Coastal transformations and connections – revealing values through the Community Voice Method

Corresponding author:
Dr Timothy G. Acott, University of Greenwich, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Greenwich, London, UK
T.G.Acott@greenwich.ac.uk

Dr Cheryl Willis, Natural England, Nobel House, 17 Smith Square, London, UK
Cheryl.willis@naturalengland.org.uk

Sue Ranger, Marine Conservation Society, Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire, UK
Sue.Ranger@mcsuk.org

Dr Gabriel Cumming, Community Voice Consulting, Warrenton, North Carolina, USA
gabrielcumming@gmail.com

Dr Peter Richardson, Marine Conservation Society, Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire, UK
Peter.Richardson@mcsuk.org

Dr Rose O’Neill, Chief Executive, Campaign for National Parks
7 - 14 Great Dover Street, London SE1 4YR
rose@cnp.org.uk

Dr Adriana Ford
Imperial College London, Department of Life Sciences, South Kensington, London, UK
a.ford@imperial.ac.uk
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Abstract

1. A wealth of evidence suggests an important relationship between nature and human health and well-being and this appears to hold particular resonance for coastal environments. Notably, this relationship has been explored in assessments of ecosystem services, or the benefits that people derive from nature.

2. In this paper, we extend the debate to encompass ideas around relational values which considers that human well-being is derived from relationships with nature rather than being solely delivered as the benefits commonly suggested in the ecosystem services literature.

3. The paper draws on conceptual ideas around relational values, sense of place, and environmental justice to understand the values and importance of coastal environments for people.

4. These value concepts are explored through detailed narratives revealed by participants in two case study UK coastal locations, using a form of civic dialogue and videography approach called Community Voice Method (CVM).

5. We find that despite levels of relative deprivation in our case study locations, interviewees express values which are striking in terms of the depth of care felt; values which are ‘time-deepened’ and shaped not only by what people do and are able to do but also by personal histories and memories which remain strong despite material changes and transformations in people’s lives and the places they live.

6. The CVM method in addition provides a practical approach for creating deliberative spaces to explore those deeply embodied and shared connections to the coast which are important and should have greater prominence in coastal management policy and practice.

Key words: coast, well-being, cultural ecosystem services, relational values, environmental justice, sense of place, community voice method

Introduction

Globally, human wellbeing and more locally responsive policy making are increasingly seen as critical goals of policy interventions (Atkinson et al., 2012). For diverse populations and governments around the world, wellbeing and marine policy agendas have mostly been segregated (Kelly, 2018). Integrated approaches are needed that make visible the diverse values of coastal environments in ways that connect to both policy makers and the general population. This study was commissioned by Natural England¹ with the aim of using a novel methodology (Community Voice Method) to understand perceptions of the coast from a diverse group of people, particularly those from low-income areas and BAME communities.

Using a frame of relational values combined with sense of place and environmental justice the research showcases the power of the Community Voice Method (CVM) for providing a platform for rarely heard voices in natural resource management, voices which are powerful in terms of the emotion and authenticity they convey. The place-based approach taken here has much to offer in enabling an exploration of relational values which shape how people connect with, ascribe meaning to and derive wellbeing benefit from the coastal environment.

¹ Natural England is an executive non-departmental public body that advises the government on the natural environment in England (Natural England - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk))
The first section of this paper explores some background conceptual ideas in relational values, sense of place, and environmental justice. Drawing from these different perspectives helps provide a frame for understanding the values and importance of coastal environments for people. This is followed by a description of the study and the CVM approach. The results section then provides the reader with insights into the rich narratives shared by participants in their own words. Finally, the issues raised are explored and reflected on in the discussion which connects the narratives of individual stories with a wider conceptual framing and also points to the implications of this work for policy around coastal management and connecting people with nature.

Background

The coast and sea have value to people who benefit from time spent in, on, under or beside it in a variety of ways (Depledge et al., 2017). Living close to the coast has positive health and well-being benefits (Wheeler et al., 2012) and is a source of therapeutic and restorative experiences including feelings of relaxation, rejuvenation and enhanced positive emotions, mood and self-esteem (Kaplan 1995; Hartig et al. 2001; Kjellgren & Buhrkall 2010, Bell at al., 2015; White et al., 2017). Wynveen at al. (2012) found that those living close to the marine environment held a deep place attachment and for some, these benefits are felt even when they are no longer by the sea.

Discussions around the kind of environmental settings that give rise to well-being benefits highlight the importance of those involving water and coastal environments in particular are significantly associated with well-being (Wheeler et al., 2012; Bell et al., 2015; Kelly, 2018). Such environments are particular examples of multifaceted, complex places that draw together human and non-humans into a myriad of different relationships such as walking on a beach, fishing, enjoying leisure facilities at a pier, bird watching or amusement arcades. Policy makers, individuals and communities need to understand these myriad ways in which the coast is important to people and gives rise to multiple and overlapping values but exploring these concepts raises many practical and theoretical issues. This is particularly problematic for policy development and decision making given their emphasis on the need for empirical data that increases visibility of some values over others. For instance, the economic value of fisheries is well documented but how to understand the value of fishing for place identity is less well developed (Urquhart & Acott, 2013).

