

# Domestic Nature-Based Tourism and Wellbeing: A Roadmap for the New Normal?



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**Abstract** Since most tourism experiences occur in the natural environment, nature-based tourism (NBT) is probably the largest and most popular form of tourism. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a multitude of studies have investigated the benefits of NBT, particularly the outcomes of participating in nature-based leisure and recreation activities for tourist wellbeing. This chapter explores how individuals pursue NBT and leisure during the COVID-19 pandemic with the aim of understanding ways of enhancing tourist wellbeing. We first review the benefits of NBT on individuals in relation to selected dimensions of human wellbeing. Due to the decline in international tourism during the pandemic, we draw insights from case studies about domestic nature-based leisure and recreation activities commonly engaged in by people before and during the pandemic. Thereafter, we reflect on the outcomes of the explored nature-based leisure and recreation activities on individuals' wellbeing during the pandemic, and propose a model highlighting three main dimensions of domestic tourism's role during and after the pandemic. Finally, we reflect on a future agenda of research on NBT and recreation in the *new normal*.

**Keywords** Tourism · Nature · Wellbeing · COVID-19 · Nature-based tourism

## Introduction

Humans have long been drawn to visit natural areas and attractions, undertake outdoor leisure and recreational activities, and immerse themselves in nature. Prior to the global disruption to mobility due to the COVID-19 pandemic, reports showed

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that visiting natural areas has been steadily, if not rapidly, increasing. In the year 2019, the National Park Service (2020) recorded over 327.5 million recreational visits to U.S. national parks, this being approximately ten million higher than for the previous year. For the major European markets (e.g., Germany, France, Netherlands, Belgium, Poland, and the Czech Republic), visiting nature has been revealed as tourists' primary motive for selecting tourist destinations (Centre for the Promotion of Imports from Developing Countries, 2020). For protected areas in Southeast Asia, natural attractions were found to strongly influence tourist spatial patterns, as opposed to cultural and other supporting artefacts (Kim et al., 2019).

*Nature-based tourism* (NBT) has received multiple labels (e.g., *nature tourism*, *natural area tourism*) and overlapping definitions. Newsome et al. (2013) simply defined NBT as tourism that takes place in the natural environment with particular attention to conserving and learning about nature. Fossgard and Fredman (2019) conceptualised NBT as the “nexus between tourism, outdoor recreational activities, and nature areas” (p. 2). Although NBT can take many forms including, but not limited to, ecotourism, geotourism, wildlife tourism, marine tourism, and adventure tourism (Fennell, 2014; Higham & Lück, 2007; Robinson & Novelli, 2005; Tisdell & Wilson, 2012), all these are characterised by natural environments and resources in developed or undeveloped locales (or a combination of both) for environmental protection and tourist enjoyment. NBT activities act as alternatives to the destructive forms of mass tourism because they are informed by a philosophy of sustainability and eco-centricity (Newsome et al., 2013). Yet, it is also recognised that NBT may damage the environment due to overuse and improper management (Cater & Goodall, 1992; Tisdell & Wilson, 2012).

The notions of environmental protection, sustainability and tourist enjoyment suggest that NBT should foster environmental education, ecological sustainability, local benefits, and tourist satisfaction (Fennell, 2014; Newsome et al., 2013). NBT can also be viewed through an economic transactional lens, which means benefits should be delivered for those who offer products (e.g., destinations, operators) and those who demand and consume tourism experiences in nature (e.g., tourists; Tisdell & Wilson, 2012). Apart from investigating the forms of NBT products and experience offerings (Arnegger et al., 2010; Huijbens, 2011), researchers have also provided significant attention on understanding *nature-based tourists*, including their needs and the perceived benefits gained from engaging in NBT.

Since tourism starts from one's need and desire for travel, early works on nature-based tourists examined the motivations for engaging in NBT (Eagles, 1992). Not surprisingly, seminal works on this topic identify *experiencing nature* as a fundamental tourist motive (Holden & Sparrowhawk, 2002; Mehmetoglu, 2007). Moreover, studies have found escaping, novelty-seeking and self-development as essential motives, proposing nature is sufficient to meet tourists' need to relax, experience new and different environments, and develop knowledge and skills (Luo & Deng, 2007; Mehmetoglu, 2007). Since the natural environment provides optimal settings for sports and adventure activities (Arnegger et al., 2010; Kulczycki & Lück, 2009), nature has also been revealed as a fundamental dimension of risk-seeking sought by some nature-based tourists (Giddy & Webb, 2016). Most importantly, NBT attractions and activities have been indicated as satisfying

wellness-seeking motives of tourists, highlighting the role nature plays in enhancing subjective wellbeing (Kim et al., 2015; Pyo et al., 1989). More specifically, recent research has illustrated that participating in NBT, leisure and recreation has positive effects on nature-based tourists' wellbeing and quality of life (Buckley, 2020; Campon-Cerro et al., 2020; Hanna et al., 2019), and is influenced by mobility (Aronsson, 2000). Thus, it is valuable to explore how individuals pursue NBT and recreation activities at these present times when human mobility is restricted.

