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Life pours back: exploring hiking, wellbeing and information behaviour on the West Highland Way

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Abstract

Introduction. This study explores wellbeing benefits on the West Highland Way (WHW) long-distance hiking route in Scotland and how they connect with concepts in information behaviour, using the NEF/NHS Five Ways to Wellbeing framework.

Method. Using ethnographic methods, WHW participants were recruited and interviewed in situ as they walked. We used reflexive thematic analysis and the Five Ways to Wellbeing (connect, be active, take notice, learn, give) to code interview data.

Findings. Wellbeing benefits were attributed to social connections along the route; accomplishment in meeting a physical challenge; positive mental mindset from being present in nature; learning through cultural heritage; giving and receiving support from fellow walkers.

Discussion. Findings link with concepts from information behaviour in a number of ways: the social sharing of information enriches the experience; low information needs and embodied sensory information were central to the positive mental wellbeing benefits; walking the WHW is a higher thing, a memorable experience set against everyday life.

Conclusion. Future information behaviour research will benefit from exploring similar activities and their connections to wellbeing benefits, from social sharing of information, low information needs and embodied information. These wellbeing benefits may also be relevant to promoting the WHW.

Introduction

Walking is one of the most basic human activities, it was our first mode of transport and over time has evolved in myriad ways. It is a means of getting from point to point, and a culturally significant endeavour reflected through writings and musings from the times of Ancient Greek philosophy through to the present day. Walking has encompassed pilgrimage (Egan, 2010), hiking (Mueser, 1997), political protest (Solnit, 2001), inspiration for poetry (Coverley, 2012), a form of tribute (Herzog, 2014), a method of creating art (Pujol, 2018) and a means of reflecting on life (Shepherd, 2008).

In seeking to further develop knowledge of walking from an information science viewpoint, this paper explores the connections between long-distance hikers' information behaviour and their wellbeing through the lens of the NEF/NHS Five Ways to Wellbeing (Aked and Thompson, 2011; New Economics Foundation, 2008). This work is part of a broader research project looking at the information behaviour of hikers on the West Highland Way, a long-distance walking route in Scotland, UK.

Literature review

Hiking, wellbeing and information behaviour

From a serious leisure perspective (Stebbins, 1982), walking offers opportunities to gain fitness, appreciate nature, learn self-directed skills and experience a flow state (Davidson and Stebbins, 2011). Walking, in the form of rambling, hiking, mountaineering and long-distance walking has also evolved into a popular leisure pursuit (Davidson and Stebbins, 2011) and is one of the most popular activities in the UK (Scottish Natural Heritage, 2018). In recent years there has been research conducted from an information behaviour and human computer interaction perspective on long-distance hiking (Asimakopoulos and Dix, 2017; Hyatt, 2017; Hyatt et al., 2021; Innocenti et al., 2022; McCrickard et al., 2018) and long-distance walking pilgrimages (Innocenti, 2023).

In religious and pilgrimage studies long-distance walking has been linked to a flow state. Descriptions of a meditative mindset are discussed by walkers on the long-distance pilgrimage routes of the Camino de Santiago (Slavin, 2003) and on St. Olav's Way (Jørgensen et al., 2020). Walking as meditation is also extolled by former monk Ernesto Pujol, who incorporates it into his artistic practice (Pujol, 2018), as well as Scottish nature writer Nan Shepherd (2008). However, in information science, wellbeing has been so far insufficiently explored in terms of information behaviour. Except for the initial work of Dewitz (2022), wellbeing appears to be yet uncharted *health information behaviour* research (which encompasses the full spectrum of one's active or passive interactions regarding health information - Kelly et al, 2014) and *health information seeking behaviour* (which typically investigates people's online health information behaviour - Johnson and Case, 2012).

The World Health Organization (WHO) states that '*Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity*' (WHO, 1946). In recent years wellbeing has been further conceptualised '*in two dimensions, subjective and objective. It comprises an individual's experience of their life as well as a comparison of life circumstances with social norms and values*' (World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe, 2013).