There is growing interest in the idea of relational values to help frame understanding of the importance of nature. Applied to interactions between people and environments, relational values are a particular value orientation with emphasis on relationships and responsibilities (Chan et al., 2016). Relational values offer a way beyond intrinsic and instrumental values to help understand the diverse reasons nature is important to people. This broadening of values draws in preferences, principles and virtues about human nature relations (Chan et al., 2018). In the context of this paper, relational values are used to bring emphasis to those meaning-saturated relationships between people and the coast. Exploring relational values draws from diverse academic perspectives across the social sciences and humanities and has given greater prominence to the importance of qualitative perspectives (Chan et al., 2018). Relational perspectives provide ways to scrutinise the values of people, places and nature with arguments being made that benefits can arise from human-nature relationships (Fish, 2016). In the words of Chan (2018); ‘Relational values are not present in things but derivative of relationships and responsibility to them’ (p1462).
An emphasis on qualitative work is particularly challenging if value accounting is largely understood as an economic technical exercise that supports decision making (although Schultz & Martin-Ortega (2018) suggest that there is already a lot of quantitative work that explicitly deals with relational values but it uses a different terminology). However, qualitative methods, and approaches rooted in the arts (Edwards et al., 2016), can help make relational values of places more visible. They can also help in developing deliberative forms of valuation (Tadaki et al., 2017) that explore deep connections between people and nature which in turn enables decision makers to design policies or management strategies that achieve socially, ecologically, and economically equitable and sustainable outcomes (Urquart & Acott, 2013; Masterson et al., 2017). In this study, relational values are explored through a form of civic dialogue using a videography approach called Community Voice Method (CVM).

Sense of place has been explored as an indicator of cultural ecosystem services and as an element of well-being as derived from ecosystems (Masterson et al, 2017). Sense of place research offers perspectives into how meanings, knowledge and relational values are formed (Ryfield et al., 2019) and also how this can influence well-being. Proshansky et al. (1983) for example, assert that place attachment is important to a person’s well-being in that it reflects “a sense of belonging and purpose which give meaning to his or her life” (p.90).

Place attachment is concerned with the emotional attachments people form with a locale (Urquart & Acott, 2013). This is often referred to as a sense of belonging or rootedness or “the extent to which an individual values or identifies with a particular environmental setting” (Kyle et al. 2003, p250). Sense of place and the importance that people attach to places cannot be understood with reference to economic and instrumental values alone. Relational value perspectives offer ways to understand the diverse reasons why places are important to people.

Despite evidence that the sea and coast generate many positive values (Gee & Burkhard, 2010; Willis, 2015; Bullock et al., 2018) it is apparent that benefits from nature are not evenly distributed amongst the population (Natural England, 2019; Boyd et al., 2018; Clarke et al., 2013). These studies concerned with barriers to nature, converge in their findings that key drivers of infrequent visits to natural spaces include socio-economic status, health and ethnicity. Issues around differential access to nature have found expression within discussions of environmental justice which is concerned with the fair distribution of environmental costs and benefits (Mitchell, 2011). In his review, Mitchell states that whilst we need to be wary of generalisations, issues of environmental injustice do tend to affect deprived communities the most and that people in these areas have less opportunity to access and benefit from a high quality natural environment. This is important because how people relate to places and form values and meanings around them (relational values), influences the well-being benefits they derive and the development of emotional bonds which is related to attitudes and behaviours within those places (Davenport & Anderson, 2005). This has important implications for policy in terms of the need for a more developed and holistic model of conservation which incorporates opportunities for connection with nature as a pathway to an array of benefits to people.

Relational values, sense of place and environmental justice are theoretical perspectives that offer insights into how, why and for whom coastal environments are important for people.
The following sections describe the study location and the CVM approach used. This is followed by a presentation of the results and a discussion that uses these theoretical perspectives to help unpack the diverse coastal values articulated and how these can be made visible for policy makers.

**Study locations and method**

In 2019 Natural England worked with Community Voice Consulting, The University of Greenwich and the Marine Conservation Society to develop and implement a CVM study to explore how people value the coast and their general relationships with it in two coastal locations in England (one in the north east (Durham coast) and one in the south east of England (Portsmouth) see Map 1). These locations have both seen considerable economic change with the decline of coal mining (in Durham) and maritime industries (Portsmouth). County Durham is the 75th most deprived area out of 326 single and lower tier local authorities in England (based on the rank of average score). County Durham has a population of 521,000 with only 8,000 identifying as non-white (ONS, 2019). Portsmouth is a densely populated coastal city with a population of 213,000 and is a diverse, multi-ethnic community with some 32,000 identifying with an ethnicity other than White British (ONS, 2019). Portsmouth is ranked 84th of 324 local authorities (excluding counties and where 1 is the most deprived).

These locations were chosen to reflect a range of contemporary socio-economic circumstances, significant socio-economic and environmental change and diverse natural and human features that create the coastline people experience and use. Work with these communities was designed to take account of such diversity by using a novel method to understand values and how they were articulated by people in these two locations. Community Voice Method (CVM) was chosen for this research, as an innovative and proven video interviewing approach (Cumming & Norwood, 2012; Ainsworth et al., 2019; Green et al., 2019) to help explore the multiple views of diverse individuals and as a tool to stimulate discussions in communities on how the coast was valued and barriers to use.

CVM is a multistep research and engagement process grounded in careful listening to the perspectives and values of a diversity of stakeholders. It is grounded in qualitative social science and uses filmed interviews to create an original documentary film which is based on analysis of interview transcripts. The intention is that all participants’ voices and views are reflected in the final cut of the film and the film is then used as a starting point for further community discussion. It is powerful in its ability to facilitate reflection on deeply held values that connect people to places and to articulate shared values and allow for a wider expression of value to be understood and incorporated into coastal management (Ranger et al., 2016). The methodological approach and sample design was strongly influenced by the desire to engage with those voices that are harder to reach, particularly in urban, more deprived locations. However, to ensure balance across a range of stakeholders we also wanted the voice of traditional coastal stakeholders to be included (e.g. birdwatchers, sailors etc). The study was designed to be completed within a nine-month period between August 2018 and May 2019.