Tourism activities were a super-spreader of the COVID-19 virus. Regardless of the form, tourism was also the first casualty of the COVID-19 pandemic. As governments enforced local to nation-wide lockdowns, international borders were closed and people were forced to stay at their homes. Travel plans were either re-scheduled or cancelled completely. People's activities and movements were limited during these lockdowns in accordance with local policies (e.g., in New Zealand, residents were allowed to undertake low-risk physical outdoor activities and visit local parks). And when travelling for leisure was once again allowed in many countries (domestically), restrictions such as social distancing and wearing of masks were commonly imposed at tourist sites. Although faced with rules and restrictions, individuals have still participated in domestic NBT and leisure activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. We propose that undertaking domestic holidays in nature regardless of the distance from home and duration, has the potential to benefit individual wellbeing. In this chapter, we provide a preliminary exploration of the types of tourism, leisure, and recreation activities pursued in nature-based settings during the pandemic. Based on the case studies investigated in this chapter, we infer some potential benefits of engaging in domestic NBT and leisure in the *new normal*.

## Nature-Based Tourism and Tourist Wellbeing

Literature on wellness tourism is predominantly focused on travel to confined spaces such as spa and health resorts, with offerings that include treatments (e.g., massage), activities (e.g., yoga), and nutrition (e.g., healthy food choices). Edited volumes, such as Smith and Puczko (2013) and Bushell and Sheldon (2009) demonstrate this focus. Our chapter focuses on less structured concepts of wellness and wellbeing outcomes because: (1) we recognise that structured wellness tourism activities seem to be less relevant due to the restrictions imposed during the global pandemic; and (2) acknowledge the overlap between wellness and wellbeing benefits especially those associated with NBT. In some cases NBT offerings such as hiking programmes (Fig. 1), are deliberately designed to promote sickness prevention and foster wellbeing (e.g., Lück & Gross, 2016; Ohe et al., 2017), and therefore have a significant overlap. Nonetheless, Pyo et al.'s (1989) seminal work that tested the relationship between push and pull travel motivations showed that wellness motives were strongly related to nature-based attractions. Their study showed that health-conscious tourists perceived that visiting natural attractions may improve their wellbeing.



**Fig. 1** Hiking can be a fun and healthy family activity, such as in the Harz Mountains, Germany. (Image courtesy of Michael Lück)

The notion of *wellbeing* is subjective and does not refer to a fixed state (Hanna et al., 2019). The term is used interchangeably with the phrase *quality of life* (Uysal et al., 2016; see also *Part III Wellbeing: Wellbeing and Quality of Life in Tourism*), particularly in the context of improving people's life domains (e.g., financial, health, social, or occupational).

From a self-determination theory perspective, wellbeing is viewed as being enhanced by fulfilling needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In line with this theory, Smith and Diekmann (2017) suggest that tourism and recreational activities that incorporate opportunities for self-development, mastering a new skill, or fostering social relationships with others, could improve tourists' wellbeing. Views on the dimensions of wellbeing vary from author to author, with some founded in the original work of Hettler's hexagonally shaped wellness model that includes elements (*life dimensions to balance*) of social, intellectual, spiritual, physical, emotional and occupational wellness (National Wellness Institute, 2020). Subsequent models were presented in circular shape (*wellness wheel*), initially consisting of Hettler's six dimensions. Over time, dimensions were changed and/or added, such as financial and environmental wellness (Fig. 2, University of Utah, 2020).

Guided by the interrelated dimensions that are commonly examined in studies of tourists and wellbeing (Huijbens, 2011; Kulczycki, & Lück, 2009; Smith &



**Fig. 2** The Wellness Wheel. (Source: University of Utah, School of Medicine 2020)

Diekmann, 2017; Uysal et al., 2016), we reviewed the perceived benefits and well-being outcomes of participating in tourism activities in nature-based settings (Table 1).

As Table 1 shows, previous studies have identified a range of outcomes and benefits for tourists who undertake tourism activities in nature. These include restorative outcomes that can improve physical and mental wellbeing. Curtin (2009), for example, found that watching wildlife and nature resulted in physical relaxation and rejuvenation. In a study of fitness holidays, Little (2015) discovered that nature was paramount in the practices of fitness-conscious tourists for their physical care and maintenance. In addition to physical wellbeing, Buckley (2020) found that tourists visiting forest and beach parks had improved mental health and they felt “regenerated, more relaxed, [and] recovered from stress” (p. 1416). Farkić et al. (2020) explored how slow journeying in nature resulted in tourists having a *sense of freedom* which enhances psychological wellbeing. Similarly, traversing natural landscapes and wildlife watching have been revealed to induce mental relaxation by transporting tourists into a *state of flow* (Curtin, 2009; Willis, 2015).

