



## Enjoying your beach and cleaning it too: a Grounded Theory Ethnography of enviro-leisure activism

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# ENJOYING YOUR BEACH AND CLEANING IT TOO: A GROUNDED THEORY ETHNOGRAPHY OF ENVIRO-LEISURE ACTIVISM

## ABSTRACT

This research explores the phenomenon of beach cleaning as an activity for environmental activism and coastal recreation. This is significant as beach litter continues to blight coastal environments and decreases visitor satisfaction. Increasingly, groups of individuals are voluntarily removing litter from the beach. Through the use of Grounded Theory Ethnography, this research was able to conceptually explain beach cleaning behaviour; thereby producing an original theory of 'enviro-leisure activism'. After following groups of beach cleaners in Northern Ireland for 16 months and iteratively collecting and analysing data through participant observation and constant comparison analysis, it became evident that beach cleaning is a predominantly recreational activity, situated on the serious leisure spectrum with competing environmental and leisure motives. Beach cleaners inhabit social worlds bounded by legitimacy, identity and shared altruistic values. They exhibit low-level focused activism and a strong sense of place attachment. Story-telling and litter hunting emerged as mechanisms to cope with the perpetuity of the litter problem. Beach cleaning events could provide opportunities for tourism planners to promote inclusive, recreational family activities and attract new visitors to their local beach. Likewise, by engaging proactively with beach cleaning volunteers, environmental NGOs and policymakers could improve their own pro-environmental behaviour campaigns.

**KEYWORDS:** environment, leisure, activism, coastal tourism, beach cleaning, Grounded Theory Ethnography

## INTRODUCTION

Coastal environments, specifically beaches, hold a special place in our hearts. Gazing over the sea, listening to the sound of the breaking waves and feeling the sand between our toes inspires awe, instils calm, releases tension and provides a transitional space for many types of recreation (Holden, 2016). The beach offers nature in perpetuity; a place outside the constraints of time and matter (Simmons, 2013). This perpetuity is threatened as no other wilderness falls victim to human interference faster than our coastlines (Leopold, 1949). Beaches are “complex spaces, anomalously located between land and sea, nature and culture.” (Urry, 2002:36) They are important to our wellbeing providing the opportunity “for tactile close up contact with the natural physical world” (Tunstall & Penning-Rowsell, 1998:329); a place for families to come together and for everyday stresses to be relieved (Holden, 2016). Their value cannot be reduced to a purely economic one, as values “appear in the human response to the world.” (Rolston, 1981). In recent years, beach cleaning has become a more and more popular activity. By cleaning beaches, participants improve the environmental quality of beaches. In doing so, they also improve the well-being value of the beach for other users and the role beaches play in coastal recreation. This phenomenon has been largely led by local volunteer groups and has become increasingly prominent.

This research explores beach cleaning as an organised activity and its implications for coastal recreation. The research seeks to 1) develop substantive, grounded theory for this behavioural phenomenon, and 2) to provide recommendations for coastal tourism. In light of the scarcity of research into understanding the beach cleaning phenomenon,

this research adopts a Grounded Theory approach, thereby culminating in an original theory of 'enviro-leisure activism'. The significance of this research lies in its impact potential to improve visitor experience and the ecological environment through enhancing and supporting beach cleaning as an organised leisure activity. The research is set in Northern Ireland, which has a high dependence on beach tourism and has seen a notable uptake of beach cleaning as an organised activity in recent years; thereby providing a suitable setting for this research. The paper is structure as follows: first, literature related to the beach-litter-nexus is reviewed. Then, Grounded Theory Ethnography is discussed as an appropriate methodology, detailing methods and materials. Following this, a newly developed theory of 'enviro-leisure activism' is presented and discussed in-depth in relation to existing literature. Finally, the article is concluded with recommendations for coastal tourism.

## **THE BEACH-LITTER-NEXUS**

The importance of beaches to human wellbeing became plainly evident when the UK government took the first tentative steps to lift some of the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown restrictions. In response, thousands of citizens visited beaches in the hope to find relief from some of the burdens brought on by a global pandemic. Beaches became a "geography of hope" (Towner, 1996:212) for a better life. However, this hope for better life on better beaches depends largely on their quality and cleanliness (Briassoulis, 2002). Beach visitors' expectations are linked to water quality, safety, facilities, absence of litter and excellent scenery (Williams & Micallef, 2009). The aesthetic value of coastal scenery (Rolston, 1981) drives the tourism economy (Williams, Rangel-Buitrago, Anfuso, Cervantes, & Botero, 2016). It is, thus, a great concern that up to

97% of the economic value of a beach could be lost due to pollution (Ballance, Ryan, & Turpie, 2000). Beach quality and cleanliness remain key decision-making factors in visitors' choice of a coastal destination (Nelson & Botterill, 2002; Tudor & Williams, 2006). Esparon, Stoeck, Farr and Larson (2015) conclude that a littered beach could reduce the length of stay by tourists in an area by up to 60%, while Roehl and Ditton (1993) contend that littered beaches decrease visitor satisfaction. Moreover, Krelling, Williams and Turra (2017) estimate an 85% drop in visitation for the worst polluted beaches. Furthermore, the doubling of litter on a beach could reduce the perception of quality of life by local residents by up to 90% (Stoeckl et al., 2014). Together with river outflows, beach use (both by locals and tourists) has been identified as the primary source of beach litter (Williams et al. 2016). Estimates of the contribution of human activity to beach litter vary from 49% (Prevenios et al., 2018) to 80% (Lee, 2015; UNEP, 2009; UNEP, 2011; UNEP & GESAMP, 2005). Regardless of the exact figure, the impact of beach users on the quality of our beaches is extensive.