**Research phases**

There were five phases to the research. First, a sample of 41 participants were recruited, identified through peer referral and a snowballing process to provide a diverse and
illustrative sample of interviewees. An interview guide was designed to explore people’s perceptions, views and values (Annex 1). There were six parts to the interview guide including background information; sense of place (wider setting), place identity (referring to the coast and sea); preferred places; access issues and issues pertaining to the England Coast path. This research is reporting on the first five interview themes. A semi-structured interview approach was used whereby interviewees where asked a series of questions about their own views of the sea and coast (for a more detailed description of the methods, see Acott et al., 2019). Ethical permission was given through the University of Greenwich ethics committee (REF: UREC/18.1.6.i.iv). At the start of the interview the ethics of the research was explained to participants and they were required to sign a consent form.

Second, the interview data were analysed to identify emergent themes and narratives through which stakeholders articulate their values, concerns, and visions. The analysis was based upon a detailed reading of the interview scripts and coding them into final thematic categories using NVivo (v11) qualitative analysis software. A combination of deductive and inductive coding was used (Acott et al 2019 for a full description of the coding process). Deductive (pre-existing) coding typologies drew upon a three-dimensional wellbeing framework, which has emerged as a complement to more traditional and material ways of conceptualising and measuring human wellbeing (McGregor 2007). This framework, which incorporates material, subjective and relational dimensions of well-being, was applied specifically to assess benefits derived from accessing and using the coast in a range of different ways (Ranger, unpublished PhD research). This multi-dimensional approach to understanding well-being is useful because it incorporates aspects which relate specifically to the material circumstances of people’s lives as well as the structural and institutional forces that shape what people have, what they can do with what they have, and what they feel about what they have. This enables a detailed appreciation of people’s diverse lived experiences in coastal areas. Inductive coding was used to supplement the deductive framework by reflecting thematic patterns that emerged across the interview data. These analyses were used to identify patterns of responses among different categories of coastal users. Thirty-five deductive coding categories were used; each was divided into as many subcategories as needed to fully reflect the diversity of interviewee views.

Representative interview excerpts were then identified in which key themes from the analysis were voiced, during the third phase of the process, and these excerpts were incorporated into two films (one for each case study area²). In addition to representing the data analysis, the films were designed to include every interviewee, thereby reflecting the full diversity of the participants. Fourth, the films were shown at a range of different public screening events and workshops. CVM films are intended to imbue workshops with the reflective qualities of the interviews. Workshop participants respond to the film through structured dialogue, respectfully discussing the issues under consideration. Results were used to inform the fifth phase, the final reporting of the project and insights from the interviews and workshops have been included in the following results and discussion.

² Portsmouth CVM film: https://youtu.be/jJB94V2g7LY. Durham Heritage Coast CVM film: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmCdqdLoVww
41 people were interviewed in 33 interviews across the two areas (19 in Portsmouth and 22 along the Durham Coast with four interviews including two people each). Interviews included 26 people who were ‘active coastal users’ and 15 who were ‘limited users’. Active users were defined as those who access the coast at least weekly on average and limited users defined as those who access the coast less frequently (based on general responses rather than a result of a direct question). 23 women and 18 men were interviewed, 4 interviewees were Asian/Asian British, 1 interviewee was Black/African/Caribbean/Black-British and the remainder were White.

Overall the analysis of interviews from the Durham Coast and Portsmouth reveals communities that care deeply about the coast and sea in a variety of ways. Drawing from the interview analysis and the subsequent workshop presentations (more fully described in Acott et al., 2019) the following section discusses selective emergent themes that reveal how people value the coast and how value concepts including sense of place and relational values are revealed through these narratives.

**Key themes and participant voices**

**Well-being**

Interview data were analysed to understand the various types of personal well-being that residents of the Durham Coast and Portsmouth derive from the coast and sea. Participants in this study reflected on how the coast influences their well-being which are summarised in the following five categories (Acott et al., 2019):

- Physical and mental health: health benefits of time spent on the coast
- Aesthetic: appreciation for the beauty of the coast and sea
• Connection to others: the social experience of enjoying the coast with family, friends, and community
• Connection to nature: the direct, often sensory, experience of the natural environment
• Restorative: the calming, relaxing, revitalizing effect of time by the coast

For Frank in Durham, the health benefits of the coast were transformative:

"The health benefits to actually living on this coastline and using the coastline... It transformed my life and health. You don't just do it and think, 'this is good for me'--it's just fantastic to do anyway, so it makes it easy. Usually when the doctor says you have to do this, you have to pack in smoking or you have to stop the drink or whatever, it's usually, 'oh, I've got to put up with that,' but to actually... go walking, you know, it's amazing the difference to your health. I've got no problems now with the doctor" (Frank, male, Durham Coast, age: 60s).

For Jane the ‘white horses’ she watched with her grandfather were an aesthetic moment to capture with a camera:

"White horses: my grandfather and I used to describe the waves as white horses galloping towards you, so sometimes the sea and the view can be different over twenty four hours. You can have a calm sea, you can have a choppy sea, and then you can have a fierce sea where the waves are galloping in and out and they’re crashing against the wall and it’s amazing to see. You take photographs, even when you’ve seen it 20 times before, you think, ‘oh, I have to capture this moment.’" (Jane, female, Durham Coast, age: 50s).

There were contrasting ways that the coast was experienced by people, and also the features from which people drew their experiences were quite diverse. One impression that emerges from the interviews is that of an individual, even solitary, experience of the coast, the enjoyment of walking by the sea or staring out at it, awed and refreshed by the beauty of the expanse, the sound of the waves, and the smell of the salt spray. The psychologically and physically rejuvenating experience of a direct connection to nature which includes a sensory experience of the natural environment. Anthony describes it as:

"It's just that sense of fulfilment afterwards and... not knowing what you're going to see. Everyone thinks, 'oh, you just see a bit of water,' but because you're along the coast... you'll see seals, or sometimes around Farlington Marshes in Langstone Harbour, you might see ospreys on their migration route, for example, various birds of prey... jelly fish in the springtime, for example, and things like that" (Anthony, male, Portsmouth, age: 40s).