The British think tank New Economics Foundation (NEF) defines wellbeing as comprising two main elements: feeling good and functioning well (New Economics Foundation, 2008). Feeling good can involve feelings of happiness, contentment, enjoyment, curiosity and engagement; functioning well is informed by positive relationships, agency over one's actions and a sense of self-worth. The NEF has produced an established wellbeing framework entitled *Five Ways to Wellbeing*, including five dimensions: connect, be active, take notice, keep learning and give (New Economics Foundation, 2008). This framework was further developed in a 2011 report, *Five ways to wellbeing: new*

applications, *new ways of thinking*, produced by the NEF in conjunction with the NHS Confederation (Aked and Thompson, 2011) and promoted through policies as a means to develop positive mental wellbeing. *Five Ways to Wellbeing* has been cited in a number of studies looking at a wide range of topics and fields: public health benefits of creative arts (Clift, 2012); environmental decision making (Fish, 2011); links between childhood experience and adult mental health (Hughes et al., 2016); green exercise (Barton et al., 2016) and urban design (Anderson et al., 2017).

There are clear links between the NEF/NHS *Five Ways to Wellbeing*, elements of long-distance hiking and information science; however these have not yet been explicitly investigated from this disciplinary viewpoint. A positive sense of connection with fellow walkers, and with family and friends away from the route has been noted amongst pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago (Innocenti, 2023; Slavin, 2003). Being active is central to long-distance hiking, as seen in the physical challenge of the TGO long-distance hiking event, where participants embark on a two-week journey through the Scottish Highlands (Hyatt et al., 2021; Innocenti et al., 2022). The benefits of being active on a long-distance hiking route include increased physical fitness and flow, taking notice as the pace of travel fosters an awareness of your surroundings (Innocenti, 2023; Slavin, 2003). A long-distance hike also represents an opportunity to learn a new skill or to develop an existing one. Lastly, long-distance hiking and long-distance pilgrimage routes offer the chance to give in several ways, from simply having positive interactions with fellow walkers to helping out people in need (Innocenti, 2023; Jørgensen et al., 2020).

In the study presented here the NEF/NHS framework has been used as one of the lenses through which to explore the information behaviour of hikers on the West Highland Way.

The West Highland Way

The West Highland Way (WHW) has previously been studied from the perspective of tourism management (den Breejen, 2007), sports medicine (Ellis et al., 2009), natural history (McWaters and Murphy, 2016) and geography (Dickinson, 1982). This information science research investigates the WHW from an information behaviour and serious leisure perspective.

The West Highland Way is Scotland's oldest official long-distance walking route, first recognised in 1980 (West Highland Way, 2021). The route (Figure 1) is 96 miles long, starting in Milngavie to the north of Glasgow and finishing in Fort William, next to the UK's highest mountain. It is the most popular long-distance walking route in the country, with more than 36,000 people walking it every year (Scottish Natural Heritage, 2018).

Figure 1. *Route (in red) of the West Highland Way* © OpenStreetMap - the map data is available under the Open Database License.

For some, walking the WHW is a long-standing ambition (Hanley, 2020). Some guides have also likened walking the WHW to a pilgrimage (Loram and Newton, 2019). The path passes through, or next to, some of Scotland's notable natural heritage sites, including Loch Lomond, Rannoch Moor and Ben Nevis (Loram and Newton, 2019). That the route goes through such a wide range of landscapes and heritage (Figure 2) is key to its appeal as a long-distance walking route, offering an opportunity for walkers to connect with Scotland's natural environments and lived history.

