

Island Blue Spaces: A Deeper Exploration

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Abstract

Preliminary research has shown that blue spaces provide many benefits to health and well-being. In response to the call for a deeper investigation into this area of inquiry, the current study seeks input from those (N=37) who live on islands in the Northeast region of the United States. Previous findings about the significance of having access to nature, identifying it as a favorite part and most influential reason for living on an island, were reaffirmed. Distinctions between island and mainland life were highlighted, emphasizing the importance of community. This study also brought to light participants' grave concerns about issues such as housing costs, overdevelopment of the island, and the impact of tourism, providing a multifaceted view of life in an island blue space. It is hoped that these findings contribute to a deeper understanding of living in a blue space that can be applied to both island and non-island populations.

Keywords

island, nature, well-being, tourism

Introduction

The connection between blue spaces and increased health and well-being have been well-cited (Ashbullby, et al., 2013; Britton & Foley, 2021; Völker & Kistemann, 2011). These benefits include less mental distress, higher life satisfaction, better mental and physical health, and opportunities for physical exercise (Wheeler et al., 2012; White et al., 2020). While there has been an increase in interest around blue spaces, further research is needed. The current study is in response to Volker and Kistemann's (2011) call for additional "qualitative and multi-faceted, interdisciplinary studies" that take an in-depth realistic look at blue spaces, particularly focusing on the health and well-being of its inhabitants (p.449). Other researchers have heeded this call seeking participants' perspectives about island blue spaces (Coleman & Kearns, 2015; Satariano, 2019), but there is still much to be learned about these unique environments (Ashbullby et al., 2013; Gascon et al., 2015; Kearns & Conradson, 2015). This study builds upon previous research and focuses on how living on an island in

the New England region of the United States is perceived and evaluated by the year-round residents (Volker & Kistemann, 2011).

New England Islands

While there are hundreds of islands off the coast of New England (which consists of the coastal states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island) that vary in size, accessibility, and population, the islands of focus in this study are Block Island, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket. Findings from previous studies with this population demonstrate the significant influence that nature has on their lives, including their mental and physical health and overall well-being (Kras & Keenan, 2021; Kras & Keenan, 2023). Islanders rated themselves as being high in nature relatedness and described how the natural environment is the setting for their physical exercise, possesses therapeutic qualities, improves their mental health, and supports spiritual and/or reflective practices (Kras & Keenan, 2021). This was especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic when island residents utilized spending time in nature as a primary coping skill (Kras & Keenan, 2023). It was during this time that islanders sought nature for solitude and restoration to improve their mental well-being. Islanders shared how their time in nature during the pandemic helped to decrease their stress and anxiety, while increasing happiness and overall well-being.

Areas of Inquiry

Initial studies uncovered gaps in knowledge about this population's view of island living that needed further exploration. These gaps include residents' reasons for living on an island, island versus non-island life, and the impact of tourism. These areas of inquiry are described as follows.

Reasons for Living on an Island

Two questions that emerged from an initial study with this population is why these residents decided to live on an island and if or how long they plan on staying on the island in the future. Studies involving other island populations provide mixed views of island life (Royle & Brinklow, 2018). Some people view islands as a place to escape to (a refuge), while others view islands as a place to escape from (Kearns & Coleman, 2018). Findings from one study states:

Islanders enjoy the relative ease of access to nature on islands and the possibility of living in tune with the rhythms of the ocean and the land. They may see islands as paradise, safe, cocooned within the confines of an edge. But just as often the opposite is true: the island is a place from which one must escape. Many people who experience this feeling are the ones who leave: for education, for employment, or just to get away from meddling family and stifling community. (Royle & Brinklow, 2018, p.11)

This study seeks to uncover the factor(s) that influence someone to live on an island in New England and how that impacts their experience on the island.

Island Versus Non-Island Life

In previous studies, New England Island residents made references to the distinctions between living on an island versus living off island (Kras & Keenan, 2021; Kras & Keenan, 2023). For most, these were personal distinctions about having more access to nature and open spaces on the island, as well as not having to deal with the stress of traffic or over-

development. Similar types of comparisons were found in a study related to the pandemic and gratitude for being isolated from the mainland and having access to the vast spaces in nature for exercise and socializing safely with friends and family (Kras & Keenan, 2023). This study expands on the research by exploring residents' comparisons of island versus non-island life.

