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Students' Environmental Identity, Spending Time in the Nature and Happiness: Is There Any Connection?

Dunja Anđić, Prof Dr. Sanja Tatalović Vorkapić

University of Rijeka, Croatia

Abstract

Having in mind the importance of developed environmental awareness and the strong mind-body connection that are present one of the significant determinants of human mental health and well-being, it is of utmost importance to explore the relationship between environmental identity (EI), healthy behaviors such as frequency of spending their leisure time in nature and in different nature places and feelings of joy and happiness among students. Therefore, the main aim of this study was to analyze the relationship between these focused variables, and the possibility of predicting EI based on students' time spending in nature and on nature places and their happiness level. In total N= 434 students at the University of Rijeka participated averaged age M=22,52 (SD=5,76). The research instrument included the Environmental Identity Scale, a happiness scale, and items assessing time spent in natural settings during leisure. Data were collected both in person (pen-and-paper) and online during 2024. Correlational analyses revealed marginal correlations between focused variables. SEM analysis showed that happiness has only indirect effect through spending time in nature and at natural places on EI but there are significant direct effects of spending leisure time in nature and natural places on students' EI. Future research and practical applications face the ongoing challenge of fostering students' connectedness to nature—not only through their leisure activities, but also by incorporating outdoor learning into educational practice. Additionally, further studies should explore other potential predictors that may influence students' environmental identity and overall well-being. These findings offer valuable practical implications for the development of academic programs that actively promote outdoor experiences and engagement with nature as effective strategies for strengthening students' environmental identity and enhancing their mental health and happiness.

Keywords: Environmental Identity; Happiness; Nature Places Students; Time Spent in Nature