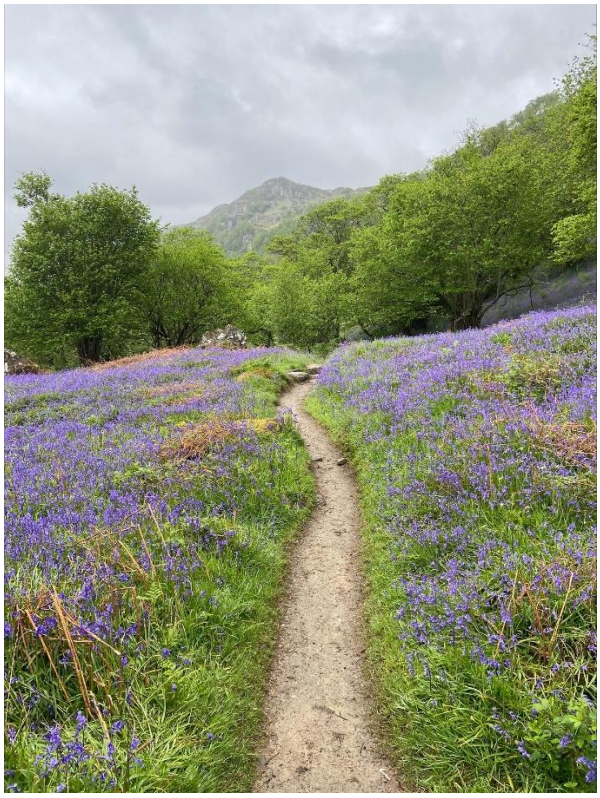

Figure 2. *An image of the WHW as it passes through a field of bluebells next to Loch Lomond (Munro).*

Methods

This study is part of a broader doctoral research designed and supervised by the second and third author. Ethical approval was granted by the Department of Computer Sciences (CIS) at the University of Strathclyde, and the overall data gathering was conducted in situ on the WHW in May 2022. Adopting ethnographic approaches (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Innocenti, 2023), participants were recruited and interviewed as they walked the route. Interviews were conducted by the first author (at the time a PhD student in CIS), who was walking the route concurrently. This helped to create an informal rapport with hikers, before supplying project information sheets and asking for informed consent to take part in the study. Interview questions and transcripts can be found with the associated dataset for this doctoral research (Munro et al., 2024).

Interviews were recorded with a Tascam dr-100mkiii portable recording device and took place in the following locations: at the side or close to the path; at a train station near the path; in eating establishments; and in locations in and around accommodation on the WHW.

In total, twenty-five participants agreed to take part in the study, from which fifteen separate interviews were conducted, typically lasting between fifteen and twenty minutes each. The interviewees were a combination of individuals, groups and dyads. Interviews began with a set of basic demographic questions, then proceeded to fifteen semi-structured questions.

The demographic data recorded included age and gender (Figure 3), nationality and previous hiking experience.

Figure 3. *Pie charts for age and gender of participants (Munro).*

German, American, Canadian, French, Dutch, Belgian and UK citizens joined this study. Only one participant had previously walked the WHW before, while thirteen of the twenty-five had previously done some other form of long-distance walking versus twelve who had not done so. Other long-distance hiking routes undertaken by participants included all, or part of: Coast to Coast, Hadrian's Wall, Rob Roy Way, Southern Upland Way, Appalachian Trail, Northville Placid Trail, Dales Way, Cumbrian Way, North Norfolk Coastal Path, Camino de Santiago and the Pennine Way.

Qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews was processed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019; Byrne, 2022). Transcription was conducted by the first author using the Nvivo data analysis software and formed an early iteration of analysis, where themes were initially noted. Following iterations discussed with the second and first authors were conducted on printed copies of the transcripts, using colour coding for broader macro themes, with annotations made of key words or instances relating to micro themes. Illuminating quotes that demonstrated examples of these themes were also underlined. During this process, the NEF/NHS *Five Ways to Wellbeing* (connect, be active, take notice, learn and give) were initially used as a macro code to identify parts of the transcripts related to wellbeing, with each individual way being used as micro codes in the next stage of coding. Through these iterations, the themes, key words, examples and quotes were extracted from the transcript into a code book. Once completed, the code book was used to structure the writing up of findings and discussion, according to the themes related to the *Five Ways to Wellbeing*.

While the themes based around the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* were documented using deductive thematic analysis, one theme emerged inductively outside of this, that of low information needs. This was observed in participants' descriptions of not needing a great deal of information day to day, or that the information required had been easy to find. Use of both deductive and inductive methods is considered by Braun and Clarke to be a fruitful way to conduct thematic analysis (2019) and using them in conjunction is common (Byrne, 2022).

