ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Impact of Nature-Based Tourism on Psychological Well-Being: A Comprehensive Review

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ABSTRACT

Nature-based tourism, encompassing activities such as forest bathing, mountain hiking, and wildlife safaris, has gained prominence due to its perceived psychological benefits. This review explores the impact of various types of nature-based tourism on psychological well-being, focusing on stress reduction, overall mental health improvement, and enhanced psychological well-being. The review includes detailed case studies on wildlife safaris and forest bathing. The review synthesizes findings from recent literature, highlighting key theories such as Attention Restoration Theory (ART), Stress Reduction Theory (SRT), and the Biophilia Hypothesis, which explain the mechanisms through which nature-based experiences influence mental health.Additionally, the review covers various types of nature-based tourism, including beach tourism, birdwatching, and kayaking, and their associated psychological benefits. By integrating theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence, this review underscores the importance of nature-based tourism in promoting mental health. The findings suggest that nature-based experiences offer substantial benefits for stress reduction, mood enhancement, and life satisfaction. Practical implications for stakeholders include the promotion of nature-based tourism as a strategy for mental health improvement and the need for continued research to explore and expand upon these benefits.

Keywords: Nature-based tourism, psychological well-being, stress reduction, forest bathing, wildlife safaris, Biophilia Hypothesis

ISSN: **2582-6891**

INTRODUCTION

Nature-based tourism involves travel to natural environments with the intention of enjoying and experiencing nature. It includes activities such as hiking, wildlife viewing, forest bathing, and eco-tourism. This sector has grown significantly in recent years, driven by increasing public awareness of environmental issues and a desire for more authentic, sustainable travel experiences. Nature-based tourism emerged as a significant segment of the travel industry in the late 20th century. Its roots can be traced back to traditional outdoor recreation and adventure tourism, but it has since evolved into a more eco-centric form of travel that emphasizes conservation and sustainable practices. In the 1980s and 1990s, there was a growing recognition of the environmental impact of tourism, which led to the development of eco-tourism principles that prioritize minimal impact on natural areas, support for conservation efforts, and benefits to local communities (Buckley, 2020; Higham, Cohen, & Cavaliere, 2014). The evolution of nature-based tourism was further influenced by the global environmental movement and the increased establishment of protected areas and national parks. Governments and organizations worldwide began to see the value of promoting tourism that could help fund conservation initiatives while providing economic benefits to local communities. This period also saw the rise of wildlife tourism,

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How to cite: Sailesh.B.,(2024). Impact of Nature-Based Tourism on Psychological Well-Being: A Comprehensive Review. Journal of Psychosocial Wellbeing 5(2):24-39

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55242/JPSW.2024.5204

Received: 04.11.2024 **Revised:** 14.11.2024
Accepted: 17.10.2024 **Published:** 17.12.2024

where visitors engage in activities like bird watching, safaris, and marine wildlife tours, all designed to be low-impact and educational (Higham et al., 2014). The demand for nature-based tourism has surged in recent years, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. With restrictions on international travel and a heightened awareness of health risks associated with crowded places, many travelers have turned to outdoor and nature-based destinations as safer alternatives. This shift has brought about several notable trends:

Increased Interest in Local and Regional Travel

Many travelers have opted for destinations closer to home, exploring local parks, nature reserves, and rural areas. This has helped reduce the carbon footprint associated with long-haul flights and has promoted the discovery and appreciation of nearby natural attractions (Spenceley, 2021).

Sustainable Tourism Practices

There is a growing emphasis on sustainability within the nature-based tourism sector. Travelers are increasingly seeking eco-friendly accommodations, tours that support conservation efforts, and activities that minimize environmental impact. This trend is driven by a more environmentally conscious consumer base that values responsible travel practices (Buckley, 2020).

Health and Wellness Tourism

The pandemic has also underscored the importance of mental and physical well-being. Nature-based tourism offers numerous health benefits, including stress reduction, improved mood, and enhanced physical fitness. Activities like forest bathing (Shinrin-yoku), which involves immersive walks in forests, have gained popularity for their therapeutic effects (Spenceley, 2021).

Technology and Innovation

Advances in technology have enhanced the nature-based tourism experience. Mobile apps, virtual tours, and augmented reality experiences allow tourists to learn more about the natural environments they visit, even from a distance. These tools also help in managing visitor flow and minimizing impact on fragile ecosystems (Spenceley, 2021).

Community Engagement and Inclusivity

Modern nature-based tourism emphasizes the involvement of local communities in tourism planning and management. This approach ensures that tourism benefits are distributed fairly and that local cultures and traditions are respected and preserved. Community-based tourism initiatives often provide authentic experiences that enrich both visitors and hosts (Higham et al., 2014).

The combination of these trends reflects a broader shift towards more thoughtful and responsible tourism practices. As the nature-based tourism sector continues to grow, it holds the potential to contribute significantly to conservation efforts, community development, and the overall well-being of both tourists and local populations.

