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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Facilitating Act Framework: A new insight into cultural ecosystem services through investigating women, wild swimming and community

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## Abstract

1. We present the Facilitating Act Framework (FAF) as a way to challenge more linear ways of thinking about cultural ecosystem services. The framework moves towards more relational and participant-led processes to provide insights on how values emerge through engaging with nature.
2. The FAF has three pillars: (i) participant autonomy, (ii) open-ended parameters, and (iii) focusing on processes over outcomes.
3. We the FAF to a case study of women and wild swimming in Scotland, illustrating how each of the pillars can be applied in practice using a mixed methods approach with a Q methodology element at its core.
4. We identify four factors, the 'competitive edge', 'connection-to-nature seekers', 'sharers and carers' and 'enablers' that variously characterised what was important to women when they participated in the 'act' of wild swimming.
5. This case study revealed the importance of community and the key social dynamics through which values emerged and connected people to nature, pointing to a range of better targeted possible policy interventions.
6. The FAF offers an avenue to deepen our understanding of how values emerge through interactions with nature as a way to better embed relational thinking in the context of cultural ecosystem services.

## KEYWORDS

cultural ecosystem services, facilitating act framework, Q methodology, recreation, relational thinking, values, wild swimming

## 1 | MOVING BEYOND CULTURAL ECOSYSTEM SERVICES (CES)

In a hyper-digitised and post-covid world, an increasing number of people are looking to reconnect with nature with increased attention on improving access to, and quality of, local green and blue spaces

(Denton & Aranda, 2020; Gould et al., 2021; Lemmin-Woolfrey, 2021; McDougall et al., 2022). The often-intangible benefits that emerge through such interactions have been well documented in the cultural ecosystem services (CES) literature (Chan et al., 2012; Hirons et al., 2016; Satz et al., 2013), focusing on wellbeing outcomes produced by interactions with nature (Kosanec & Petzold, 2020).

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Studies into ecosystem services (ES) valuation often follow, implicitly or explicitly, linear progressions within specific value systems and with pre-determined outcomes in mind (Cheng et al., 2019). For example, the cascade model of ES depicts benefits and values as a result of hierarchical processes, originating from a biophysical structure or process and transformed by ecological function (Potschin & Haines-Young, 2011). The combination of such frameworks and common ES classifications results in each aspect being laid out prior to investigation commencing: a particular benefit, a valuation (and value) system and a set of pre-identified desired outcomes. This may facilitate the understanding, quantification and valuation of ES in many contexts; for example, it may assist in the appraisals of provisioning and regulating ES and their trade-offs, including with recreation (Bateman et al., 2013). It may also provide a useful system to identify the types of ES impacts resulting from human intervention, for example from agriculture (Zhang et al., 2007). However, such an approach does not allow for the complexities of diverse human values expressed through culture, which must be acknowledged (Norgaard, 2010). Additionally, by focusing on values decided a priori, there is a risk of loss of understanding by closing off avenues of understanding through which values emerge before they have been identified. Many values generated through interactions in a natural space are interlinked and experienced as a whole and not as mutually exclusive units (Turnhout et al., 2013). Trying to force a linear framework in valuation processes neglects the nuance of how people value being in nature and being part of it. O'Connor and Kenter (2019) highlight this concern when institutions, including valuation methods (Vatn, 2009), focus predominantly on ways in which people value living from nature, at the risk of overlooking the importance of people living in, with and as nature, reflecting more embedded and reciprocal human–nature relationships. Research needs to shift its focus towards the interwoven human–nature interactions, how people engage with a natural space and why they do so (Fischer & Eastwood, 2016). Steps in this direction have begun through appraisals creating holistic pictures of stakeholder values and relative weightings (Arias-Arévalo et al., 2018; Chan et al., 2012; Hirons et al., 2016; Kenter & O'Connor, 2022; Satz et al., 2013). Broad studies into CES are useful for gaining insight into a geographical area or activity across a large scale or population. For example, Bryce et al. (2016) and Wood et al. (2022) use sets of standardised survey items to capture multiple dimensions of CES and well-being in relation to marine areas and wild swimming respectively, across large samples of the population. The dimensions considered include aspects of interactions with nature, such as learning more about the natural environment and spiritual satisfaction and are mindful of the idea that there are multiple interactions between natural spaces and cultural practices that enable and shape CES benefits (Church et al., 2014; Fischer & Eastwood, 2016; Fish et al., 2016). However, such studies stop short of improving our understanding of how such values emerge, focusing instead on the associated CES, as outcomes, that are used to describe these values alone. There is a need therefore to work beyond CES to focus more specifically on what facilitating factors are at play, and on the specific processes that generate

values. To address such questions, and to move beyond the dominant linear models of CES, we propose a conceptual framework: the Facilitating Act Framework.

## 2 | INTRODUCING THE FACILITATING ACT FRAMEWORK

In this article, we build on developments within the CES discourse that have demonstrated how relational and process-based ontologies offer a more useful way to understanding human–nature interactions and socio-ecological systems change (Hertz et al., 2020; Himes & Muraca, 2018; Ishihara, 2018). In particular relational values, as ways in which relationships between people and nature are variously understood to be important, have helped move away from a dualistic paradigm where nature and culture are seen as distinct categories, even if they may shape and enable each other (Chan et al., 2016; Fish et al., 2016; West et al., 2020). While there has been attention to how the term 'relational values' has created a space for relational values to be expressed in valuation outcomes, as the *contents* for valuation studies, there has been little attention as to how the valuation processes in themselves may be redesigned so as to better allow for their expression (Himes & Muraca, 2018; West et al., 2021).

Starting from this viewpoint that values emerge from the dynamic relations between people and nature, the Facilitating Act Framework (FAF) takes people's interactions with nature as the focal point of any valuation process. We therefore define 'act' more specifically as the various interactions, inclusive of activities (e.g. recreational activities) and practices (e.g. cultural practices or practices of care), in spaces in which they encounter more-than-human. The motivations for starting with an 'act' are grounded in the recognition that our understandings of values only emerge through first following people's various interactions with nature. In this article we start from Maller's (2023) and Hertz et al. (2020) arguments to begin with actions and processes as the basis for socio-ecological system change. For example, social relations do not spring out of the ground, but they do develop from the process of going walking in the hills with other people. Whilst building social relations, one may also be developing personal *physical* and *mental wellbeing*, appreciating *aesthetics* of a landscape whilst building and connecting to a *sense of place*. This shift to starting with the act entails a focus on processes through which people act as opposed to outcomes (Hertz et al., 2020). Starting with processes allows a diversity of emerging values, and associated CES, to be more clearly traced. This is evidenced by recent work advocating a change in thinking towards how values emerge, away from one-directional, linear, nature-benefitting-people, towards dynamic, embodied and co-produced understanding of values (Fish et al., 2016; Maller, 2023; Raymond et al., 2017).