Tourism

Tourism and the influx of summer residents greatly increases the population of these islands during the summer months. For example, Nantucket's population grows from approximately 14,000 during the winter to over 80,000 during the summer (United States Census Bureau, 2022a). It is important to note that visitors and summer residents of these islands often include United States Presidents, celebrities, and the ultra-wealthy (Brandt, 2019; Sperance, 2022). While tourism often boosts the economy, serious concerns about tourism on small islands often center around increased traffic, environmental depletion, overcrowding, disruption to daily life, and unwelcoming behavior from visitors (Briguglio, & Avellino, 2019; Kurniawan et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2019; Smeral, 2019). This is an area of importance especially as "gentrification and coastal transformation are accelerating in New England as it is in most coastal areas of the US" (Clark et al., 2017, p.36). The impact that tourists have on New England Island life was referenced by participants in earlier studies, but further investigation is needed (Kras & Keenan, 2021; Kras & Keenan, 2023).

In response to the need for a greater understanding of people who live in small remote island coastal communities, this exploratory study continues to investigate the various ways that living on an island in New England impacts the lives of its residents (Kearns et al., 2015; Satariano, 2019; Wheeler et al., 2012). The research questions which guide this study are: *What factor(s) influence someone to live on an island in New England? How is living on an island different from living on the mainland? How does tourism influence island life?*

Method

Participants and Procedures

The requirements for participation in the study were being 18 years of age or older and having lived on an island in New England for a minimum of one year. Block Island, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket were selected due to feasibility and access for the researchers, as well as higher year-round resident populations as compared to other New England Islands. These three islands also face similar complexities associated with the swelling summer populations consisting of tourists and summer residents.

Block Island

Block Island, the town of New Shoreham, is located approximately nine miles of the coast of Rhode Island (Block Island Tourism Council, 2022). The island is seven miles long and three miles wide. Approximately 40 percent of the island is conservation land. In 2020, there were 1,010 people living on the Island (United States Census Bureau, 2020). The majority of the population identifies as White. The median household income is \$72,500 and approximately 46% of residents have a bachelor's degree or higher. The median home price is approximately 1.46 million (Block Island Realty, 2022). In the summer season, there are approximately 15,000 to 20,000 visitors a day (Block Island Tourism Council, 2022).

Martha's Vineyard

Martha's Vineyard is located just south of Cape Cod, MA. This island is 96 square miles with approximately 21,097 year-round residents and in the winter which grow to approximately 200,000 in the summer (United States Census Bureau, 2021). The majority of the population identifies as White. The median household income in 2021 was \$77,392 and approximately 46% of the population 25 and older had a bachelor's degree or higher. The average home price in 2022 was 1.8 million (Tea Lane Associates, 2022).

Nantucket

The island of Nantucket is located 30 miles off the south coast of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. The island is 14 miles in length and 3 1/2 miles wide. Over 40% of the island is conservation land. There are approximately 14,500 year-round residents and in the summer that expands to over 80,000 (United States Census Bureau, 2022a). The majority of the population identifies as White. The 2019 median household income for Nantucket is \$116,571 and 51% of the population 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or higher (United States Census Bureau, 2022b). The average home price on Nantucket for 2022 was \$3 million (Graziadei & Creed, 2023).

Participants

Participants in this purposeful sample were initially identified through two previous studies with residents from the three New England Islands (Kras & Keenan, 2021, Kras & Keenan, 2023). Former study participants were provided the option to anonymously submit their email addresses if they would like to be contacted to participate in future studies on this topic. After receiving IRB approval for the current study, electronic invitations were sent to these potential participants. Utilizing a modified snowball sampling technique, these individuals were also asked to directly share the study information with others who they believe may be interested in participating (Mertens, 2020). This differs from traditional snowball sampling because the participant was asked to directly share study information with others who they thought might be interested. This approach was taken with the intent to gain access to the island population that the researchers would not otherwise have access to (Mertens, 2020). In addition, the principal investigator sent electronic invitations to participate in the study to publicly available island community and non-profit organization emails, as well as island community social media pages asking them to share the study information with those that may be interested. The electronic survey was open for three weeks.