Another experience of the coast is a social one, the enjoyment of the seaside with family, friends, and everyone else. This is the coastline of bustling piers, kids splashing around, and fish and chips.

"It's one of those things you can enjoy with the family pretty much all year round. Summertime on the beach, building sandcastles or plodging [paddling] along the coast" (Trevor, male, Durham Coast, age: 40s).
The connection to others also goes beyond a social experience and can have significant positive impacts for mental health. As Michael describes:

“I’m at home and I’m not feeling very good and I get on the scooter and get down the front and within half an hour down here, meeting people and talking to people, I can go home and I can feel a hundred percent better” (Michael, male, Portsmouth, age: 60s).

Connected to issues of mental health are the restorative values of being at the coast. Emma suggests:

“When you sit there and you’re watching the sea and you’re calming down, and you’re looking at this... bit of water, and these stones, and they’ve been here for thousands of years, it helps put you back in your place... It’s not that things don’t matter—you’ve still got to pay the rent, you’ve still got to put food on your table, you’ve still got to do your family arguments—but in the grand scale of the world you’re just a small tiny piece of it. And that’s humbling and very... calming for me” (Emma, female, Portsmouth, age: 30s).

These are deep, emotional relational values being expressed by the interviewees, showing the importance of the coast and encounters with it as fundamental aspects of their lives. All respondents valued the restorative, social and health benefits of time spent by the coast. All these different types of coastal experiences are loved. In many cases, they are loved by the same people. Together, they characterise the coast for people in these communities and the well-being benefits derived from their encounters which go beyond notions of instrumental values, although these may also be important.

**Coastal features**

Interviewees expressed preferences for particular features in coastal place ranging from beaches, natural scenery, seaside businesses, visitor facilities, wildlife and maritime traffic. This reinforces how the coast is meaningful to different people for multiple reasons. Relational values emerge from interactions with things that are a mixture of humans and nature. For instance, Beverley from Durham said:

“I prefer the more natural look, so the coastline the way it is. The wildness of it, if you like, not so built up and, I suppose, less amenities.... I love to see the beach banks. I like to see the pathways, the dene area with the trees” (Beverley, female, Durham Coast, age: 50s)

Similarly, Mary described her experience of the sea as something that takes you away from modern life:

“Being near the sea is to hear the sea and... the smell as well.... It’s sort of, tranquil, really. Just takes you away from the modern life into something that’s natural” (Mary, female, Portsmouth, age: 40s).

A different response can be seen from Marie in Portsmouth who emphasised the importance of the facilities on offer;
“Old Portsmouth is quite nice... you can sit in the pubs round there and have a drink and relax and watch the world go by. That’s a good area. Around here, where there’s the D-Day museum and the ground is flat, having children... they can run around and not hurt themselves and enjoy, tumble around, that is nice... I like the green space and the castle and the museums and the play area for everybody” (Marie, female, Portsmouth, age: 80s).

The difficulties of providing a range of coastal experiences were also noted. Trevor from the Durham Coast talked about wanting both seclusion and also amenities;

“You want it to be secluded.... But then, you want amenities as well.... You always want your fish and chips, so you want some sort of local amenities nearby. Facilities for washing and cleaning, as well, and bathroom facilities that’s accessible for all would be an ideal world” (Trevor, Male, Durham Coast, age: 40s).

There were clear differences between the two locations, Portsmouth interviewees were more likely to mention historic sites, green spaces, and maritime traffic than their counterparts on the Durham Coast. The tension between an appreciation of the “wild,” natural coastline and a desire for amenities while visiting the coast was evident in both sites but was more pronounced on Durham Coast. The contrast between wild coasts and places with lots of amenities speaks to how coastal features can invoke a different sense of place which describes both the subjective feelings people have for a place, but also, as Stedman (2003) argues, the physical environment also matters in this. The preferences for different types of coast being described here can be understood in terms of relational values co-constructed between people, nature and place.

**Sense of Place**

Ainsworth et al (2019) suggest that sense of place is dynamic and can change and be influenced by social and environmental factors. Whilst this is undoubtedly true, our research shows a strong and enduring sense of place associated with and strengthened by the coast. In both locations, there was a strong sense of place, as articulated through a range of relational values where sea and the coast have a special role and provide constants in an ever-changing world. The sea was referred to in conversations as a ‘leveller’ and something that people could identify and connect with despite whatever else was going on in their lives. The assertion from Ainsworth et al (2019) that contributions from marine environments can support ‘fulfilled human lives’ (p1) certainly appeared to play out through participants’ stories, and memories about the specialness of their local coast, the history and heritage of it and how it plays a part in both individual and collective identity.

Everyone we interviewed had a story to tell about how they feel connected to the coast. People’s identities were wrapped up in their relationship to the coast, both in their specific location but also to the coast more generally, which contributed to both a sense of belonging and to individual well-being. Although it is possible to twist the descriptions of the importance of the coast into an instrumental value perspective, the values articulated fit better with a relational frame that stresses the heartfelt connections experienced.

“I think if I moved away, I would really miss it. I don’t know if I could live anywhere that’s not close to the coast now… if I come out in the morning you’ve got a gorgeous sunrise coming
up over the sea… it kind of starts the day off with a bit of tranquillity” (Scott, male, Portsmouth, age: 30s).

“I fish three, four times a week off the cliffs here, or off the bottom down there, which is part of my psyche, really. I’ve been brought up with it, all our lives, haven’t we? Part of life” (Joe, male, Durham coast, age: 60s).

Relational values help to describe the importance of identity and sense of place which contribute to a sense of belonging and well-being;

“I get to some point on the train [approaching Portsmouth] and I just relax. I think it’s [when] you get that first glimpse of the sea, coming in, it’s that first glimpse of home” (Emma, female, Portsmouth, age: 30s).