There are three main pillars to the FAF framework

1. Participant Autonomy: Participants are able to drive the direction of the valuation process.

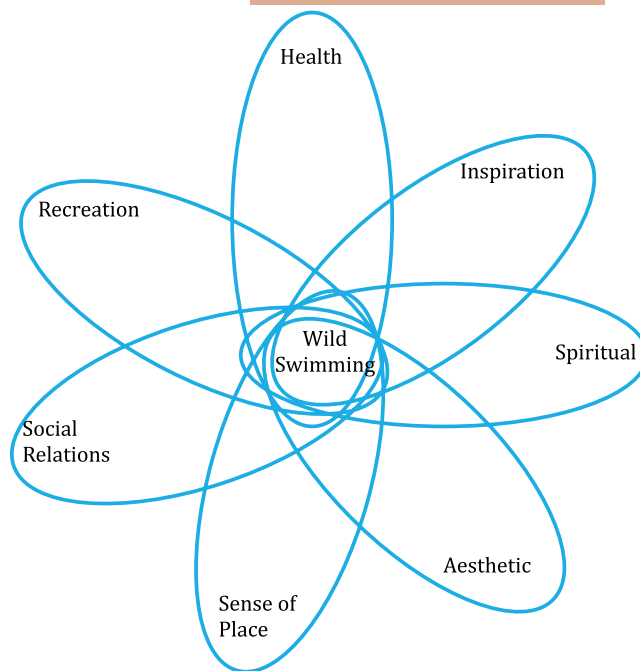
2. Open-ended parameters: Whilst focusing on an act, the valuation process that follows is open-ended.
3. Understanding Processes Over Outcome: There is no a priori defined outcome in terms of well-being impact that a study aims to investigate. Instead, the aim is to garner a deeper understanding of the process of how people come to experience natural spaces through human-nature(-human) interactions, which CES the experiences relate to, and how associated impacts on well-being arise from the process.

While there are no a priori defined well-being outcomes, the application of FAF requires identifying the 'act' and natural space(s) that become the focus of study. Also, the chosen methodology must allow for open discussion. Participants can be given space to draw on any sense of importance that they feel when talking about their interactions with natural spaces. Maller (2023, pg. 263) describes the importance of starting with social practices, 'a social practice approach to social-ecological change first examines what practices comprise everyday life in a certain place and time to understand why, when, where, what and with whom they are undertaken, and how they are connected as a system of practice'. Such an approach reflects the premise of FAF. This can allow a more holistic picture of what is important to those that use natural spaces and identify what is actually relevant to the context under investigation. We demonstrate here the potential of FAF through an application of a case study that investigates why the act of wild swimming is important to communities of women in Scotland.

### 3 | WILD SWIMMING IN SCOTLAND; COMMUNITIES OF WOMEN

We focus on the act of wild swimming as a human-nature interaction, particularly the experience and values of communities of women across Scotland. It is timely to investigate the importance of community in these networks as the recent growth in wild swimming will likely trigger the development of related policy, for example concerning safety (including water quality regulation) and the management of potential conflicts in the use of water bodies. Knowing how people relate to a space is important for understanding how to protect the environment and these relations. It is imperative, therefore, to have a proper understanding of what aspects of such communities' interactions through wild swimming are important, to ensure that policy related to wild swimming is facilitating, promoting and protecting wild swimming communities.

We define wild swimming as swimming outdoors in a natural in semi-natural (e.g. reservoirs) bodies of water, excluding outdoor pools and swimming in a competitive nature such as for triathlon. Wild swimming is deeply embedded within CES, spanning many of its aspects (Figure 1). The knowledge of the benefits of wild swimming and cold-water immersion goes back centuries (McDougall et al., 2022). Benefits not only encompass health directly but also those associated with blue spaces (accessible settings principally



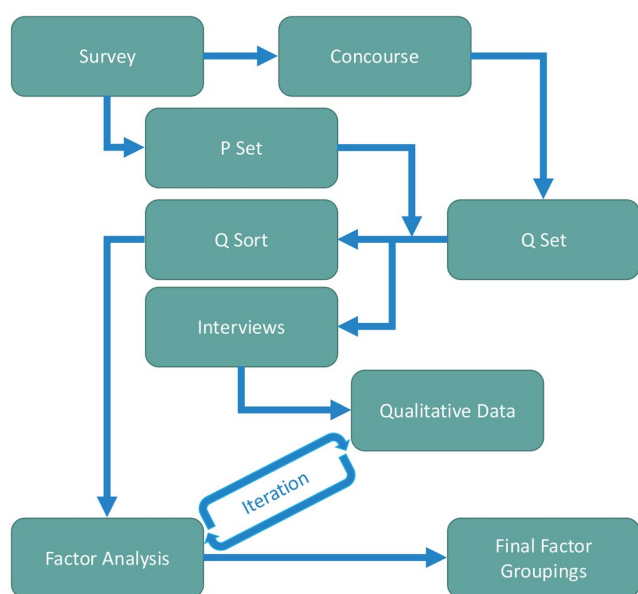
**FIGURE 1** Wild swimming can be seen to sit at the intersection of many cultural ecosystem services.

consisting of water) generally (Lynch et al., 2020; White et al., 2020). Proximity to water has been found to increase perceived quality of life (Brereton et al., 2008) and pro-environmental behaviours (White et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2022); further, being in the sea can open the mind to new ways of thinking and becoming more receptive to new perspectives (Shefer & Bozalek, 2022). There has been little research focussing on how the act of wild swimming in itself is contributing to plural CES and how associated values emerge through the act.