Importance of Studying Its Impact on Psychological Well-Being

Understanding the impact of nature-based tourism on psychological well-being is crucial for several reasons:

Mental Health Benefits

Numerous studies have shown that exposure to natural environments can significantly improve mental health. Benefits include reduced stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as enhanced mood and cognitive function. For instance, Bratman, Hamilton, and Daily (2012) found that time spent in natural settings can lead to measurable reductions in stress hormones and improvements in mood. Similarly, Capaldi, Dopko, and Zelenski (2014) conducted a meta-analysis revealing a strong correlation between nature connectedness and happiness. Tyrväinen et al. (2014) demonstrated that urban green environments contribute to significant stress relief. Recent research continues to support these findings. A study by White et al. (2019) highlighted that even short durations (e.g., 120 minutes per week) spent in nature are associated with better health and well-being. Moreover, a systematic review by Twohig-Bennett and Jones (2018) confirmed that green space exposure is linked to a wide range of health benefits, including reduced risks of cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes, and mental health disorders.

Policy Implications

Insights from this research can inform public health policies and tourism development strategies, encouraging the integration of mental health considerations into planning and promotion of nature-based tourism. Hartig, Mitchell, de Vries, and Frumkin (2014) emphasized the need for urban planners and public health officials to consider green spaces as essential infrastructure for public health. Policies that promote access to natural environments can help alleviate mental health issues and reduce healthcare costs.Recent policy developments reflect this understanding. For instance, the European Union's Green Infrastructure Strategy aims to promote the integration of green spaces in urban areas to improve citizens' quality of life (European Commission, 2019). In the U.S., the National Park Service has launched initiatives like "Healthy Parks Healthy People" to highlight the health benefits of spending time in national parks (National Park Service, 2020).

Sustainable Development

By demonstrating the mental health benefits of nature-based tourism, stakeholders can advocate for the protection and sustainable management of natural areas, balancing conservation with tourism development. Zhang et al. (2014) argued that tourists' involvement and place attachment are crucial for fostering environmentally responsible behaviors, which can support sustainable tourism practices. Recent studies emphasize the role of nature-based tourism in achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs). For example, Maller et al. (2019) discussed how nature-based tourism can contribute to SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) by providing mental health benefits and promoting physical activity. Additionally, a report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2021) highlighted the potential of nature-based tourism to support biodiversity conservation and community development, aligning with SDG 15 (Life on Land).

Objectives of this review

(i)to explore how different types of nature-based tourism (e.g., forest bathing, mountain hiking) influence psychological well-being.

The review will delve into various forms of nature-based tourism and their specific impacts on psychological health. For example, forest bathing (Shinrin-yoku) has been shown to lower cortisol levels and reduce stress, while activities like mountain hiking can enhance mood and improve mental clarity through physical exercise and exposure to natural beauty (Li, 2018; Lee, 2017).

(ii) to investigate the mechanisms by which nature-based experiences contribute to stress reduction and overall mental health.

Understanding the underlying mechanisms is crucial for determining how and why nature-based tourism is beneficial. This includes examining theories such as Attention Restoration Theory (ART) and Stress Reduction Theory (SRT), which suggest that natural environments can restore depleted cognitive resources and reduce stress through sensory engagement and aesthetic appreciation (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Ulrich et al., 1991).

(iii) to identify gaps in the current literature and suggest areas for future research.

By reviewing the existing body of research, the review will highlight areas where further study is needed. This might include longitudinal studies to assess long-term benefits, research on diverse populations to ensure inclusivity, and investigations into the economic and social aspects of nature-based tourism's impact on well-being (Beery et al., 2020).

Scope of the study

This review covers peer-reviewed articles, books, and credible reports published in the last decade. Focusing on recent literature ensures that the review reflects the latest findings and developments in the field. This approach also allows for the inclusion of new methodologies and emerging trends in nature-based tourism and psychological well-being (Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018; White et al., 2019).It includes studies from various geographical regions to provide a comprehensive understanding. Nature-based tourism occurs worldwide, and its impacts can vary based on cultural, environmental, and socioeconomic contexts. By including studies from diverse regions, the review aims to provide a holistic view of the global implications and benefits of nature-based tourism (Lee & Lee, 2017;

Spenceley, 2021).Both quantitative and qualitative research is considered to capture diverse perspectives and methodologies. Incorporating both types of research allows for a more nuanced understanding of the topic. Quantitative studies provide statistical evidence of the benefits of nature-based tourism, while qualitative studies offer insights into personal experiences and subjective well-being (Capaldi et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2014).

Literature Review

Overview of Existing Research on Nature-Based Tourism and Psychological Well-Being

Nature-based tourism, defined as travel to natural environments for the purpose of experiencing and enjoying nature, has been extensively studied for its potential psychological benefits. Recent literature consistently demonstrates the positive impact of nature-based tourism on mental health, highlighting various mechanisms through which these benefits are realized.

Positive Effects on Mental Health

Studies have shown that nature-based tourism can lead to significant improvements in mental health outcomes, such as reduced stress, anxiety, and depression. Bratman et al. (2019) provided a comprehensive review of the health benefits associated with nature exposure, concluding that regular engagement with natural environments can lead to improved mood, cognitive function, and overall well-being. Similarly, a meta-analysis by McMahan and Estes (2015) found robust evidence supporting the psychological benefits of nature-based activities, including enhanced emotional well-being and reduced negative affect.

