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Immersion in Natural Environments and the Perceived Psychological Wellbeing of Foreign Wellness Tourists: Evidence from Colombo, Sri Lanka

KA Krishani Gunawardana [1*], WAN Jayanga [2], A K Schumacher [3]
[1] Department of English Language Teaching, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka
[2,3,] London Metropolitan University, UK

* Corresponding Author: **K.A. Krishani Gunawardana**

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Abstract
The relationship between natural environment immersion and psychological wellbeing represents one of the most compelling yet underexplored dimensions of urban wellness tourism. This study investigates the influence of immersion in natural environments on the perceived psychological wellbeing of foreign tourists participating in mindfulness-based wellness programmes in Colombo, Sri Lanka, an urban-coastal metropolitan destination experiencing rapid wellness tourism growth. Drawing on Attention Restoration Theory and Stress Recovery Theory, a quantitative cross-sectional design was employed, with data collected through structured Likert-scale questionnaires administered to 374 international wellness tourists at luxury hotels, yoga studios, and specialised wellness centres. Descriptive statistics revealed uniformly high agreement across all five facets of natural immersion (mean values: 1.77–1.83). Chi-square analysis confirmed a statistically significant relationship between natural environment immersion and psychological wellbeing ($\chi^2 = 340.217$, $p < 0.001$). The findings affirm that access to coastal and green natural settings is a primary psychological restoration mechanism in urban wellness tourism contexts. Practical implications are offered for Colombo's wellness destination stakeholders, with broader applicability to urban-coastal tourism destinations in developing Asia-Pacific economies.

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Keywords: wellness tourism, natural immersion, psychological wellbeing, mindfulness; urban tourism, Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

The global wellness tourism market has undergone a remarkable transformation in the post-pandemic era. Driven by rising consumer awareness of mental health, the limitations of pharmaceutical approaches to psychological restoration, and the growing appeal of holistic travel experiences, wellness tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing and highest-value segments of the international tourism industry (Global Wellness Institute, 2023) [5]. Within this broader trend, mindfulness-based wellness programmes which integrate meditation, breathing practices, movement, and contemplative inquiry into structured tourism experiences have attracted particular interest from both practitioners and researchers.

A critical yet underexamined dimension of mindfulness-based wellness tourism is the role of the natural environment in shaping psychological outcomes. While the restorative properties of natural settings have been well-established in environmental psychology literature (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Ulrich, 1983) [8, 15], their specific application to wellness tourism contexts in urban-coastal metropolitan destinations in the developing Asia-Pacific region remains insufficiently theorised and empirically underexplored. This gap is particularly salient for cities such as Colombo, Sri Lanka, which possesses a distinctive geography combining coastal, tropical, and urban-green environments that distinguishes it from both the established luxury wellness destinations of Southeast Asia and the nature-retreat settings that dominate existing wellbeing research. Sri Lanka's wellness tourism sector has grown considerably in recent years. The country's Ayurvedic heritage, Buddhist contemplative traditions, and coastal biodiversity position it as a uniquely authentic wellness destination. Colombo, as the commercial and hospitality capital, has seen rapid development of wellness infrastructure including luxury hotels, dedicated yoga studios, Ayurvedic centres, and specialist mindfulness retreat programmes.

Yet the specific mechanisms through which Colombo's natural assets its Indian Ocean coastline, urban green corridors, and tropical flora contribute to the psychological restoration of international visitors have not been systematically examined.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the relationship between immersion in natural environments during mindfulness programme participation and the perceived psychological wellbeing of foreign wellness tourists in Colombo. The central research question is: to what extent does immersion in natural environments during mindfulness programme participation influence the perceived psychological wellbeing of foreign tourists engaging in wellness tourism in Colombo, Sri Lanka?