To our knowledge, there is also yet to be any wild swimming research solely looking at the perspective of women. This is despite women making up the vast majority of the wild swimming community, 82% of Wood et al.'s (2022) survey and 65% of those surveyed by Outdoor Swimmer in 2020 (Wood et al., 2022). There is a tendency towards studying behaviours and values of aggregate men and women (Fortnam et al., 2019; Güler & Caymaz, 2019). This is despite evidence of gendered attitudes towards ES in open water swimming, including more positive responses by women towards physical and mental health benefits, and greater importance attributed to community and socialising by women (Wood et al., 2022). This mirrors the dearth of research into women and outdoor recreation generally (Evans et al., 2020). A better understanding of what is important to women could help challenge negative perceptions of women in the outdoors, embracing body positivity and supporting physical capabilities, and encourage more women to partake (Bates & Moles, 2022). Thus, while the purpose of this study is to understand how an act, such as swimming, can facilitate connections with nature through values and associated CES, we chose to study specifically the perspectives of women in this example. This resembles the recent work of Ono et al. (2023) who explore the phenomena of 'acculturation' as a CES through investigating the perspectives of women migrants in Canada.

## 4 | METHODS

We utilise Q methodology here as a systematic approach to identify widespread discourses. Each wild swimming experience is personal, requiring direct discourse to truly fathom (Satz et al., 2013). As a method to understand women's experiences in wild swimming Q method brings into focus individual priorities (Tadaki et al., 2017). Q methodology is as a systematic approach to identify widespread discourses across a larger group of women and geographical range. Additionally, this approach enabled participant observations of group dynamics around interviews when the main author joined in with group swims which allowed for further values such as 'values as relations' to emerge (Tadaki et al., 2017). We followed a mixed method approach to this study (Figure 2).



**FIGURE 2** Workflow of the study, starting with the survey and resulting in a set of social discourses.

This research was carried out with the ethical approval of the University of Edinburgh, following their Research Ethics and Integrity guidance. Written consent was obtained from all interviewees via a consent form after providing information on the study purpose and aims, details of the study process and the use and storage of data.

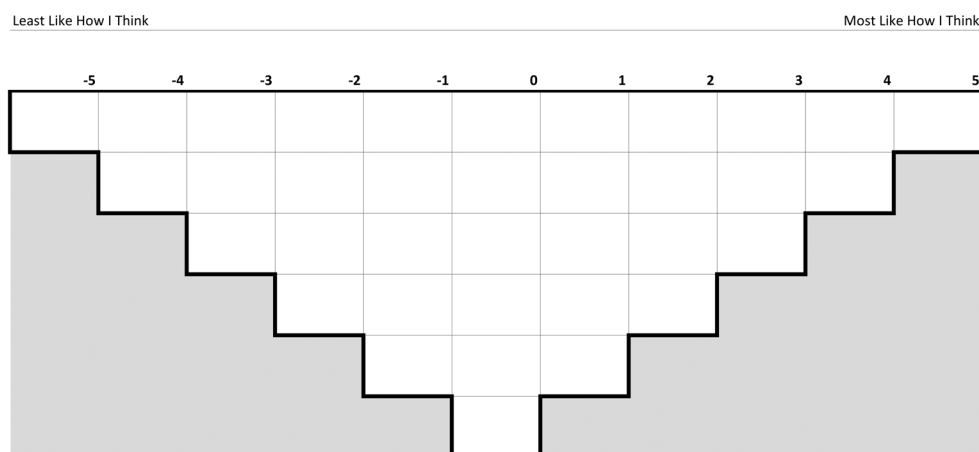
#### 4.1 | Online survey

The main aim of the online survey component was to form the basis of statements to be collected and used for the Q study (discussed in Section 4.2). The survey helped to gather an overview on where, for how long and with whom women swim using closed-ended questions (Appendix A). The second aim of the survey was to identify attitudes towards community in wild swimming using open-ended questions.

The survey was distributed through Facebook, by being posted on wild swimming groups. The post was shareable, meaning it could be shared to private groups, encouraging snowballing (Wood et al., 2022), and was open for 1 week. Willingness to participate in the next stage was also recorded.

## 4.2 | Q methodology

Q methodology is an interview format combining qualitative and quantitative data to produce groupings representing social discourses on a subject matter (Brown, 1993). The aim is to identify shared positions through factor analysis, which, when combined with qualitative data, represent a set of meaningful social discourses (Webler et al., 2009). This is done by comparing how participants sort a set of statements—the Q set—onto a forced distribution grid. The grid allows participants to rank statements based on their level of agreement, from +5 to -5 (Figure 3). Similar sorts are then grouped into factors, representing different social discourses. The use of a systematic method for eliciting groups in Q can reduce bias



**FIGURE 3** The quasi-normal distribution Q grid which participants sorted statements onto, totalling 36 spaces for the 36 statements in the Q set.

introduced by the researcher in a more purely qualitative study (Webler et al., 2009). A detailed explanation of Q methodology is given in [Appendix B](#).

#### 4.2.1 | Q set selection

The concourse of 331—a long list of relevant statements—was created from the first 450 survey responses ([Appendix B: Table B2](#)). This meant that Q statements were tailored to the specific location and population under investigation and ensured familiarity with the language and sentiments (Kenward, 2019; Webler et al., 2009). Additionally, we drew on wild swimming videos and published literature referenced in the Data Sources section of this article (also see Supporting Information [Appendix B: Table B1](#)). Statements were selected based on their relevance to key themes and kept verbatim, except where they were refined or combined for clarity. This resulted in a Q set of 36 statements ([Appendix B: Table B3](#)).

#### 4.2.2 | Finding the P set

To find the P set—individuals to carry out a Q sort—50 individuals were selected from those agreeing to participate further. The aim was to account for major discourses in the population (van Exel & de Graaf, 2005). Therefore, participants were chosen to represent different levels of experience and membership of formalised or social media swimming groups. Additionally, a focus was on selecting women across the country, representing city dwellers, islanders and those living in more rural areas, as well as a range of sea, river and loch/reservoir swimmers. The P set was made up of women ranging from their 20s through to their 70s, representing students, working mothers and retirees.