However, as discussed in one workshop in Hartlepool where all the participants were British Asian, connecting with the coast was interpreted in a different way. They highlighted that for some of their group, they have a much shorter relationship with the sea and so do not necessarily feel a deep sense of connection to it. Nonetheless, they articulated the well-being benefits of being at the coast and discussed it as a space to connect with each other.

This study included locations from diverse income areas and yet the care and love people expressed for the coast was universal, with all respondents demonstrating strong positive feelings towards the coast. This is notable given that participants included both active coastal users and those who rarely use the coast and those without obvious association with it. This importance of the coast to people is not limited to contemporary values, there is a dynamic relationship between people and the coast that changes over time. The values that emerge from people’s relationships to place are time thickened, with memories providing an anchor for how people feel now. A relational perspective between past and present helps understand how places become emotionally charged for people.

Both case study locations have undergone extensive periods of change and transformation, resulting in different narratives today describing connections to the coast from those in the past. In the late 80’s and early 90’s huge social, economic and environmental change took place in the North East of England. One after another of the six coal mines were closed, with the last at Easington colliery being closed and demolished in 1993. By this stage the area was described as an ecological disaster zone after 100 years of tipping from the 6 nearby coal pits. With impacts evident 7km out to sea. People at this time suffered economic hardships and coal picking became common practice, memories of which for some provide an enduring connection to the local coast;

‘When I was a child I went to the mining strike in Horden and we spent many an evening or day or weekend going down to the picking coal and that’s memory that’s always stuck in mind, like, that, you know, I had it hard when I was a child, because we had no money and we used to go down to Horden Beach and, you know, as little as I was I would have a ruck-sack full of coal. But that was our fuel, that was our heating, so yes, when I do go down to

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3 Industry - Heritage Coast [durhamheritagecoast.org]
Horden Beach it does bring back those memories of going down with my mum, dad and my
brother, picking coal' (Alison, female, Durham Coast, age: 60s).

'It just feels like home. I mean, when the colliery was there, the colliery waste used to go out
to sea in the buckets, the waste from the colliery used to go out. And my brother and his
friends used to climb in them and see how far they could get out before they chickened out. I
used to sit and watch them, and I used to think, I want to do that. I never did, but, like, I don't
know, when you're on the beach banks and you're watching the sea, it's clean now where
before it was coal, the sand was black, but it's all cleaned up now and it's refreshing to just
sit there and watch it all go by' (Maureen, female, Durham Coast, age: 70s).

Underpinning many of the interview responses was a deep heartfelt association with the
coast that often extended back in time to childhood memories. At times responses were
emotional and passionate. One Portsmouth interviewee broke down crying when recounting
early memories of living near the coast. One Durham Coast interviewee described some of
her best memories as those with her children on the local beach. There was a sense of
nostalgia as people described themselves as children being able to visit the coast
independently. This contrasted with their views of young people today who were described
as not tending to visit the coast alone. This observation is supported in the MENE report that
shows a decline in the time children spend outside without adults (Natural England 2019a).

Access and safety

In both case study locations, access and safety issues were cited as important in connecting
with the coast and participants expressed concern when they felt that access was
insufficient. For some, access was about challenges in physically reaching the coastline,
despite living relatively near to it. Issues of transport for example or being able to park
sufficiently near the coast were cited. For others, concerns were about being able to
comfortably use aspects of the coastline (e.g. physically challenging trails or areas with
limited seating).

In Portsmouth, participants in the Paulsgrove council estate (one of the most deprived areas
of the city) spoke about how they remembered when the estate was once coastal. This was
before the building of the M27 motorway in the 1970s which completely cut the estate off
from the sea. There is no longer accessible coast from Paulsgrove and people spoke of
having to go to the seafront 8 miles away, entailing multiple bus rides. Terry describes his
frustration with the change of bus routes that make a journey to the seafront more
complicated;

"In the bus company's wisdom they've decided to change all the bus routes, especially in our
area. If I wanted to go down to the seafront I would have to catch three busses.... the older
generation here is so used to going out on the bus, maybe go down to Southsea. They can't
no more because there's no bus" (Terry, male, Portsmouth, age: 60s).

Haneka expressed concern about the use of dangerous stairs to get access to a beach:

"The stairs down there is really dangerous. The path is completely overgrown... you can't go
down to the beach, come back and have a picnic, because you can't get to the beach... I'd
love to take my kids down there, but you just can’t get down there, it’s too dangerous”  
(Haneka, female, Durham Coast, age:20s).

Access to the coast is also linked to personal mobility and in some cases, this becomes harder through life’s journey. Although Portsmouth is a coastal city, for people with limited mobility, even living a short distance from the seafront can be a significant barrier to access. One interviewee with impaired mobility and poor health talked about the importance of the coast for his mental and physical health. For him, being able to drive down to the pier on his mobility scooter was a source of vitality and social engagement.

The multiple narratives around access to the coast challenges the idea that living in a coastal place means users are satisfied with their access to the coastline. Depending on personal circumstances, even relatively small distances (from a few miles to a few meters) can create significant barriers to use if the appropriate facilities are not in place. While coastal places are often lauded for their naturalness and the ecosystem services they provide, accessibility barriers may still exist for people living near or actually on the coast. Physical safety while on the coast was also frequently raised as an issue, especially along the Durham Coast, where the rugged coastal topography presents safety risks.

Discussion

Relational values can be used to frame understanding about why environments are important to people as opposed to trying to resolve everything into the dichotomy of instrumental and intrinsic value, even if these value orientations still have salience in some circumstances (Klain et al 2017; Chan et al 2016; Knippenberg et al., 2018; Stålhammar and Thorén 2019). Relational values offer the opportunity to have open ended conversations with people about why environments matter (Tadaki et al 2017), and in this study the community voice method provided the approach to enable conversations with interviewees but also subsequently with others via focus groups. The previous section has presented results across four themes with each theme relating to different dimensions of relationality (Table 1).