In addition to these social, recreational and economic impacts of beach litter, the environmental concern cannot be overstated. Each year, millions of marine animals are mutilated or killed by marine litter (Butterworth, Clegg, & Bass, 2012). Anthropogenic beach litter, such as cigarette butts or plastic fragments, act as mobile marine pollutants endangering fragile coral reef ecosystems (Wilson & Verlis, 2017). A report by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre highlights a plethora of ecological hazards resulting from human-induced marine litter, including entanglement and ingestion, transfer of chemical substances from litter to marine wildlife as well as interference with marine wildlife patterns of movement (Werner et al., 2016) as well as having adverse effects on over 1,400 species of marine fauna

(Fossi, Panti, Baini, & Lavers, 2018). In light of these hazards, keeping our beaches clean seems imperative to ecological, economic and societal wellbeing.

The negative impact of marine litter has led early adopters to act by collecting litter from the beach (Windom, 1992). However, as an organised activity, beach cleaning has only recently gained traction. Wyles, Pahl, Holland and Thompson (2017) recognise the educational value of removing debris from the beach, suggesting it may lead to more pro-environmental behaviour overall. As a coastal activity, beach cleaning provides physical and mental health benefits (Wyles et al., 2017). Cheng, Wu, Wang and Wu (2019) noted clean-ups for their potential to build social capital; while others suggest clean-up activities enhance individualistic altruism (Brown, Ham, & Hughes, 2010). The literature on cleaning up, specifically beach cleaning, however, is scarce. The phenomenon is in its most fundamental essence not yet understood.

The significance of understanding beach cleaning as a coastal recreational activity stems from two sources. First, its strength in numbers. The Marine Conservation Society (2019) reports that during the 2019 bathing season in Great Britain and Northern Ireland 10,896 volunteers took part in beach cleaning activities. In Northern Ireland, environmental charity Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful (2019:2) reported that “509 people have donated over 118 hours in cleaning our survey beaches” during that year. Clean Coast Week in September 2019 in Northern Ireland attracted 1895 volunteers (KNIB, 2019). It is evident that beach cleaning is no longer a fringe activity. There are now over 800 ‘2-Minute Beach Clean’ stations on UK beaches; and social media is awash with beach cleaning hashtags and influencers. Second, the impact on local environmental quality of this activity is noteworthy. In 2019, the 1 millionths piece

of litter was collected by a beach cleaner in Northern Ireland (KNIB, 2020). During the Great British Beach Clean in September 2019, 10,833 kg of litter were removed from UK beaches in just one weekend (MCS, 2019). Concludingly, an activity with such notable impact and strength in numbers deserves academic attention; not least because of its ability to improve local environmental quality and the local tourism product itself. This is significant. Northern Irish beaches perform poorly for cleanliness standards. 508 pieces of litter were found on average for every 100m of beach (KNIB, 2020), and coastal tourism accounts for 32% of domestic tourism in Northern Ireland (NISRA, 2020). Thus, clean beaches are of great importance to the Northern Irish tourism economy.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Grounded Theory Method (GMT) and Ethnography (GTE)***

Beach cleaning as an uncoerced, voluntary activity is a little understood behavioural phenomenon, which has seen a significant increase in participation over recent years. Despite these indicators of significance, the phenomenon itself has seen only basic attention in academic research. Wyles et al. (2017) noted beach cleaning as an educational tool, while Lucrezi and Digun-Aweto (2020) suggest that willingness to participate remains limited. Rayon-Viña, Miralles, Fernandez-Rodríguez, Dopico and Garcia-Vazquez (2019) conclude that beach cleaning could improve environmental awareness. However, research to date has not sought to explain the behavioural components of beach cleaning as an organised activity. This is a significant oversight, as beach cleaning has become an increasingly popular leisure activity with a pro-environmental impact. Filling this gap by developing an explanatory, theoretical

framework is the primary objective of this research. Stumpf, Sandstrom & Swanger (2016) recommend using GTM in cases where there is a lack of theory regarding sustainable tourism phenomena. Moreover, GMT is useful for studying a process, an interaction or an interaction involving many individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In this research, this interaction between individuals is 'beach cleaning as an organised leisure activity'.

“Grounded theory method (GTM) is a qualitative research methodology explicitly focused on generating new theoretical insights grounded in a systematic data collection and analysis process.” (Stumpf, Sandstrom, & Swanger, 2016:1962) Developed in the 1960s by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, GTM has evolved as a robust methodology for theory development in qualitative research. Glaser and Strauss (1967) set out the ground-breaking parameters of GTM as a way of generating theory through a data-driven process of discovery. They note that GTM “brings out distinctive elements or nature of the case” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967:25), which in this research are the elements underpinning the behavioural phenomenon of beach cleaning. Over the decades, GTM has evolved along three schools of thought: The Glaserian tradition (1978; 1992) which is closest aligned to the original text; the positivist Straussian school (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) and the constructivist approach of Kathy Charmaz (2000) – the latter being adopted in this research.

The constructivist approach admits that “neither observer nor observed come to a scene untouched by the world” (Charmaz, 2014:15) The researcher and the researched co-construct knowledge through interaction and engagement. Data is analysed from shared experiences and the phenomena under investigation take



centre stage in constructivist GTM (Charmaz, 2014). Constructivist research is informed by the researcher's positionality and reflexivity (Valentine, 2013). My own desire to pursue this research was influenced by my introduction to environmental volunteering during a sabbatical with an environmental charity. Having been unaware of beach cleaning, I received a rapid introduction through working with a variety of grassroots volunteer groups who come together to clean beaches in Northern Ireland. It became evident to me that this was a fast-growing, behavioural phenomenon. However, there seemed to be no real understanding of the elements underpinning this activity, such as facilitators, motivations or systemic influences. My co-investigation with beach cleaners has informed the epistemological position of this research – knowledge is situated and co-constructed (Cloke et al., 2004).