#### 4.2.3 | Q interviews and sorts

Eighteen interviews were scheduled, and an additional seven took place ad hoc, totalling 25 Q sorts. One interview was carried out with a pair of interviewees. They were friends, displayed very similar opinions, agreeing for the vast majority on where statements should be placed, notably at the extremes and so for the rest of the analysis were treated as one participant. Interviews were recorded for later transcription to allow for proper interviewer-interviewee engagement. As a wild swimmer, the main author was able to act as an insider, creating a connection with the interviewees and building trust through joining in with group swims after interviews (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Interviews took between 15 min to just over an hour.

Twenty-two interviews were carried out in person at the participant's wild swimming site, or nearby in their homes after an initial visit to the swim site. Interviewing at the site of the subject helps to bring emotions and responses to the fore, creating a better

connection to the interview material (Bates & Moles, 2021; Shefer & Bozalek, 2022). Three interviews were carried out online as the pragmatic option when there were time and travel constraints.

Participants were asked to sort the Q set, presented on cards, onto a grid whilst articulating their thoughts ([Figure 3](#)). After the statements were sorted onto the grid, interviewees were asked a series of follow-up questions, to allow them to explain why they felt most strongly about their  $\pm$  4 and 5 statements, and if they wished to make any other comments about the wild swimming community. The same steps were carried out for online interviews.

#### 4.2.4 | Factor analysis

Qualitative data analysis was carried out using NVIVO (QSR International, 2021), and qualitative data analysis was carried out in R studio (R Core Team, 2020) using the package Qmethod (Zabala, 2014) and the function factorHunt (Baulcomb, 2022), which follows a varimax rotation. Based on scree plots and statistical criteria, the preferred factor solution was chosen (details in [Appendix B](#)). Additionally, we obtained idealised sorts based on how the factor exemplars sorted statements. Consensus and distinguishing statements were identified to pin down potential areas of disagreement or unity. Discourses for each factor could then be built based on the combined qualitative and quantitative data collected through the Q sort and accompanying interview transcripts.

## 5 | RESULTS

### 5.1 | Online survey results

Selected results of the online survey are given in [Table 1](#) ( $n=439$ ). Whilst we advertised the survey to hear women's perspectives we received 11 responses from participants who identified as 'male', 'non-binary', 'other' or 'preferred not to say'. As we did not want to exclude the perspectives of those who did not feel well represented by binary notions of gender, we decided only to exclude the 'male' respondents as reflected in [Table 1](#). The most common swimming experience was between two and five years and the majority of respondents ( $n=425$ ) reported to usually swim in Scotland. The most popular location was in the sea, followed by lakes and lochs. Other locations included canals, disused quarries and tidal pools.

Over half ( $N=254$ ) were a member of more than one social media group for wild swimming, with 122 members of formalised swimming groups. The most important aspects of a swim were 'how you feel during the swim' followed by 'how you feel after the swim'. Only nine respondents believed 'getting a good social media post' was important. Other important aspects indicated included mental health, headspace and meditation, challenging themselves and accomplishment, as well as feeling healthy. Most swimmers found their swim groups through friends ( $N=243$ ) or social media ( $N=141$ ).



**TABLE 1** Survey results based on the responses of the first 450 respondents.

Question	Answer options	Count responses	Percentage responses
What gender do you identify as?	Female	439	97.6
	Male	3	0.7
	Non-Binary	2	0.4
	Prefer not to say	1	0.2
	Other	5	1
What types of wild swimming do you enjoy? <sup>a</sup>	Sea	386	85.8
	Lake	313	70.0
	River	172	38.2
	Reservoir	141	31.3
	Loch	64	14.2
	Tidal Pool	6	1.3
	Waterfall	5	1.1
	Quarry	3	0.7
How long have you been wild swimming for? <sup>a</sup>	0–1	140	31.1
	2–5	215	47.8
	6–10	32	7.1
	10+	60	13.3
Where do you usually swim? <sup>a</sup>	Scotland	425	94.4
	Rest of the United Kingdom	16	3.6
	Other	9	2.0
What aspects of wild swimming are important to you? <sup>a</sup>	How you feel after the swim	417	92.7
	How you feel during the swim	372	82.7
	Getting out in nature	364	80.9
	Socialising with others	241	53.6
	Meeting likeminded people	140	31.1
	How you feel before the swim	112	24.9
	Escaping busy city life	91	20.2
	Getting a good social media post	9	2.0
How did you find your wild swimming group? <sup>a</sup>	Through Friends	243	54.0
	Social Media	141	31.3
	With Family	62	13.8
	Met at a Swimming Location	37	8.2
	Met at a Swimming Event	3	0.7

**TABLE 1** (Continued)

Question	Answer options	Count responses	Percentage responses
Are you a member of a formalised wild swimming group? <sup>a</sup>	Yes	122	27.1
	No	321	71.3
Are you a member of a social media wild swimming group? <sup>a</sup>	One	133	29.6
	More than one	254	56.4
	No	61	13.5

<sup>a</sup>Based on  $N=447$  respondents who did not identify as male.

## 5.2 | Q methodology results

Based on the factor analysis of Q sorts, a four-factor solution was preferred (see [Appendix B](#) for details). There were no confounding sorts, and three participants did not load significantly onto any factors. Each factor drew on themes of: everyone believed that keeping safe is vital; getting into nature is empowering; there is some conflict about equipment but not much and supporting your fellow swimmers in all senses is important, but clustered mostly around how they interact with community and its importance to them. The idealised sorts for the four factors are shown in [Table 2](#).

The rest of the results section will be presented as follows: a brief profile of each factor; the consensus statements from the factor analysis and finally overall perspectives and key messages from the qualitative data, including CES identified through the act of wild swimming.

## 5.3 | Factor briefs

### 5.3.1 | Factor A—The competitive edge

Factor A represented those towards the edge of the more conventional wild swimming community, either as less frequent swimmers or closer to more competitive open water swimming such as triathlon or swim-run. Their high positive statements were D, AG, T, K and AI, and negative statements were X, J, Z and A.