Perceived outcomes and benefits of tourists’ emotional wellbeing have also been examined in previous NBT studies. These were investigated in the context of general tourism activities, as well as happiness and positive psychology (see *Part III Wellbeing: Health Psychology, Positive Psychology, and the Tourist*). Like the latter area of tourism scholarship, the reviewed studies for this chapter showed a direct positive link between NBT and tourists’ happiness (Buckley, 2019, 2020;

**Table 1** Published studies examining perceived outcomes and benefits of nature-based tourism on tourists' wellbeing

Wellbeing dimension	Perceived outcomes and benefits for nature-based tourists	Contributors
Physical	Physical relaxation Improving overall physical health Rejuvenation Improved physical fitness Prevention	Buckley (2020), Croy et al. (2020), Curtin (2009), Farkić and Taylor (2019), Little (2015), Lück and Gross (2016) and Willis (2015)
Mental	Mental relaxation and recovery De-stressed/lower stress levels Being in a state of <i>flow</i> Feeling a sense of freedom Restore cognitive resources	Buckley (2019, 2020), Croy et al. (2020), Curtin (2009), Farkić et al. (2020), Mackenzie and Brymer (2018) and Willis (2015)
Emotional	Increase in overall happiness and positive emotions Experiencing a sense of awe and wonder Place attachment	Aquino et al. (2018), Buckley (2019, 2020), Campon-Cerro et al. (2020), Curtin (2009), Kulczycki and Lück (2009) and Willis (2015)
Social	Sense of togetherness (e.g., <i>communitas</i> ) Social connectedness	Farkić et al. (2020) and Mackenzie and Brymer (2018)
Occupational	Sense of accomplishment Gaining new skills	Aquino et al. (2018), Croy et al. (2020), Hanna et al. (2019) and Kulczycki and Lück (2009)
Intellectual	Increasing awareness about nature and wildlife Learning about cultures	Croy et al. (2020), Hanna et al. (2019) and Lück (2003, 2015)
Spiritual	Changed worldview Clarity or purpose in life Spiritual fulfilment Harmonising life with nature Rethinking human-nature relationships	Aquino et al. (2018), Buckley (2020), Campon-Cerro et al. (2020), Curtin (2009), Farkić and Taylor (2019), Hanna et al. (2019), Heintzman (2019), Pernecky and Johnston (2006) and Willis (2015)
Environmental	Harmony with nature World and political awareness Natural resource management Recycling/Conserving energy Sustainable and healthy food choices	Ardoin et al. 2015, Katpar et al. (2016), University of Nevada Las Vegas (2020) and Winter et al. (2020)

Campon-Cerro et al., 2020). Positive emotions, such as having a sense of awe and wonderment, were also associated with the experiences of tourists viewing and immersing themselves in geological landscapes (Aquino et al., 2018; Willis, 2015). While conceptualised to contribute to all dimensions of wellness and wellbeing, Kulczycki and Lück (2009) postulated that tourists' performance of adventure tourism activities and immersion in risky environments also develop the positive attribute of place attachment.

Social wellbeing outcomes were also evident in NBT studies. In a study of guided slow nature-based adventures, a sense of togetherness related to the concept of *communitas* between tourists and their guides was a main finding (Farkić et al., 2020). Accordingly, this social outcome was postulated to enhance "tourists' feelings of belongingness, fulfilment and overall wellbeing" (Farkić et al., 2020, p. 2074). This outcome appears to be common in outdoor adventure and NBT because these settings encourage individuals to work with others towards achieving common goals (e.g., skill mastery), thus promoting social connectedness (Mackenzie & Brymer, 2018).

Self-development as a result of improved occupational and intellectual wellbeing was also apparent. In several studies (Campon-Cerro et al., 2020; Hanna et al., 2019; Mackenzie & Hodge, 2020), a sense of fulfilment or accomplishment was strongly present in tourists' perceived benefits from engaging in NBT activities and recreation (e.g., conquering a mountain peak or finishing a trail), which in turn enhances individuals' occupational wellbeing. It can be argued that one of the most important benefits of NBT is learning new things about the environment, specifically about wildlife, biodiversity and its stewards (e.g., local communities and cultures). An environmentally educative experience is one of the pillars of ecotourism (Fennell, 2014), and past studies have shown that knowledge enhancement outcomes were evident, especially in nature-based tours with interpretation provided (Lück, 2003, 2015). Moreover, results suggest that experiences of nature are facilitators of personal change, as tourists partaking in outdoor adventure activities were revealed to become more environmentally and culturally aware (Hanna et al., 2019).