The research design is based on the question of explaining a behaviour, i.e. picking litter on the beach, that has evolved into an organised activity, i.e. participation in beach cleaning groups and events. GTE was used to address the central research question because it offers a research strategy that helps to understand the progression from a simple to a complex behavioural phenomenon. "GTE gives priority to the studied phenomenon or process – rather than a description of the settings." (Charmaz, 2014:22). The ethnographer seeks to compile the fullest set of information about a group of people or phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, rather than providing a thick description of certain actions, a Grounded Theory Ethnographer seeks to "make conceptual rendering of these actions" (Charmaz, 2014:22). Cloke et al. (2004:312) describe this as the artisan approach to data collection and analysis, aiming "to understand the world as it is revealed in the everyday experiences,

encounters and utterances” and allowing tourism researchers to build holistic theories of human behaviour (Jennings & Junek, 2007).

### ***Methods of Data Collection and Analysis***

The following paragraphs outline in detail the methods of data collection and analysis in this research. They are based on Weed’s (2009) eight steps to develop rigour in GTM research: (1) iterative process; (2) theoretical sampling; (3) theoretical saturation; (4); theoretical sensitivity (5) constant comparison; (6) codes, memos and concepts; (7) fit, work, relevance, and modifiability; and (8) substantive theory.

**Step 1 – Iteration:** Data was collected and analysed iteratively over a period of 16 months from June 2018 to September 2019 spanning over two bathing seasons in the Northern Irish tourism calendar. As a Grounded Theory Ethnographer, I took part in 20 beach clean-up events that had been organised by grassroots volunteer groups. My participation had a dual functionality: to be a beach clean volunteer and also to be a researcher. This is called being a ‘complete participant’. This form of participant observation reduces participant bias (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). This strategy also enabled me to participate and observe beach cleaning behaviour in a sustained, structured and in-depth manner (Charmaz, 2014), minimising research participants’ fatigue over a 16-month period. Institutional ethical approval was received prior to commencing data collection.

**Step 2 – Theoretical Sampling:** Sampling followed a purposive, theoretical approach. Purposive, to select groups of participants for observation that are central to the study (Saunders et al., 2019). Selected groups included volunteer groups of

beach cleaners in Northern Ireland who advertised their organised beach cleaning events via social media and opened them to the public for participation. The theoretical sampling element aims to discover data that is pertinent for the development of an emerging theory (Charmaz, 2014). In practice, this meant focusing on elements of the beach cleaning behaviour during the participant observation to obtain a rounded and grounded picture. The backbone of theoretical sampling is its continuity throughout data collection and data analysis (Holt & Tamminen, 2010). In short, the sampling process is ongoing, focusing on significant categories, which are emerging from the data collection and analysis process. This, in essence, is the reason for the time-consuming nature of GTE (Charmaz, 2014). Figure 1 depicts the locations of the beach clean data collection instances. Following each beach cleaning event, I compiled comprehensive field diaries, describing in detail observations with quasi-verbatim participant quotes. Using qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12 provided structure and accountability during the analysis (Lewins & Silver, 2014).

**Figure 1: Locations of beach cleaning events during data collection**

#### Beach Clean Locations

- 1 Smelt Mill Bay
- 2 Swineley Bay
- 3 Ballyholme Beach
- 4 Helen's Bay Beach
- 5 Whitehouse Lagoon
- 6 Crawfordsburn Beach
- 7 Hollywood Sea Park
- 8 Ballyhalbert Beach
- 9 Murlough Beach
- 10 Donaghadee Harbour
- 11 Hollywood Sea Park
- 12 Millisle Beach
- 13 Ballywalter Harbour
- 14 Groomsport Beach
- 15 Millisle Beach
- 16 Hollywood Sea Park
- 17 Ardglass Cove
- 18 Ballywalter Beach
- 19 Ballyholme Beach
- 20 Carnalea

June 2018 - September 2019



**Step 3 – Theoretical Saturation:** During the time of this research, I focused on events around the Ards Peninsula area of Northern Ireland; therefore, allowing me to attend as many events as possible in order to achieve data saturation. Each beach cleaning event was organised by a group of local volunteers, was open to the public, free of charge and lasted usually between two and three hours. For 20 data collection instances this equated to approximately 50 hours of participant observation of approximately 400 participants in total. While Weed (2009) identify theoretical saturation as an element of rigour for GTE, Bryman (2012) notes that GTE researchers cannot conceivably anticipate the instances of data collection required in order to

achieve saturation. Therefore, theoretical sufficiency (Dey, 1999) presents a more suitable criterion in constructivist GTE (Charmaz, 2014). This was achieved after 16 months of participant observation and iterative analysis.

**Step 4 – Theoretical Sensitivity:** Theoretical sensitivity “acknowledges that the researcher enters a research site with an awareness of the area, but importantly, without any pre-conceived notions about what they might discover.” (Weed, 2009:505). This means that a comprehensive literature review should not take place prior to data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Instead, a detailed comparison of the emergent theory with existing literature will lead to substantive theory (Charmaz, 2014; Saunders et al., 2019) as seen in the next section of this paper.

**Step 5 – Constant Comparison:** Data analysis was rooted in a constant comparison approach – a process whereby emergent themes are continuously compared to new, incoming data (Hardy, 2005) and data collection is tailored to further exploration of emergent themes (Charmaz, 2014). This approach acknowledges theory as a process rather than a static entity (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To do so, Charmaz (2014) recommends beginning with line-by-line coding using words from the field notes to develop initial codes. Line-by-line coding reveals “visibly telling and consequential scenes and actions” (Charmaz, 2014:50), staying close to the data. In doing so, 114 initial codes emerged through constant comparison of incoming data.

