

Digital waters: Understanding the impact of virtual blue spaces on environmental identity and wellbeing

Melusine Martin

My research project examines the impact of virtual blue spaces (i.e., the experience of aquatic environments via digital and virtual-reality technologies) on environmental identity, nature connectedness, and well-being of young adults. Nature exposure is positively associated with well-being and negatively associated with mental distress; it also strengthens nature connectedness and environmental identity (i.e., a sense of identity that transcends the individual and encompasses the natural environment). Research shows that environmental identity is an important predictor of ecological behavior. In this respect, nurturing environmental identity of young adults is key to fostering proenvironmental individuals who will treat nature respectfully.

However, for young adults living in urban areas regular contact with nature can sometimes be difficult to achieve. Immersive virtual natural environments and the experience of nature through virtual reality have emerged as a potentially valuable alternative to real nature exposure. Additionally, while many studies focus on the impact of virtual green environments (usually forest environments via forest bathing), few of them investigate the effects of blue environments (i.e., oceans, rivers, reefs, mangroves, etc.)—a gap this project aims to address. At the Landhaus, I will focus on completing the first phase of this study, that is to conduct preliminary research and a critical analysis of scientific sources in order to write a literature review. This piece of academic writing will demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the academic literature on the scope of virtual and real nature benefits and limitations in the context of the blue humanities. In addition, it will offer a critical evaluation of the scientific sources that will inform the theoretical framework and methodology of the research project.