Another highly evident and an increasingly explored benefit of NBT is the effect on tourists' spiritual wellbeing. Studies indicated that communing with the natural environment induces individuals to rethink their relationship with nature, achieve clarity of outlook in life, and change their worldviews (Buckley, 2020; Hanna et al., 2019). In some instances, NBT may provide individuals with the opportunity to reflect and self-realise. In an exploration of experiences when traversing a risky volcanic trail, Aquino et al. (2018) found tourists were thinking philosophically about life while being challenged by the trekking activities and landscapes. These incidents of personal reflection that positively shape tourists' spiritual fulfilment were also depicted in other empirical inquiries (Campon-Cerro et al., 2020; Curtin, 2009; Heintzman, 2019; Willis, 2015).

Strongly related to spiritual wellbeing outcomes, nature-based tourists may develop place attachment given the immersive environments they engage with during NBT (Hanna et al., 2019; Kulczycki & Lück, 2009). In turn, this outcome may lead to several environmental wellbeing benefits while increasing sustainability

(Winter et al., 2020). Environmental wellbeing promotes lifestyles that respect the natural environment (University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2020). As shown in previous studies, participation in NBT may lead to a range of pro-environmental behaviours (e.g., energy conservation, food waste reduction) making individuals mindful of the adverse impacts of their activities and lifestyles on nature (Ardoin et al., 2015; Katpar, et al. 2016).

Conversely, it is important to note that while tourists produce their own NBT experiences, benefits and outcomes accruing from this form of tourism on individual wellbeing are also dependent on the experience design. Some elements of NBT experience design may include the natural environment, built tourism provisions (e.g., walkways and viewing platforms), physical activities, presence of interpretation, and social interactions.

## **The Nordic Countries and Japan: Case Studies in Tourism and Nature-Based Leisure Philosophy and Practice**

In order to illustrate the positive wellness effects of NBT, we have chosen two case studies of regions and countries where the population generally has a very close relationship with nature, namely the Nordic countries and Japan. These cultures have a philosophy that places great importance on outdoor pursuits during leisure times, be these recreational activities or main holidays. There are different approaches in these places, from “just being in nature” by engaging in activities, such as hiking, kayaking, or skiing, to more formalised programmes, such as forest therapy.

### ***The Nordic Countries, the Outdoors, and Friluftsliv***

Fredman et al. (2006) note that Scandinavians have always had a great affinity with the outdoors, and as such a profound understanding of NBT. For example, Viken (2006) notes that Norwegians do not really understand the concept of ecotourism because Norwegians have a close relationship with nature, and “nature is more or less where the Norwegians are born and where they live, harvest and spend their spare time, and it is also a significant element of national identity” (p. 39). Icelanders and Danes have developed an understanding of nature-based and sustainable tourism, which takes place in natural environments, and where learning about and conservation of nature is self-evident (Andkjær, 2012; Huijbens, 2011). As for Sweden, a national census revealed that 78% of the Swedish population had participated in forest hikes, and 11% in mountain hikes at least once per year (Fredman et al., 2006; Statistics Sweden, 2004).

This fundamental connection with the natural environment, based on the everyday life of Scandinavians, is manifested in the term *friluftsliv*, which can be loosely translated into *free air life*. The term was coined by the famous Norwegian author Henrik Ibsen in 1859, and is a philosophy deeply rooted in Norway and Sweden (Gelter, 2000). It is a philosophy hard to grasp in its entirety and depth, and difficult to translate, but it underpins a lifestyle, or way of life, based on experiencing the natural environment. Referring to Romanticism, Faarlund et al. (2007, p. 393) postulate that this philosophy relates to a culture where “nature is home of culture”, “Friluftsliv is a way home”, and “silence is a way free Nature speaks by keeping quiet.” Gelter (2000, p. 78) notes that “the reward of this connectedness with the landscape is this strong sensation of a new level of consciousness and a spiritual wholeness”, which in turn may be translated as wellbeing.

While Finland is not part of Scandinavia, it is a Nordic country and shares many similarities with its Scandinavian neighbours, including the significant role of outdoor recreation. Puhakka et al. (2017) note that there is a growing effort in developing nature-based wellbeing tourism in Finland. Indeed, they argue that national parks play a role in human wellbeing and health, and that there are psychological and cognitive benefits of interacting with nature. The National Resources Institute Finland (LUKE) recognised this importance and published *From Forest Bathing to Green Roofs: Guide for Productised Environments in Summer and Wellness Tourism* (Uusitalo & Lindroos, 2018), including practical information for landscaping in a tourism resort and tourism resort *cultivates*, that is, the beneficial plants that can be cultivated in the resort’s grounds (such as providing pollen for bees and food for the restaurants). The Institute’s overall goal is wellbeing through NBT.

Based on case studies in the Nordic countries, Hjalager and Flagestad (2012) noted that the conception of wellbeing tourism in these countries is very diverse, and includes varied products, such as events and festivals. They advocated for innovation in wellbeing tourism in these countries, highlighting the importance of technology (such as the integration of mobile phone technology) and for institutional innovations through collaboration.