Findings and discussion

The *Five Ways to Wellbeing* (New Economics Foundation, 2008) are used to structure findings from this study (Table 1), which are presented alongside discussion of their connections to information behaviour literature. Key insights include the social exchange of information while walking, the immersion in embodied information from the environment and the low information needs (a sort of information holiday) of the activity, which led to commonly stated wellbeing benefits.

NEF/NHS Five Ways to Wellbeing				
Connect	**Be active**	**Take notice**	**Learn**	**Give**
• Strong social connections amongst walkers on the route and with family and friends away it. • Social connections strengthened through the sharing of information during journey.	• Being active is central to the activity and the physical challenge is key to making journey memorable and classifiable as a higher thing (Kari and Hartel, 2007).	• All participants reported that journey had a positive effect on their mental wellbeing. • Low information needs and immersion in embodied information were key to wellbeing benefits.	• Walking the WHW was a learning experience for beginners and experienced long-distance hikers alike. • Participants learned about the cultural and natural heritage of the route as they walked.	• Social connections on the WHW developed to the point where mutual support was given between hikers.

Table 1. Research data mapped against the NEF/NHS Five Ways to Wellbeing (Munro, Innocenti).

Connect

Within the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* (New Economics Foundation, 2008), to connect is to make connections with people around you in your life: family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. (Aked and Thompson, 2011; New Economics Foundation, 2008). Amongst walkers on the WHW there was evidence of strong social connections, both on the route between walkers, and away from the route with family and friends. These connections primarily developed during the walk, but also occurred before it.

Before the journey, the sharing of interpersonal information motivated people to walk the route, hearing positive descriptions of the WHW from a family member (P16) and work colleagues (P1 & P13). Beyond personal social networks, some were recommended it from fellow walkers on other long-distance walks;

> *I think we knew from other long-distance walking routes, people will tell you what they have done and the West Highland Way was one of the ones that always comes up, so you just think well, you've just got to do it.* (P15)

While walking the WHW, participants noted a variety of social connections: interpersonal sharing of information; a deepening sense of connection due to repeated interactions along the route; social connections despite introversion; social connections amongst groups and dyads on the WHW; and social connections away from the WHW.

The interpersonal sharing, or exchanging, of information about their journeys amongst fellow walkers was commonplace. Regular, repeat interactions were described to help foster enquiring about others' journeys:

> *I think you're seeing the same people on the journey, so when you get to the end of the day you ask them 'How's your day been? How's your journey gone?'* (P15)

In conversation with other walkers, people would share personal information about their lives, especially where they were from (P5, P6, P18, P19, P20 & P25). Although some personal information was shared, this was noted to be a pleasant interaction to have and was not too intrusive, described as:

> *It's very supportive and it's mostly people talking about the experience of being here, it's not a lot of talk about what you do and do you have any kids or anything like that. It's more like, 'how did you like the loch side today?'* (P6)

Regular interactions amongst walkers created a shared experience which deepened the social connection over the course of the journey. The sense of a shared activity strengthening social connections was commonplace:

> *The trail kind of connects everybody, I feel like there's already this shared background, so it's easy to strike up conversations with people.* (P11)

Introversion was not a barrier to strong social connections on the WHW. Some participants described how they were normally introverted or shy in their everyday life, but felt emboldened to be sociable due to these connections (P10, P13).

Social connections were also strengthened amongst dyads while walking the WHW. This was observed amongst participants who were part of a couple walking the route (P6 & P25), who were grateful to be with their partners. Connections amongst family members, dyads of a father and two sons (P16), as well as a group of three sisters (P18, P19 & P20), were also described as personally meaningful and a big positive benefit of the experience.

Social information about the journey was shared with family and friends away from the WHW. This was predominantly photos and videos that participants took as they walked the route and was shared privately through direct communication such as email or text message, or publicly through social media or fitness applications. Sharing with family and friends away from the route was also a way to demonstrate they were safe and well, '*my partner, I check in with him every day*' (P17).