**Step 6 – Codes, Memos and Concepts:** The second stage of coding seeks to conceptualise phenomena (Weed, 2009) through the process of focused coding,

memo-ing and developing concepts. Focused coding is a form of analytical sense-making (Charmaz, 2014) and involves making decisions about the internal validity and credibility of initial codes. This means focusing on those codes that are most significant and/or frequent (Charmaz, 2014) and removing those that don't have enough substance to provide room for analytical interpretation. The 114 initial codes were condensed to 64 codes following a round of focused coding, and then grouped inductively into six significant theoretical categories as outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1: Significant, theoretical categories**

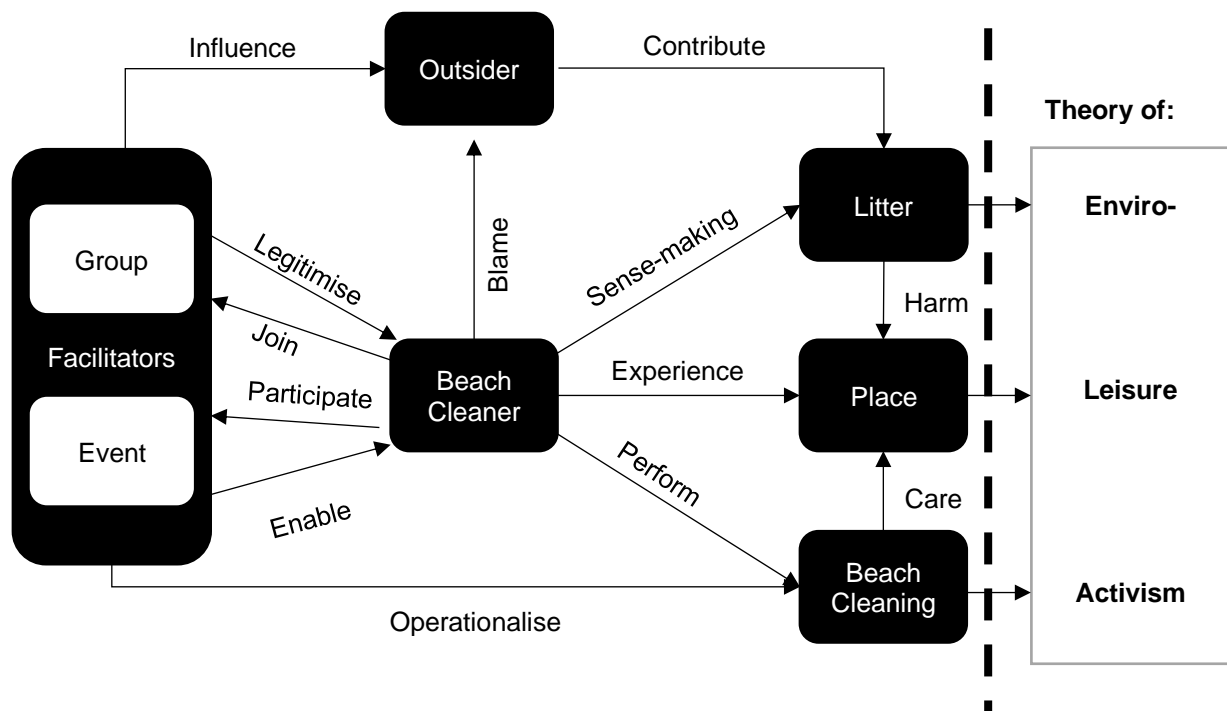
<b>CATEGORY</b>	<b>COMPRISES FOCUSED CODES DESCRIBING...</b>
Beach cleaner	... the individual partaking in the beach cleaning activity
Beach cleaning	... the beach cleaning activity itself
Facilitators	... the combined codes describing events and group sub-categories
▪ <i>Events</i>	... <i>the beach cleaning events</i>
▪ <i>Group</i>	... <i>the group characteristics, dynamics and logistics</i>
Litter	... the composition, frequency and experience of beach litter
Outsider	... the interaction with and feelings towards non-participants
Place	... the location specifications and feelings towards the beach

**Step 7 – Fit, Work, Relevance and Modifiability:** The third stage of coding consisted of memo-ing – the process of making extensive, interpretative notes for each category and their respective focused codes. Memo-writing is crucial as it increases the level of abstraction from codes to constructs and categories to concepts (Charmaz, 2014). This important stage supports accountability in research (Decrop, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) or as Weed (2009) identifies specifically for rigour in GTE: the fit, work, relevance and modifiability of emerging theory. This process of extensive memo-writing led to the development of 6 concepts with 18 theoretical constructs posited for interpretation, explanation and investigation of relationships. The data analysis stages are thus complete; with **Step 8: Substantive Theory** forming the basis for the presentation of the findings and discussion.

## A GROUNDED THEORY OF ENVIRO-LEISURE ACTIVISM

This section presents ‘enviro-leisure activism’ as a grounded theory based on the previously described GTE methodology. The theory is visualised as a Concept-Indicator Model in Figure 2 depicting the concepts and their relationships of ‘beach cleaning as an organised activity’. Charmaz (2014) describes this as a visualisation of the theoretical concepts and their relationships of time, people, places and circumstances. The significant categories from Table 1 build the basis for the Concept-Indicator Model. These have been elevated to concepts by identifying relationships among them and assigning analytical properties in the form of constructs. These concepts and constructs are explained in relation to existing literature, thereby generating substantive propositions for a grounded theory (Hardy, 2005).

