

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION  
Social Ecological Context of Restorative Environments  
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This research investigates the influence of environmental change on psychological and physical health benefits of restorative environment visitation. Restorative environments, primarily natural environments, alleviate directed attention fatigue, assuage psychophysiological stress, and provide environments for passive and exercise activities. This study aims to fill the knowledge gap regarding influences of environmental gradients on the nature experience and health outcomes relationship. This is an opportune time to address this gap due to climate change vulnerabilities and the WHO's study revealing neuropsychiatric diseases the number one burden of disease. The objectives of the study were: (1) survey visitors at coastal parks where there are current, measurable environmental gradients; (2) elucidate the relationship between perceived restorativeness of coastal environments and gradients in environmental health and (3) elucidate the relationship between activity choices and gradients in environmental parameters; (4) determine whether participants would alter their visitation behaviors given a set of hypothetical weather and environmental conditions; and (5) determine if visitor abundance within coastal parks significantly affects experience. Visitors (n = 1,153) to three California State Beaches were surveyed on 75 dates in 2008. Participants completed a questionnaire on (1) park visitation, (2) perceived weather, environmental quality, and crowd, (3) stress and perceived restorativeness, and (4) demographic characteristics. Visitors perceived a greater psychological restorativeness when temperatures were at/below monthly maximum temperatures, mean sea level was below average, and air quality was rated 'Good' (compared to 'Moderate' or worse). Visitors' environmental quality perceptions were positively correlated with perceived restorativeness. When presented with warmer temperatures scenarios, those visiting on days with temperatures above average were significantly more likely to select 'Visit for a shorter time' and/or 'Definitely not visit'. Given results, projected global climate change will constrain the psychological health benefits associated with beach visitation. Activity participation, conversely, increased as ambient temperature rose above monthly average. Lastly, visitors significantly preferred less crowded beaches. Overall, the results advance the understanding of how environmental quality contributes to human – environment experience and explicates the need for further research to ascertain thresholds within parametric environmental gradients beyond which public participation in psychologically restorative activities is significantly impaired.