Types of Nature-Based Tourism and Their Specific Benefits

Different forms of nature-based tourism, such as forest bathing (Shinrin-yoku), mountain hiking, and wildlife viewing, have been examined for their unique contributions to psychological well-being. Forest bathing, for example, has been associated with lower cortisol levels and improved immune function, indicating reduced stress and enhanced health (Li, 2018). Mountain hiking has been linked to improved mood and mental clarity through physical exercise and exposure to scenic beauty (Eigenschenk et al., 2019). Wildlife viewing, another popular form of nature-based tourism, has been shown to foster a sense of connection with nature, leading to increased life satisfaction and reduced feelings of loneliness (Curtin, 2009).

Recent Trends and Emerging Issues

The COVID-19 pandemic has further underscored the importance of nature-based tourism for mental health. With lockdowns and social distancing measures in place, many people turned to natural spaces for respite and relaxation. This shift has been documented in recent studies, which highlight increased participation in outdoor activities and a growing appreciation for nature's therapeutic benefits (Slater et al., 2020). Moreover, the pandemic has accelerated discussions on sustainable tourism practices and the need to balance tourism development with the conservation of natural resources (Spenceley, 2021).

Key Theories and Concepts

Several theories provide a framework for understanding the psychological benefits of nature-based tourism. Among the most influential are Attention Restoration Theory (ART) and Stress Reduction Theory (SRT).

(i) Attention Restoration Theory (ART):

Developed by Kaplan and Kaplan (1989), ART posits that natural environments have restorative properties that can help replenish depleted cognitive resources. According to this theory, urban environments often demand focused attention, leading to cognitive fatigue. In contrast, natural environments engage what is known as "soft fascination," allowing individuals to relax and recover their attentional capacity. Berman, Jonides, and Kaplan (2008) found that participants who took walks in natural settings performed better on cognitive tasks compared to those who walked in urban environments, supporting ART's claims.

(ii) Stress Reduction Theory (SRT):

SRT, proposed by Ulrich et al. (1991), suggests that natural environments can elicit an automatic, positive affective response that helps reduce stress. This theory is based on the premise that humans have an innate affinity for nature, a concept known

as biophilia. Ulrich's research demonstrated that even brief exposure to natural scenes can lower physiological markers of stress, such as heart rate and blood pressure. More recent studies have corroborated these findings, showing that nature exposure can significantly reduce psychological stress and improve overall well-being (Bowler et al., 2010).

(iii) Biophilia Hypothesis:

Introduced by Wilson (1984), the biophilia hypothesis suggests that humans possess an inherent tendency to seek connections with nature and other forms of life. This evolutionary perspective argues that because humans evolved in natural environments, we are naturally inclined to find solace and comfort in nature. The hypothesis has been supported by numerous studies demonstrating that natural settings can evoke positive emotions, reduce stress, and enhance overall health (Kellert & Wilson, 1993).

(iv) Restorative Environment Theory:

Proposed by Hartig et al. (1991), this theory emphasizes the role of natural environments in facilitating recovery from stress and mental fatigue. Restorative environments are characterized by four key properties: being away (a sense of escape from routine), extent (a sense of immersion in a coherent environment), fascination (the ability to effortlessly capture attention), and compatibility (a match between the environment and one's purposes). Empirical studies have shown that environments with these properties can lead to substantial improvements in psychological well-being (Hartig et al., 2003).

Types of Nature-Based Tourism:

(i) Forest Bathing (Shinrin-Yoku):

Forest bathing, or Shinrin-Yoku, is a Japanese practice that involves immersing oneself in a forest environment to enhance physical and mental health. The term "Shinrin-Yoku" was coined in 1982 by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, and it translates to "taking in the forest atmosphere" or "forest bathing" (Li, 2018). Forest bathing is not about rigorous exercise but rather about slowing down and engaging the senses to connect with nature. Participants typically walk slowly through the forest, take in the sights, sounds, and smells, and may practice mindfulness or meditative activities during their time in nature (Park et al., 2010).

Psychological Benefits:

Research has shown that forest bathing has numerous psychological benefits. Studies have found that spending time in forest environments can significantly reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, while also enhancing mood and cognitive function. One study by Li et al. (2010) found that participants who engaged in forest bathing had lower levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, compared to those who spent time in urban environments. Another study by Park et al. (2010) demonstrated that forest bathing can improve mood and reduce feelings of anxiety and depression. Additionally, forest bathing has been associated with improved immune function, which can further contribute to overall well-being. Li (2018) found that spending time in forests can increase the activity of natural killer (NK) cells, which play a crucial role in the body's immune response.

(ii) Mountain Hiking:

Mountain hiking involves walking through mountainous terrain, often on designated trails, to experience the natural beauty and physical challenge of the environment. Hiking can vary in difficulty from easy walks to strenuous climbs, making it accessible to a wide range of people (Eigenschenk et al., 2019).