This factor felt the most connection to those they directly swim with, a smaller group of friends or a select few that swim at a similar level:

I guess that's quite a rare thing, to have someone that swims at that style or speed or distance—  
Participant 9

They like to escape their busy lives to gain some perspective through connecting with nature:

**TABLE 2** Idealised sorts for each factor based on Spearman's correlation.

Statement code	Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D
A1	-2	-1	5	0
B2	-3	2	1	2
C3	-2	1	2	3
D4	5	3	1	0
E5	-1	0	2	0
F6	1	0	3	-1
G7	0	0	-1	0
H8	-1	-1	4	-1
I9	1	-1	0	4
J10	-4	-2	1	-3
K11	4	4	2	2
L12	-1	0	3	2
M13	0	1	0	5
N14	0	0	1	3
O15	2	1	0	0
P16	2	-1	0	3
Q17	1	3	2	-1
R18	0	4	-2	-2
S19	1	-1	0	-1
T20	-1	5	-1	-4
U21	2	2	3	2
V22	-3	-2	-3	1
W23	-3	2	-3	-4
X24	-4	-5	-5	-2
Y25	-2	1	-1	0
Z26	-5	-2	-4	1
AA27	3	1	0	1
AB28	0	-3	-3	-1
AC29	-2	-4	-5	-2
AD30	0	-3	-1	-5
AE31	1	-2	-2	-3
AF32	3	0	-1	1
AG33	3	-4	-1	-3
AH34	2	3	1	4
AI35	4	2	4	1
AJ36	-1	-3	-4	-2

Note: Positive sorts are highlighted green, negative in red, neutral are uncoloured. For z scores and idealised sorts based on Kendall and Pearson see [Appendix B](#).

I swim out and I look back at my house and the thing that fills my day, the house and children and everything, is in the distance—Participant 9

They have a deep-set respect for the water and take responsibility for their own safety, concerned that others might not. They

were the only factor to place AE positively, being perhaps more realist about people's awareness for safety, especially those newer to the water. They are not adverse to swimming alone, or at least imagine that with more water confidence this would be a mindful past time.

Sharing with friends was a minor aspect for them, feeling less connected to the wild swimming community. Factor A was the only one to rank B negatively, not being interested in the inspiring stories of others. There is a distinct sense of 'let people do what they want', including being noisy and posting on social media.

### 5.3.2 | Factor B—Connection-to-nature seekers

Although being part of a group and bonding is important to Factor B, swimming was just as much about escaping busy lives as getting in touch with nature, swimming early in the morning to hear the birds or to reconnect with their space after time away:

I'm an early swimmer and I do that so that I can get the birds—Participant 15

Their high positive statements were T, D, K and R, and negative X, AC and AG. Factor B enjoys the calming effects of swimming alone, although not all of the time, also swimming with groups and friends. They appreciate the dangers and take responsibility by educating themselves, taking almost personal offence to statements X and AG.

Factor B also appreciate the close human connection that one can get from wild swimming with others, but do not like large groups. They have a greater sense of community and that they are part of something bigger than themselves than Factor A:

It feels like a huge tribe!... I used to think it's my thing and a thing that a few people did but I think its ballooned so much that isn't true anymore—Participant 2

Generally, Factor B believe that everyone should enjoy swimming how they want to, including alone. But, they have a sense of 'outsiders' to the community towards those that do not engage socially in a shared space, that take unnecessary risks, or disturb their practice:

The swimming community is really nice, people say hello... There are these two women who swim with tow floats with lights in. I go to swim in the dark and they come with their luminous lights and ohh its awful and they don't say hello... I wish they would go away—Participant 2

They were the only factor to rank statement P negatively, and are a very body confident and independent group of women. They were the only factor to rank statements R and W positively, feeling



confident in the water alone, although having someone on the bank was still important from a safety perspective for some.

### 5.3.3 | Factor C—Sharers and carers

This factor was brought together by their love of shared experiences and the almost unconditional support of their group was vital to them. Their most important positive statements were A, L and H. The statements that they most disagreed with were W, AC, Z, AF and AB.

They are part of very close-knit groups with a lot of respect for each other, appreciating that everyone has their own reasons to swim and how they do that is personal. They are hugely welcoming to new people into their groups. They recognise that their groups are also often a safe, female space, but not by design and are not against men joining in. They have a stronger social media connection than other groups. Although they are not all 'posters', they like seeing pictures of others having a good time, and will share pictures with a smaller community of friends, often in a group chat. Furthermore, they have not experienced conflict or issues in person or online within the wild swimming community. They have a strong sense of letting everyone get the most out of their experience in their own way:

I love coming down here and seeing new people enjoying it—Participant 3

Their only distinguishing statement was not being a fan of gate-keeping (AA), which they placed lower than other factors, mostly for the preference of more community focussed statements than for a lack of agreement with this statement in particular:

it's all about community and supporting each other—Participant 3

### 5.3.4 | Factor D—Enablers

Factor D represented those who want to make sure that everyone is able to partake, to get as many as possible involved and getting the benefits out of wild swimming that they have experienced themselves. Their most important positive statements were I, AH, M, H, AI and U. Their most important negative statements were AD, W, AE, T and AI:

I do it for other people. Someone wants to swim, and I've already been out and I don't, I'm not desperate, but they are, then actually I will go out, doesn't kill me—Participant 21

This factor is the one that most represents an actual wild swimming group, spanning the spectrum of safety opinions and ways of

swimming, but at their core they want to encourage and enable others. This factor includes someone who started a swim group, as well as another individual well-known in their local swim group:

Me and my daughter, we seen people swim and we decided we would do it for a bit of a laugh, and made a group and it, just kinda took off—Participant 5

They welcome greater numbers of swimmers and help 'newbies' with safety and getting in the water:

In our community anyway, do your thing as long as you're safe and yeah, we encourage new people to use a float and not swim alone, I never swim alone and no longer use a float because everybody knows I am a strong swimmer but when you don't know somebody it is beneficial to do that—Participant 23

They are generally hugely accepting of letting people do their own thing, although admit to being at least partially judgemental if people take risks which have the potential to endanger others:

I think as a community we will be quite judgmental if you're stupid... I can think of someone who went out in a force 8 gale, swimming into a shipping lane. As far as I'm concerned that is totally stupid and unacceptable. So generally, we don't, but if somebody does that, then the community will act, there will be a backlash within the community—Participant 21

They are the only factor to rank statement V positively. Some believe that there is a bit of superiority about equipment, but that they tend not to engage unless it is for the purpose of teasing their friends. They have a body neutral perspective and revel in the fact that their groups span a huge age range (12 to 80 plus), and both men and women.