An example of a study from Sweden, demonstrating the wellness benefits of being active in nature, in this case a marine park, follows.

### **NBT and Wellness in Kosterhavet National Park, Sweden**

Hansen (2018) undertook research in Kosterhavet National Park, Sweden’s first marine park, investigating the connection between the natural environment and visitors’ health and wellbeing. Kosterhavet is located in the north-west of Sweden, bordering Norway. Being a marine park, 98% of its 389 km<sup>2</sup> is sea, with 2% comprised of adjacent coastline and a number of islands in the archipelago (Fig. 3).

(continued)

The Park attracts approximately 300,000 visitors annually (Figs. 4 and 5), most of whom are Swedes and Norwegians (Hansen, 2016). Hansen employed visitor generated content analysis by asking visitors to provide him with up to 25 photos of their stay in Kosterhavet, followed up by an interview discussing these photos. Subsequent analysis showed that several photos linked to health and wellbeing aspects, and this became even clearer in the accompanying narratives. The study revealed five wellness-related main themes:

- (a) physical activities and exercise,
- (b) food experiences,
- (c) sensations of the elements,
- (d) peace and relaxation, and
- (e) togetherness.

Hansen (2018) concludes that:

Together, the visitor pictures and narratives from the study form an idea about how aspects of health and wellbeing are experienced in Kosterhavet. These experiences take place on an individual level and connect to personal feelings related to health and wellbeing when engaging with the natural environment in Kosterhavet (2018, pp. 132–133).

It became clear that many of the themes are interrelated; for example that good and healthy food experiences were also linked to togetherness. Another noteworthy finding of Hansen's study was that he observed the natural environment to have a dual role. First, the natural environment acts as a frame for the visitor experience and moderator for their wellbeing. These experiences can take the form of direct feelings (e.g., exercise and physical wellbeing) or indirect feelings (e.g., sensations, emotions). The second role concerns the experience of the healthy environment itself. This may include the sound and smell of the sea, or the taste of healthy locally caught seafood.

Given that most visitors to Kosterhavet National Park are from Scandinavia, the findings of Hansen's study underpin the importance of the philosophy of *friluftsliv*, and how it is directly related to quality of life and wellness.

## Japan and Forest Bathing

For many, the term forest bathing sounds unfamiliar, and perhaps even absurd. However, this concept has a long tradition in many countries including Germany, France and Russia (Zheng & Yang, 2013). Many studies have examined the health and wellbeing benefits of forest bathing (spending time among trees) in a variety of contexts and countries including Taiwan (Chen et al., 2018), Finland (Konu, 2015), Poland (Bielinis et al., 2018), and China (Mao et al., 2012). In Japan, forest bathing has not only wellness benefits, but is also directly linked to spirituality (Lee et al.,



**Fig. 3** Kosterhavet National Park, Sweden. (Source: Hansen (2016, p. 62))

2018). Indeed, Lee et al. (2018) argue that the concepts of forests and nature are based on the tripartite relationship of Shintoism (one of Japan's main native religions or belief systems); human beings, nature/forests and Kami (神 or deity). Consequently, the authors note that while there are common notions, the Japanese meaning of nature is distinct from that of other East Asian countries (Fig. 6).

Many non-tourism studies have investigated the health and wellbeing effects of forest bathing on various demographic groups (e.g., youth in Poland, middle-aged women in Taiwan, the elderly in China), and have highlighted the importance of the benefits of forest bathing. Further studies have specifically investigated the benefits



Fig. 4 Kosterhavet National Park in Sweden. (Image courtesy of Michael Lück)



Fig. 5 Nature-based tourism in Sweden's Kosterhavet National Park. (Image courtesy of Michael Lück)



**Fig. 6** Shintoism is based on the relationship between humans, nature and Kami. (Image courtesy of Michael Lück)

of forest bathing in Japan (Fig. 7). Here, the concept of forest bathing is referred to as *Shinrin-yoku*, a term meaning *making contact with and taking in the forest atmosphere* coined by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries in the 1980s (Japan Experience, 2020; Park et al., 2010). Research provides evidence of the positive effects of *Shinrin-yoku* (Ohe et al., 2017; Park et al., 2010; Tsunetsugu et al., 2010; Zheng & Yang, 2013), so much so that an official Forest Therapy Program was established by the Forest Agency in Japan.

### The Forest Therapy Program in Japan

In the early 2000s, the Japanese Forest Agency and the Forest and Forest Products Research Institute initiated a programme that enhanced forest bathing to include forest therapy. In addition to research about the positive effects of forest therapy, venues for the programme could be certified under two categories: (a) forest therapy base, or; (b) forest therapy road, based on how widely the effects reach. The official Forest Therapy website explains:

#### WHAT IS A “FOREST THERAPY BASE”

A “Forest Therapy Base” is an area located in a forest where the relaxing effects have been observed based on scientific analysis conducted by a forest medical expert. Moreover, it is an area where nature merges with society permitting people

(continued)

to come together and partake in some social activity surrounded by a natural environment. At each “Forest Therapy Base”, for the purpose of promoting a healthy lifestyle and encourage relaxation, other than forest walking, various other forest therapy programs are made available to visitors.