Mental Health Benefits:

Mountain hiking offers numerous mental health benefits. The physical activity involved in hiking helps release endorphins, which are natural mood enhancers. Studies have shown that regular physical activity, such as hiking, can reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, improve mood, and increase overall mental well-being (Eigenschenk et al., 2019; Teas et al., 2020).In addition to the physical benefits, the natural environment of mountains provides unique psychological advantages. The scenic views, fresh air, and sense of accomplishment from reaching a summit can boost self-esteem and provide a sense of achievement. A study by Hansmann, Hug, and Seeland (2007) found that hiking in natural environments can lead to improved mood and reduced stress levels. The combination of physical exercise and exposure to nature makes mountain hiking a powerful tool for enhancing mental health. Hiking in natural environments has been shown to

improve cognitive function, reduce rumination, and enhance overall well-being (Bratman et al., 2015).

(iii)Other Types of Nature-Based Tourism:

Beach Tourism-

Beach tourism involves visiting coastal areas to enjoy activities such as swimming, sunbathing, and beachcombing. The soothing sound of waves, the feel of sand underfoot, and the sight of the vast ocean can have a calming effect on the mind. Studies have shown that spending time near water, also known as "blue space," can reduce stress, improve mood, and enhance overall well-being (White et al., 2020). The beach environment provides opportunities for relaxation, physical activity, and social interaction, all of which contribute to mental health.

Wildlife Safaris:

Wildlife safaris involve traveling to natural habitats to observe and interact with wildlife in their natural environment. This type of tourism is particularly popular in regions like Africa, where visitors can see animals such as lions, elephants, and rhinos in the wild. The experience of seeing wildlife up close can evoke awe and wonder, which have been associated with positive psychological effects. Curtin (2009) found that wildlife tourism can increase feelings of connectedness to nature, enhance life satisfaction, and reduce stress. Additionally, the educational aspect of wildlife safaris can promote environmental awareness and conservation efforts.

Birdwatching:

Birdwatching allows individuals to engage with nature in a peaceful and focused manner, which can reduce stress and increase mindfulness. Birdwatching involves observing birds in their natural habitats, often requiring patience and quiet observation, which can be meditative and stress-relieving (Dallimer et al., 2012). The activity also promotes a deeper connection to nature and can enhance cognitive function and mood.

Kayaking and Canoeing:

Kayaking and canoeing provide opportunities to connect with water-based environments while engaging in physical activity. Paddling through rivers, lakes, or coastal areas offers a unique perspective of nature and can enhance feelings of tranquility and relaxation. Studies have shown that water-based activities can reduce stress and improve mood, contributing to overall mental health (Loureiro & Gonçalves, 2014).

Camping: Camping involves spending extended periods in natural environments, often in tents or cabins, away from urban settings. This immersive experience allows individuals to disconnect from technology and daily stressors, fostering a deeper connection with nature. Research has indicated that camping can improve sleep, reduce stress, and enhance overall well-being by promoting relaxation and mindfulness (McEwan et al., 2019).

Cycling: Cycling in natural environments combines physical exercise with the benefits of nature exposure. Whether on mountain trails, forest paths, or coastal routes, cycling can enhance mental health by reducing stress and anxiety, improving mood, and promoting a sense of freedom and adventure. Studies have highlighted the positive effects of cycling on mental health, particularly when done in natural settings (Gatersleben & Andrews, 2013).

Fishing: Fishing is a nature-based activity that involves catching fish in natural water bodies like rivers, lakes, and oceans. The activity is often associated with relaxation, patience, and mindfulness, making it beneficial for mental health. Fishing can reduce stress, enhance mood, and provide a sense of accomplishment. Research has shown that fishing can improve overall well-being by promoting relaxation and social interaction (Pawson et al., 2008).

Impact on Psychological Well-Being:

Stress Reduction-

Stress reduction is one of the most significant psychological benefits of nature-based tourism. Various studies have demonstrated that spending time in natural environments can lower stress levels, as evidenced by physiological markers such as cortisol levels and heart rate.

Cortisol Levels:

Cortisol is a hormone released in response to stress. Elevated cortisol levels are associated with chronic stress and various health problems. Research has shown that exposure to nature can reduce cortisol levels significantly. For instance, a study by Li et al. (2010) found that participants who engaged in forest bathing had lower cortisol levels compared to those who spent time in urban environments. This reduction in cortisol indicates a decrease in stress.

Heart Rate:

Heart rate is another important indicator of stress. A lower heart rate typically signifies a state of relaxation. Park et al. (2010) conducted a study that showed participants who spent time in forest environments had significantly lower heart rates compared to those in urban settings. This suggests that nature-based activities can promote relaxation and reduce physiological stress.

Other Stress Indicators:

Other physiological and psychological indicators, such as blood pressure and self-reported stress levels, have also been shown to improve with exposure to natural environments. A study by Song et al. (2016) reported that participants who walked in forests experienced lower blood pressure and reported feeling less stressed compared to those who walked in urban areas. These findings underscore the stress-reducing effects of nature-based tourism.

Overall Mental Health:

Nature-based tourism has been shown to have profound effects on overall mental health, particularly in reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Reduction in Anxiety:

Exposure to natural environments has been linked to significant reductions in anxiety symptoms. A study by Bratman et al. (2015) found that participants who walked in natural settings reported lower levels of anxiety and exhibited reduced activity in the subgenual prefrontal cortex, a brain region associated with anxiety. This suggests that nature-based tourism can help alleviate anxiety by promoting relaxation and mental clarity.