## 5.4 | Consensus statements

The only consensus statement across all statistical distributions was statement U: 'It's about how it makes me feel, not how others perceive that I feel'. This statement was consistently ranked either +2 or +3 in the idealised sorts, and it truly captures the sentiment of all participants. It is important for many people to be able to enjoy the water and their swim for their own personal reasons. Many of the women interviewed talk about finding wild swimming, and how much it has helped them with their confidence and with building new relationships with people and place. But how each got there is a unique journey, and swims hold their own unique meanings as well:

Why would I put a load of gear in the car, leave the house, drive, park, faff around, put on a wetsuit,

just for somebody else to think I was having a good time?!—Participant 18

There's always someone there to hold my hand when I'm ready to go back because I lose my confidence. And that encouragement is vital when it would be really easy to say I can't do anything—Participant 21

## 5.5 | Key messages

Four key messages emerge taking both Q sorts and interviews into account:

1. Community, support and a sense of belonging, both physically and virtually, are important.
2. Confidence and safety in the water have a huge effect on the experience, often facilitated by the presence of others.
3. Most conflicts are not personally seen and may well be a 'storm in a teacup' (Participant 9) as a result of connection through social media.
4. The biggest source of concern is over the risk and lack of respect for nature that comes from outside the wild swimming community.

The message that united all factors was the fourth one. Although this is rarely something that hugely affects their day-to-day experience, or even something that occupies them much, risk and lack of respect for nature by 'outsiders' were common concerns across participants:

There's a lot of disrespect for the environment... it's not swimmers—Participant 21

Figure 4 shows that opinions overlap between factors, but that each factor still has its own distinct pattern. For example, all factors cover the full range of 'who to swim with', with the exception of A, which was also the smallest factor. However, the strongest feeling for each factor lay at different points along the spectra. This shows how complex the experience is for the participants, with message two encapsulating best how being with others can affect the experience.

## 5.6 | CES identified through applying FAF

By applying the FAF approach of open-ended parameters (pillar 1), we were able to identify a range of values that emerged that were important to the women. Firstly, the building of social relations was important to all factor groups, whether it was with friends or a physical or online swim group. Secondly, relating to a sense of place, all the swimmers had 'their' regular spot in which they felt comfortable, confident and a little protective. This connected to their personal growth and learning from the water and each other of the local flora

and fauna, the tide or current patterns. Finally, many interviewees alluded to the importance of meditative calm and sense of peace when swimming, relating to spiritual and religious CES. This tied with the importance of immersion in nature and connection with the natural world.

No interview took the same direction, with each participant focusing on the statements and experiences that they felt were important to them. By giving participants autonomy (pillar 2) to drive the direction of discussion and thus understanding (pillar 3) from the first stage of the survey, we were able to delve deeper into the interconnected benefits and relational experiences that each individual held. Moreover, we found that while many of the associated CES could be seen to be important across the board, how each individual accessed or reached these experiences through human–nature connections was unique.