Questionnaire

An electronic questionnaire was developed by the primary researcher based on findings from two previous studies with this population and a review of the literature about coastal and island communities (Kras & Keenan, 2021; Kras & Keenan, 2023; Satariano, 2019). A draft questionnaire was reviewed by four academic researchers not connected to the study for validity and clarity. The wording of four questions were modified for clarity based on the academic researchers' recommendations. The questions inquired into various aspects of what it is like to live on an island in New England and consisted of six open-ended questions, six Likert scale questions, and seven demographic questions (see Table 1).

Table 1. Island Life Questionnaire

1. How long have you lived full time on an island in New England? (this is your primary residence):

- ☐ I have lived on an island my whole life
☐ 1–5 years
☐ 6–10 years
☐ 11–25 years
☐ More than 25 years
☐ Other: _____

Please rate to what degree the following influences your decision to live on an island.

2. Personal relationships (family, friends, romantic partner):
 Strongly Disagree — Disagree — Neither Agree nor Disagree — Agree — Strongly Agree

3. Island community:
 Strongly Disagree — Disagree — Neither Agree nor Disagree — Agree — Strongly Agree

4. Employment:
 Strongly Disagree — Disagree — Neither Agree nor Disagree — Agree — Strongly Agree

5. Economic:
 Strongly Disagree — Disagree — Neither Agree nor Disagree — Agree — Strongly Agree

6. Access to nature:
 Strongly Disagree — Disagree — Neither Agree nor Disagree — Agree — Strongly Agree

7. Geographical separation from the mainland:
 Strongly Disagree — Disagree — Neither Agree nor Disagree — Agree — Strongly Agree

8. How is island life from different from mainland life?

9. What is your favorite part of living on an island?

10. What is the most challenging part of living on an island?

11. How do tourists and summer residents impact island life?

12. If you could change one thing about the island you live on, what would it be?

13. Do you plan to remain on the island indefinitely? If not, why will you move away?

14. Gender:
☐ Male
☐ Female
☐ Other
☐ Prefer not to disclose

15. Age:
☐ 18–29
☐ 30–45
☐ 46–65
☐ 65 and older

16. Current employment status:
☐ Full-time
☐ Part-time
☐ Retired
☐ Not currently working
☐ Other

17. Housing Status:
☐ Rent
☐ Own
☐ Other

18. Please select the option(s) that best describe you:
☐ American Indian, or
☐ Alaska Native-Hawaiian, or
☐ Other Pacific Islander-Asian-Black, or
☐ African American-Hispanic, or
☐ Latino-Non-Hispanic White-Multiracial

19. On which New England Island do you reside?
☐ Block Island
☐ Martha's Vineyard
☐ Nantucket

Data Analysis

The five-point Likert-scale questions (questions 2–7) inquired into the influences of living on an island indicating a rating from ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Responses for each point on the Likert scale were reported as percentages. Responses to each qualitative open-ended question (questions 8–13) were analyzed separately following the steps of thematic analysis (Nowell et al, 2017). First the principal investigator (PI) familiarized herself with the data reading through all responses for each open-ended questions and made initial reflective notes about similarities and differences before developing a preliminary coding framework for each question. Next, using an inductive analysis approach, responses from each question were read multiple times, analyzed, and coded by the PI (Creswell, 2014). Preliminary emergent themes, as well as sub-themes, were developed, reviewed, revised, and named. Notes on the rationale behind the development of these themes were kept. At this point in the process an academic researcher who was unfamiliar with the responses, was brought in for peer debriefing (Creswell, 2014; Nowell et al., 2017). The researcher repeated the same steps as the PI. Once completed, the PI and the researcher met to come to a consensus on themes and discuss any discrepancies (Nowell et al., 2017). Similarities and differences among coded responses were explored and noted.