Reduction in Depression:

Similarly, spending time in nature has been associated with reductions in depression symptoms. A meta-analysis by Berman et al. (2012) concluded that nature exposure leads to significant improvements in mood and reductions in depressive symptoms. The natural environment provides a calming and restorative setting that can counteract the negative thoughts and feelings associated with depression.

Enhanced Psychological Well-Being-In addition to reducing stress and alleviating anxiety and depression, nature-based tourism enhances overall psychological well-being.n

Positive Affect:

Positive affect refers to the experience of positive emotions such as joy, enthusiasm, and contentment. Studies have shown that nature-based activities can significantly boost positive affect. For instance, Capaldi et al. (2014) found that individuals who spent time in natural settings reported higher levels of positive emotions and overall happiness compared to those who did not.

Life Satisfaction:

Life satisfaction is a key component of psychological well-being. Research indicates that spending time in nature can increase life satisfaction by providing opportunities for relaxation, recreation, and connection with others. A study by Lee and Lee (2017) demonstrated that participants who engaged in nature-based tourism reported higher levels of life satisfaction, attributing this to the restorative and enjoyable experiences provided by natural environments.

Personal Growth:

Personal growth involves the development of new skills, self-awareness, and a sense of purpose. Nature-based tourism can facilitate personal growth by challenging individuals, promoting self-reflection, and providing new experiences. A study by Ewert and McAvoy (2000) found that participants in outdoor adventure programs reported significant personal growth, including increased self-confidence and a greater sense of achievement.

Psychological Mechanisms Mediating the Effects:

(i) Attention Restoration Theory (ART)-ART, proposed by Kaplan and Kaplan (1989), suggests that natural environments have the ability to restore attention capacities that have been depleted by sustained mental effort. According to ART, engaging with nature helps in recovering from mental fatigue and improving cognitive functioning through four components: being away, extent, fascination, and compatibility.

Being Away: This component refers to the sense of escape from daily routines and environments that demand directed attention. Natural settings provide a break from urban life and its stressors.

Extent: Extent pertains to the scope of an environment, which needs to be rich enough to engage the mind. Natural environments typically offer vast and immersive experiences.

Fascination: Fascination involves involuntary attention, which requires no effort and allows the mind to rest. Nature effortlessly captures our interest with its beauty and diversity, providing an ideal setting for mental rejuvenation.

Compatibility: Compatibility refers to how well the environment supports the individual's goals and preferences. Nature often aligns with personal desires for peace and relaxation. Berman, Jonides, and Kaplan (2008) found that participants who walked in a natural setting performed better on a cognitive task than those who walked in an urban environment, demonstrating nature's restorative effects on attention. A study by Ohly et al. (2016) confirmed that exposure to natural environments improves cognitive performance and mood through attention restoration mechanisms.

*(ii) Stress Reduction Theory (SRT):*SRT developed by Roger Ulrich (1983), posits that natural environments promote recovery from stress. SRT suggests that natural settings elicit positive emotional responses, reduce physiological arousal, and enhance overall well-being.

Positive Emotional Responses: Natural environments often evoke feelings of pleasure and calm, which can counteract the negative emotions associated with stress.

Reduced Physiological Arousal: Exposure to nature has been shown to lower blood pressure, heart rate, and cortisol levels, all of which are markers of stress. Ulrich et al. (1991) conducted a study showing that participants who viewed nature scenes recovered from stress more quickly than those who viewed urban scenes. Korpela, Ylén, Tyrväinen, and Silvennoinen (2010) found that people who spent time in natural environments experienced significant reductions in stress and improvements in mood.

(iii) Biophilia Hypothesis- The Biophilia Hypothesis, introduced by E.O. Wilson (1984), suggests that humans have an innate affinity for nature due to evolutionary processes. This inherent connection to natural environments is believed to enhance psychological well-being. The hypothesis argues that because humans evolved in natural settings, they are naturally predisposed to feel comfortable and relaxed in such environments. A study by Joye and van den Berg (2011) found that people exhibit a preference for natural over built environments, supporting the idea that humans are inherently drawn to nature. Kellert and Wilson (1993) provided comprehensive evidence that interactions with nature contribute to physical and mental health, reinforcing the Biophilia Hypothesis.

(iv) Mindfulness and Presence: Nature-based tourism can enhance mindfulness and present-moment awareness, which are key components of psychological well-being. Mindfulness involves being fully engaged in the present moment, with a non-judgmental awareness of thoughts, feelings, and sensations.

Mindfulness: Nature provides a setting that encourages mindfulness by offering a multisensory experience that can anchor attention to the present moment. The sights, sounds, and smells of nature can help individuals practice mindfulness more effectively.

Present-Moment Awareness: Spending time in natural environments can help individuals focus on the here and now, reducing ruminative thoughts and promoting a sense of peace and clarity.Brown and Ryan (2003) found that natural settings promote mindfulness, which in turn enhances psychological well-being. A study by Teas et al. (2020) demonstrated that nature-based activities like hiking and forest bathing can increase mindfulness and reduce perceived stress among participants.