For those that shared information publicly, this took the form of sharing photos and videos using social media, participants discussed using Facebook (P2, P20) and Instagram (P7, P10, P12, P13, P15, P16 , P17). For one interviewee, sharing on Instagram was a means of memory making, '*I've been doing an Instagram post every day because I think it's a nice way to show people but also, it's nice for me to revisit*' (P10).

The sharing of information during the walk along the WHW can be considered a sharing of journey by proxy: '*we've been using Discord for our friends and family to interact and they can send us their comments in real time*' (P3). Some hikers also used data from fitness applications to let family members follow their journey: data from a smart watch allowed a family not just to see where they were but to interact and ask them questions about the landscape around them (P23).

One of the strongest themes to emerge during the analysis stage was that of social connections fostered through the interpersonal sharing of information while walking the WHW. For many in this study, these social connections were a highlight of their journey and created strong positive associations with the activity. This also chimes with descriptions of positive interactions with fellow walkers on Camino de Santiago and St. Olav's Way fostering connections (Innocenti, 2023; Jørgensen et al., 2020; Slavin, 2003).

Social connections that develop over the course of the journey are clear evidence of wellbeing as described in the *Five Ways* (Aked and Thompson, 2011; New Economics Foundation, 2008). This

demonstrates that there was a direct link from participants' information behaviour, the exchange and sharing of information, and their sense of wellbeing while walking the WHW. These findings also help to situate the activity as a higher thing (Kari and Hartel, 2007), demonstrating that for many this type of camaraderie and shared communal experience run counter to everyday interactions and information behaviour.

The positive wellbeing benefits resulting from social connections along and away from the WHW may be usefully included in the promotion of the WHW and similar routes, highlighting to potential walkers that positive and memorable social interactions are regularly encountered and they add greatly to the richness of the experience of walking the WHW.

Be active

To be active within the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* (New Economics Foundation, 2008) is to engage in physical activities such as walking, running, cycling, gardening, dancing and other forms of exercise, often practised outside. The central theme identified here was that of the WHW representing a physical challenge to be overcome. Participants considered walking the WHW to be a '*challenge*' (P1, P5, P9, P17, P23, P24, P25) or adventure (P16, P17, P19), with one questioning '*what have we done?*' (P12). One of the sections of the WHW alongside Loch Lomond was likened to an '*assault course*' (P21). However, the physical challenge of walking the route was not always perceived negatively, it was '*fun, but difficult*' (P23).

From the physical challenge of the activity came a number of strongly positive associations, including '*increased fitness*' (P19). There was also a deep sense of fulfilment from walking the route, described as '*pride*' (P17), '*achievement*' (P21), '*satisfaction*' (P21) and '*accomplishment*' (P24). This strong sense of gratification also '*makes you want to do it again*' (P6).

The centrality of walking itself to the activity was observed to be a key component of what made the WHW memorable. This was described as, '*it's the journey, not the destination*' (P16) and '*it's better to travel hopefully than to arrive*' (P21).

These are similar benefits to ones noted in a report on long-distance walking routes in Scotland (Scottish Natural Heritage, 2010). This level of activity clearly links the wellbeing benefits of walking the WHW in relation to the *Five Ways* (Aked and Thompson, 2011; New Economics Foundation, 2008). A physical challenge being key to the appeal of an activity was also present in information science studies on hikers on other long-distance walks (Hyatt, 2017; Hyatt et al., 2021; Innocenti, 2023; Innocenti et al., 2022). Again, this links with the concept of higher things (Kari and Hartel, 2007) in creating a memorable lived experience for participants from which they take a sense of achievement.

Take notice

Within the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* (New Economics Foundation, 2008), to take notice is to retain curiosity in your surroundings and be receptive to moments of beauty and points of difference in your surroundings that occur in the moment.