**Figure 2: Concept-Indicator Model of ‘Enviro-Leisure Activism’**



The darker rectangles present six concepts, which together make up the core elements of this behavioural phenomenon. These are connected by arrows indicating the direction of a relationship. The verbs attached to these arrows explain the nature of the relationship between these concepts. To the right of the diagram, the concepts and relationships are channelled into three strands: environment, leisure and activism – henceforth combined as ‘enviro-leisure activism’. Thereby, concepts have been analytically abstracted into substantive theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The following sections explain each concept and its constructed properties in depth. The constructs are numbered consecutively from 1 to 18. This is combined with illustrative verbatim quotes from beach cleaning participants and a detailed comparison to existing literature. Pseudonyms were used for all participant quotes to safeguard anonymity.

### **Concept 1: The Beach Cleaner**

At the centre of the diagram is the beach cleaner – the individual taking part. Through analytical abstraction three constructs emerged for this concept: (1) learning, (2) commitment and (3) recreation.

**1 – Learning:** Families reported that deciding to participate in a beach clean coincided with the child’s schooling on environmental topics. *“This is our first time. The boys are really looking forward to it. They are talking a lot about plastic and the environment at school at the moment. We thought this would be a great way to teach them.” (Helen)*

Such learning experiences have shown to increase pro-environmental attitudes among participants (Lee & Jan, 2018) and empathy toward the natural environment (Ballantyne, Packer, & Falk, 2011). Research has also indicated that learning experiences improve future pro-environmental leisure behaviour (Van Riper & Kyle,



2014). Morse, Carman and Zint (2019) report that observational learning particularly increases future environmentally responsible behaviour. The participatory and inclusive nature of beach cleaning has a strong normative orientation. Coughlan and Gooch (2011) contend that those learning opportunities lead to increased personal cross-spectrum activism.

**2 – Commitment:** Activism is based on commitment, and in the context of beach cleaning demonstrated through the regularity of participation. Most family groups attended only one or few beach clean events as part of a ‘family day out’, whereas couples and solo participants attend regularly and express strong environmental commitment. *Sinéad* explains:

*“I am very independent. I do my own thing and I am passionate about the environment. I don’t care what the rest of my family thinks. I just like cleaning beaches.”*

Commitment is a strong indicator for identification as a beach cleaner. This is often observed among serious leisure participants, for whom obligations, commitment and responsibilities form a vital part of their leisure activity (Gibson, 2005). Though Ryan et al. (2001) purport that altruistic values as ‘helping the environment’ tend to wane over time and develop into self-interested motivations (e.g. leisure or social interaction). Similar observations could be made in this research; for example *Allan* stating: *“I was looking for a group to join and do something good together.”* While *Gareth* explains *“I like being at the beach. Beach cleaning gives me even more reason to visit the beach now.”* Nonetheless, commitment to the cause (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014) and regularity of involvement (Veal, 2017) situates beach cleaning within the serious leisure spectrum.

**3 – Recreation:** Contrary to the belief that beach cleaners are local residents, it in fact emerged that many beach cleaners were excursionists. Excursionists or same-day visitors (UNESA, 2010, §2.13) are those domestic visitors travelling from further afield, including urban areas and in-land regions, motivated by spending a day on the coast. Excursionists reported to have planned activities such as participating in beach cleaning and visiting coastal resorts for food/drink and retail opportunities.

*“We live in Dungannon. We have retired here from England as we prefer the pace of life here. We travel up for a beach clean event about once a month. It’s a bit of a drive, but it’s a great reason to go to the coast. We make a day of it and have some food and do some shopping.” (George and Anne)*

This suggests that recreation plays an important role in environmental conservation (Lyon, Bidwell, & Pollnac, 2018) and highlights the need to engage with a variety of audiences for environmental awareness campaigns (Bolderdijk, Gorsira, Keizer, & Steg, 2013), which often overlook the recreational value (Rolston, 1988) of the environment in question.

### **Concept 2: The Beach Cleaning Activity**

The next concept under investigation is the beach cleaning activity. The relationship between the beach cleaner and the activity can be explained along three constructs of the beach cleaning activity: (4) preparation, (5) risk and thrill, (6) achievement.

**4 – Preparation:** Preparation is taken very seriously. This includes wearing proper footwear and weather appropriate clothing. While organisers usually provide participants with litter picking equipment, more often regular beach cleaners have

begun investing in their own. From an 'enviro'-perspective, these investments are key to improving of the local environmental quality (Williams et al., 2016); while from a 'leisure' perspective, investment and preparation embody "such qualities as earnestness and sincerity" (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014:16); thus, reinforcing the serious leisure dimension of beach cleaning. Finally, investment has also been identified as a characteristic of "focused activism" upgrading from "incidental activism (e.g. picking up litter while on a walk)" (Weaver, 2013:388).

**5 – Risk and Thrill:** During beach cleaning, risky behaviour has been observed, especially in the form of risk to one's physical well-being. Beach cleaners have shown to accept pain and discomfort in the pursuit of this activity – in extreme cases even leading to injury. *Laura* remarks:

*"I couldn't come for a while because I had my arm in a sling. I fell during a beach clean and broke it. It was my own fault."*

Taking personal risk denotes another characteristic of focused activism (Weaver, 2013), whereas perseverance in the face of pain and discomfort are identifiers of beach cleaning as a serious leisure activity (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014; Green & Jones, 2005; Moularde & Weaver, 2016). Stebbins (2005:351) called this the "dark side of agreeable obligation."