Case Studies and Empirical Evidence: Significant studies show diverse psychological benefits from nature-based tourism. Forest bathing in Japan reduces stress and improves mood, while mountain hiking in Austria boosts mental health through physical activity. Beach tourism in the UK relieves stress and increases life satisfaction, and wildlife safaris in South Africa evoke awe and promote conservation awareness. Urban Park walks in the U.S. decrease rumination and negative thoughts, highlighting the value of accessible green spaces. Comparative analyses reveal unique benefits across different environments, with each experience offering distinct ways to support mental well-being.

Forest Bathing in Japan: A seminal study by Park et al. (2010) examined the effects of forest bathing (Shinrin-yoku) on psychological well-being in Japan. The study involved 280 participants who engaged in forest bathing across 24 different forests. Results showed significant reductions in cortisol levels, heart rate, and blood pressure, indicating reduced stress levels. Participants also reported improvements in mood and feelings of vigor.

Mountain Hiking in Austria: A study by Niedermeier et al. (2017) investigated the psychological benefits of mountain hiking in the Austrian Alps. Participants were divided into a hiking group and a control group that engaged in indoor activities. The hiking group showed significant improvements in mood, reduced anxiety, and enhanced overall mental health compared to the control group. These findings highlight the mental health benefits of physical activity in natural settings.

Beach Tourism in the UK: White et al. (2020) conducted a study on the mental health benefits of beach tourism in the UK. The research involved surveys of beachgoers and non-beachgoers, measuring stress levels, mood, and overall well-being. The results indicated that spending time at the beach significantly reduced stress and improved mood. The study also found that the calming effects of the beach environment contributed to overall life satisfaction.

Wildlife Safaris in South Africa:Curtin (2009) explored the psychological impacts of wildlife safaris in South Africa. The study involved in-depth interviews with safari participants, who reported feelings of awe, wonder, and a deep sense of connection to nature. These experiences were linked to increased life satisfaction and reduced stress. The educational component of safaris also promoted environmental awareness and conservation efforts.

Urban Parks in the United States:A study by Bratman et al. (2015) examined the effects of nature walks in urban parks on mental health. Participants who walked in a natural park showed significant reductions in rumination and negative thoughts compared to those who walked in an urban environment. The natural environment was found to enhance mood and reduce anxiety, highlighting the benefits of accessible green spaces in urban areas.

Comparative Analysis of Different Types of Nature-Based Tourism:

(i) Forest Bathing vs. Mountain Hiking- Forest bathing and mountain hiking both offer substantial psychological benefits, but they differ in their approaches and impacts. Forest bathing emphasizes mindfulness and sensory engagement with the forest environment, leading to significant reductions in stress and improvements in mood (Park et al., 2010). Mountain hiking, on the other hand, combines physical exertion with scenic views, which can enhance mood, reduce anxiety, and improve overall mental health (Niedermeier et al., 2017).

(ii) Beach Tourism vs. Wildlife Safaris- Beach tourism and wildlife safaris provide distinct experiences and benefits. Beach tourism involves relaxation and sensory enjoyment of coastal environments, which significantly reduces stress and enhances mood (White et al., 2020). Wildlife safaris offer unique encounters with wildlife, evoking awe and a sense of connection to nature, which contribute to life satisfaction and reduced stress (Curtin, 2009). Both types of tourism promote mental health, but through different psychological mechanisms.

(iii) Urban Parks vs. Remote Natural Areas: Urban parks and remote natural areas offer varying levels of accessibility and experiences. Urban parks provide accessible green spaces for daily stress relief and mood enhancement, particularly important for urban dwellers (Bratman et al., 2015). Remote natural areas, such as national parks or wilderness areas, offer more immersive experiences that can lead to profound psychological benefits, including reduced anxiety and increased feelings of well-being (White et al., 2019).

Challenges and Limitations: Methodological challenges in researching the psychological impacts of nature-based tourism arise from issues in research design and data collection. Convenience sampling and a focus on short-term outcomes limit generalizability, while inconsistent measurement scales complicate comparative analysis. Self-report bias and a lack of ecological validity further hinder accurate assessments. Contextual factors like

cultural, geographical, and individual differences also shape psychological responses, making it vital to consider these for nuanced results. Literature gaps include a need for longitudinal studies, exploration of diverse nature-based activities, understanding of cultural influences, and research into specific mechanisms affecting mental health outcomes.

Methodological Challenges:

Issues in Research Design: Sample Bias: Many studies on nature-based tourism and psychological well-being use convenience sampling, which can lead to non-representative samples. This bias affects the generalizability of findings to broader populations (Buckley, 2020).

Short-Term vs. Long-Term Effects: Many studies focus on short-term outcomes, making it difficult to assess the long-term psychological benefits of nature-based tourism. Longitudinal studies are needed to understand the sustained impacts of such activities (Gosling & Williams, 2010).

Measurement Variability: There is a lack of standardization in measuring psychological outcomes, with different studies using varying scales and methods. This variability can make it challenging to compare results across studies and establish consistent findings (White et al., 2019).

Issues in Data Collection:

Self-Report Bias-Much of the data on psychological well-being relies on self-reports, which can be affected by social desirability bias or inaccuracies in participants' self-assessment (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010).