Trustworthiness

This study included views of island living from participants from three islands to help establish validity of the findings. Responses were elicited from young, middle, and older adults, as well as those who have lived on an island all their lives and those who recently relocated to an island. Peer-debriefing was also implemented to establish intercoder reliability and increase the trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell, 2014; Nowell et al., 2017; Spall, 1998). In addition, exact quotes and thick descriptions of responses including many exact quotations from participants, were included in the study's results (Nowell et al., 2017).

It is important to note that while the authors are frequent visitors to islands in New England, they are not residents. As non-islanders, it is important that the findings from the study allow the voices of the residents to be shared. The researchers engage in continuous reflection on the research design and analysis of the data to minimize any bias when reporting the findings through consultation with two academic researchers not associated with the area of study.

Results

Participants in this study (N=37) were residents of Nantucket ($n=21$), Martha's Vineyard ($n=8$) and Block Island ($n=7$). Most participants were female (69%) and identified as Caucasian (83%). Participants were primarily between the ages of 30–64 (74%). Participants were recruited from four representative age groups, no participants under the age of 30 responded. Most participants (30%) have lived on an island for more than 25 years or 11–25 years (24%). Seventy-five percent of participants owned a house on the island and most participants were either employed full-time (53%) or retired (22%).

Influences on Living on an Island

Participants were asked to use a five-point Likert-scale to rate the degree of influence that the following areas have on their decision to live on an island: personal relationships, island community, employment, economic, access to nature, geographical separation from the mainland (see Table 2). These potential influences were selected based on initial

findings from previous studies with this population (Kras & Keenan, 2021). Results showed that access to nature was the strongest influence on participants' decision to live on an island with 91% percent ($n=34$) "agreeing" or "strongly agreeing" that it influences their decision to live on an island, followed by personal relationships (76%) and the island community (73%). Economic reasons were the least influential factor for living on an island (25%).

Table 2. Influences on decision to live on an island

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Personal relationships (family, friends, romantic partner)	5.4%	2.7%	16.2%	32.4%	43.2 %
Island Community	2.8%		22.2%	36.1%	38.9%
Employment	10.8%	8.1%	35.1%	16.2%	29.7%
Economic	16.2%	16.2%	43.2%	18.9%	5.4%
Access to Nature		2.7%	5.4%	29.7%	62.2%
Geographical Separation from the Mainland	5.4%	10.8%	32.4%	32.4%	18.9%

Island Versus Mainland

Participants were asked the qualitative, open-ended question, "How is island life different from mainland life?" The most common responses centered around the positive sense of community found on the island. The second most cited difference between island and mainland life is that island life is "simpler" in some respects. Responses also included increased access to nature on the island as well as facing different travel challenges and the high cost of living. An islander from Nantucket shares his perception of this conflict, "Having a 30 mile moat between you and the rest of the world has benefits and setbacks. In general, it is pleasant, however, the economic and logistical costs take a severe mental toll." One Block Islander shares the following about how island life is differs from mainland life:

Fewer movies, no Chinese or Indian food, no strangers (except in summer), a stronger feeling of community, deadly poor internet, until recently we had fairly unreliable power, no fast food. Delayed gratification is the way it is. Though online shopping has helped with that. If you can't entertain yourself this is a terrible place to live. Anyone who has ever said "I'm bored" should stay on the mainland. You can't make enemies—if you burn a bridge you'll eventually have to rebuild it; this is more challenging for some than it is for others. Most communities are not as populated with stubborn, independent, self sufficient people.

Sense of Community

Islanders overwhelmingly identify the island community as the biggest difference between island life and mainland life. Adjectives given to describe the island community were "strong", "tight knit", "special", and "supportive." Statements such as "I feel a greater connection to my community. There is a spirit of pulling together" and "Less convenient, but special in how it brings people together" demonstrate the importance of community to these islanders (even though some note the lack of privacy that comes with being part of a small community). A woman who is retired and resides on Block Island simply states, "You need to rely on your neighbors, great small community where you know most everyone."