In order to be certified as a “Forest Therapy Base”, an appropriate forest location must be properly maintained so that visitors can effectively receive “Forest Therapy” and enjoy the physiological and psychological benefits. Also, a certified “Forest Therapy Base” needs to have more than two “Forest Therapy Road[s]” which will be discussed further.

#### WHAT IS A “FOREST THERAPY ROAD”

A “Forest Therapy Road” is a walking path that has been scientifically evaluated by a qualified expert. The path is judged on the physiological and psychological benefits it provides to those who walk along it. The “Forest Therapy Road” normally consists of a leisurely walking environment with mainly gentle slopes and wider paths than a regular sidewalk (Forest Therapy Society, 2020, *Forest* page, para. 1–3).

In 2006, the first six therapy bases and four therapy roads were certified, and this number has grown to 58 bases and 4 roads in 62 forests (Table 2).

Given the many health benefits of forest therapy and forest bathing, this programme has the potential to grow significantly and become a popular part of the tourism offerings in Japan, and elsewhere.

## Nature-Based Tourism, Wellbeing and COVID-19: Lessons for the New Normal?

The cases we have presented demonstrate that NBT and wellbeing are an integral part of these countries’ make-up, and outdoor experiences are engrained in the cultural DNA of their residents. This is particularly noteworthy, because due to travel restrictions and fear of flying during a pandemic the majority of travel during the COVID-19 pandemic is indeed domestic. It is also important to encourage NBT experiences, because for many COVID-19 has added stress in the workplace and at home. Domestic NBT has the capability to alleviate some of the pandemic induced stresses and enhance the general wellbeing of domestic tourists. The next two subsections outline some of the responses to the adverse impacts of COVID-19 on the case study locations’ international tourism, as well as these countries’ subsequent measures to promote domestic NBT. Thereafter, a model that emphasises the valuable role of domestic NBT in the new normal is presented.

### *The Nordic Countries*

During the pandemic, Nordic countries had different government responses in terms of travel restrictions, and COVID-19 measures in general. Sweden has been in the spotlight for its controversial herd immunity approach. However, despite this



**Fig. 7** Forest bathing near Kyoto, Japan. (Image courtesy of Michael Lück)

**Table 2** Forest therapy bases and forest therapy roads in Japan

Region	Forest therapy base	Forest therapy road
Hokkaido	2	–
Tohoku	5	1
Kanto	10	1
Hokuriku—Koshinetsu	16	1
Tokai	2	1
Chugoku	10	–
Shikoku	2	–
Kyusyu	10	–
Okinawa	1	–
<b>Total</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>4</b>

Sources: Forest Therapy Society (2020) and Japan Experience (2020)

approach, there were travel restrictions in place, but these were lifted in the height of summer just before the important mid-summer holidays (mid-June; Radio Sweden, 2020). At the end of 2020, those asymptomatic were allowed to travel, but individual municipalities may have had local restrictions. International arrivals were permitted to enter Sweden from EU countries, the UK, Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein or Switzerland. All non-essential inbound tourism was not permitted (Krisinformation Sverige, 2020).

At the time of writing, all Nordic countries had travel restrictions, especially for tourists from outside the EU. Within each country, rules also existed in terms of when and where to travel and under which conditions. These regulations change frequently, so it would be moot to detail them here. For up-to-date information, one may consult national tourism advisories, such as the ones shown in Table 3.

As might be expected, all countries aforementioned had significant decreases in visitor numbers and overnights stays. For example, Sweden's overnight stays have declined by approximately 30% since the outbreak of the pandemic early in 2020 (Statista, 2020). This decline was exacerbated by the tighter travel restrictions including mandatory quarantine on return required by Norway, one of the most significant tourism generating countries for Sweden. Iceland's inbound travel had dropped by more than 95% in September 2020 compared to the previous year (Icelandic Tourist Board, 2020). Other Nordic countries experienced similar reductions in visitor numbers, especially from outside their respective borders.

