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Abstract for consideration (Paper presentation)

**Nature and Wildlife Tourism Experiences:  
Feelings of Well-Being and Restoration**

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Wildlife tourism is an important and growing sector of the tourism economy with an increasing number of destinations and operators offering tourists the opportunity to take part in wildlife-orientated tours as an entire holiday or as an activity whilst on holiday. The relationship between experiences in nature and human quality of life and well-being is relatively well-established in the literature. The general consensus is based on a number of theories such as The Biophilia Hypothesis (Kellert and Wilson 1993) and the Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989). However the psychological benefits of watching wildlife on tour are less well researched.

To this end the researcher joined a number of wildlife tours in order to experience the phenomenon from the inside. The analysis of on-site observations of wildlife tourists, personal field journals and narrative interviews enabled the discovery of a number of themes which provide a rich understanding of how such tourism experiences provoke feelings of well-being and satisfaction with life which extend far beyond the holiday-self. These 'expressive indicators' include 'wonderment and awe beyond articulation', 'experiencing a state of "flow"', 'sensual awakening', 'time to stand and stare', 'voyeurism and contemplation', 'spiritual fulfilment' and 'feelings of well-being'. Together these act as 'food' or 'sustenance' for the return to everyday life and concerns. Nature and wildlife therefore have curative and sustaining properties beyond the mere aesthetic.

Despite the wild, exotic and remote nature of wildlife tourism destinations (e.g. polar regions, rainforests, deserts, off-shore locations etc), one of the most surprising and initial discoveries is the importance of seeing or watching wildlife 'back home'. Here too, this study has shown that nature and watching wildlife has the potential to temporarily distract people from their hectic time-driven schedules, daily existence and work / family demands, to a space where time is their own, and a place where it is possible to reconnect and restore their mental well-being to a state of equilibrium. This is further evidence that such experiences are potentially fundamental to human mental health and happiness; that the very existence of wildlife may indeed enhances our lives.

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