The study makes three contributions to the literature. First, it provides rare empirical evidence from a rapidly developing urban-coastal wellness destination in South Asia. Second, it applies Attention Restoration Theory and Stress Recovery Theory in a tourism context that is simultaneously urban and naturally immersive, extending the theoretical applicability of these frameworks. Third, it offers actionable implications for destination managers, wellness programme designers, and policymakers in Colombo and comparable Asia-Pacific urban-coastal tourism cities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Wellness Tourism and Psychological Wellbeing

Wellness tourism is broadly defined as travel motivated by the desire to maintain or improve personal health and wellbeing (Smith & Puczkó, 2014) [14]. It encompasses a wide spectrum of activities including spa and balneotherapy, yoga and meditation retreats, Ayurvedic treatments, nature immersion experiences, and digital detox programmes. The psychological dimension of wellness tourism specifically, the capacity of wellness experiences to restore, enhance, and sustain mental and emotional health has become a central preoccupation of both the industry and the academy.

Perceived psychological wellbeing, as operationalised in this study, encompasses three interrelated dimensions: reduced anxiety and emotional tension, emotional stability and positive mood, and mental clarity and focused attention. This operationalisation aligns with Ryff's (1989) [11] multi-dimensional model of psychological wellbeing and with the attention restoration and stress recovery frameworks discussed below. In tourism research, psychological wellbeing has been examined as both a motivational driver tourist seeks destinations that they expect to restore their mental health and an outcome variable researcher measure whether travel experiences actually deliver the anticipated psychological benefits (Chen & Rahman, 2018) [1].

2.2. Natural Environment Immersion in Tourism Contexts

The relationship between natural environments and psychological health is among the most extensively researched topics in environmental psychology. Two theoretical frameworks are foundational. Attention Restoration Theory (ART), developed by Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) [8], proposes that natural environments facilitate the recovery of directed attention capacity by providing effortlessly engaging stimuli that allow the directed attention system to rest and replenish. Natural settings characterised by their fascination, extent, coherence, and compatibility with human needs are argued to produce restorative states that reduce mental fatigue and improve cognitive functioning.

Stress Recovery Theory (SRT), advanced by Ulrich (1983) [15], offers a complementary psychophysiological account, arguing that natural environments elicit rapid affective responses that counteract stress arousal. The theory proposes that exposure to natural scenes particularly those involving water, vegetation, and open prospect activates a positively toned affective response that inhibits stress-related physiological activation and promotes psychological recovery. Both ART and SRT predict that natural immersion during wellness activities should enhance the psychological outcomes of those activities by providing restorative conditions that amplify the benefits of mindfulness practice.

In tourism research, Djernis, Poulsen, and Stigsdotter (2023) [3] confirmed that nature-immersed mindfulness programmes generate 23% greater stress reduction than equivalent indoor programmes, establishing a quantitative benchmark for the added value of natural settings. Huynh and Torquati (2019) [6] demonstrated that coastal and water-proximate environments are particularly effective restoration contexts, a finding of direct relevance to Colombo's Indian Ocean coastal geography. Chen *et al.* (2021) [2] extended these findings to wellness tourism specifically, establishing that nature-based programme design is among the strongest predictors of overall satisfaction and intention to return among international wellness tourists.

2.3. Urban-Coastal Wellness Destinations and Natural Immersion

The majority of existing wellness tourism research on natural immersion focuses on either rural retreat settings (forest therapy centres, mountain lodges, rural Ayurvedic estates) or purpose-built nature resorts removed from urban environments. Urban wellness tourism where natural immersion occurs within or proximate to a metropolitan context has received substantially less attention, despite representing the fastest-growing segment of the wellness market (Global Wellness Institute, 2023) [5].

Urban-coastal destinations such as Colombo present a distinctive research context. Unlike rural wellness retreats, urban-coastal settings require tourists to access natural restorative environments within an urban environment, creating a specific type of nature-urban interface. The availability of ocean access, coastal parks, and urban green corridors within Colombo's wellness tourism infrastructure creates conditions for natural immersion that are structurally different from both rural retreats and entirely urban wellness settings. This distinction has not been theorised in existing literature and represents one of the key contributions of this study.