In relation to the above, competitiveness and thrill-seeking were observed during the data collection. The notion of 'going the extra mile' dominates and picking litter becomes a competitive hunt. It is reasonable to suggest that beach cleaning should in fact be called 'litter hunting' as the following quote signifies:

*“Boys, come here! I think I found a drinking spot. We’ll be able to pick up lots of litter here.” (Gerry)*

Rolston (1981) argues that thrill is a precursor to recreational and aesthetic values in nature. Thrill is also apparent as an abstract reward in serious leisure (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014). Participants also expressed disappointment at not finding enough litter, as the following quote illustrates:

*“I’m glad we found this. I was starting to get a bit disappointed. There was very little litter here today. It’s been really clean. But now I feel better that we found these bottles.” (Joan)*

Herein lies a paradoxical intention. On the one hand, beach cleaners are motivated by environmental conservation. On the other hand, lack of litter would not satisfy the beach cleaner’s leisure motivation. Such is the dissonance between being an incidental vis-à-vis a focused environmental activist (Weaver, 2013). Leaning on Leopold’s (1949) contrast-value, it is reasonable to assume that the hunt for litter trumps the joy over discovering a litter-free beach.

**6 – Achievement:** Achievement and reward orientation are crucial. *Sam* is satisfied: *“I’ve done my bit. I can go home happy now.”*, while *Brian* beams *“I’ve got a pot of hot stew on the hob. Just what we deserve after a day out in the rain.”* In either case it is notable that beach cleaning is not an entirely positive experience. Feelings range from positive emotions such as joy, happiness, dedication and commitment, as well as competitiveness and thrill, to negative feelings such as pain, physical discomfort and disappointment. Reward orientation motivates the beach cleaner and is “arguably central the serious leisure perspective” (Veal, 2017:210). Research has shown that personal rewards increase pro-environmental behaviour among recreationists (Font,

English, & Gkritzali, 2018), while Weaver (2005) associates these rewards with an 'ethic of enhancement', which – when channelled effectively – increases environmental activism (Weaver, 2013).

### **Concept 3: Facilitators of Beach Cleaning**

The concept of facilitators comprises of two elements: groups and events. Beach cleaners join a group which creates both moral and social legitimacy (Anderson & Smith, 2007). Three constructs explain the group sub-category: (7) informality, (8) social media and (9) praise. In addition, beach cleaners participate in events which enable them to carry out the activity; constructs include (10) competition and (11) communication.

**7 – Informality:** Beach cleaner groups are characterised by their informality. Informality refers to the degree at which people assume formal roles and carry out formal tasks. It acts as a precursor to low-level focused activism (Weaver, 2013) and is an important aspect of volunteering as leisure (Stebbins, 2004). Informality also reduces expectations to perform socially, thereby diminishing social and psychological risks that are traditionally associated with joining new groups (Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard, & Hogg, 2016). Group interaction revolves around the three commonalities: collecting litter, enjoying nature and working together. These are directly reflected in the theory of 'enviro-leisure activism'. *"I find it relaxing – picking litter with a group. It makes me happy to be together outside and to do something good for the environment."*, Helen explains.

**9 – Social Media:** This combination of shared interests creates a social world which the beach cleaner inhabits. These “social worlds are characterised by a high degree of informality” (Unruh, 1983:129). The group provides a conduit for cognitive identification with shared perspectives and interests (Unruh, 1983). Group cohesion is achieved through the extensive use of social media; thereby, linking actors cognitively through shared communication channels (Unruh, 1983). Each group tends to have a lively social media channel to communicate with one another, discuss issues, advertise events, report problems and recruit participants. *Pamela* explains:

*“We have a Facebook page. I always add pictures of us on the page and let people tag themselves. We’re a little community now and I hope it encourages others to join us.”*

This cognitive interaction increases environmentally responsible behaviour intentions (Morse et al., 2019). Therefore, social media presence bestows identity and validity upon a group and reduces cognitive dissonance in relation to unsustainable behaviours (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014). Furthermore, Stone and Fernandez (2008) found that giving people the opportunity to publicly advocate correct environmental behaviours increases their own motivation for environmental activism. In addition to identity, validity and activism enhancement, social media also serves the purpose of story-telling. *Allan* jokes *“The other day I found an empty pint glass and posted this on the group’s Facebook page and just waited for the comments.”* The story of litter moves from the beach to the online world.

**9 – Praise:** Despite displays of competitive behaviour among beach cleaners, praise plays an important role in the group dynamic. Praise legitimises behaviour. In light of the perpetuity of the littering problem, the smallest litter picking success is generously

celebrated. *“I’m pleased with this outcome,” says Jonathan, “every small item of litter that we collect counts.”* However, the aforementioned hunting notion prevails. Praise is directed often to those who collected the largest or most curious items: *“You’ll get first prize today for finding this [a marijuana bong]. Great work!”*, says Linda. Praise can be seen as the group’s response to the individual’s competitiveness. The interplay between altruistic and self-interested motivations as a characteristic of environmental volunteering (Ryan et al., 2001) becomes evident in the beach cleaner group setting. In addition, Kim and Stepchenkova (2020) have found that such altruistic values combined with environmental knowledge encourage pro-environmental behaviour. Praise increases environmental activism (McGehee, 2002), even among softer forms of activism, such as removing litter (Weaver, 2013).

**10 – Competition:** Outside the social media context, the group’s existence and by extension the facilitation of beach cleaning depends on the organisation of beach cleaning events. Events enable participation; however, not without challenges. A lack of co-ordination between different beach cleaning event organisers has become evident over the time of observation. *Linda* explains:

*“I try to co-ordinate with Jonathan. We usually take the first Sunday of the month and he takes the third. But he’s now changed it and didn’t tell us.”*

Despite subscribing to a common goal, competition among groups and event organisers occurs, and territorial tendencies emerged as justifiers for an un-coordinated approach. Unruh (1983) contends that separation is deeply embedded within social worlds, even between those interest groups with notably common goals. Obligation to the cause is different from obligation to the group in the world of

volunteering (Stebbins, 2004), as it also appears in the social world of beach cleaning. This competitive conflict should be taken seriously as it poses a barrier to impact.