Travel restrictions, along with the fear of contracting COVID-19, and cumbersome border procedures at airports, resulted in many citizens staying at home or travelling domestically. Consequently, some locales in Nordic countries have experienced significant growth in tourist numbers. For example, the island of Öland is reported to be “packed with people, but not everyone is pleased” (Nikel, 2020, para.10). Negativity has arisen where the local Öland population fears that the virus will return to the island. In Norway, expedition cruise ships with up to 250 passengers are permitted (at the time of writing) to make port calls in Longyearbyen, Svalbard, a popular cruise destination. However, since most cruise operators have cancelled their operations until at least early 2021, this visitation is of limited help to boost tourism income, since it appears that only the Norwegian Coastal Express (Hurtigruten) continues to serve Svalbard (Nilsen, 2020). Finland reported that domestic trips became very popular in 2020. However, Finns had some reservations about the safety of commercial accommodation in the country—hotel nights decreased by about one-third compared to 2019. In contrast, cottage holidays, both

**Table 3** National tourism advisories.

National tourism advisories	Website
Icelandic Tourist Board	<a href="https://www.ferdamalastofa.is/en">https://www.ferdamalastofa.is/en</a>
Visit Norway	<a href="https://www.visitnorway.com">https://www.visitnorway.com</a>
Visit Denmark	<a href="https://www.visitdenmark.com">https://www.visitdenmark.com</a>
Visit Finland	<a href="https://www.visitfinland.com">https://www.visitfinland.com</a>
Krisinformation Sverige (Swedish Emergency Information)	<a href="https://www.krisinformation.se">https://www.krisinformation.se</a>

in owned and rented cottages, were extremely popular and “increased nearly one-and-a-half times compared with the previous year” (Official Statistics of Finland, 2020, para.7).

## *Japan*

As for most tourist destinations around the globe, Japan’s inbound tourism ground to a halt during the pandemic. Indeed, at the time of writing, Japan Guide reports the current state of tourism as “borders virtually closed” (Japan Guide, 2020, para.1). Consequently, Japan aimed to support the industry by fostering domestic travel, promoted by the *Go To Travel* campaign, offering Japanese travellers subsidies for day and multi-day trips amounting potentially to 50% in savings (Furutani, 2020). The campaign was successful, and Asahi.com, (2020) reported that the Nishitama area, rich in nature with forests and a limestone cave, was overcrowded by cars carrying day visitors. The congestion was so bad that public transport and emergency services had trouble operating, triggering a limit to the number of cars allowed to enter the area. This resulted in 870 cars being denied entry the following day.

Another response to the lack of international travel is the call for a re-emergence of micro-tourism. This was common in the 1970s, when limited budgets and leave days necessitated short and close-by holidays for Japanese workers (Shoji, 2020). Now there is a call to revive this concept, particularly to support the tourism industry while at the same time spreading the number of tourists across the year to avoid seasonal crowding issues. However, during specific holidays such as during the Golden Week or the Bon holidays, too many Japanese took micro-holidays resulting in unprecedented crowding (as for the case of the Nishitama area described above). Nevertheless, Shoji (2020) concludes that in 2020 micro-tourism has been judged as successful, where, for example, reports claim that domestic visitors keep the Gunma Prefecture’s hot-spring industry alive.

## **The Role of Nature-Based Tourism During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Template for the New Normal?**

After having introduced and reviewed the case studies on the Nordic countries and Japan, it became clear that despite the significant negative impacts the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the tourism industry, as well as on individuals, there are positive lessons to be learnt. This is particularly the case when it comes to nature-based activities and NBT. As discussed above, the traditional forms of *wellness tourism*, that is, tourism focused on spa and wellness hotels appear to have less relevance during a global pandemic. However, it has been widely reported that many people

have experienced significant stress during the pandemic due to lockdowns, fear of contracting the virus, changed work arrangements (i.e., working from home), additional responsibilities (such as home schooling of children), actual or potential job losses, and others. We argue that NBT has great potential to help alleviate at least some of these stresses by providing a direct positive effect, be it through day trips, short stays or the main holidays. While this outcome may be a quite obvious positive effect on the wellbeing of the tourists or recreationists during a difficult time, we also argue that such holidays will have an equally positive effect in the new normal for years to come. Staying closer to home, and spending time in nature, has the added bonus of taking the stress out of travelling long haul (such as check-in queues, safety checks, time differences, climate differences), which presumably contributes to the overall wellness of the travellers.