2.4. Mindfulness Programme Design and Natural Immersion

The integration of natural environments into mindfulness programme design is increasingly recognised as a best-practice dimension of high-quality wellness programming. Beach meditation, forest walks, nature-based breathing practices, and outdoor yoga have all been documented as effective components of wellness programme design that enhance psychological outcomes (Frontiers in Psychology, 2021) [4]. Mueller and Kaufmann (2024) [9] establish that competitive differentiation in wellness tourism destinations relies on the perceived authenticity and environmental quality of programme settings, suggesting that natural immersion is

not merely incidental to wellness tourism but constitutive of its value proposition.

In the Sri Lankan context, the integration of coastal and tropical natural elements into Ayurvedic and mindfulness programming has a long historical precedent, rooted in Buddhist and Ayurvedic philosophical traditions that regard connection with natural forces as essential to health and equilibrium. This heritage creates conditions for natural immersion that are simultaneously environmental and cultural, making the Sri Lankan wellness tourism context particularly rich for studying the intersection of nature, culture, and psychological restoration.

2.5. Research Gap and Hypothesis Development

Despite the extensive theoretical grounding for the natural immersion-wellbeing relationship, empirical research specifically examining this relationship in urban-coastal wellness tourism destinations in South Asia is absent from the literature. Existing studies either focus on European or East Asian destinations, rural rather than urban settings, or examine natural immersion as one component of a multi-variable wellness tourism model rather than as a dedicated focus of inquiry.

This study addresses that gap directly. Drawing on ART, SRT, and the wellness tourism literature, the following hypothesis is advanced:

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between immersion in natural environments during mindfulness programme participation and the perceived psychological wellbeing of foreign tourists in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Philosophical Stance

A positivist philosophical stance was adopted, consistent with the deductive research approach employed. The study sought to test a theoretically derived hypothesis using statistically analysable data, making quantitative methods the most appropriate research design. A cross-sectional survey design was employed, enabling data collection from a large, heterogeneous sample of international wellness tourists at a single point in time.

3.2. Sample and Data Collection

The target population comprised foreign tourists visiting Colombo who actively participated in structured mindfulness or wellness programmes during 2025. A judgmental (purposive) sampling strategy was employed to ensure that only respondents with direct, relevant experience of mindfulness programme participation were included. Data were collected through structured self-administered questionnaires administered physically at luxury wellness hotels, specialised yoga studios, and dedicated meditation and mindfulness centres within the Colombo metropolitan area. Survey administration occurred immediately following participants' completion of wellness programme sessions to ensure accurate recall and authentic response.

A target sample of 330 respondents was set based on statistical power requirements for chi-square analysis. A final valid sample of 374 respondents was achieved. Anonymous data collection was maintained throughout; no demographic information capable of identifying individual respondents was collected, ensuring participant confidentiality and minimising social desirability bias. Each questionnaire item was explained to participants during administration to ensure comprehension across diverse language backgrounds.

3.3. Measurement Instrument

The Natural Immersion construct was operationalised using five items, each measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Agree; 5 = Strongly Disagree). Items were developed based on the ART and SRT theoretical frameworks and adapted from established wellness tourism scales (see Table 1). The five facets measured were: (i) natural outdoor settings (beaches, gardens, forests) as a context for mindfulness practice; (ii) balance between Colombo's urban setting and access to coastal and green spaces; (iii) activities promoting connection with natural elements (ocean, plants, fresh air); (iv) peaceful and restorative qualities of natural surroundings; and (v) incorporation of nature-based mindfulness practices (beach meditation, forest walks).

Perceived Psychological Wellbeing was operationalised using three items reflecting: reduced anxiety levels, emotional stability and positive mood, and mental clarity and focus. The instrument was validated for internal consistency using Cronbach's Alpha prior to the main data collection phase.

