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From stress reduction to even mitigating the climate crisis, the societal benefits of lakes and ponds are profound.

Sea-bathing was encouraged back in the 1750s; recent census data [5] shows that the closer you live to the sea, the healthier you report being.

In the 1930s, writing in the *Lancet*, Dr Fortescue Fox called for research into the health benefits of the sea; today, the BlueHealth project [6] at the University of Exeter is investigating the impact of blue spaces on human health—and whether these benefits can be brought indoors.

Harnessing health from the sea and other "blue spaces"

It's known that urban green spaces [7], such as parks and community gardens, promote physical and mental health and wellbeing through stress reduction, and through encouraging exercise and social interaction. Blue spaces, which include everything from coasts to rivers, lakes, reservoirs, and fountains, likely confer similar benefits.

Historically, water's mineral content drew many to the Roman Baths [8] in search of healing; today the focus is on the ability of water spaces and sports to create a sense of achievement, serenity, freedom, wonder—and even a mitigating effect on the climate crisis and its health impact.

Meeting challenges

"Jumping into the sea in winter is the only time the anxious negative chatter in my head is truly silenced. After even a brief swim, I feel elated for hours and calm for days," writes Dr Chris van Tulleken [9], who suggests that one reason for his post-swim high may be the sense of empowerment and achievement that such a challenge brings.

Others describe [10] the euphoria arising as they master the waves, and their weaknesses and fears, when surfing. Thrilling and intoxicating, the inherent dangers of the sea need appreciating before its antidepressant potential is explored.

Mitigating the climate crisis

Climate change [11] is recognised as a health emergency: if action is not taken, the number of heat-related deaths could increase by more than 250 per cent by 2050; the heatwave of 2003 may have killed more than 70,000 people in Europe.

Good old garden ponds, and other urban blue spaces, may play a remarkable role in turning the temperature down, according to Chris Packham and Megan McCubbin in their book, *Back to Nature*. Acting as carbon sinks, they also absorb surrounding heat during evaporation, dropping daytime temperatures by 2 or 3°C.

Much is made of planting trees to combat global warming; creating ponds and restoring swamps and bogs are other natural climate solutions.

Muting calls

Being away from your mobile phone because you're in the water can be beneficial for your health. Excessive screen time is linked to poorer mental health, and the development of obesity, insomnia, depression and anxiety; try transitioning into an aquatic environment and disconnecting from daily life.

Even the shortest of sea trips opens up the possibility of wonder, which is known to boost wellbeing, as the sense of awe makes us, and our worries, feel small. There's freedom to be found in a few fleeting moments of self-forgetfulness; being on the sea helps you to see land, and life, from a different perspective.

Moving comfortably

Research in the *British Medical Journal* [12] suggests that around 70,000 deaths each year in the UK are linked to spending too much time sitting down, with cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer risk all linked to inactivity.

For some people, land-based exercise is difficult or painful, but the warmth and buoyancy of water make aquatic exercise an attractive alternative. "I can't walk far, but I can swim 60 lengths," reports one wheelchair user. Aside from swimming, aqua aerobics and aqua jogging are also recommended, facilitating movement and offering new-found freedom and health benefits.

A majestic chorus

Author Charlie Corbett entitled his book *12 Birds to save your life*. Working his way through grief, he describes how the song of a skylark pulled him from the depths of despair; how birds played a part in his mental rehabilitation and even saved his life.

The impact of birdsong on the mind and body is, in Charlie's words, almost akin to that first ice-cold gin and tonic after a hot and stressful day at work, or the warm bath after a bone-achingly difficult day on your feet. Being by water brings an abundance of birdsong, affectionately known as "the alternative dawn chorus [13]", comprising the high-pitched call of the kingfisher, the warbling notes of the yellow wagtail, the mix and match sounds of the moorhen and the call of the cuckoo. Hear and be healed.

Missed communities

For care home residents and others less able to access the great outdoors, benefits of blue spaces might be brought inside through innovative virtual reality technology. Researchers in the BlueHealth project wonder whether artificial aquatic environments may reduce stress and discomfort in the dentist's chair, and boost wellbeing among housebound older people.

When it comes to nature though, nothing beats the real thing, and specially adapted wheelchairs [14] are enabling care home residents to reach the water's edge and embrace its healing power.

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