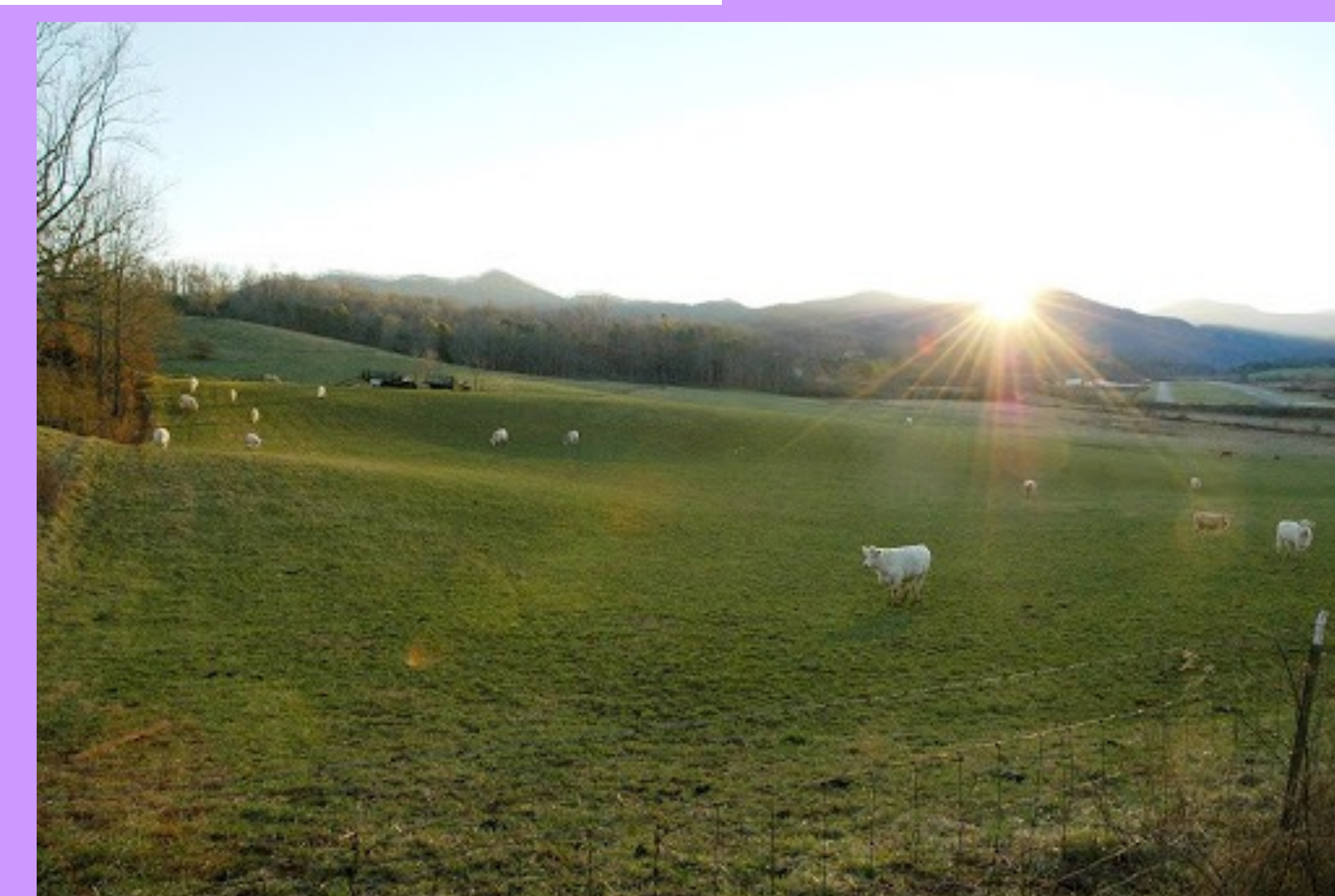




“That was the happiest time of my life”: Understanding Eco-Connections in Appalachian Communities

Katherine Montgomery^{1,2}, Lynnaya Hamby^{1,3}, & Sherry Hamby^{1,2}

¹Life Paths Research Center, ²University of the South, ³Hendrix College



An eco-connection strengthens positive feelings towards relying on and being surrounded by nature

Abstract

Objective: To further the psychological study of place and understand how eco-connections, the quality and strength of our relations to nature, can influence an individual’s wellbeing and impact their experience of community.

Methods: 145 adults from rural communities in southern Appalachia participated in semi-structured qualitative interviews, discussing their life stories and its most important moments. Recorded and transcribed interviews were coded for mentions of place, nature, or geography using grounded theory analysis.

Results: Participants mentioned several instances of their life being impacted by geographical features. Mentions about geographic-related memories or interactions were coded into four themes: eco-connections, nature nostalgia, rhythms of nature, and formative/educational experiences with nature.

Conclusions: The results of this study show the importance of the natural environment to people’s experience of community, at least for this population from largely rural areas in southeastern Tennessee.

Introduction

- Geographical surroundings can have a significant impact on the risk factor for various mental health disorders (Engemann et al., 2019).
- Past studies have shown that various activities in nature can help treat illnesses or help decrease the risk of developing psychological stress-related diseases (Morita et al., 2007; Carrell, 2018).
- Much of this research focuses on extreme environments, such as remote islands, rainforests, or mountains (Grotti, 2017).
- Although not an island, the mountains of Appalachia also influence the communities that reside on and around them.
- This study uses a qualitative approach to explore positive experiences related to interacting with nature, such as access to wooded areas that promote an eco-connection.