3.4. Reliability and Validity

Cronbach's Alpha for the Natural Immersion construct was 0.804, indicating high internal consistency and exceeding the 0.70 threshold recommended by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2019) [12]. The combined instrument across all constructs achieved an alpha of 0.942, confirming excellent overall reliability. Construct validity was assessed through Pearson inter-item correlation analysis; all items recorded statistically significant inter-item correlations ($p < 0.05$), confirming convergent validity. Face validity was ensured through expert review of items by two tourism and wellness academics prior to pilot administration.

3.5. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS (Version 26). Descriptive statistics including mean, median, mode, and standard deviation were computed for all-Natural Immersion items. A Pearson correlation analysis examined the linear relationship between Natural Immersion scores and Perceived Psychological Wellbeing. A chi-square test of independence was applied to test Hypothesis 1, assessing the statistical significance of the association between the two constructs. The conventional significance threshold of $p < 0.05$ was applied.

4. Findings

4.1. Descriptive Statistics: Natural Immersion Facets

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for each facet of the Natural Immersion construct. Mean values across all five items ranged from 1.77 to 1.83 on the five-point scale, where lower values indicate stronger agreement. Median and mode values were uniformly 2.00, indicating that the modal response across all items was 'Agree'. Standard deviations ranged from 0.622 to 0.741, reflecting high response consistency and a well-clustered distribution around the mean.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics — Natural Immersion Facets (n = 374)

Item	N	Mean	Median	Mode	SD
Mindfulness practices conducted in natural outdoor environments (beaches, gardens, forests)	374	1.77	2.00	2	0.741
Programmes effectively balance Colombo's urban setting with access to natural coastal and green spaces	374	1.83	2.00	2	0.692
Activities promote connection with natural elements (ocean, plants, fresh air)	374	1.77	2.00	2	0.684
Natural surroundings provide peaceful and restorative environments	374	1.81	2.00	2	0.687
Programmes incorporate nature-based mindfulness practices (beach meditation, forest walks)	374	1.79	2.00	2	0.622
Construct Average	374	1.794	2.00	2	0.685

Source: Author's own analysis. Scale: 1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree.

The item with the lowest mean and therefore the strongest agreement was 'natural outdoor settings as a context for mindfulness practice' and 'activities promoting connection with natural elements', both recording a mean of 1.77. This indicates that direct physical contact with Colombo's natural landscape- its beaches, coastal gardens, and green spaces is the most consistently endorsed dimension of natural immersion. The item with the widest standard deviation was 'natural outdoor environments' (SD = 0.741), suggesting slightly greater heterogeneity in how respondents experienced this dimension, likely reflecting variation in the natural settings accessible across different programme providers.

These descriptive findings are notable in their uniformity. Across all five facets, over 88% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that each dimension of natural immersion positively influenced their psychological wellbeing. This represents the highest aggregate endorsement rate of any construct in the broader study, reinforcing the primacy of natural immersion as a psychological restoration mechanism in this context.

4.2. Hypothesis Testing

4.2.1. Pearson Correlation Analysis

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the linear relationship between the Natural Immersion construct composite score and the Perceived Psychological Wellbeing composite score. The analysis returned a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.312$, $p < 0.001$), indicating a statistically significant linear relationship between the two constructs. This finding provides initial support for Hypothesis 1.

4.2.2. Chi-Square Test of Independence

A chi-square test of independence was conducted to test the statistical significance of the association between Natural Immersion and Perceived Psychological Wellbeing as categorical distributions. Table 2 presents the results.

Table 2: Chi-Square Test of Independence — Natural Immersion and Perceived Psychological Wellbeing

Test Statistic	Value	df	p-value (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	340.217a	132	.000
Likelihood Ratio	261.445	132	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	95.328	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	374	—	—

a. 137 cells (87.8%) have expected count less than 5. Source: Author's own analysis.

The chi-square statistic of 340.217 ($df = 132$, $p < 0.001$) is statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. The null hypothesis that there is no relationship between immersion in natural environments and perceived psychological wellbeing is rejected. Hypothesis 1 is therefore supported: there is a significant positive relationship between natural environment immersion and the perceived psychological wellbeing of foreign wellness tourists in Colombo.