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<th>Theme</th>
<th>Relational value dimensions</th>
<th>Insight</th>
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<tr>
<td>Well-being</td>
<td>Health Benefits</td>
<td>Multiple dimensions of value were articulated that referred to relationships with the coast and a sense of wellbeing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Aesthetic</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Connections to others</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Restorative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coastal features</td>
<td>Contemplation</td>
<td>Challenging an ontological dualism, relationality facilitates understanding coastal features that are human / nature hybrids</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Tranquillity</td>
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<td>Leisure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sense of place</td>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>Relational values help to describe the bonds people make to place. Many of which are deep heartfelt responses, not captured in an intrinsic / instrumental dichotomy</td>
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<td>Attachment</td>
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Across both case study locations everyone interviewed spoke of strong connections to the coast and articulated many different reasons why coastal places were important to them. Relational values help to understand these narratives and can provide leverage points for policy development (Mattijssen et al., 2020). In our study the deep, often emotional connections people described emerge out of relationships with the coast that in some cases have been developing since childhood. While instrumental and intrinsic ideas of value help to explain some aspects of valuing nature (Klain et al., 2017), they fail to encapsulate how value develops from personal connections being made with both human and non-human elements of coastal places. Many of the values described were not expressed in a language of valuing something because of its utility (instrumental value) or because of value in itself (intrinsic value). Rather they were rich descriptions of how places made the interviewees feel and how ongoing connection was important for them and how the coast created a sense of well-being. The multiple dimensions of relational values (table 1) help to explain the range of reasons coastal places were important for people from a well-being perspective. This is important, as Bell et al (2015) suggest ‘there is a need for greater acknowledgement of people's emotional, deeply embodied and often shared connections to the coast within coastal management policy and practice” (pg. 56). The CVM in our study provides a practical approach for creating deliberative spaces to explore those deeply embodied and shared connections.

In both study locations, connections with the coast are strong and tied up with a sense of identity, belonging, love and care that people feel towards the coast, even in situations where people are less able to physically interact with it. Understanding a sense of relationality with diverse coastal features is a departure from thinking about nature and people in a dualistic sense, as in the dominant framing of ecosystem services as nature providing benefits to people. A relational frame is a way to articulate the importance of features that are both natural and artificial. Thinking about relational values is important in terms of methods (the mutual consideration of social and natural entities) but also as a foundational ontology that promotes process and heterogenous associations (West et al., 2018). The coastlines in Portsmouth and Durham County are a hybrid mixture of natural and societal elements and relational values help to frame an understanding of the importance of the coast that recognises this ontological relationality, rather than forcing the use of a dualism.

The depth of feelings towards the coast, the powerful emotional responses that people have for these spaces is evident through the rich narratives presented. The exact causal pathways between coasts and well-being benefits have limited discussion in the literature but are interesting to consider here as it is clear that both direct and indirect connections to the coast drive well-being and even where participants were unable to physically connect to...
the coast, they were still able to derive benefits through their memories and deep sense of
identity, sense of place and belonging to the coast. Marselle et al (2021) offer a conceptual
framework which is useful here and suggests that exposure and experiences with natural
features are important pathways to well-being. Through the narratives presented in this
study, it is clear that these pathways play out differently for different people and exposure for
some may not always be possible. However, our study illustrates that experience of coastal
features does not necessarily need to occur in the present for overall well-being effects to be
felt.

For many participants, their relationship and sense of place and belonging to the coast
remains firm and values appear to have become ‘time-deepened’ through memories, despite
profound changes in environmental, socio-cultural or individual contexts in the study
locations. For others, the lack of direct contact or exposure to the coast because of access
or mobility issues is rather more problematic as interactions are often enabled by facilities
such as paths, seating or car parking. The infrastructure facilitates the ability of the
environment to provide benefits to people. Participants spoke about the lack of, or difficulty
with, transport options as well as the safety concerns about paths and steepness of steps in
reaching the coast. Many access issues are much harder to overcome for those with low
incomes and this raises the issue of environmental justice and differential patterns of access
of natural resources (Mullin et al., 2018). This concept provides a useful perspective for
considering the implications of differential access to environments and a firm starting point
for coastal management.

Studies indicate that deprived communities are exposed to much greater levels of
environmental ‘harms’ including pollution, fly-tipping, neighbourhood noise etc and that they
enjoy poorer access to environmental goods and services (Lucas et al., 2004). The
cumulative impacts for communities with both poor local environments and restricted access
to nature rich places has a detrimental effect on quality of life for members of those
communities which often tend to be minority and economically disadvantaged groups (Mullin
et al, 2018). However, research also suggests that the negative health effects of socio-
economic deprivation might be mitigated to an extent by proximity to the coast (Wheeler et
al.,2012). While the research is not conclusive, the stress-reducing value of the sea is
thought to be an important factor, although Lucas et al (2004) remind us that issues are not
only about proximity but also about access and other diverse issues raised by study
participants.

These issues are all important in considering policy responses to ensure greater access to
nature is assured even for those in more deprived areas. This is critical because developing
natural spaces alone won’t be enough to address the complex underlying causes and issues
underpinning the unequal distribution of ecosystem services which affects certain groups.
Greater attention should therefore be paid to improving the pathways to well-being, through
targeted interventions to help address the inequalities in access to coastal spaces.
Connecting more people to nature in a place may not only lead to greater individual well-
being but also to the development of social capital, community cohesion and a sense of
belonging which may be associated with pro-environmental behaviours through developing
more of a sense of care and love (West et al, 2018). In this regard, Boyd et al (2018) point
out that ‘a richer understanding of the values, cognitions and emotions experienced by
diverse populations is needed during the landscape design process to optimise societal level benefits’ (p104).