“Simpler” Life

Several islanders also described island life as being a sort of “simpler” life in some respects. Absence of highways, big box stores, chain restaurants, traffic lights, and high rises help to keep that “small town feel.” In comparison to the mainland or “America” as some participants refer to it, island life is “quieter”, “simpler”, “slower”, and “easier.” The following island residents expand further:

You don't have to drive everywhere, there is no "commuting" so you have more personal and family time at the end of your work day and often that time is better quality (i.e. beach, fishing, sporting events, walks).

Simpler. Off island I could waste a morning running from store to store trying to find the best hammer at the best price. On island, I have two choices. The stores are five minutes apart. I couldn't spend more than 15 minutes examining and making the choice if I had to.

It's hard to put this into words, but living on an island puts a simpler focus on life and one's priorities. The pace of things feels different. Because we all live, work, and/or go to school in the same place, there's an extra strong sense of community and collective good. You can't go anywhere without seeing someone you know, and often know well.

Island Living

To expand upon the understanding about what it is like to live on an island, residents were asked to identify what their favorite part of living on an island is and what the most challenging part of living on an island is. They were also asked what they would change about living on an island, as well as if they planned to remain living on an island in the future. The following is an overview of their responses.

Advantages

Participants shared a variety of responses when asked “What is your favorite part of living on an island?” Responses fell into three main themes, access to nature, community, and solitude. Several responses included all three themes.

Access to Nature. Island residents shared how being able to have access to nature, including being able to see the ocean daily, beach walks, watching storms, open spaces, salt marshes, and access to a variety of plants and animals were their favorite parts of island living. One participant responded, “The extraordinary natural diversity of this hundred square miles of land but, especially, the constant presence of the ocean in its endlessly varied moods,” while other participants indicate the personal importance of “Knowing the whole physical island intimately (I’m a nature journaler),” the “smell of the air and sound of the waves no matter where you are,” and “I love being connected to nature, walking on the beach, sitting on a boat, watching the storms, experiencing nature every day.” One Block Island resident provides examples of both the importance of nature and community in her response,

Raising children here was beautiful...they can all identify birds, love to kayak and go clamming, they know how to cook, can drive a boat and stick shift car and when they come home they appreciate the island so much more than they did growing up. In the winter, as soon as the ponds freeze the entire community is on the ice. Skate swaps take place and the ice boats get pulled out and everyone has hot chocolate pondside... for real. It's pretty perfect.

Community. Being part of an island community, including the people who live on the island was frequently cited as one of the favorite parts of living on an island. Some of the words used to describe the island community were “close,” “unique,” “small,” and “strong.” Participants shared examples such as “I love the sense of community and feeling like we're all in this together. It helps me push through the busy season,” “running into people I know and who know me everywhere I go,” and “knowing a lot of people and meeting very good people here.” One island resident expands on this idea of community:

Most people have more than one job and may serve on multiple committees. The woman who owns the liquor store is also the island piano teacher and in her spare time makes embroidered Christmas ornaments to sell; nobody fits neatly into a stereotype. When our kids come home they know everyone and carry on conversations with children on the beach and 80 year olds after church as easily as the friends their own age.

Challenges

Participants shared three main obstacles when they were asked what the most challenging part of living on an island is. These challenges include logistics of getting on and off the island, access to medical care, and the high cost of living.

Logistics. The logistical challenges of getting on and off the island was the most frequently cited challenge among participants. This challenge included limited ferry schedules, booked ferries, cancelling of ferries in bad weather, cost, and the amount of time consumed traveling. Island residents shared the following concerns:

The added time and expense to get ordinary things done. Missing planes, concerts, the circus, etc. because the ferry didn't run. Now that our kids have moved away it's too difficult to do holidays here; the unpredictable ferry schedule and weather factors in too much.

Winter can be frustrating/isolating as we are completely governed by weather, bad weather, boats don't run which can ruin travel plans and cause shortages in the grocery stores, delays in getting help from mainland by electric companies, etc in the event of power outages.