The linear-by-linear association value of 95.328 ($p < 0.001$) further confirms a consistent directional relationship: as endorsement of natural immersion increases, perceived psychological wellbeing improves correspondingly. Table 3 provides a summary of the hypothesis test outcome alongside key descriptive indicators

Table 3: Summary of Key Findings — Natural Immersion and Psychological Wellbeing

Indicator	Natural Immersion (IV)	Psychological Wellbeing (DV)
Valid N	374	374
Construct Mean	1.794	1.973
Cronbach's Alpha	0.804	0.938 (full instrument)
Pearson r (with DV)	0.312***	—
Chi-Square (χ^2)	340.217	—
p-value	.000 ($p < 0.001$)	—
Hypothesis Decision	**H1 Supported — Reject H_0**	—

$p < 0.001$. Source: Author's own analysis.

5. Discussion

5.1. Natural Immersion as the Primary Psychological Restoration Mechanism

The finding that natural environment immersion is significantly and positively associated with perceived psychological wellbeing among foreign wellness tourists in Colombo is consistent with the theoretical predictions of both Attention Restoration Theory and Stress Recovery Theory, and extends these frameworks into a novel empirical context. With 90.6% of respondents agreeing that connecting with coastal elements is necessary for psychological wellbeing during mindfulness programmes the highest endorsement rate of any variable in the full study natural immersion emerges not merely as one dimension of wellness programme

quality but as its foundational psychological mechanism.

This finding resonates with Djernis *et al*. (2023) [3], who established a 23% advantage for nature-immersed over indoor mindfulness programmes in stress reduction outcomes. In Colombo's context, this advantage is amplified by the city's specific geographic assets: the Indian Ocean coastline, tropical botanical gardens, and urban green corridors provide a density of restorative natural stimuli within the metropolitan area that is unusually high for a city of comparable scale and economic development. The descriptive uniformity observed across all five natural immersion facets all mean values within 0.06 of each other suggests that it is not any single natural element but the integrated natural environment of Colombo as a whole that generates the restorative response.

5.2. The Urban-Coastal Wellness Context: A Distinctive Restorative Profile

The findings contribute a new empirical profile to the emerging literature on urban wellness tourism. Unlike rural retreat settings, where natural immersion is total and uninterrupted, Colombo's wellness context involves the management of nature-urban transitions moving between the stimulation of the city and the restoration of coastal and green spaces within a single day or programme experience. The strong endorsement of 'balance between urban setting and natural coastal access' (mean = 1.83) suggests that foreign tourists do not experience this transition as a deficit but as a distinctive feature of Colombo's wellness value proposition.

This finding has theoretical implications for the conceptualisation of restorative environments in tourism. The existing literature tends to contrast urban and natural environments as opposites on a restoration continuum. The Colombo data suggest a more nuanced picture: urban-coastal environments that provide structured access to natural settings within a metropolitan context may generate restorative outcomes that are qualitatively distinct from, but not inferior to, those produced by full immersion in remote natural settings. This deserves further theoretical development and comparative empirical investigation.

5.3. Nature-Based Programme Design as Competitive Differentiation

From a destination management perspective, the findings affirm Mueller and Kaufmann's (2024) [9] argument that natural immersion is a core competitive differentiator in the wellness tourism market. International tourists who choose Colombo as a wellness destination are not simply seeking generic mindfulness instruction that could be obtained anywhere; they are seeking the specific restorative experience that Colombo's coastal and tropical natural environment provides. Programme designs that maximise exposure to these natural elements through beach meditation sessions, coastal yoga, garden-based breathing practices, and nature walks deliver demonstrably superior psychological outcomes and therefore represent the highest-value programming investments for Colombo's wellness tourism operators.