An emergent theme from the interviews was that of positive mental wellbeing benefits from walking the WHW. Participants were asked if they had felt any positive or negative effects on their state of mind since starting their journey: all 25 participants stated that they had encountered positive effects from their experience. These effects were described in the following effusive terms: '*positive effects only*' (P1), '*absolutely positive*' (P3), '*very positive*' (P12), that it was like a '*mental holiday*' (P9), '*mentally it's fantastic*' (P15) and '*I haven't been this content consistently in a while*' (P17). Participants had a wide range of descriptions of these positive mental wellbeing benefits: of feeling '*at peace*' (P3), '*calm*' (P3 & P16), '*present*' (P5), '*relaxed*' (P9), '*chill*' (P10) and '*zen*' (P12). Further description of these positive effects included that the activity was '*meditative*' (P5), akin to a

'*walking meditation*' (P17), that they had an '*ease of mind*' (P16) and they felt that they were '*clearing the head*' (P4 & P15).

One participant eloquently summed up the positive effects as follows:

> *I've been very, very present with what's going on in the moment, and when my thoughts do meander, I've had a few thoughts where I'll drift back to my work or things like that, but they're very, very light. They're not really going into that … if they just kind of … they'll pop down like a cloud and float away very quickly. Yeah, it's being here.* (P5)

It is worth considering that two of the participants (P2, P5) experienced positive benefits, but pointed out that they were in a good place with their mental health before starting the journey. The positive effects on participants' state of mind were also described to run counter to, or alongside, negative physical effects associated with tiredness or bodily pain (P4, P9, P10, P21, P23 & P25), described as '*my body's in pain but my mind is clear*' (P4).

Central to these positive mental wellbeing benefits was a theme of what we suggest calling *low information needs*, leading to simplified thought processes that were key to the stated positive mental effects of walking the WHW (P1, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P10, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P23, P24, P25). Low information needs are defined here as occurring during an activity or experience where the information needed to take part is easily accessible and simple to comprehend. This runs counter to everyday life, where work or stressful life events can create large volumes of information, which can be overwhelming and difficult to understand. Low information needs create the conditions where cognitive load is reduced and more pleasant thought processes, such as entering a flow state or being present in your surroundings, can occur during the activity. Low information needs do not occur where there is no information required, merely that the information is readily available and easy to understand. Low information needs in an activity or experience can enhance a serious or project-based leisure pursuit, where information is key, and are not necessarily indicative of them being considered casual leisure due to a lack of information required.

Low information needs on the WHW resulted from participants stating how easy navigation was due to the route being well-signposted (Figure 4) meaning more complex forms of navigation were not necessary. These low, or simple, information needs were summed up in the following terms:

> *To have this activity where you get up and the only thing you have to do is get to where you're going to be that night, what could be better than that?* (P14)

Figure 4. *A waymarker at the side of the WHW as it winds towards the Devil's Staircase (Munro).*

These low information needs led to a number of simple thought processes that participants described to have a positive effect on their mindset: '*It's nice, from like a psychological perspective, you're just so focused on the things you need to do*' (P23).

Many participants talked of how the benefits from these low information needs and simplified thought processes were an antidote to stress and anxiety experienced in their everyday work lives (P1, P6, P8, P9, P12, P14, P15, P16, P24, P25), '*to fight against stress and against burnout*' (P1). Others talked of how walking the WHW helped combat work related stress:

> *I have a very busy job, not classic nine to five, but longer hours and when you come here you forget it. Every minute you're not thinking about work.* (P16)

These positive effects were corroborated by other participants who were in groups or dyads, P5 and P15 stated they had noted improvements in P6 and P14's mindset. Beyond work stresses, some other participants felt the activity to be an antidote to everyday stresses more broadly (P4, P6, P12).

Further to the description of low information needs and simplified thought processes leading to positive mental wellbeing benefits were description of how immersion in the natural environment resulted in these positive effects. Taking in the sensory information of the WHW was described as, '*I think being in nature this much really helps calm my mind*' (P3). Also commented on by a number of participants was how concentrating on the going, the terrain underfoot, helped to foster a positive mindset (P6, P13, P15, P20, P24).