For policy, insights on relational connections through time are important in developing understandings of the need for conservation strategies that sit hand in hand with considerations of access to nature and human health and well-being, in one integrated framework. CVM holds great promise for exploring the diversity of values at the coast and for facilitating a route into decision making processes. It can help to redress the imbalances which often occurs when those who are in some way marginalised fail to get their voices heard. CVM builds on an interviewing approach by creating a film that allows all interview participants to be included in a curated narrative that underpins a shared deliberative space and facilitates stakeholder engagement in ongoing civic dialogue (Cumming & Norwood 2012). The experience of running CVM projects is that using a film as a starting point for a workshop helps to foster tolerance and empathy amongst the participants. It effectively demonstrates the ability to transcend people’s usual capacity to take part in consultation processes. This was highlighted through the participants interviews as a particularly important aspect of the research, such that people felt they were actively involved and ‘being heard’ and ‘I think people do feel like they’ve made an impact’ (female participant at the Durham coast).

Aligned with the interests of environmental justice, place-based and values-led approaches to managing the natural environment for wellbeing presents huge opportunities. People’s use of and connection to the natural environment for example, is not only linked with physical features but also with a host of attitudinal, behavioural and experiential factors as well as the proximity, quality and quantity of natural capital. Therefore, simply providing greater access to the coast in itself may not necessarily increase levels of use and access to benefits amongst less engaged audiences and much more needs to be done to understand and address the nuance in reasons for not engaging with the coast. There are clear opportunities to promote emphasis on how experiences and understanding relational values at the coast can be part of the regeneration and health agenda in seaside towns, particularly in lower income areas.

Conclusion

In relation to the coastal and marine environment, global trends show a decline in the quality of coastal regions (Garmendia et al., 2010) and in the UK, a range of historic and current pressures are recognised to have resulted in the degradation of the marine environment (Ranger et al., 2016). Despite all the challenges, coastal places have a special quality that can have positive implications for well-being and understanding the coast as a therapeutic landscape challenges marine conservation discourses that focus solely on altruistic perspectives (Kelly, 2018). This paper has reported on how CVM was used with a range of diverse people to elicit why the coast was important to them where they live. Their responses are reported under four themes: Wellbeing; Coastal features; Sense of Place; Access and safety. Each of these themes explores different ways that values are rooted in relational encounters between people and the coast. According to Chan et al., (2016), how people relate to nature, and with others, through preferences, principles and virtues are relational values. Relational values can provide a frame to understand why nature is important and how human well-being can be derived from relationships with nature rather
than just delivered as benefits as suggested in much of the ecosystem services literature (Jax et al., 2018). In the context of this research, relational values, sense of place and environmental justice have helped make visible the myriad connections people make with coastal places and why particular places are important to them. The process of conducting CVM has the potential to create new dialogues where the public and policy makers can reflect on why coastal environments are important. CVM is a particularly powerful approach as it can be used to help make visible relational values not easily seen using quantitative, economic approaches.

Alongside the elicitation of coastal values, it is important to be able to tell new and emerging stories of people’s engagement with the coast. This research reflects the potential for the CVM films to validate plural and potentially conflicting views and generate an atmosphere which is conducive to social learning (Ranger et al., 2016). The CVM films provided a means for the voices of diverse people to be heard and begins to build a picture of communities that care deeply about their local coastal environment. The deep connection that many interviewees expressed towards the coast is particularly interesting given the study targeted groups who would perhaps not normally be identified as interested in nature or wildlife. While it is impossible to discount any form of self-selection, the study overwhelmingly demonstrated that people care deeply for the coast even in situations where they have limited opportunities to access it. Environmental justice helps highlight how privilege exists to make access to the coast and its wellbeing benefits more difficult to some groups of people. It is important that policy makers understand that some deeply felt relational values at the coast are not easily quantified and require subtle, nuanced approaches like CVM to help make them visible. An important challenge is how to ensure the relational values revealed by such approaches are able to be included in decision making and policy development. This opens up questions about the ability of institutions to utilise qualitative, creative approaches that describe relational values of the coast.
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Acknowledgements: This research was funded by Natural England under the Living Coast
Project (reference Proj_23581). Our thanks go to all the participants who took part in the
study and agreed to be filmed and to the individuals and organisations that helped in
recruiting and providing community contacts. Special thanks to Dr Victoria Leslie, who
helped with filming and interviewee recruitment in Portsmouth, as well as Niall Benson
(Durham Heritage Coast Officer) and the staff at Seascapes who were instrumental in linking
the team with participants on the Durham Coast. Finally, thanks to Sarah Manning for her
role as Living Coast Project Manager.

Data availability statement: Our ethics agreement for the Living Coast project does
not allow us to make the raw data available in a public archive. Our permissions
clearly state that the data will be used as part of the Living Coast project but we do
not say that data will be made available in a public archive. The Community Voice
Method is involved with filming people and making those films publicly available so
the process does not allow for confidentiality or anonymity. As we are hearing some
of the words spoken by people in the film this means that any subsequent
anonymised transcript could still be identified to a particular person. It is therefore not
appropriate to place data in a public archive unless consent is explicitly provided.

Conflicts of interest: No conflicts of interest

Authors’ Contributions: Dr Acott led the Portsmouth interviews and filming and was the
lead writer for the paper. Dr Willis and Dr O’Neil were the lead researchers from Natural
England, supervising and guiding the main research aim, objectives and outcomes. Ranger
led the editing of the CVM films. Dr Richardson led the Durham interviews and filming. Dr
Cumming led the analysis of the interviews. Dr Ford assisted with the Portsmouth filming
and the design of the interview guide.
LIVING COAST INTERVIEW GUIDE

Checklist for Interviewer:

- Briefly introduce yourself and the project.
- Consent: Go over the consent form with the interviewee and obtain consent. Give the interviewee a copy of the consent form to keep. Retain the signed part of the consent form.
- Ensure interviewee is comfortable and go through interview protocol (i.e. no swearing; pre-record so not dependent on first take; clearly state if they do not want us to use one of their answers; interview can be stopped at any time; frame the answer with the content of the question).
- Questions in BOLD are anchor questions. Prioritise these if you don’t have time to ask all the questions.