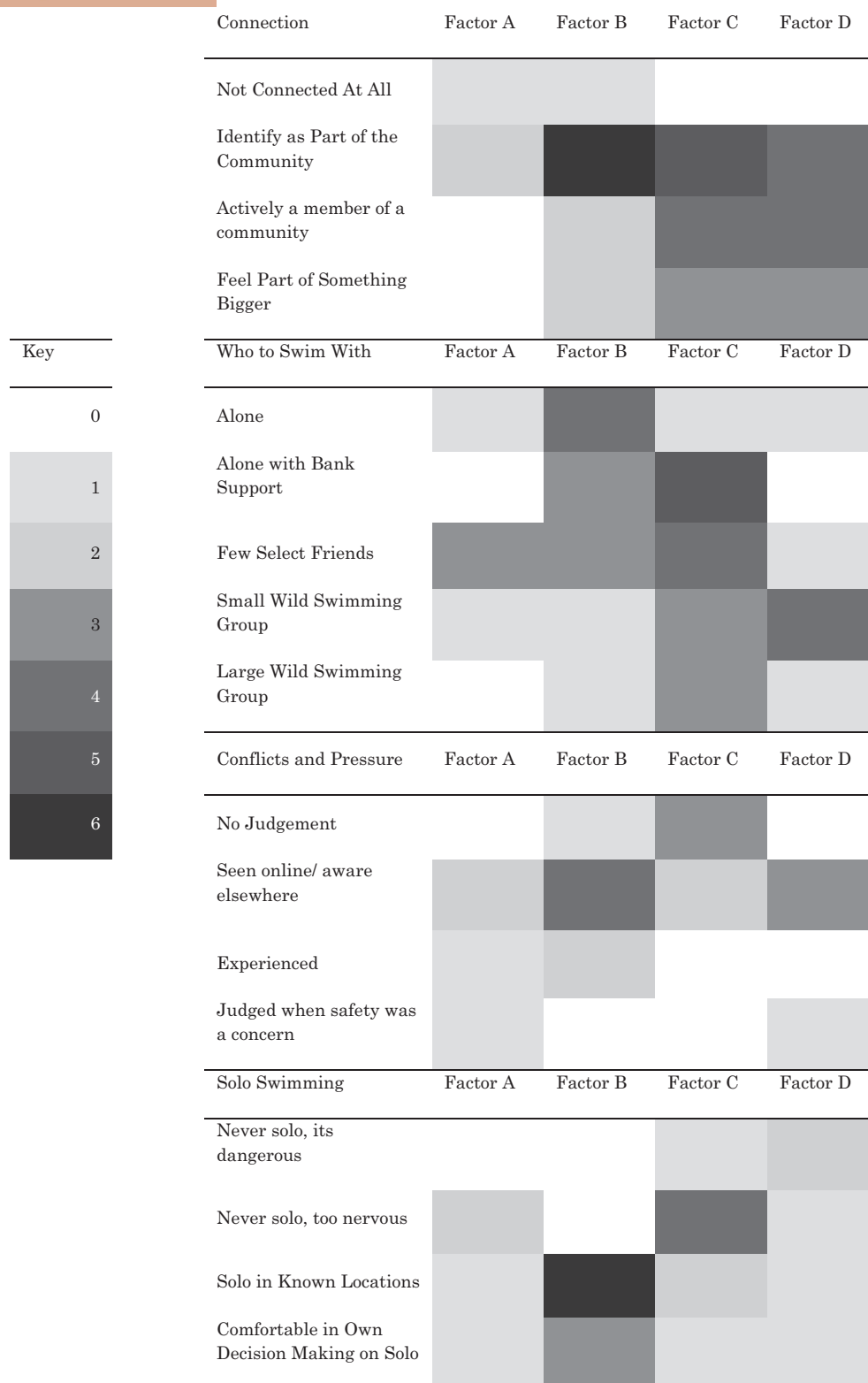
## 6 | DISCUSSION

With regards to the case study, two important themes emerged that highlight the potential of FAF to operationalise relational thinking in policymaking. FAF revealed (1) the importance of people and community in generating the values associated with CES that emerged from swimming, and (2) how a focus on the act is place-based and process-oriented as opposed to outcome oriented also highlighted key points of possible intervention in policymaking.

### 6.1 | Values emerging through community

Across factors, we found how important the support of a community was for enabling women to access the CES associated with wild swimming. We have shown how an act in nature facilitates connecting with others, and the support of others feeds back to a range of CES and associated social values (Wood et al., 2022). Engaging with others through an act in nature can help maintain meaningful connections and relations (Shefer & Bozalek, 2022). Many of the women in our case study reacted strongly to the statements about tribe, family, and groups, fitting with a sense of belonging. When these statements were placed negatively (such as H8), it was mostly because they did not want to be exclusionary or boundary protecting; they wanted to be welcoming. Community fosters a feeling of belonging, that members' needs matter to each other and that these needs are met through commitment to each other (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Promoting the needs of others was particularly shown by the Enabler's factor, who would often go out of their way to help others get out and swim. Thus, community-building and connection are frequently mentioned as a draw of wild swimming.

For some, declarative kinship was enough to feel part of the community. Women did not need to be part of a particular group to feel a sense of the wider community. Relations were more



**FIGURE 4** Strength of agreement within factors towards key messages 1–3. Confidence and safety have been broken down into ‘who to swim with’ and ‘solo swimming’ as these were often treated differently by participants. Darker colour represents stronger agreement from the factor. Strength of agreement was assessed by mentions on the theme by members of the factor during interviews.

transient, such as the feeling of being part of something much bigger than themselves; these more other-regarding relations pointed towards the social values that emerged through the act of wild

swimming. This may be facilitated in itself through online connections, supported by our survey results where more than four fifths of respondents were a member of at least one online wild

swimming group. Being connected virtually can be inspiring and empowering for many women (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012), particularly for Factor C.

Differing 'cultures of practice' can form around practice and place. Most notably in this case were group specific perspectives on safety in the water. This was seen both between factor groups and observed by the interviewer when participating in group swims. Further evidence has been found by McDougall et al. (2022), who found direct conflict between groups over this issue, suggesting there is more inter-practice conflict than we captured. Further study into what makes wild swimmers feel safe and how this is projected onto others may well be important to better understanding group swim culture both in person and online.

### 6.1.1 | Community tied to place

We have demonstrated how the community that emerged through an act facilitated accessing nature, and accessing nature through an act facilitated community. These aspects exist in tandem. Our study demonstrated how important a connection with nature is to facilitate connecting with others (Wood et al., 2022). Some of these relations were directed towards a specific swim site, with ownership phrases often used: 'our beach' or 'my river'. Gould et al. (2021) found similar sentiments, the importance of socialising as an additional way to form connection with specific sites. Bates and Moles (2022) found that conviviality and a sense of belonging can be found through a shared space. The sense of community and connection to nature was not entirely independent of where the act was taking place. The where, who and how are equally important for accessing each other.

### 6.1.2 | Community facilitating access to other CES

We have also shown how community around a shared act can open the door to other CES. As an activity that sits outside the organised sport sphere, wild swimming groups form organically, built around similar schedules, convenience and place, rather than a governing body (Costello et al., 2019). Many of the women interviewed mentioned making new friends and organising swims with those of similar schedules. This gives swimmers a sense of agency and ownership over their community. Belongingness, often described as a fundamental human need (Stenseng et al., 2015), was formed around connection to others. Community can further lead to a sense of empowerment (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012), which may well be a strong draw beyond just the effects of being in the water. Women become empowered in the water; they appreciated the support they gain from each other across many aspects of wild swimming, be it online, on the shore or in the water, through the community they have built (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012). Building community and confidence brings women back, keeping them connected to nature and accessing the health, spiritual, aesthetic and other services around them.

## 6.2 | Facilitating Act Framework as a tool to bridge relational thinking into policy-making

There is a movement towards relational thinking in sustainability science (West et al., 2021). Indeed, relational values, variously understood as the 'preferences, principles and virtues associated with relationships, both interpersonal and as articulated by policies and social norms' (Chan et al., 2016), often characterised by notions of care, identity and belonging, were clearly seen in our results. However while relational values indicate towards the *contents* of valuation, here we have introduced the FAF as a relational framework as a tool to help researchers and decision-makers understand the processes through which such relational values might more easily emerge and be expressed. Cooke et al. (2016, pp 836) describe this more relational approach when drawing upon Ingold's notion of the 'taskscape' stating: 'the taskscape is the active component of dwelling that is evidenced in the landscape—the processes, movement and "doing" of people and nature that continually makes and re-makes the world'. Of importance here is that the taskscape does not consist of patterns of activity in isolation, but ongoing 'interactivity' between human and nonhuman agents. In many ways, this idea of the taskscape outlines what the FAF attempts to communicate with policymakers. The pillars of FAF fit with the relational themes identified by West et al. (2021), utilising accessible methods whilst moving away from finding a standardised or 'single best perspective' and instead occupying a stance of openness and contribution to ongoing learning. The researcher is not 'standing outside the world', but instead interacting with and through natural spaces. In introducing the FAF, we have responded to tensions in sustainability science around acknowledging relational thinking whilst developing tools that can put this relational thinking 'to work' (Raymond et al., 2017; West et al., 2021). We have introduced FAF as an effective way of exploring values through emphasis on connections and relationships that emerge through interacting with nature.