The *take notice* findings demonstrate strong evidence of participants reporting positive mental wellbeing benefits from walking the WHW and that these were linked to their information behaviour. Noticeably, all participants noted the experience as having had a positive effect on their state of mind, and how low information needs during their journey had a key role in the reported

wellbeing benefits. This is a development of the concept of information needs (Savolainen, 2012) into a novel area, a serious leisure activity that runs counter to everyday activities, where low information needs provide respite from high information environments and are linked to positive mental wellbeing benefits, a form of information holiday.

An information holiday can be defined as an activity, associated with travel, leisure or an activity distinct from everyday life, where low information needs are encountered. The information holiday may require information to plan, but any information required during it is minimal, easy to follow and simple to understand. This can provide relief from the cognitive load of dealing with large volumes of information in work or online, allowing for clearer mental processes and positive mental wellbeing benefits to present themselves.

Connections with nature help to place embodied information in a new context, where taking in sensory information from the natural environment of the WHW links to positive mental wellbeing benefits. This takes the call to look at physical activities as a source of embodied information (Cox et al., 2017) and offers the opportunity to consider that such information is not just functional, but central to making an activity a higher thing (Kari and Hartel, 2007), a memorable lived experience set in nature that runs counter to everyday life (Stebbins, 2009). This is also observed in pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago (Innocenti, 2023), suggesting embodied information can be key to activities that encourage positive mental wellbeing.

These social and natural connections link with reporting of positive mindsets and thought processes in an initial study on the WHW (Munro et al., 2022) and in previous studies on the Camino de Santiago (Innocenti, 2023; Slavin, 2003) and the St. Olav's Way (Jørgensen et al., 2020), as well as in broader literature around walking (Davidson and Stebbins, 2011; Pujol, 2018; Shepherd, 2008).

Findings from this study clearly demonstrate that walking the WHW has positive mental wellbeing benefits that can be linked to the NEF/NHS *Five Ways to Wellbeing* (Aked and Thompson, 2011; New Economics Foundation, 2008), of being present in the moment, meaningfully engaging with the environment around them and being receptive to profound experiences. These wellbeing benefits stem from information behaviour displayed by participants along the route, encountering low information needs, and experiencing an information holiday.

Learn

Within the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* (New Economics Foundation, 2008), to keep learning is engage in new activities or rekindle an interest in an old hobby, such as cooking, exercise or a creative activity and to continue personal development through formal and informal education (Aked and Thompson, 2011; New Economics Foundation, 2008). The activity of walking the WHW itself represents an opportunity to learn. For thirteen participants this was an extension of long-distance walking as a pursuit; for the other twelve hikers it was their first experience of the activity.

Of those who had done some other long-distance walking only one (P2) had previously walked the WHW before, meaning that, for the rest who were developing long-distance walking as a hobby, the route offered an opportunity to deepen their knowledge of the activity. Amongst those who were developing their practice of long-distance walking were dyads who had previously done the activity together on different routes, including three couples (P5 & P6, P7 & P8, and P10 & P11), as well as a pair of work colleagues (P14 & P15).

For those undertaking a long-distance walk for the first time there was an intention that this was a stepping stone before attempting other walks (P23, P24). Among some dyads there was a mixture of experienced long-distance walkers and first timers; a group of three siblings (P18, P19, & P20) and a married couple (P21 & P22). This demonstrates how one member of a group with greater experience was able to share knowledge of the activity with inexperienced walkers.

Another opportunity to learn while walking the WHW came from experiencing the cultural and natural heritage present along the route, to '*see Scotland through hiking*' (P9), another spoke of being drawn to walk the WHW as they, '*enjoy the people, the culture*' of Scotland (P4).

The food and drink of Scotland was part of the local culture that walkers on the WHW experienced positively: '*the food has been great*' (P5), '*we've had a lot of really good food*' (P11), with the '*Scottish breakfast*' (P2) '*haggis*' (P8) and '*beers*' (P2) said to have been highlights.

Historical heritage was reflected on as walkers walked the route, described as:

> *I guess maybe because I'm a history person, I think a lot about the long journeys that people have historically taken by foot and this … this feeling that if they can do it, and they don't have you know nice hiking shoes and hiking gear, and I'm out here and there's nothing to complain about and people did these kinds of journeys, you know … with a purpose.*' (P11)

The natural heritage of the WHW was central to walker's experiences. Participants spoke of '*nature*' (P2, P12), '*the space, the countryside*' (P4) and '*the ruggedness of Scotland*' (P19) being what had drawn them to walk the route.