*The fact that there are no uncomplicated trips to "America." Going to pick up my new glasses at the optician in Wareham will kill most of a morning *if* I leave on the 7:00 ferry. Going to Boston or Providence consumes an entire day, and going to see a live evening performance anywhere beyond the nearest corner of the Cape means a night in a motel. On one level, that's a small inconvenience... but (in my experience) it narrows your social and cultural horizons compared to living on the mainland.*

Medical Care. Related to the logistics and cost of getting on and off an island, were concerns directly tied to the accessibility of medical services and mental health care on the island. This was an identified concern, especially from islanders who are worried about being able to get and keep medical appointments, especially in the winter, and lack of access to health services. One participant shares:

Getting to and from the island proves to be incredibly expensive and time consuming. When travelling back and forth to Boston for chemotherapy and radiation, the cost of illness almost triples, even with good health insurance. The less affluent and less fortunate people suffer greatly.

High Cost of Living. The high cost of living has been echoed throughout responses to various questions and is understandably noted as a challenge to island living. The high cost of transportation, housing, food, and resources were frequently mentioned and expanded on in the response, “If you are middle class, the super-rich have skewed the cost of things, so the local contractors and retailers charge rich people rates vs. normal rates for everything from a dozen eggs to a pair of shoes to cedar shingles.”

Change

When participants were asked “If you could change one thing about the island you live on, what would it be?” responses fell into two main themes: affordability and the overdevelopment of the island.

Affordability. Being able to lower the cost of living on an island was a change that many island residents would like to see across the three islands. This included lowering the cost of utilities, ferry transportation, goods and services, and especially housing. The following are some shared concerns about housing costs on the island, “To bring back the middle class. No one who's middle class can afford to live here and own a home anymore without assistance,” “Housing that would be available to working people who want to raise a family here. It's impossible. It may be too late,” “Housing issues and how impossible it is for a normal person to afford to buy a house to actually live in (not rent or spend a month in)” and “50 years ago it was the most extraordinary low key and wonderful place to live. It has been irrevocably developed and the lack of affordable housing is chronic.” Furthermore, one Martha's Vineyard resident shares:

I'd find a solution to the seemingly intractable problem of affordable year-round workforce housing: Paying wages high enough to let service workers afford year-round rentals at market rates would break the economy, but creating enough affordable housing for those employed in the service economy seems like an impossible dream. A reckoning is coming, and I don't know what it will look like . . . I just know it will be disruptive.

Overdevelopment. Island residents wish to stop the overdevelopment of the island. This included tougher building restrictions, including new houses and pools being built, limiting demolition permits and the limitation of cars allowed on the island in the summer. There were also mentions of retaining the historic character of the island.

Future Plans

The question “Do you plan to remain on the island indefinitely? If not, why will you move away?” ignited several types of responses that were evenly divided across yes, no, and maybe. For those who plan to remain on the island, some cited their families being on the island for generations such as “I plan to live out the rest of my life here, and — like my parents and grandparents (fellow “wash-ashores”) — have my ashes scattered over the surrounding waters” and others referenced traveling to other parts of the world, but making clear that the island will always be their home “It will always be my homebase. I have moved away multiple times to explore the world but this is my home” and “I will move away part of the year when I retire for a change of scene and warmer weather in the winter but will always come back.”

Out of the third of residents who shared that they do not plan to remain on the island indefinitely, cited increased cost of living on the island, lack of housing, the wealthy taking over, and lack of medical access as the main reasons. One islander states, “No. It is, sadly, not the safe haven it once was. The natural beauty of the island has and continues to be destroyed. The culture has suffered as well. The super wealthy have taken over. It's their place now.” Two island residents share more details in the following:

No. I'm waiting until my quite elderly parents pass away before I can leave... I am very stuck. I will move because I cannot afford to live out my years here, even though I would if I could. My savings will not sustain the last years of my life, so off to the mainland I go. Honestly, I can't wait.

We (my partner and I) discuss this often. If we decide to leave, it will be because of the high cost of housing and the type of economy. We rent, and only 10 months because our apartment is used in the summer by our landlord's family. This is very common, and results in the "shuffle." Because of the service economy, it's also hard to find work with a consistent schedule and one that works with my partner. We have gone as long as 4 months without having a single day off together. At some point, if we cannot afford a place of our own, and cannot find work with schedules that allow us to have the same days off, we will likely get tired of the constant moving and look elsewhere.