The ceiling effect observable in the descriptive data where mean values cluster close to 1.77–1.83 with minimal variance, indicating near-universal agreement raises an important strategic question. If natural immersion is already so highly and uniformly valued by current wellness tourists, there may be limited marginal return from further emphasising its importance in marketing communications. Instead, the strategic priority may lie in ensuring that all wellness programme providers in Colombo have equitable access to high-quality natural settings, which may require coordinated destination-level investment in coastal access infrastructure, urban green space protection, and multi-provider programme networking.

5.4. Theoretical Contribution

This study advances the existing literature in three respects. First, it provides the first empirical test of the ART-SRT framework in the context of urban-coastal wellness tourism in South Asia, confirming the cross-cultural and cross-contextual applicability of these foundational theories. Second, it introduces the urban-coastal wellness context as a theoretically distinct category requiring its own conceptual framework, separate from both urban wellness settings without natural access and rural retreat settings with total natural immersion. Third, the finding that natural immersion generates the highest endorsement rates of any wellness programme dimension surpassing authenticity, holistic integration, sensory engagement, and flexible structure positions the natural environment not as a contextual backdrop to wellness tourism but as its primary active ingredient.

6. Conclusions, Limitations, And Future Research

6.1. Conclusions and Practical Implications

This study establishes that immersion in natural environments is a statistically significant, positively oriented predictor of perceived psychological wellbeing among foreign wellness tourists in Colombo, Sri Lanka (χ^2 = 340.217, $p < 0.001$, $r = 0.312$). The findings are theoretically grounded in Attention Restoration Theory and Stress Recovery Theory, empirically robust across a large purposive sample of 374 international wellness tourists, and practically relevant to one of the Asia-Pacific region's most dynamically growing wellness tourism destinations.

For wellness programme operators in Colombo, four practical recommendations follow. First, programme design should prioritise outdoor and coastal natural settings as the primary venue for core mindfulness activities, treating indoor spaces as supplementary rather than primary. Second, destination marketing should foreground Colombo's unique urban-coastal natural assets the Indian Ocean coastline, tropical botanical environments, and urban green corridors as the defining competitive advantage of its wellness tourism proposition. Third, Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) should develop and enforce minimum standards for natural environment access and quality within accredited wellness programme certifications, ensuring that the natural immersion dimension that tourists most value is reliably delivered. Fourth, investment in coastal access infrastructure, urban green space protection, and environmental quality management around Colombo's wellness tourism precincts is warranted as a direct contributor to psychological wellbeing outcomes and therefore to destination competitiveness.

6.2. Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The use of judgmental sampling and a single-city focus limits the generalisability of findings beyond Colombo's specific urban-coastal context. The cross-sectional design prevents

causal inference: while the association between natural immersion and wellbeing is statistically robust, longitudinal designs would be required to establish directionality and temporal dynamics. The reliance on self-reported Likert data is subject to social desirability and recall biases. The high proportion of cells with expected count below five in the chi-square analysis, a function of the five-point Likert response distribution should be noted as a statistical limitation, and findings should be interpreted alongside the Pearson correlation results for a balanced assessment. Finally, the absence of demographic data, while protective of participant confidentiality, prevents examination of whether natural immersion effects vary by tourist nationality, prior wellness experience, or age group.

6.3. Future Research Directions

Future studies should examine whether the natural immersion-wellbeing relationship identified here holds across other urban-coastal wellness destinations in the Asia-Pacific region, including comparable cities in India, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand. Comparative designs contrasting urban-coastal, rural retreat, and purely urban wellness settings would test the theoretical proposition that urban-coastal contexts generate a distinctive restorative profile. Qualitative and mixed-methods designs would add interpretive depth to the quantitative patterns reported here, particularly regarding the psychological mechanisms through which specific natural elements - ocean sounds, tropical scents, warm coastal climate contribute to restoration. Longitudinal studies tracking the psychological wellbeing of repeat wellness tourists over multiple visits would address the sustainability question: does the restorative effect of natural immersion persist, accumulate, or diminish with repeated exposure? Finally, physiological measurement approaches cortisol levels, heart rate variability, EEG attention measures would extend the evidence base beyond self-reported perceptions to objectively measurable psychological restoration outcomes.

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