

Manchester Geographical Society



Funding Report

Investigating sense of place in the coastal zone: A survey/photovoice comparison using Morecambe as a case study

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1. Introduction

The past fifteen years have witnessed an increased interest in the marine environment by social sciences and decisionmakers alike. After decades of sea blindness (“a general lack of interest for the marine space, and the failure to recognise how it connects and matters to societies, cultures and people's identity”; Germond-Duret & Germond, 2022), oceans are increasingly recognised as providers of ecosystem services, including cultural services such as spiritual enrichment, recreation, and aesthetic experiences (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). At the global level, 2021 marked the start of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development, and a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 14) is devoted to “life below water”. At the national level, the UK Government has recognised the need to protect the marine environment and has for example joined the Global Ocean Alliance that supports the target to protect at least 30% of the global ocean by 2030. DEFRA also commissioned the largest ocean literacy survey ever conducted in England and Wales in 2021 to understand the levels of knowledge and engagement of the public with the marine environment and identify pro-environmental behaviours. However, people’s sense of connection and identity in relation to the coastal and marine environment has not been widely investigated.

The aim of the study was to compare two different methods, an online survey and the use of photovoice, to identify and interpret how the residents of Morecambe, a seaside town in the North West of England, define their sense of place, and in particular, if their sense of place relates to the coastal and marine environment. It was conceived as a pilot project, targeting a small but sufficient number of participants to get some insights on the advantages and limitations of each method. It was funded by the Manchester Geographical Society, and prior to the research starting, I obtained ethical approval from my institution (Liverpool John Moores University at the time). The study was due to start in summer 2020 but was delayed due to Covid-19’s restrictions; it started in Spring 2022.

This report describes the methodology used and gives a snapshot of some of the results obtained. It is not aimed at providing a thorough interpretation and discussion of the results, but at reporting on the activities conducted. An academic publication will be published at a later stage.

2. Methodology

2.1 Online Survey

An online survey was circulated through social media and mailing lists. The survey was anonymous and open to any resident of Morecambe aged 18 or more. It included closed and open questions. 60 people completed the survey.

The box below provides examples of the questions asked.

- What is your favourite place in Morecambe?
- Thinking of that place, please rate the following statements (from strongly disagree to strongly agree):
 - That place means a lot to me
 - I am very attached to that place
 - I feel happiest when I am at that place
 - Many important memories are tied to that place
 - I identify with the physical landscape of that place
 - I get more satisfaction out of visiting that place than any other recreational place
 - I have no particular attachment for that place compared to other areas outside Morecambe
- Name 3 things that make a place feel like home
- What values do you associate with Morecambe Bay? [Please tick all that apply]
 - Contact with nature
 - Leisure
 - Sanctuary
 - Economic
 - Educational
 - Physical exercise
 - Scenic
 - Other [Please describe]:
- Please give a bit more detail about the values you have ticked above:
- Please rate the following statements (from strongly disagree to strongly agree):
 - Everything about Morecambe reflects who I am
 - I am more satisfied in Morecambe than in other places
 - I feel proud of my local environment
 - I would feel sad if I had to leave the area
 - Morecambe Bay is a place to connect with nature
 - Morecambe Bay is a place to enjoy nature's beauty
 - Morecambe Bay is a place to have fun in nature
 - Morecambe Bay is a place to learn about nature
 - I feel like Morecambe Bay is part of me
 - I would be equally happy if I didn't live in a coastal area
 - If I had to move, I would like to go to another coastal location
 - I define myself as part of a coastal community
 - I don't pay much attention to the sea in my daily life
 - The presence of the sea is not noticeable when we are not at the seafront

Box 1: Examples of survey questions

2.2 Photovoice

Photovoice is an innovative method used for community-based participatory research whereby participants document their own engagement and experience with the subject investigated. Participants receive a short brief (e.g. "your sense of place") and are invited to take pictures (usually 10-12) that best respond to this brief (usually during a couple of weeks). The researcher then meets with the participants to discuss the pictures and their meanings. I undertook a photovoice training in August 2021 (provided and certified by Photo Voice, a UK based charity).

The use of photo elicitation presents advantages when discussing personal topics, or topics with a strong visual element, or when working with participants who may be intimidated by a more formal setting or who may struggle to formulate ideas in an articulated way. It is well adapted to younger participants and when investigating environment-related topics. The reason I have selected this method is indeed because of the topic investigated; sense of place can indeed be difficult to grasp using words,

and it also relates to the direct environment surrounding us. Literature has demonstrated the relevance of using photo elicitation to investigate sense of place, including in a coastal environment. For example, Bennett and Dearden (2013) used photovoice to explore social and environmental change among coastal communities on the Andaman coast (Thailand). Pierce (2020) used photovoice to document women working in aquaculture and fisheries. Kerstetter and Bricker (2009) used photovoice to explore the impact of tourism on local communities' sense of place in Fiji.