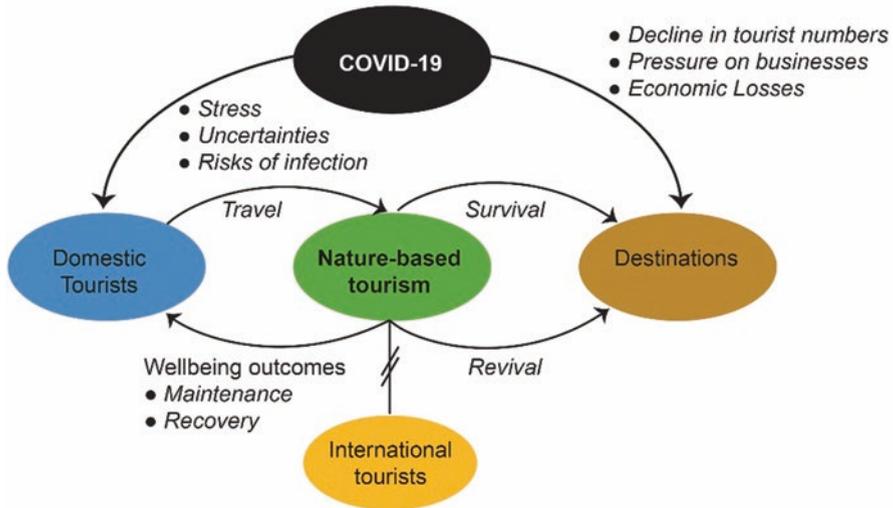
Another, far less obvious benefit of NBT in terms of wellbeing and tourism is the fact that local tourism businesses benefit from domestic travel. In many countries, from small populations (such as New Zealand) to large populations (such as the USA), domestic travel was generating greater economic benefits pre-pandemic when compared to international tourism. If domestic tourism in the era of the new normal becomes even more popular, there are additional wellness benefits, not only for the travellers, but also for the tourism business proprietors, employees and destination communities. Many business owners and employees in the tourism industry have been heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and underlying causes may continue for some time to come. This has direct and indirect wellness implications due to financial worries, actual and potential job losses and furloughs, and a sense of not being needed. Domestic NBT has the power to infuse funds into these businesses, and thus help them *survive*. In focussing on NBT and increasingly healthy holiday options, NBT can also *revive* the domestic tourism industry by reinventing itself. In this way, the often mentioned “reset button for the tourism industry” (Lück et al., 2021) may indeed be pushed. The model in Fig. 8 illustrates these relationships between the impacts and stresses induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, NBT, wellbeing outcomes and the survival of domestic tourism destinations.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic transpired to be a truly global pandemic and posed unprecedented challenges to countries around the world. One of the hardest hit industries has been the tourism, hospitality and leisure sectors due to international travel being almost eliminated. However, with some restrictions, domestic travel has been possible in many places. Governments and businesses have begged people to travel and spend money in local tourism and hospitality businesses in an effort to support their survival.

A second major effect of the pandemic was a significant impact on the wellbeing of many citizens induced by uncertainty about jobs, isolation during lockdowns, and in the most severe cases hospitalisation and even loss of loved ones due to the virus.

### THE 3 DIMENSIONS OF NATURE-BASED TOURISM



**Fig. 8** The three dimensions of domestic nature-based tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic: Wellbeing, revival and survival

In this context, we have discussed the wider concepts of wellness and wellbeing, and their different dimensions. Using case studies from the Nordic countries and Japan, we explored the inherent connectedness of these cultures to nature, and how this is exemplified in people’s daily lives. Even during a global pandemic, their desire to spend time in nature seems hardly to have evaporated. In fact, in the absence of international travel, the attraction of natural settings is likely to have gained an even more significant role. This is shown in examples where encouraging short-distance travel has resulted in a heavy use of local infrastructure and overcrowding in Japan.

On the basis of these case studies and earlier research, we argue that domestic NBT can play a major role during a pandemic, as well as in the *new normal*. Our proposed model identifies three interrelated dimensions that, through their interactions, aid in the maintenance and improvement of wellness among citizens. First, we argue that simply being in nature (e.g., hiking, forest bathing) has significant health benefits, as evidenced by the Japanese example of forest bathing and forest therapy. Second, domestic NBT may aid the survival of the hardest hit tourism businesses and destinations. And third, NBT can play a major role in reviving and re-inventing tourism in the new normal, and in doing so underscore the need of more sustainable travel options.

While the latter two dimensions (Fig. 8) are ostensibly economic in nature, an assumption may be that they have no obvious relationship to wellbeing. This view would be short-sighted. As we have discussed, most tourism businesses have been significantly affected by the pandemic, and this had major wellbeing implications;

business owners will continue to worry about how to survive, pay their bills, whether to let go employees. They hence face a bleak-looking future. Equally, many employees have lost their jobs or face uncertainty about the security of their employment. All of these effects have a direct impact on the wellbeing of these individuals, and if domestic NBT can help revive the tourism industry, then this would have positive implications for the wellbeing of many people working in the tourism and hospitality sectors. An additional benefit, though not directly discussed in this chapter, may be a more sustainable and resilient tourism industry not heavily reliant on international tourists in a new normal after a global pandemic.

The need to travel in nature for recreation, recovery and renewal has existed long before the global pandemic. Given this, we suggest more empirical examinations of nature-based tourist experiences (including the barriers to engaging in NBT and its limitations) and the impacts of domestic NBT on wellbeing during the new normal. Although our chapter has focused on NBT, we also recognise that individuals may have engaged in other forms of nature-based leisure and recreation during the pandemic (e.g., walks in urban parks during lockdowns). Thus, we also suggest investigating the immediate effects of non-tourism leisure and recreation activities in nature on individual wellbeing.

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