Ecological Validity: Some studies are conducted in controlled environments rather than real-world settings, which may not accurately reflect the true impact of nature-based tourism on psychological well-being (Hartig et al., 2014).

Contextual Factors:

Cultural Differences-Varied Interpretations: Cultural differences can influence how individuals perceive and experience nature-based tourism. For instance, attitudes towards nature and well-being practices can vary widely across cultures, affecting the outcomes of nature-based activities (Lee & Lee, 2017).

Cultural Sensitivity: Research may lack cultural sensitivity, leading to misinterpretation of how different cultural groups benefit from nature-based tourism. Incorporating diverse cultural perspectives is essential for a comprehensive understanding (Spenceley, 2021).

Geographical Differences:

Environmental Variability- The psychological benefits of nature-based tourism can vary depending on geographical factors such as climate, terrain, and biodiversity. For example, the benefits of forest bathing may differ from those of beach tourism due to different environmental stimuli (White et al., 2020).

Access and Equity: Geographic accessibility to nature-based tourism varies, affecting the ability of different populations to participate and benefit. Studies need to consider issues of access and equity to ensure inclusive research findings (Tyrväinen et al., 2014).

Individual Differences:

Personal Preferences- Individual preferences and prior experiences with nature can influence how people respond to nature-based activities. These personal factors can lead to variability in psychological outcomes (Gosling & Williams, 2010).

Baseline Psychological Health: Individuals with different baseline levels of psychological health may experience varying benefits from nature-based tourism. Tailoring interventions to individual needs can enhance the effectiveness of such activities (Bratman et al., 2015).

Gaps in Literature:

Diverse Nature-Based Activities- While much research focuses on popular activities like hiking and forest bathing, less is known about other forms of nature-based tourism, such as underwater exploration or urban green spaces. Expanding research to include a broader range of activities can provide a more comprehensive understanding of their psychological benefits (Kuo, 2015).

Longitudinal Studies: There is a need for more longitudinal studies that track the long-term psychological effects of nature-based tourism. Such research can help determine whether the benefits observed are sustained over time (Hartig et al., 2014).

Cultural and Contextual Variability: Further research is needed to explore how cultural and contextual factors influence the psychological benefits of nature-based tourism. Studies that include diverse populations and settings can address this gap (Lee & Lee, 2017).

Mechanisms of Action: While theories like ART and SRT provide frameworks for understanding the effects of nature, more research is needed to elucidate the specific psychological mechanisms involved. This includes exploring how different types of nature-based experiences affect various aspects of mental health (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989).

Discussion

The review of literature on nature-based tourism and its impact on psychological well-being reveals several key insights:

Psychological Benefits Across Activities: Nature-based tourism activities, such as forest bathing, mountain hiking, beach tourism, and wildlife safaris, consistently show positive impacts on psychological well-being. Forest bathing and mountain hiking reduce stress and enhance mood, while beach tourism and wildlife safaris contribute to overall mental health and life satisfaction. These findings underscore the broad psychological benefits of engaging with natural environments (Bratman et al., 2015; White et al., 2020).

Mechanisms of Action: The psychological benefits of nature-based tourism are mediated by several mechanisms, including ART, SRT, and the Biophilia Hypothesis. ART explains how natural environments restore cognitive resources depleted by urban and stressful environments, while SRT highlights how natural settings lower physiological stress markers. The Biophilia Hypothesis posits that humans have an innate connection to nature, which contributes to mental health improvements (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Ulrich et al., 1991).

Variability in Effects: The impact of nature-based tourism on psychological well-being can vary based on the type of activity, the individual's baseline mental health, and contextual factors such as culture and geography. For instance, while forest bathing may be particularly effective for stress reduction, mountain hiking offers additional physical benefits that enhance overall mental health (Niedermeier et al., 2017). Similarly, beach tourism and wildlife safaris provide unique experiences that contribute to positive psychological outcomes through different mechanisms (White et al., 2020; Curtin, 2009).

Integration of Different Theoretical Perspectives: Integrating different theoretical perspectives helps provide a comprehensive understanding of how nature-based tourism influences psychological well-being: ART suggests that natural environments facilitate recovery from cognitive fatigue by offering restorative experiences that engage effortless attention. This theory helps explain why activities like forest bathing and mountain hiking, which involve immersive natural experiences, are effective in reducing stress and enhancing mental clarity (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). SRT emphasizes that natural settings help reduce physiological stress responses, such as elevated cortisol levels and heart rate. This theory is supported by studies showing that nature-based tourism activities lower these stress indicators, contributing to improved mood and reduced anxiety (Ulrich et al., 1991; Hartig et al., 2014).

Biophilia Hypothesis: The Biophilia Hypothesis posits that humans have an inherent affinity for nature, which contributes to psychological well-being. This perspective supports the idea that nature-based tourism activities foster positive emotional responses and a sense of connectedness to the environment, enhancing overall mental health (Wilson, 1984; Kellert & Wilson, 1993).

Mindfulness and Presence: Mindfulness theories highlight how nature-based activities promote present-moment awareness and mindfulness. For example, forest bathing encourages individuals to engage deeply with their surroundings, fostering a mindful state that contributes to reduced stress and improved psychological well-being (Hanson, 2018).