For this pilot project, I recruited 5 participants through a community centre, local organisation and social media.

Participants were instructed to take pictures (10-12) about what matters to them in Morecambe and makes it feel like "home". I did not mention the coastal or marine environment in the brief, as I wanted to see if this theme would be present and prominent. After two weeks, I met with each participant to discuss their picture and their significance (why did they take this picture; how would they describe it in a few words; what does it mean to them); two participants met together and engaged in a dialogue over the topic.

3. Snapshot of results

3.1. Online survey:

The respondents included a majority of female participants (over 75%) and were principally over 45 years old. There were no participants under the age of 25.

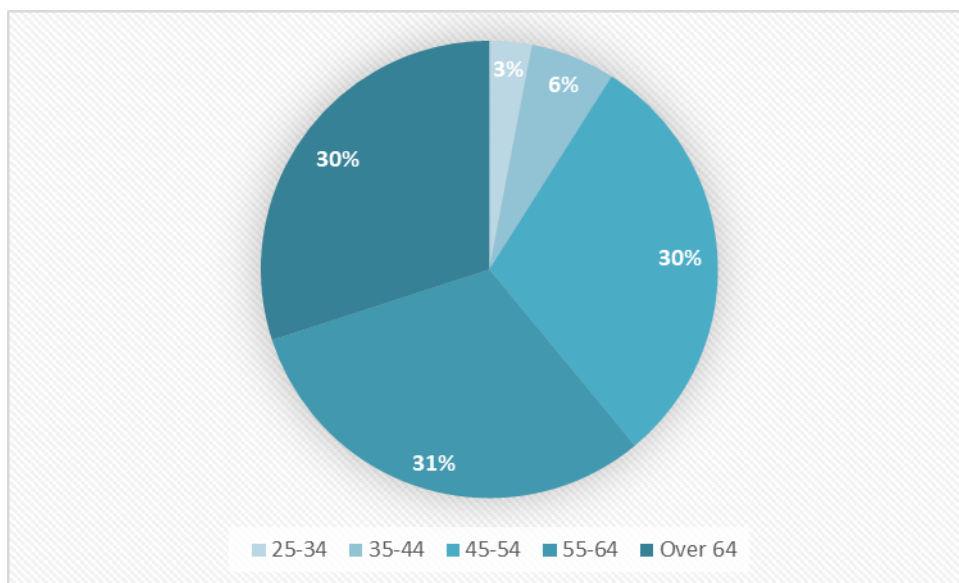


Figure 1: Age of participants

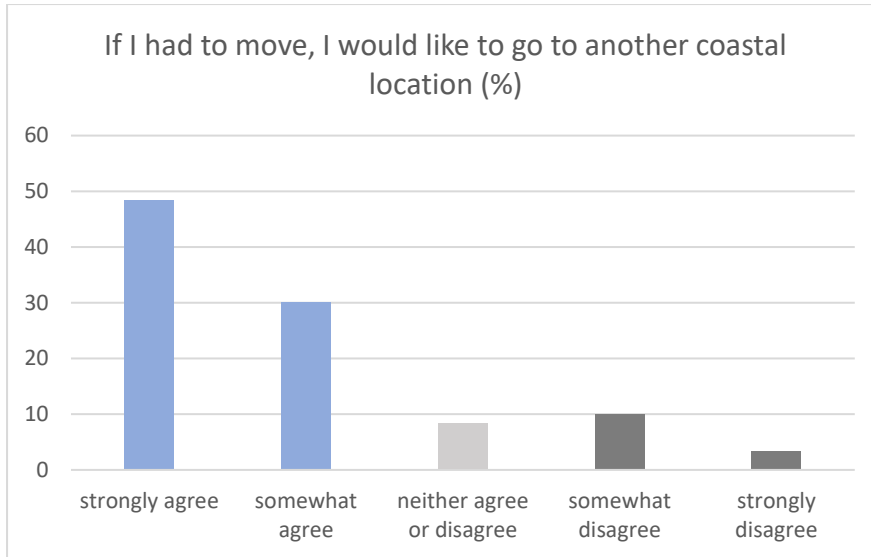


Figure 2: preference over coastal location

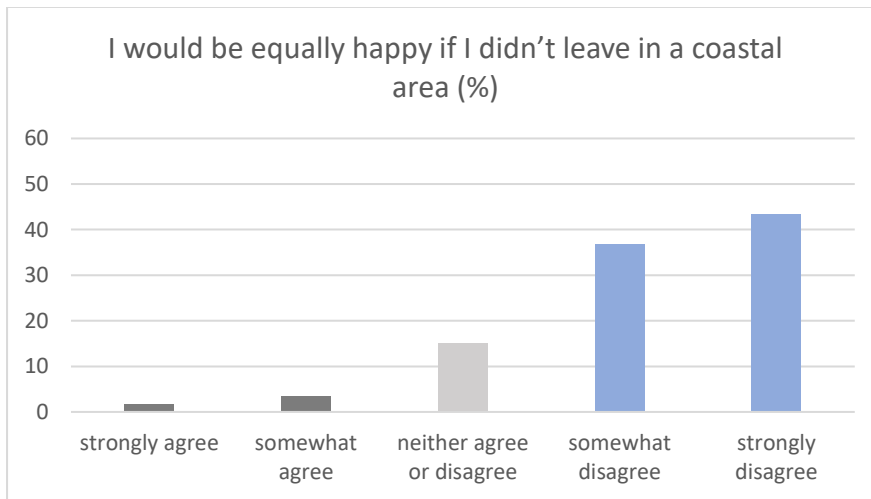


Figure 3: happiness over coastal area

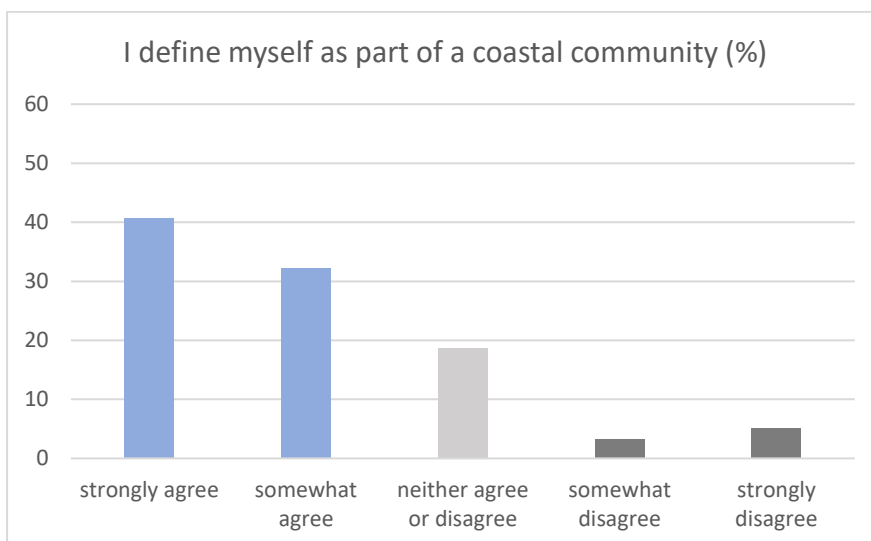


Figure 4: identification as part of a coastal community

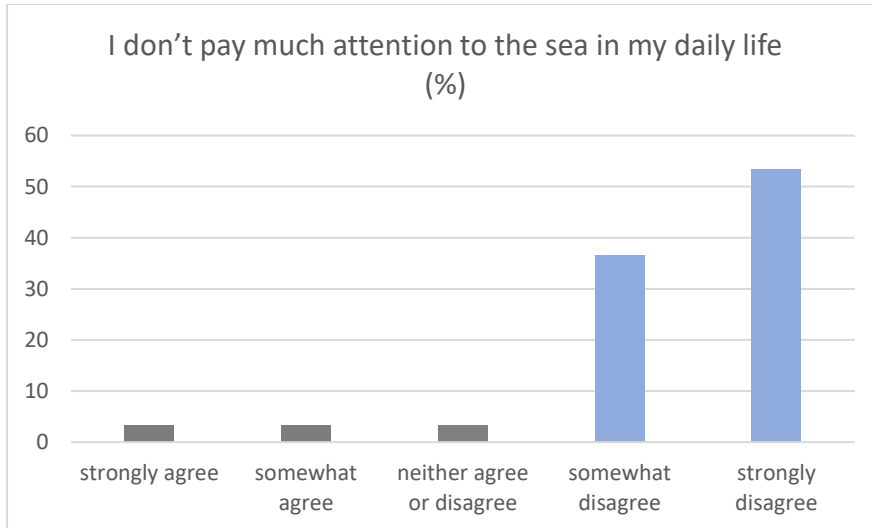


Figure 5: the sea in daily life

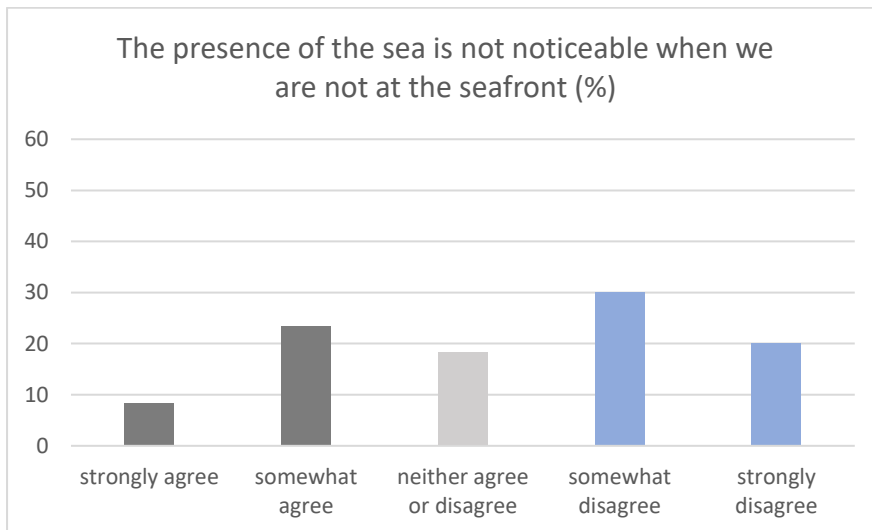