Descriptions of what had been memorable about their journey so far featured their interaction with the natural environment. Participants said: '*the most memorable thing about this journey is how lovely it is and how easy the scenery makes it to walk*' (P12). Specific points along the WHW were also cited as providing memorable experiences; Loch Lomond (P1, P3, P4, P15, P21), Conic Hill (P7), Loch Tulla (P12, P13) and Rannoch Moor (P17).

Thematic analysis showed there were a number of ways in which participants were learning from the experience, and this was linked to their information behaviour. Some were developing a pre-existing hobby or interest in long-distance hiking and for others this was their first experience of the activity. Both are relevant to the concept of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1982), as they represent the development of a skills in a Nature Challenge Activity (NCA) (Davidson and Stebbins, 2011), or a possible entry point for a new pursuit. This links with findings of a report by Scottish Natural Heritage on the benefits of long-distance walking routes, that they represent an opportunity for life-long learning (Scottish Natural Heritage, 2010).

Walking the WHW also represents an opportunity for participants to immerse themselves in the cultural and natural heritage of the route, something that is seen on cultural heritage routes with a history of religious pilgrimage like the Camino de Santiago (Innocenti, 2023; Slavin, 2003), the Fife Pilgrim Way (Bowman, 2020) and St. Olav's Way (Jørgensen et al., 2020). This also demonstrates how sensory embodied information from the natural environment of the WHW provides wellbeing benefits and links to memory making.

Give

To give in the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* (New Economics Foundation, 2008) is to engage in a positive action for someone other than yourself, either known or unknown, through simple interactions such as a gesture, or more committed activities like volunteering.

Evidence of giving can be seen alongside some of the social connections reported in the connect stage of the *Five Ways to Wellbeing*. For example, strengthening social connections over the course of the route resulted in concern for fellow walkers' welfare. This was described by one as;

> *Like a lot of long-distance walks, you keep bumping into people along the way and then you find you've invested a bit of emotion if you like into that and I keep wondering how people, if I haven't seen people, well how are they getting on?* (P14)

Another participant also showed concern for the physical condition of fellow walkers, *'I stopped and asked if they were alright and if they needed any blister plasters'* (P22).

Concern for others was balanced with '*support*' (P6) and '*encouragement*' (P22) from and to fellow walkers as the journey progressed. There was discussion of '*inspirational people*' (P6) helping to create an uplifting experience along the route.

Giving amongst hikers on the WHW was another way of demonstrating the wellbeing benefits of the activity and how they are linked to the information behaviour of social interactions. Participants described situations where help was given to fellow walkers and this elevated the experience. Giving is linked to the social connections evident in the connect stage, but developed into mutual support. This dimension further contributes to situate the activity of hiking the WHW as a higher thing (Kari and Hartel, 2007).

Conclusion

The findings in this study clearly point at significant wellbeing benefits from walking long-distance hiking routes, and that they are directly linked to information behaviour. Walking the WHW offers the opportunity to encourage positive wellbeing and mental health benefits to those who walk it: through immersion in environmental embodied information; through social connections from the sharing and exchange of information; and through experiencing low information needs, akin to an information holiday. Wellbeing benefits may be usefully highlighted in the dissemination of information about the WHW, and other routes, to the public; their promotion could also be encouraged by public bodies with a broader remit for promoting public health.

There are interesting implications for the field of information and library science arising from this study, suggesting that providing, seeking and experiencing information can positively affect an individual's personal wellbeing. Future studies are encouraged to delve into the relationship between the concepts of embodied information, social sharing of information and low information needs to wellbeing benefits in other similar embodied and outdoor activities. Also, while the findings and wellbeing benefits of this activity were positive, activities and areas of life where information behaviour can negatively affect personal wellbeing may be explored, so that the provision of information may address and mitigate this impact.

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