**11 – Communication:** Communication with wider stakeholders is a key factor in the legitimisation of social worlds (Unruh, 1983). Event organisers across the observed spectrum have engaged in a range of communication activities to legitimise their activism. Such activities included recording the number of volunteers and bags of litter collected and submitting this data to local environmental NGOs as evidence of impact. Pictures of event attendees are frequently taken and posted on social media. Some event organisers also regularly submit articles to the local press to highlight the problem of marine litter and promote the work of their respective groups. Research has demonstrated that such communication approaches significantly support messaging around pro-environmental behaviour into the wider community (Font et al., 2018). The personal angle of communication activities contributes positively to the forming of altruistic values (Brown et al., 2010) and improved pro-environmental behaviour (Manning, 2003).

#### ***Concept 4: The Outsider***

Events and groups facilitate beach cleaning as an activity. However, through them, the beach cleaner can also act as an influencer on wider society. Concept 4 concerns 'the outsider', which explains the relationship between beach cleaners and those not directly involved, but indirectly affected or effecting the beach-litter-nexus. Such groups include other beach users, professionals responsible for the maintenance of the beach and adjacent local community residents. The 'outsider' concept can be



explained along three constructs: (12) demonstration effect, (13) community relations and (14) reluctant networking.

**12 – Demonstration effect:** Impact is established in two ways: to promote beach cleaning as an inclusive activity, and to achieve an overall reduction of littering behaviour. Both are hoped to be achieved through the continuous visibility of the beach cleaning group on a regular basis along popular tourist and leisure spots. Thereby, beach cleaners demonstrate desirable behaviour somewhere between complete restraint and complete recreation (Holden, 2009). The aim is threefold: educate, engage and enable.

*“As a group, I think we have made quite an impact this year. People see us out picking litter and I hope that this visibility has an impact on their own littering behaviour. It’s important that we are not affiliated to a brand or an organisation. We are just normal people, like everyone else. I think this has a great impact on the local population.” (Meghan)*

By demonstrating desirable behaviour (removing litter) and highlighting undesirable states (littered beaches), beach cleaners hold up a mirror to those who otherwise might not see themselves as the cause of the problem (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014). Therefore, beach cleaners demonstrate a shift in ethical positioning (Holden, 2013) in relation to the use of the beach. It was interesting to observe the reaction of beach visitors to the volunteers, which ranged from gratitude to ignorance to uneasiness. Most visitors react positively to the sight of beach cleaners, with many conveying messages of appreciation. Beach cleaning can thus be regarded as a non-intrusive activity, which does not diminish a good day out on the beach for other visitors. This demonstration effect also reinforces the serious leisure dimension of beach cleaning

(Moularde & Weaver, 2016). Research further suggests that demonstrating negative states increases empathy among outsiders, inadvertently leading to a reflection on their own environmental behaviour (Lee & Jan, 2018); in essence providing a “demonstration effect of lifestyles” (Holden, 2003:99).

**13 – Community Relations:** Considering the local community, it became evident that beach cleaning event organisers were particularly concerned with the establishment of good community relations. As *Brian* pointed out:

*“We need the buy-in from the local community whenever we visit a beach for cleaning. We can’t just show up and be seen to be cleaning up their beach, as if to say that they’re not looking after it.”*

The wish to not offend was obvious. Instead, by carefully and at times democratically selecting clean-up sites, event organisers wished to create a sense of stewardship. *“I almost want the local community to host us. Or even better, start organising their own clean-up events in the future,”* explains *Linda*. Ryan et al. (2001) identified stewardship as an important precursor to activating environmental volunteering commitment as it reinforces the idea of common resource ownership (Holden, 2005:340). Such a careful approach to community relations promotes joint advocacy over public resources (Bendle & Patterson, 2008), enabling a form of community activism (Krebs & Holley, 2006). However, research on the effects of community activism on environmentally responsible behaviour intentions of visitors is still ambiguous (Cheng et al., 2019; Morse et al., 2019).

**14 – Reluctant Networking:** Many beach cleaners have expressed an uneasiness about joining existing, larger litter campaigns or related networks, such as the *Live*

*Here Love Here* campaign in Northern Ireland or the *Clean Coast* network across the island of Ireland. While loose association was evident for the purpose of information sharing or event promotion, affiliations did not run deeper than that. “Network weaving” (Krebs & Holley, 2006:17) could not be observed in the social world of beach cleaners.

*“I share the event details on the [campaign name] website, but I do not use their flyers or branding because the whole campaign is sponsored by [large company name] and they are the worst polluters in the first place. I can’t be promoting them without losing my integrity.” (Linda)*

This reluctance suggests that blame is laid at authorities and original polluters. A multi-sectoral failure is seen as the cause of the persistent littering problem on the coast of Northern Ireland. Even today pollution is rife (Hardin, 1968) and the guilty do not pay sufficient attention (Goodman, 1960). This multi-sectoral blame perspective is heavily problem-focused, with criticism directed to the public, private and voluntary sectors respectively.

