**'Cause down the shore, everything's all right…**

by

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Seasonal Naturalist

Whenever I hear singer Bruce Springsteen sing the above lyrics from the song **Jersey Girl**, I feel my thoughts turn to pleasant memories of playing in the ocean as a young child or now as a 61 year-old kid! Growing up in New Jersey, I often find myself, heading to the Jersey Shore to surf the waves in my kayak, bop up and down in the surf, walk the boardwalk or on the beach. I often wonder how do people who live in the middle of America survive without a glimpse of the ocean!

 Often, I have pondered on why I receive so much joy and contentment from just smelling the salt air and sensing the lightness of the sea air! In reading the book, **Blue Mind – The Surprising Science That Shows How Being Near, In, On, or Under Water Can Make You Happier, Healthier, More Connected, and Better at What You Do** by Wallace J. Nichols PhD (Little, Brown and Company Hachette Book Group New York, NY 2014), I have discovered that there is actual scientific data to support the very strong positive feelings that I have towards water. Being an avid swimmer since the age of six, a canoeist in my teens and twenties, later on, a whitewater and ocean kayaker and now also a paddle boarder, I have always felt my daily concerns and stresses slip away when I am in or on the water. Even my winter passion for cross-country skiing is on frozen water crystals! Apparently, I am not alone!

According to the author, 80 per cent of the world’s population lives within sixty miles of a body of water whether it is an ocean, lake, or river. Worldwide, more than half a billion people derive their living directly from water. About one billion people rely on water-based sources for protein. It is very possible that the increased consumption of omega-3 oils from eating fish and shellfish has placed a big role in the development of the human brain[[1]](#footnote-1)

Could our strong connection to water be that the Earth is 70 percent covered by water and when we are born, our bodies are approximately 78 percent water? In the early stages of our development, human fetuses still have gill slits and the human embryo is immersed in a watery mixture inside their mother’s womb for nine months. As we age our bodies become about 60 percent water but our brains remain to be 80 percent water.[[2]](#footnote-2)

 Dr. Nichols cites research that the late philosopher, Denis Dutton conducted in 1997, which Dutton presented in a 2010 Ted Talk entitled “A Darwinian Theory of Beauty”. In his study, when people were asked to describe a “beautiful landscape, they commonly described open space with low grasses and some trees. Dutton found that if you added water or a bluish tint to the picture, people chose this scene every time. Dr. Dutton theorized that this scene contained all the elements that a person required to survive and thus, it was an innate choice for them to describe it as being beautiful.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In a 2010 survey at Plymouth University in the United Kingdom, researchers had forty participants rate over one hundred photos of different natural and urban settings. The scientists discovered that the settings that had water in them were rated higher for positive mood, preference, and perceived restorative qualities, regardless if they were natural or urban environments.[[4]](#footnote-4)

At the European Centre for Environment and Human Health, researchers conducted a similar study in 2010 to the Plymouth University study. Their findings indicated that the respondents had more positive emotions towards photos with water in them, even if the photo was of a fountain located in an urban plaza. The results showed that the urban water scenes were rated as high as scenes with green space.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In 2006, Irish researchers conducted a study of people who lived within five kilometers of the coast. They discovered that these residents expressed a higher life satisfaction than those that lived farther away from the coast. They also discovered that those participants that resided within two kilometers of the coast had an even stronger feeling about their life satisfaction.[[6]](#footnote-6) At the University of Essex in the United Kingdom, researchers reported that every green environment had an effect on both self-esteem and mood but places with open water produced a significantly larger degree of improvement in mental wellbeing.[[7]](#footnote-7) In a 2009-2011 Natural England study, Mathew White and his fellow researchers surveyed 4,225 people who compared visits to parks and open space in towns and cities or visits to countryside or coastal areas. In 2013, Dr. White reported that their findings concluded that people who visited coastal areas reported significantly greater feelings of restoration. This was true across all demographics.[[8]](#footnote-8)

With over 123 million people living in close proximity to water in the United States[[9]](#footnote-9), many communities have made an effort to revitalize their waterfronts to make them more attractive for people to visit, recreate and live in. In New Jersey, urban centers like Hoboken, Jersey City, Trenton, and Camden have all invested in redeveloping these areas. Where there were once rotting docks and abandoned warehouses; baseball stadiums, playing fields, walking, running, and bike trails have been constructed along with residential housing, restaurants and shops, so people can enjoy being close to the water. On a recent trip North on the New Jersey Turnpike near Secaucus, I was surprised to see the amount of new luxury condos and townhouses that have been built in the Hackensack Meadowlands. Out of the garbage dumps of my childhood have sprung expensive homes close to New York City - all having a water view! Just try to book a hotel room, rent an apartment, or buy a house or a condo with an ocean, lake, or river view and you can instantly see the high value that we place on being close to the water!

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1. Nichols, Wallace J. PhD, ***Blue Mind – The Surprising Science That Shows How***

 ***Being Near, In, On, or Under Water Can Make You Happier, Healthier, More***

 ***Connected, and Better at What You Do*** Little, Brown and Company Hachette Book

 Group New York, NY 2014, p. 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., p. 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., p. 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., p. 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., p. 54 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p. 64 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., p. 64 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., p. 76 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., p. 65 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)