



Well-being and rural living

Why are remote rural areas leading on well-being? An important aspect is having both the need for belonging and for individual self-expression met, discovers Carol Craig.

In 2012, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) started its annual survey of 'subjective well being'. Every year it asks 165,000 people across the UK to assess their life satisfaction and happiness and judge whether they feel that their life is 'worthwhile'. A fourth question asks how anxious they felt the previous day. I was sceptical about the benefits of this research but it has yielded some interesting results, including a sizeable well-being gap between urban and remote rural communities.

In each survey, Eillean Siar (the Outer Hebrides), Orkney and Shetland have featured somewhere in the top five. Scottish Highland region usually isn't far behind on most measures. Dumfries and Galloway also scores well on happiness and low on anxiety, as do the Scottish Borders, Perth and Kinross, Moray and Aberdeenshire. Rural areas in Northern Ireland, like Fermanagh and Omagh, also score highly; two years ago Northern Ireland pushed the north of Scotland out of the top three slots. Other places

that do well are Anglesey, the Isle of Wight, Cornwall, Somerset, and Suffolk. Obviously, there are people in these areas who are languishing rather than flourishing. Life is not great for considerable numbers of folk living in remote rural areas but there are proportionately fewer of them. Indeed the places with the lowest life satisfaction and happiness, and the highest levels of anxiety, are generally urban areas, such as various parts of London (particularly Islington) or places like Bolsover, and Dover. In 2015, the third least happy place in the UK was Dundee.

Something lost

Some of the areas with the worst subjective well-being are places that have suffered most from deindustrialisation, such as South Tyneside, Liverpool, and Ayrshire. Other areas with pronounced urban deprivation also score badly. Well-off urban areas do not come out particularly well either. We are continually told that the route to happiness is more money yet

some of the areas in the UK with the lowest well-being, particularly high anxiety, have high disposable income. For example, Edinburgh is often rated highly for quality of life yet respondents in the ONS surveys report greater levels of anxiety than other seemingly less attractive places.

So why are rural areas doing so well? There is no definitive answer but there is some indicative research. The most obvious answer to why well-being in rural areas is likely to be higher is because people are living in a green environment with ready access to nature. Theodore Roszak, the father of what is called the 'ecopsychology' movement once remarked, "When highly stressed people are asked to visualize a soothing scene, nobody imagines a freeway or shopping mall. Rather, images of wilderness, forest, seascape, and starry skies invariably emerge".

In the last decade, various psychologists and thinkers have argued that contact with the green world is imperative for people's well-being. Bestselling author Richard Louv even talks about 'nature-deficit disorder'. Numerous empirical research projects have supported the idea that contact with nature is good for people's health. For example, researchers have shown

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that walking in a green environment, as opposed to an urban area, can improve attention, memory, and mood as well as counteract or prevent depression. Nature truly has the capacity to soothe and make us feel



better by having a 'restorative' effect. This may explain why those living in rural areas report less anxiety and professionals now talk about 'green therapy'.

There is now a considerable body of research on the importance of trees to people's physical and mental health. This can be as simple as the healing benefits for patients when

they can see a tree from their hospital beds; the considerable well-being boost for urban residents when they live in a street with more than ten trees; or the mental health benefits for participants in forest-based projects.

Values

While I am very taken by ecopsychology and personally believe that contact with the green world is important for well-being, I do not think it completely explains the urban-rural split in the ONS results. After all there are plenty of rural areas in these surveys where respondents do not report excessively high well-being. For the past four years the results show it is remote rural areas, particularly coastal and island communities, which score highly. So this begs the question, does the well-being benefit evident in these surveys

come from living in areas which are furthest away from our dominant materialist culture and values? By 'materialist values' I mean the pursuit of money, image and appearance, fame, popularity and status. These are the values of celebrity culture and, as I argue in my book for the Postcards from Scotland series, *The Great Takeover: how materialism, the media and markets now dominate our lives*, they saturate our culture.

There I quote extensive research which shows that the more people pursue these values in life the worse their well-being. Materialist values make people more unhappy, dissatisfied and anxious. One simple explanation for these findings is that they take us away from the things in life that really are important for well-being, particularly relationships, a sense of meaning and purpose, and contact with nature. It is not difficult to see why remote rural areas are less likely to be animated by materialism. If your dominant value system is making money, how you look and being popular or high status, the chances are that you are not living in a rural location miles away from big urban centres where invitations to indulge your materialist instincts abound.

Another reason why remote rural areas score well is because it is essential for people to be part of the community. One of the main things I have learned about well-being over the years is that it results from a complex balancing act. Well-being is more likely to result when people have two different, yet fundamental, needs met. The first is the need for a sense of belonging. Human beings are not designed to be solitary individuals who simply think about

themselves and their own interests. That is why we need relationships and why loneliness is as dangerous to our health as smoking. A sense of meaning is vital for well-being and by definition this is about serving a goal larger than yourself. The second great human need is for individuality: the opportunity for self-expression and the chance to be recognised by others as a unique individual. It is having both the need for belonging and individual self-expression met that facilitates well-being. Indigenous cultures traditionally were able to meet both these human needs. People belonged to the tribe or the clan yet they were recognised for having specific gifts, talents and experiences. But these needs do not tend to be met equally in modern societies. Capitalism tends to destroy a sense of belonging as its *raison d'être* is competitive, acquisitive individualism and ultimately consumer conformity. Traditionally socialism was better at promoting a sense of belonging than capitalism but it has been hopeless at providing the opportunity for individual self-expression and autonomy. The good news is that vibrant community organisations can fulfill both these human needs. They help individuals to have a sense of belonging as well as providing them with the opportunity for individual self-expression and recognition.

Ultimately, the idea that remote rural areas are leading on well-being is a challenge for policy makers. For too long these areas have been defined by what they lacked. They were literally seen as the poor relations. But once we stop seeing the world through the prism of money and materialist values, and start valuing people's subjective experiences and well-being, a very different picture emerges. One that values our common humanity and the greenness of our habitats. Who better to promote this paradigm shift than Reforesting Scotland?

centreforconfidence.co.uk

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Nature has the capacity to soothe and make us feel better. Photos by Karen Grant and Flickr user Kate Hiscock, used under a Creative Commons Attribution License.

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