Method

Participants. The community sample included 145 adults (71.7% female), ages 21 to 69 years (M=36.23 years; SD=12.08 years). The sample was somewhat more diverse than census data from the area: the majority of participants were European American/White (75.5%), and 12.6% identified as Black/African American, 4.9% multiracial, 3.5% Asian, 2.1% Latino/a, and 1.4% Pacific Islander. **Procedure.** Through semi-structured qualitative interviews, participants discussed their life stories by describing high, low, and turning points, positive and not-so-positive behaviors. They were also asked to describe the context of their early childhood. The recorded and transcribed interviews were coded using grounded theory analysis. The psychological mentions of place were also counted and categorized.

Thematic Results from Grounded Theory Analysis

Eco-Connections

“It was 33 acres of bayou-front property. The corner property had bayou on all three sides. I grew up living with alligators, opossums, and...rattlesnakes, and big king rattlesnakes.”
- 39-year-old Female

“We had, they had like an old railroad track that ran through there so when it snowed, it would freeze the railroad track. We could slide down there on like people’s trashcan lids. So, I mean, it was fun out there. There was lake back there, we fished everyday too. We still go out there and fish. To this day, still going out there.”
- 27-year-old Male

“We’d go and, you know, play in the water, and go out there and roll up different kinds of grass and stuff and be trying to smoke it, rolling it up with notebook paper, just being bad, and just running around.”
- 31-year-old Female

Rhythms of Nature

“The people we rented our property from, the farm, they raised cattle on it. Every time they’d slaughter a cow, they would come fill up our freezer.”
- 30-year-old Male

“When it rained on this island, that was sort of an understood tradition that that’s when people might come visit you, ‘cause there weren’t any phones. And it was a relatively large island, so, so when it rained you just sort of expected to do it. I, I would go visiting or you would be visited by people, which was kind of fun.”
- 60-year-old Female

“My dad raised swine and we, that’s how we survived in life, is he raised a big garden, we’d can things to the winter, for the winter, and plus we’d eat pork through the...all the time. And we’d sell potatoes, just things like that.”
- 54-year-old Male

“My dad grew a garden every year.”
- 47-year-old Female

Nature Nostalgia

“And he had the honeybees and he had the grapes and all... He just loved to grow things. And so we were always, you know... We would walk that mile to go to his house. So it’s just... That was... That was the happiest time of my life.”
- 38-year-old Female

“Riding the horse out in the mountains. I think was a very high point for me. I lived in (place) and I had a wonderful horse. So those times I think were the highlight of my life.”
- 60-year-old Female

“That’s where my love of animals was. I helped my grandfather in his garden and he had goats that he raised, and we had to feed some of them with the coke bottles and a nipple. And I’d help go with him when he had to go swarm some bees, ‘cause he was a beekeeper...just good memories.”
- 51-year-old Female

Formative/Educational Experiences with Nature

“I grew up, you know, working on the farm and it meant that I had a little bit of a different viewpoint when I got to college...I think that it really shaped how I saw things because it meant that I was working every day...you just can’t go to school without feeding animals or without weeding a garden because before you know it, it’s gone.”
- 22-year-old Female

“It, uh, teaches you a lot, you know, of respect of yourself, respect of yourself and respect of the land, you know. Because if you don’t take care of it, you can’t put something out there and it grow by itself, you have to take care of it.”
- 45-year-old Female

“Living out there gave me, like it taught me about nature. It taught me about working hard. My dad would make us, you know, go out and work with him and stuff like that and mess with the garden and things like that. And so, it gave me a sense of responsibility.”
- 22-year-old Female

Discussion

- This study aims to explore the effect of geographic and natural features of a place on individuals. Because there has been limited research on the psychology of place, this study uses in-depth qualitative interviews and grounded theory analysis to explore constructs related to a psychology of place and the magnitude of an eco-connection.
- The qualitative data from the four themes show the significant impact of relying on and/or being surrounded by nature.

Limitations and Implications

- This data can be used to help map strengths.
- Some of the ideas in the interviews can be used to help draft new survey questions on eco-connections and a sense of place.
- Paying attention to “eco-connections” may be beneficial for getting individuals and communities to commit to addressing climate change.

References

- Carrell, S. (2018, October 5). Scottish GPs to begin prescribing rambling and birdwatching. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/oct/05/scottish-gps-nhs-begin-prescribing-rambling-birdwatching>
- Engemann, K., Pedersen, C. B., Arge, L., Tsirogiannis, C., Mortensen, P. B., & Svenning, J.-C. (2019). Residential green space in childhood is associated with lower risk of psychiatric disorders from adolescence into adulthood. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *116*(11), 5188. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1807504116
- Morita, E., Fukuda, S., Nagano, J., Hamajima, N., Yamamoto, H., Iwai, Y., . . . Shirakawa, T. (2007). Psychological effects of forest environments on healthy adults: Shinrin-yoku (forest-air bathing, walking) as a possible method of stress reduction. *Public Health*, *121*(1), 54-63. doi: 10.1016/j.puhe.2006.05.024
- Grotti, V. (2017). Childbirth on Europe’s Ultra-Periphery: Maternity Care, French Universalism and Equivocal Identities on the Maroni River, French Guiana. In F. Decimo & A. Gribaldo (Eds.), *Boundaries within: Nation, Kinship and Identity among Migrants and Minorities* (pp. 75-91). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Tim Lomas (2020) Towards a cross-cultural lexical map of wellbeing. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, DOI: [10.1080/17439760.2020.1791944](https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2020.1791944)

This project was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this project are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.