For the remaining third of responses, residents are not sure if they would stay, it would depend on various factors; they primarily cited medical access and affordability. The following is an example of such a response from an older adult who lives in Nantucket:

My current dilemma. Everyone wants a quick, even if catastrophic, death on island. Most of us will die instead from chronic debilitating illnesses of age that are mostly treated off island. Many of us will be over-treated and will die anyway. How does one gather courage to tell the specialists in the medical center hospitals thanks but no thanks? You can follow me with telemedicine, but I won't be coming back. My brother — on another island in another region of the country — faces the same issues.

Tourists and Summer Residents

In response to the open-ended question, "How do tourists and summer residents impact island life?" there were mixed responses. One response that pretty much expressed the sentiment of participant responses was "We love to see them come and love to see them go." This common theme expressed the islanders' dependence on summer visitors to support the economy, but also their frustration of them being on the island. While some participants shared positive aspects of these summer visitors such as getting to meet people from all over the world, the jobs they provide, and cultural offerings they support, there were many challenges expressed. One participant shares his conflicting views of tourists and notes an associated mental health challenge:

They provide the backbone of the economy. Without them, the island dies. However, the pressure of making a year's worth of income in a 3 month period leads to some serious mental health struggles for many year-round residents. However, it IS great to see the island come to life with people in the summer. You meet some truly interesting people (and some celebrities).

Island residents used words such as "needy," "rude," "entitled," "strangers," and "annoying" to describe summer visitors, as well as stating how they "act like they 'own' the place." One Block Island resident clearly states her perspective, "They demand SO MUCH. They are very needy. They have no concept of island time. They can be disrespectful and are often drunk. Our children saw a lot more bad behavior in adults (tourists) than most of their contemporaries."

Some residents do not believe that these visitors appreciate the island and the natural beauty. It was described that they “don’t understand island time” and possess a “mainland attitude.” These visitors are “just on vacation” and more “concerned with keeping up with the Jones’s.” Some respondents made clear distinctions between tourists and summer residents including “The tourists are OK, but the wealthy summer residents are incredibly entitled, and their attitudes negatively affect island workers.”

When the summer tourists and residents arrive, island residents often have their daily lives disrupted and access to resources become more limited. One resident states, “almost all my daily life changes.” Residents describe how they are not able to launch their boats, get ferry reservations, and the islands are crowded with people and cars. Two islanders expand further:

Traffic mostly but also ability to access restaurants, boat reservations and shipping of items to the island, cell service and internet also seem to be impacted as it gets terrible in the summer due to the volume of people vs. the rest of the year. I also think it is very difficult to shop for groceries. With access to only 1 major grocery store for approximately 80,000 people, it is very challenging.

We love them and hate them. We all know we need them to come and support our businesses, non-profits, etc. but increasingly, they are more and more affluent, less connected to the island, drive too fast/aggressive, don't abide local customs, less concerned with local issues and more concerned with keeping up with the joneses. More short term rentals bring in more and more tourists who are just here for vacation and don't care about the island, care more about status...

Discussion

The current study provides a deeper understanding of what it is like to live on an island in New England. Findings emphasize the importance of nature, the island community, and the impact of tourism that were noted in previous studies with this population, but new insights emerged surrounding serious concerns over the cost of island living, access to healthcare, and the overdevelopment of land. Of particular interest is how these factors are influencing islanders’ decisions to stay or to leave the island.

Nature

The importance of nature was strongly supported in the findings, as noted by participants’ overwhelmingly selecting access to nature as the most important influence on their decision to live on an island, as well as the most frequently cited favorite part of living on an island. These findings echo previous research about the significant role that nature plays in these islanders’ lives (Kras & Keenan, 2021; Kras & Keenan, 2023). The benefits from having access to these natural spaces can hold many benefits for islanders’ overall well-being, including their mental, physical, socio-emotional, and spiritual well-being (Coleman & Kearns, 2015; Klinger, 2015; Kras & Keenan, 2021; Kras & Keenan, 2023; Nicholas, 2014; Satariano, 2019; Wheeler et al., 2012; White et al., 2020). Having the unique opportunity to live in a blue space in these small island communities, away from some the stressors of mainland life, is essential to these residents but like other islanders throughout the world, they face many challenges (Briguglio & Avellino, 2019; Clark et al, 2007; Harling Stalker & Burnett, 2016; Kurniawan et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2019; White et al., 2013).