Ensure camera is switched on, shot is set up and camera is recording.

Check sound levels by asking interviewee to say their name and what they had for breakfast.

START INTERVIEW

Interviewer says their own name, the date and location of the interview.

1. Background

   1 a) Please could you say and spell your name (if possible) - if not deal with this using consent form

   1 b) How old are you and how long have you lived in the Durham/Solent area? Depending on answer might want to prompt here e.g. if recent, why did you move here?

   1 c) Are you in employment/education at the moment?

      (if employed) What do you do for a living?

      (if a student) Where do you go to school? (If relevant) what are you studying?

      (if retired) What did you do for a living?
2. Sense of place (wider setting)

2 a) What is it like living here? How would you describe the community here?

2 b) Is there anything you particularly value about the Durham/ Solent Area? What do you like/dislike about living/being here? What are interesting or special things about this place?

Do you spend much time outside here? If so, where and doing what?

3. Sense of place/place identity (Coast & sea - general)

3 a) What do the words ‘coast’ and ‘sea’ make you think of?

3 b) How would you describe your relationship with the coast and sea around here? Do you feel connected or attached to it in any way? Is the coast or sea important / unimportant to you?

3 c) Are there any particular memories that come to mind when you think about the coast and sea around here?

4. Preference – characteristics of preferred place (what features would incentivise visits)

4 a) Are there any particular places that come to mind when you think about the coast and sea around here? If so, what is it about those places that brings them to mind?

If you had your pick, are there particular types of places by the coast and sea near here that you like to visit? Are there other places by the coast and sea that you prefer to visit? What makes them different from places around here?
5. Access and (perceived) benefits /disbenefits (coast path specific)

5 a) How much time do you spend by the coast and sea near here? What do you usually do when you are by the coast and sea here?

5 b) Do you visit the coast around here as often as you would like? Ask for explanation of positive or negative responses. What would make you want to visit more?

5 c) How would you describe your nearest or most accessible bit of coast or sea? What's there? What does it look like? Is there any wildlife there? Do you visit there?

5 d) If not specified: Do you ever go for walks by the coast / access coastal paths? If so, where/which ones?

5 e i) How do you feel when you are using a coastal path (walking / other types of access)?

5 i) Is there any reason why you don’t access coastal paths (more often)?

5 e ii) How do you feel after you have spent time there?

5 f i) What do you think the coast path around here to be like?

5 e iii) Does spending time on coastal path have any impact, either positive or negative on your frame of mind or mental wellbeing? How/why?

5 f ii) Do you think you could benefit from accessing the coast path more? How (or why not?)

5 e iv) Does spending time on the coastal paths impact upon your physical health in any way?

5 f iv) Do you think other people benefit from the coast path more than you do? Or in different ways?

5 e v) Is there anything you dislike about coastal paths around here?

5 e vi) Would you like to access coastal paths more often than you do? If yes, why is that?
6. The England Coast Path

6 a) Before we contacted you about this interview, did you know anything about the England Coast Path? Do you know if any of the bits of coast you access are part of the ECP?

“Read short para describing vision for the ECP once complete”

A new England Coast Path is being created around the entire coast of England. When it is complete it will be the longest waymarked coastal path in the world at over 2,700 miles, giving hikers, walkers and joggers new public access rights to foreshore, beaches, dunes and cliffs. The new path will provide a great opportunity for people to experience and enjoy all of our wonderful coastal landscapes and to get closer to nature.

6 b) What do you think about this proposal? Will you access the resource? Will the community access the resource? Will it bring benefits? What sort of benefits? Do you think that the local community will have a role in looking after the path and the coastline along it?

6 c) Imagine 10 years from now and the ECP has been open for some time. In an ideal world, what would you like the path and the local coastline to be like? What changes would you like for the local community?

6 d) What do you imagine it will actually be like?

Thank you. Was there anything else you wanted to say or ask about your local coastline and the project?

Stop recording and switch off camera.
Plain Language Summary

Using a video and interview method to understand people's connections to the coast

Being in nature generally is good for us but there seems to be something particularly special about the coast for our health and well-being. In this research, we wanted to find ways to capture what the coast means to people in their own words. We used an approach called Community Voice Method which films people being interviewed. The interviews are analysed and a short film made that represents all the key themes discussed. The film is then used in workshops to start a conversation amongst the original interviewees and a broader collection of people.

In this study we interviewed a total of 41 participants who ranged from people using the coast regularly to more limited users across two case study areas in Portsmouth and along the Durham coast. In both places people's relationship to the coast was important to them and endured through time. For some, they love the coast because they can get out and about and enjoy the diverse places coastal environments offer. For others, attachment to the sea happened through memories rooted in deep heartfelt emotions of past experiences. The people interviewed expressed a range of important issues including a sense of belonging to the coast, the features of the coast that were important to them, difficulties of access and the well-being benefits they felt.

The films that were made provided a way for the voices of different people to be heard and helps to show how communities care deeply about their local coastal environment. The deep connection that many interviewees expressed towards the coast is particularly interesting given the study targeted groups who would perhaps not normally be identified as interested in nature or wildlife. An important challenge is how to ensure the voices revealed by approaches like the community voice method are able to be included in decision making and policy development. This opens up questions about the ability of institutions to utilise qualitative, creative approaches that describe different ways people feel the coast is important.