Implications for Practice and Policy: To maximize psychological benefits, nature-based tourism experiences should be designed to incorporate elements that promote relaxation, mindfulness, and physical activity. For example, integrating guided mindfulness practices into forest bathing or ensuring accessible natural spaces in urban environments can enhance their therapeutic effects (Bratman et al., 2015; Kuo, 2015)

Promotion of Sustainable Practices: Tourism operators should emphasize sustainable practices that protect natural environments while providing mental health benefits. Sustainable management of natural resources ensures that tourism activities do not compromise the ecological integrity of these spaces, thus preserving their psychological benefits for future generations (Spenceley, 2021).

Policy Implications:

Integration into Public Health Policies- Policymakers should recognize the mental health benefits of nature-based tourism and incorporate these insights into public health strategies. Promoting access to green and blue spaces, supporting nature-based interventions for mental health, and encouraging community engagement with nature can enhance public well-being (Hartig et al., 2014; White et al., 2020).

Development of Urban Green Spaces: Urban planners and policymakers should prioritize the development of green spaces and nature-based recreational areas within cities. Access to well-designed urban parks and nature reserves can provide residents with opportunities for stress relief and improved mental health (Bratman et al., 2015; Tyrväinen et al., 2014).

Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity: Tourism policies should consider cultural and contextual factors to ensure that nature-based tourism activities are inclusive and accessible to diverse populations. Tailoring interventions to different cultural contexts and addressing accessibility issues can enhance the effectiveness and equity of nature-based tourism initiatives (Lee & Lee, 2017; Kuo, 2015).

Recommendations for Future Research: Future research should include longitudinal studies to assess the long-term psychological impacts of nature-based tourism. Understanding how sustained engagement with nature affects mental health over time can provide deeper insights into its benefits and mechanisms (Bratman et al., 2015).

Diverse Populations: More studies should focus on diverse populations, including different age groups, cultural backgrounds, and socioeconomic statuses. This can help identify variations in the psychological benefits of nature-based tourism and tailor interventions to specific needs (Lee & Lee, 2017; Kuo, 2015).

Innovative Methodologies: Incorporating innovative research methodologies, such as ecological momentary assessment and virtual reality simulations, can provide new perspectives on the psychological effects of nature-based tourism and enhance the validity of findings (Schneider et al., 2017; White et al., 2020).

Interdisciplinary Approaches: Future research should adopt interdisciplinary approaches that integrate psychology, environmental science, and tourism studies. Collaborative efforts can offer a more holistic understanding of the complex interactions between nature-based tourism and psychological well-being (Mason et al., 2020; Palinkas et al., 2015).

CONCLUSION:

This review has provided a comprehensive examination of the impact of nature-based tourism on psychological well-being, highlighting several key findings: Nature-based tourism, encompassing activities such as forest bathing, mountain hiking, beach tourism, and wildlife safaris, offers a range of psychological benefits. These include stress reduction, enhanced mood, and overall mental health improvements. The review has demonstrated that engaging with natural environments can significantly lower stress indicators like cortisol levels and heart rate, improve mood, and contribute to life satisfaction (Bratman et al., 2015; White et al., 2020).The psychological benefits of nature-based tourism are mediated by several theoretical frameworks:

ART suggests that natural environments help restore cognitive resources depleted by urban stressors (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989).

SRT indicates that natural settings can reduce physiological stress responses (Ulrich et al., 1991).

Biophilia Hypothesis posits that humans have an innate connection to nature that enhances well-being (Wilson, 1984; Kellert & Wilson, 1993).

Mindfulness and Presence theories highlight the role of nature in fostering mindfulness and present-moment awareness (Hanson, 2018).The review has outlined various research methodologies employed in studying nature-based tourism, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches. Each methodology has its strengths

and limitations, and using a combination of these methods can provide a more nuanced understanding of the psychological impacts of nature-based tourism (Mason et al., 2020; Palinkas et al., 2015). Operators should design nature-based tourism experiences that maximize psychological benefits by incorporating elements that promote relaxation, physical activity, and mindfulness. For instance, integrating mindfulness practices into nature-based activities can enhance their therapeutic effects (Bratman et al., 2015; Kuo, 2015). Emphasizing sustainability in tourism practices is crucial. Operators should promote environmental conservation and responsible tourism to ensure that natural areas remain protected and continue to provide psychological benefits for future generations (Spenceley, 2021).Policymakers should incorporate the mental health benefits of nature-based tourism into public health strategies. Supporting access to green and blue spaces and integrating nature-based interventions into mental health programs can enhance public well-being (Hartig et al., 2014; White et al., 2020).Urban planners should prioritize the development of accessible green spaces and nature reserves. Providing urban residents with opportunities to engage with nature can contribute to improved mental health and stress reduction (Bratman et al., 2015; Tyrväinen et al., 2014). Demonstrating the psychological benefits of nature-based tourism can strengthen advocacy efforts for environmental conservation. Promoting the value of natural spaces for mental health can support conservation initiatives and sustainable management practices (Zhang et al., 2014; Spenceley, 2021).

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