggesting that individuals with stronger biophilic tendencies experience higher psychological wellbeing (Farkic & Taylor, 2024; Humberstone, 2015; Munroe, 2022). It therefore creates opportunities to understand its multiple positive effects on people, as Hans articulated:

> What [being outdoors] is all about is simply 'feeling yourself', the physicality of it all, the rain, the snow, the wind, the cold, the smell. You're at one with it all, this 'being at one' with it. And to feel yourself in the process. It's nothing rational, it's just emotional - a feeling.

This quote depicts Hans's awareness of the deeply embodied, emotional connection he experienced in nature and the positive impact it had on him. The phrase 'being at one with it all' illustrates a sense of unity with the natural environment, suggesting that immersion in outdoor settings leads to a profoundly meaningful relationship with both the self and the environment. The attention to the sensory stimuli and elements like rain, snow, wind, and cold demonstrates how physical contact with them fosters self-awareness and emotional connection, moving beyond the rational to evoke a more primal, instinctive response. As the concept of biophilia suggests, the participant felt an innate and intimate belongingness to nature. This connection further facilitated a form of affiliation, as Hans experienced his own vitality and interconnected existence within the broader ecosystem, through which he was able to construct meaning.

Other participants reported that they managed to attune to natural rhythms, slow down, and become more mindful of their surroundings. Stefan explained that outdoor activities taught him to appreciate small moments, such as the tranquillity of stepping out of a tent in the early morning and noticing the quietness of the forest. He appreciated not rushing anywhere, resisting the urge to make coffee or create unnecessary noise, to instead simply be; to be present and part of the natural environment, which made him feel well. Similarly, the convergence with nature through hiking and becoming at one with it also came through the physical connection with the ground, as Tom, an English hiker, mountaineer and climber, explained:

> I feel deeply connected to the ground that I'm stood on. That's deep. You know, that's where I feel at one. […] I connect with the ground that I'm walking on. I think that's where my connection comes from. It's great to have that experience of feeling grounded.

Here we can see the potential of biophilia to "expand one's ability to appreciate and comprehend the inherent interconnectivity between ecological integrity and human wellbeing" (Hensley, 2015, p.3). In some participants, the embeddedness in vast open landscapes triggered a sense of awe, explained as the admiration of the vast space that transcends our normal point of reference, which we can see in Jana's example of doing via ferrata in Italian Alps:

> …when I am above the clouds, which is not our usual sight, and you are having coffee at 4000 metres while the cloud is just in front of you, I have the feeling I can breathe it in, like a big foam. Or when you are hanging from 2500m, and the bird is flying past, you then realise you are in its world and you feel its energy and freedom. These are only a few seconds but it is enough. Life is full of these beautiful moments.

The imagery reported by Jana illustrates an extraordinary encounter with the natural world that transcends ordinary human experience (Pomfret et al., 2023). These moments elicit awe

and fascination, one of the key aspects of biophilia, where one feels small yet connected to the larger, more majestic nature. The acknowledgment of existing in 'the bird's world' and feeling 'its energy and freedom' suggests a shift in perspective, where one becomes part of nature rather than an observer of it and where the boundaries between the self and the (natural) environment blur, as Lukas describes:

> It's very important to me to be in nature somehow. And to consciously feel that, to perceive it with all your senses. Just like the natural elements, feeling the wind or the waves, somehow being part of this wave and then standing on a surfboard just by the power of the sea or the moon... And the fact that you feel at home, that you feel like you belong somewhere.

Both quotes reflect a biophilic engagement, where humans feel intrinsically affiliated with the world around them, closely resembling what Schnell (2009) refers to as vertical and horizontal self-transcendence as main sources of reported meaning-in-life. The fleeting yet profound nature of these moments highlights the idea that even brief encounters with nature can lead to a heightened awareness of all that is alive and vital, enhancing one's sense of connection and love of life through the appreciation of being part of it (Fromm, 1964). Tom also mentioned nature's grandeur and what it instills in him:

> You might be halfway up or at the top of the hill, and you'll have what I call a big sky. And that's really inspirational for me. And, I just think 'wow, how small am I in the grand scheme of things'. So, it brings a perspective to me. You know, there's a bigger, wider world out there. So, it means there are more adventures to be had!

This, like previous narratives, suggests that the participant finds meaning in shifting their perspective, which offers a completely new way to view their place in the world, replete with humility and a sense of humbleness. Experiencing the grandeur of nature, one begins to cultivate a love of non-human nature, and develop empathy and care that may lead to a broader environmental sensitivity, as Klara expressed:

> Being humble when you're in the mountains and realising what a small fart you are in the big wide world. [Realising] that nature can manage quite well without us and also how things work and to be aware of climate change…

The quote reflects a recognition of human insignificance in the face of nature's independence from us, humans. It taps into the biophilic principle that we possess an innate affiliation with nature, but also reminds us that nature can thrive without human interference. In this context, biophilia is not just about a love of nature, but also an appreciation of its power, balance, and self-sufficiency. Klara's cautioning of climate change suggests that biophilia goes beyond an emotional connection to the environment to also embrace a cognitive understanding of the ecological systems at play. Such an understanding in turn leads to a deeper environmental consciousness and respect for the planet's natural and non-natural processes, in which we as humans need to take a humbler, yet more caring and protective role.