What our case study revealed is that by focusing on the action in any valuation process as opposed to the outcomes, potentially unexpected and emergent directions can come up with associated implications for policy and decision making. In so doing, FAF offers a more politically generative framework than frameworks such as CES which often fail to move beyond the descriptive character of valuation processes alone with little connection to policy and decision-making (Gould et al., 2019; Stålhammar, 2021). For example, previous research into wild swimming found that fresh-water swimmers preferred the relative calm and safety of enclosed water bodies to help them truly switch off and meditate (McDougall et al., 2022). However, we found almost the opposite for many of the women we spoke to who found the thrill of being in crashing waves a way to connect with other swimmers, especially factor C. They expressed a nuanced perspective on concerns around risk and safety in wild swimming as way to build confidence in their decision making, in being able to access the water safely, and confidence in knowing what they are doing. This has lessons for policy development. Current information and policy around wild swimming is

mostly about risk prevention and avoiding danger, rather than enabling people to have the confidence to enjoy the environment. For example, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) website advises only swimming on a lifeguarded beach, to wear a wetsuit and to take a phone with you in the water (RNLI, 2022a). Yet there are only eight lifeguarded beaches in Scotland, all on the South-West coast (RNLI, 2022b). We found that women who wild swim are often doing so to escape, which might be in conflict with taking a phone with them. Further still dependence on organisations such as the RNLI, as important as they are, reduces the need to take responsibility or actively seek education on safety measures themselves (should they be given the resources to learn). This risk and danger rhetoric may be keeping those that would benefit away from participating, whilst also alienating those that could help from better advice and guidance (Denton & Aranda, 2020; Foley, 2015). Instead policies which restrict or remove access to the water would also remove the physical community grounded in the sense of place that so many women need (Hirons et al., 2016). Rather, information flows to support local safety knowledge (tide times, weather warnings, swimming lessons, etc.) through better supported local groups could be more effective (de Lange et al., 2019). While regulating such groups would be ineffectual and difficult to manage owing to their fluid nature, described as having a life of their own (Foley, 2015), supporting and helping facilitate their activities would foster the community and values outlined above. Strengthening such communities connections to place (in this case, bluespaces) can also lead to further impacts of increasing active participation in democratic governance systems, for example, holding regulatory bodies and private water companies to account for water pollution (Cohen et al., 2023). This is evident in the campaigning of a number of key swimming community groups pushing for and successfully achieving Bathing Water status across a range of bluespaces across the United Kingdom (Horton, 2024).

Further still, our study revealed wild swimming has a completely different set of values, as priorities, to many formalised sports, that is, it is non-competitive, valuing much more the experience, feeling and being in nature over swimming farther, longer and faster (Aggerholm & Breivik, 2021). Wild swimming is rarely classified as a 'sport', given this lack of target driven progress and governing body. Women are finding a place, in nature, where they can be who they are and build confidence, alone or with a community, to challenge perceptions of women in the outdoors (Bates & Moles, 2022). For many of the women who participated in this study, wild swimming represented a break-away from the historical and social norms of more formalised sport, which can be exclusionary of those that do not fit the mould (Aggerholm & Breivik, 2021). A move away from competition and towards supportive cooperation has transformed how women think about themselves and how they can provide support to their peers. Foley (2015) also found that putting together both 'healthy and unhealthy' bodies has huge potential for empowerment and the diversity of ability can help women understand each other better, a sentiment reflected by participant 2 who did not have 'large friends' before wild swimming, a finding supported by Hennigan (2010) who also found spending time nature helped

facilitate confidence and body image by providing distance from cultural contexts. In this way the act of wild swimming can be seen to generate a system of social values and strengthening of social relations that are grounded in connections to place (Cohen et al., 2023).

By focusing on the processes from which these values emerged through the act of swimming, we were able to distinguish a more nuanced understanding of how nature was understood to matter in this context, in a way that an outcome-oriented approach might have missed out on. Not only did this lead to unexpected outcomes, but it also highlighted potential for a more holistic set of possible policy interventions. Starting with an act, in this case wild swimming, in order to explore human-nature relationships and how connections to nature could be better facilitated led to more nuanced understandings of practices that might not typically be conceived of as pro-environmental in themselves but nonetheless offered implications and insights for strengthening human-nature relationships (Maller, 2023).

## 7 | CONCLUSION

We have outlined a new framework for gaining understanding of how people relate to natural spaces and the values that emerge through such interactions with nature. The framework challenges more linear ways of thinking and instead moves towards more relational and participant-led processes.

We have presented a case study looking into how women specifically relate to nature and community through the act of wild swimming. Following the three pillars of FAF of (i) participant autonomy, (ii) open-ended parameters and (iii) focusing on processes over outcomes, we found that participants pointed to the role of community in its various forms was essential in enabling interactions with natural spaces. Following these themes that emerged through the FAF approach, we were able to elicit a more nuanced and holistic understanding of how policy interventions could better mediate and enhance human-nature relationships in the context of wild swimming in the United Kingdom.

This study demonstrates how FAF is a flexible and open framework that could be applied through a range of mixed methods, such as in this case, Q methodology. Finally, FAF may be relevant to future study and deepening understanding of the relational values that people hold towards nature. As a recognition of and move towards relational thinking in CES, frameworks that allow for more process-oriented and emergent characteristics of socio-ecological systems to emerge need to be established. The FAF provides an accessible and effective way in which researchers can engage with relational thinking research whilst bridging the gap to understanding how a range of policy interventions might support flourishing human-nature relationships.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Lucy Barnard conceived of the main ideas for this article and its implementation. Lucy Barnard performed the data analysis, which was



supported by Seb O'Connor and Klaus Glenk. Lucy Barnard led the writing of the manuscript together with feedback, suggestions and text contributions from Seb O'Connor and Klaus Glenk. All authors critically contributed to the draft and approved the final version for publication.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There were no conflicts of interest in the research and preparation for this manuscript.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data of Q sorts and related code can be found at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.29149388>. To ensure complete confidentiality as promised in the informed consent provided to all participants, we are unable to make the transcripts of interview data publicly available. For further questions, contact the corresponding author.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

**Appendix A.** Women, wild swimming, & community survey information and questions.

**Appendix B.** Detailed explanation of Q methodology.

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