**Title**

The role of eco-tourism businesses in promoting health and well-being: A Case Study of Wild Swim Retreats at the Forge Glamping, Corwen, North Wales.

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**Introduction**

This presentation offers an evaluation of wild swim retreat experiences and the benefits these bring to promote better physical, mental and social health from an eco-tourism perspective. The retreats are organised by *The Forge* off-grid glamping site in North Wales, UK, who in 2021 launched rewilding retreat packages. Wild swimming proved extremely popular with predominantly larger ladies, women in their 40s and 50s, who were non-athletic and experiencing significant life changes, including menopause, changing self-perceptions, divorce, and new career directions. We explore in this presentation the role of *The Forge* as a sustainable tourism business and its pursuit in focusing on the multi-faceted benefits to physical, mental and social health of women through wild swim retreats.

**Background**

According to the Mintel Wellness Traveller Report UK (2021) post pandemic nature-based activity wellness holidays became more popular, with consumers increasingly demanding greener wellness, motivated to go on a holiday to improve mental wellbeing to reduce stress. A further Mintel Report (2020) on special interest holidays stated that operators incorporating wellness elements to recover from the stress of the pandemic will attract new customers. Wild swimming is one of those wellness activities.

The well-being benefits to health of outdoor swimming are generally accepted as physical, mental, emotional and social (Olive, 2022). Wild swimming became popular during the pandemic in the UK with growing numbers of women and men of all ages rising for an early morning plunge (Lemmin-Woolfrey, 2021) in an attempt to reconnect with the natural world (Gould et al, 2021). The transition in some women’s lives during menopause is an opportunity to reassess one’s health, lifestyle, and goals (WHO,2022), but it is also an important transition from a social perspective as well as from a biological one. Wild swimming then in the context of this case study presentation, can be liberating for women, with the harshness of the cold water, exposing their vulnerabilities and/or embracing this transition in their lives.

Often described as the Land of adventure (VisitWales, 2022) Wales is full of open spaces providing many opportunities for activities to get away from it all. With its many lakes, waterfalls and rivers, Wales is a paradise for wild swimming (Start, 2018). *The Forge* has easy access to lakes and mountains and built upon a passion for sustainable living and rewilding,

**Research approach**

This project stems from the existing work and provision of *The Forge*, a small business that values inclusion and well-being. Therefore, the research approach is that of a qualitative case study, led by the owner of The Forge derived from owner observations and qualitative data from seven participants in the form of online reviews and direct feedback via email. They were women in their 50s, experiencing life-changes, including menopause. The women attended with a friend, or on their own, and for many this was their first break without their family, offering a chance to completely focus on themselves. They were typically larger ladies who are not fit and athletic, and often have started wild swimming in the past year or so. The feedback was analysed thematically.

**Discussion**

The retreats have proven beneficial for the participants physically, mentally and socially but have also provided an additional outlet for *The Forge* to embed its values of sustainability and sharing of its skills and resources for others. The nature of glamping itself creates a conducive environment for the benefits of the wild swim retreats to emerge, connected with nature, home cooked meals and luxury camping, away from the stresses of everyday life. The location is a key element to the retreat experience. The motivation to attend the retreats stemmed from the need for a mental health break as a result of the pandemic, burnout and menopause. Overall feedback from the women was that there seemed to be an unspoken rule that no one cares what anyone else looks like which is a great boost for body positivity and self-confidence. The physical and mental benefits have been well researched but for *The Forge* the retreats have emphasised women getting back in touch with themselves through the swimming and as a group but significantly it’s the opportunity to refocus on oneself and on one’s self-worth again. Rather than being an individual activity it is the social interactions that ‘facilitate a deep engagement with their local “bluespace” … rather than swimming away from the world, by “wayfaring” together these swimmers become connected to their environment, and each other, simultaneously’ (Gould et al, 2021).

**Conclusion**

*The Forge* wild swim retreats have proven to be beneficial for the women in terms of physical, mental and social health and proved to be so much more than just swimming outdoors. It provides an outlet for women who have hitherto dedicated their lives to other people, allowing them to focus on themselves and experience the outdoors in a way which they felt excluded from before. The retreats have engendered the values of the business with *The Forge* planning now to evolve the Wild Swim Retreat formula to become more accessible and affordable to different demographics of women. e.g. Black and Muslim women’s outdoor clubs. It is anticipated that further research projects will now evolve. While the physical and mental benefits have been more widely discussed it is the social or self that has shone through in the retreats, literally undressing oneself inside and outside within the freshwater environments of the lakes and waterfalls.

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