5. Conclusion: Let us restore the love of life

This study, adopting an interpretivist phenomenological approach, explored how shared outdoor adventures can restore the *love of life*. By intersecting outdoor adventure, biophilia, and eudaimonic experiences, each promoting wellbeing, we examined how tourism and leisure facilitate meaningful relationships. Rather than defining love, we aimed to explore its emergence through the development of connections with self, others, and non-human nature. Observing affiliation as a "primal and innate dimension of our humanity" (Cajete, 1999, p. 190) we were able to better understand the concept of love as a possibility to achieve a sense of purpose, meaning and overall wellbeing in life.

Theoretical implications

While positive psychology approaches have been useful in understanding what contributes to eudaimonic wellbeing in tourism (Filep et al., 2022), it has not yet transcended the flourishing of humans. The findings of this study suggest that the achievement of a sense of meaning and purpose is built on a foundation of understanding, affiliating with and caring for self and the other (Fromm, 1956; Wilson, 1984). What our participants consistently reported was a recognition of the inherent affiliation, interconnection, and interdependence within the living system. The natural environment did not represent merely a passive backdrop for outdoor activities, but an active agent in the construction of meaningful outdoor experiences. The relationship with nature then became an affective, material exchange, where the generation of love is more than a psychological or emotional phenomenon; it is also a material process that emerges from the myriad relationships among human and non-human agents. Biophilia thus nicely represents this interconnection, showing that love of life and all living beings is an extension of our ability to affect and be affected, and extend care and love beyond the human species.

Through intersecting environmental psychology perspectives with positive psychology through the concept of biophilia, we were better positioned to explore how the love of life was co-produced through entangled relationships, extending beyond personal, passionate, or romantic connections between humans to also consider ways in which non-human nature might contribute to the construction of eudaimonic experience. We therefore followed Wilson (1984) and Fromm (1956) in approaching love as an active force that is essential to human wellbeing. Both thinkers claimed that it is not just an emotional state but a fluid category, however; it is a process that requires effort to understand, engage, and sincerely care – for the other. This shifted our understanding of love to a broader, more inclusive concept and process; one that is enacted and embodied through the physical, affective and emotional ties that humans develop through undertaking activities in the outdoors.

Biophilic and more relational and flatter approaches to its exploration might help in further understanding the reciprocal relationships humans have with non-human nature, contributing to both human *and* non-human wellbeing (Farkic et al., 2024). Future research might therefore intersect positive psychology approaches to tourist wellbeing with more post-humanist, new materialist or ecofeminist approaches, as human experiences are not constructed in isolation but are co-constructed through vibrant and symbiotic relationships that humans develop with the environment, elements, terrains, bugs, mushrooms, plants, and

other non-human agents. They are all interconnected and benefit from one another (Rantala et al., 2020). This might allow us to further examine the emergent meanings and relationships in relation to the looming ecological crisis that we now face. It becomes even more important to recognise the urgency in sensitising ourselves about the role nature plays in sustaining human life and wellbeing. Without this knowledge, it has been claimed, human species are at risk.

In restoring biophilic feelings, therefore, we as a Western society need to depart from mechanistic and reductionist worldviews, to embrace more ecological perspectives of life. Consequently, an understanding of love through a biophilic lens might result in the achievement of eudaimonic wellbeing, construed by meaningful and purposeful being in the world. For this to happen, as Johnson (2014) urges us, we need individual and collective (love-induced) action to trigger meaningful societal change. To be sure, there is urgency in restoring the love of life in our disenchanted world. Thus, reimagining a different world rooted in reciprocity and mutual respect that will prioritise caring, respecting and protecting nature (including us humans) might lead us to a more purposeful, meaningful and just socioeconomic world order (Nussbaum, 2013). Because - as our participant rightfully observed - "there are many more adventures to be had…"

Practical implications

A key critique of tourism as a means of fostering biophilia and ecological connection is that such experiences are often temporary, returning participants to the same fast-paced and alienating conditions they sought to escape. However, rather than viewing this as a limitation of tourism per se, we suggest it is indicative of broader socio-economic structures that prioritise productivity over long-term wellbeing. Research suggests that while tourism experiences may be short-lived, they can act as catalysts for deeper, more sustained shifts in perception and behaviour. The challenge, then, is not necessarily tourism's temporality but the extent to which these experiences are integrated into everyday life post-travel. We argue that by designing tourism experiences with intentionality, such as embedding reflective practices, community engagement, and encouraging participants to adopt ongoing nature-based practices, tourism can serve as a way to achieve long-lasting changes in ecological awareness and lifestyle choices. There is a need for tourism, public health, and related sectors to work collaboratively in creating environments that support engagement with the more-than-human world beyond the context of travel.

Drawing on theoretical insights, the tourism industry could design and promote slower-paced activities that facilitate deeper, more meaningful interactions with nature, helping to rekindle people's innate biophilic tendencies. Outdoor tours, for instance, could embrace the concept of co-living with non-human agents, such as tree and plant dialogues, eco-storytelling, and nightwalking, encouraging participants to see nature not as a passive backdrop for leisure but as an active and resonance-generating partner in building reciprocal relationships. Similarly, public health programs like green social prescribing, including forest bathing, bio-gardening, and biodegradable nature-based art, could provide education on ecological interconnectedness and the essential role of non-human nature in sustaining planetary wellbeing. To amplify these efforts, tourism and public health organisations should collaborate on community-driven

initiatives that cultivate care and respect for all living beings, inviting participants to practice love as an active, skillful force in their interactions with both humans and non-humans. In framing these practices as pathways to restoring a 'love of life' (biophilia) and contributing to planetary wellbeing, such initiatives can inspire greater collective engagement, support grassroots action, and strengthen relational bonds, advancing societal transformation toward a more just and sustainable future.

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