Figure 6: presence of the sea

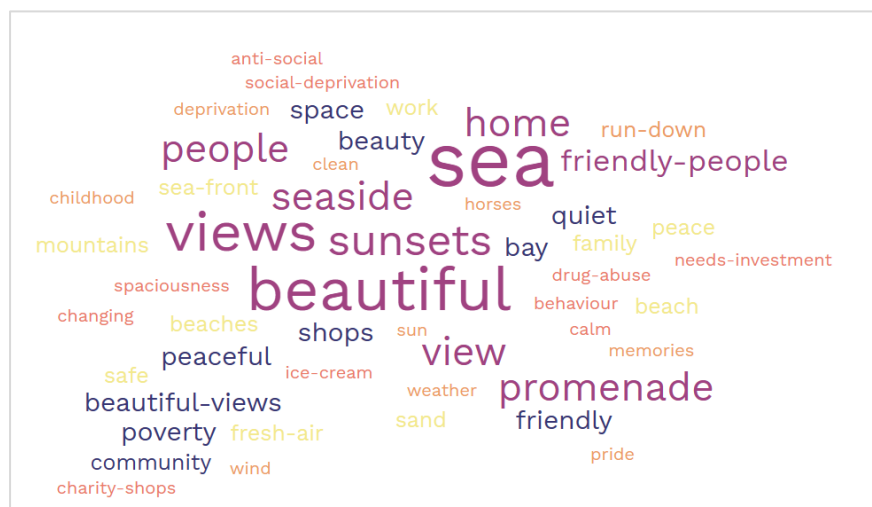


Figure 7: 3 things that come to mind when thinking about the area you live in

3.2 Photovoice:

Photovoice projects are not meant to be interpreted individually but in conjunction with other projects to highlight recurring themes. For the purpose of this report, I only highlight some features resulting from a single project (by participant #3). I shall specify, however, that the presence of the sea was a significant element in all the portfolios provided.

Participant #3 was born in Morecambe and has spent all their life there. Their children and their families are living there too. Their photovoice portfolio includes a mix of old pictures representing childhood memories and present day pictures. Their stories highlight bonds that refer to place attachment, place identity and place memory. Key themes standing out include:

| Themes | Examples |
|--------------------|---|
| Aesthetic | Sea front; sunset; beautiful; “never tires of the sea view”. |
| Luck | “Luckiest person in the world”, “I cannot believe my luck”. |
| Sense of belonging | Knows everyone; children and their partners decided to live her; grandchildren making the most of the shore; friendly neighbourhood; part of a community. |
| Nostalgia | Importance of childhood memories; bought a house next to their childhood house, overlooking the sea. |
| Sense of safety | Safe and safety repeated many times. Passing person would come and help. Ambulance, fire service, police, can be there in minutes. |
| Other comment | <i>Deep and enduring attachment. Had the opportunity to move away but felt them with dread.</i> |

Table 1: Key themes standing out from Participant #3’s portfolio



Figure 7: Grandchildren (aesthetic, luck, belonging, safety)



Figure 8: Bedroom view (aesthetic; luck)



Figure 9: Winter Gardens (nostalgia)

4. Next steps

The analysis and interpretation of the results and the comparison of the online survey and the photovoice projects will be published at a later stage in an academic article and will include recommendations regarding the methodologies employed to investigate sense of place. Importantly, this pilot project has enabled me to get insights into the use of photovoice and refine my approach for future projects. In particular, this pilot project has informed the research design and methodology of a British Academy-funded project investigating young people's views on the coastal and marine environment.

5. References

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