Concerns

Serious concerns over the cost of living, access to healthcare, and realistic views about the probability of being able to remain living on an island was something new that emerged in this study. Significant fears about housing costs, health care access, overdevelopment of the island, and transportation costs were revealed. To provide an example of the latter, the cost of one roundtrip ticket to take a vehicle on the Nantucket ferry ranges from \$128.00 to \$270.00 depending on vehicle length and the time of year and day of the week in addition to a \$20 roundtrip passenger fee per adult (The Steamship Authority, 2023). While there is the option to purchase discount ticket books and multi-ride cards, this is still a significant cost for those who must frequently travel on and off the island. Future studies should further investigate these identified challenges and potential solutions.

Island Visitors

As many islanders shared, tourists and summer residents provide economic resources. Simply described by one islander, “They infuse the island with money and provide work.” These visitors can also be a disruption to everyday life contributing to overcrowding, transportation challenges, and overdevelopment of the island (Kurniawan et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2019; Smeral, 2019). An article from the NY Post titled, “Can Nantucket survive the stress of year-round tourism?” cited many of these concerns including the lack of workers to fill summer positions due to the lack of affordable housing, increased automobile traffic, impact on the environment and increased pollution (Plummer, 2022). According to the article, several establishments around the island were unable to open in 2022 due to lack of staff who were able to afford to live on the island. The gap between the year-round residents and the summer residents, which include United States Presidents and celebrities, has also been shared in the news.

In an article, “Housing needs assessment portrays an island in crisis,” shared in the Vineyard Gazette (February 21, 2021) a commission economic development and affordable housing planner Christine Flynn states “Those with insecure housing, who have relied on winter rentals in the past, have been outbid by more affluent families from off Island or their winter rental has been sold due to the pandemic.” Flynn continues by stating “The Island’s socio-economic diversity is eroding as lower income households are dwindling in number and in proportion to the population.” One non-profit agency, Housing Nantucket, whose mission is to “support and provide equitable, affordable housing solutions for Nantucket’s year-round community” and provide programs that “encourage, create and protect quality workforce housing that remains price-accessible for future generations” (Housing Nantucket, 2023) is just one of the multitude of island organizations, non-profits, and government initiatives focused on addressing concerns such as land conservation, housing shortages, and island preservation.

When discussing the multitude of benefits that island blue spaces provide for health and well-being, it is also important to consider the unique challenges that many who live in these spaces also face. Future studies should continue to highlight the voices of island residents to share their perspectives.

Conclusion

As research continues to explore blue spaces, the more we will uncover about the complexities of these spaces. One point that has been made clear in the current and previous studies, is the significance of nature in these islanders' lives. While year-round island residents get the opportunity to live in a place that thousands flock to for vacation, they face their own set of unique concerns. For many islanders, these challenges are influencing their decision to remain on the island in the future. Issues of gentrification, over development, and rising housing costs present challenges that are not easy to combat. Further exploration into the issues and how they impact island life is needed.

Limitations

Although findings from this study, as well as other studies with various island populations cannot be generalized to individuals living on all islands throughout the world, they do offer a deeper understanding of these scarcely studied island populations. A limitation of this study is that participants self-selected to be part of this study and their views may not necessarily be representative of all islanders. In addition, no young adults (ages 18–29) completed the questionnaire. Future studies should look at ways to target participants in that age bracket to provide additional perspectives.

Future Research

Future research with this population should continue to explore issues of concerns including rising housing costs and over-development of island land. Research should also provide a more in-depth exploration of what it is about blue spaces that they find so beneficial, perhaps through interviews and utilizing visual methods of data collection. These methods will encourage islanders to be active research participants, finding new ways to share their perspectives and tell their stories. Another area of inquiry would be to seek the perspectives of summer residents and visitors to these islands and compare them to the year-round residents.

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