*“I am frustrated with the council,” explains Pamela. “We organise these events and then the council fails to collect the litter bags.”*

Such discourses are fuelling blame culture within the social world of beach cleaners (Croft, 2018). However, by focusing on the failure of others, people inadvertently are reminded of their own shortcomings (Stone & Fernandez, 2008). Attributing blame stimulates looking for solutions, demonstrating new steps towards activism, as *Laura* explains:

*“We need to take our activism to the next level. What we do here is good. We meet and collect litter. But it’s not enough! We should really all get together – all the different groups – and discuss the problem. Like a Litter Summit! Yes! That’s exactly what we should do to discuss the problem and share our ideas.”*

The call for action is one for fellow beach cleaners and remains at grassroot level. Grassroot organisations are important inside social actors (Bendle & Patterson, 2008). Their “lived experiences” (Beech & Johnson, 2005:33) of litter on beaches provide necessary, intimate knowledge of the problem (Unruh, 1983). Such close proximity and tacit understanding (Unruh, 1979) triggers pro-environmental behaviour change. Their pro-environmental values are fully activated (Tölkes, 2018) and would offer a meaningful conduit for sustainability communication (Font et al., 2018; Tölkes, 2018). Unfortunately, thus far; beach cleaning groups have been largely excluded from the development of anti-littering campaigns in Northern Ireland.

### ***Concept 5: Litter***

Litter signifies an important concept in this grounded theory development. The concept includes all codes in the data relating to litter objects or litter frequency, as well as the thoughts and feelings of beach cleaners in relation to litter on the beach, such as condemning littering, types of litter, worries about litter etc. From the many initial codes, two constructs have emerged: (15) citizen-science and (16) story-telling.

**15 – Citizen-Science:** While research suggests that not all litter is perceived as equal (Wilson & Verlis, 2017). For example, discarded fruit peel is often not regarded as litter, whereas a discarded plastic bottle is. In fact, many littering instances are not seen as such (Kantar Millward Brown, 2018). Beach cleaners, however, appear not to share this notion and perceive all types of litter as offensive regardless of their composition and size. Beach cleaners have adopted a holistic view on litter and its harmful effects on wildlife and habitat.

*“It’s not really just about the big items,” says Sam. “You need to pick up the small stuff too because otherwise this gets washed back into the sea and can really hurt marine wildlife.”*

Most event organisers weigh collected litter and provide an overview of litter quantities and composition to environmental advocacy groups. As such, beach cleaners contribute to the growing field of citizen science. Long before citizen science became a popular term, Leopold (1949) advocated citizen scientific enquiry, with research proposing it as a driver for pro-environmental values (Dean, Church, Loder, Fielding, & Wilson, 2018; Toomey & Domroese, 2013). Citizen science encourages intellectual adventure and the telling of nature’s tale (Rolston, 1981).

**16 – Story-Telling:** In addition to telling nature’s tale, beach cleaners have also shown to tell stories about the litter they find. This was a most unexpected observation. *Jonathan* explains that:

*“Sometimes people find very old items, like 20-year-old crisp packets or beer cans. People like that, especially the kids, because you can tell stories about the old stuff, like where it might have come from and who might have left it here.”*

Stories are used to make sense of the perpetuity of litter; they improve the mood and create bonds. Story-telling provides a form of narrative therapy (Barry, 1997). Stories act as emotional barriers to the reality of litter that confronts them (Darwin, Johnson, & McAuley, 2002). These litter stories have the potential to provide authentic narratives of beach cleaners (Croft, 2018), creating ‘discourse coalitions’ (Hajer, 1993) and accumulate the power of cross-spectrum activism (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011;

McGehee, 2002; Mezirow, 1991; O'Sullivan, 1999). Rolston (1981:120) concludes "that the story can never be worthless".

### **Concept 6: Place**

The final concept of 'enviro-leisure activism' is place, signifying the leisure component of the theory. The data revealed two core constructs: feelings of (17) leisure and (18) attachment.

**17 – Leisure:** The leisure potential of beach cleaning cannot be underestimated. The beach/place provides the recreational value (Rolston, 1981) and the attractiveness of the place increases the willingness to participate in clean-up activities (Brown et al., 2010). Beach cleaners reported a sincere appreciation of the scenery and of engaging in an activity that is taking place on the beach. "*You're outdoors and it's healthy and good for you*", explains Allan. Weaver (2013:377) contends that "the optimal scenario is *symbiosis*, wherein the quality of visitation and biodiversity are mutually reinforced through visitor-related activity that enhances both biodiversity and the wellbeing of visitors." The beach provides the place where the reciprocal relationship between nature and our own wellbeing can be exercised (Holden, 2015) and psychological health can be improved (Wyles et al., 2017). Positive, nature-based leisure experiences activate environmental identity, moral norms and behaviours (Clark, Mulgrew, Kannis-Dymand, Schaffer, & Hoberg, 2019). In Rolston's view (1981:114) such experiences increase the "kinds of values that arise *in association with nature*".

**18 – Attachment:** While leisure was important, the relationship between beach cleaner and place is also one of attachment.

*“I live in Mid Ulster now, but I used to come to this beach as a child. I haven’t been back for many years, but now we travel here on some weekends and always take part in the beach clean when it’s on. It brings back great memories being here and caring for the place”* reminisces Karen.

The beach becomes a place to be consumed through a nostalgic lens (Urry, 1995). Additionally, place attachment increases willingness to participate in environmental activism (Kyle, Mowen, & Tarrant, 2004; Niininen, Szivas, & Riley, 2004; Stedman, 2002; Vorkinn & Riese, 2001; Weaver, 2013). In social worlds, attachment stems from regularity (Unruh, 1983) and bestows upon the beach a spiritual value (Rolston, 1981). The beach remains a place of spiritual connection, with a value that runs deeper than just a place of sea-sand-sun hedonism.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research investigates beach cleaning as an organised leisure activity. Through the use of Grounded Theory Ethnography, a substantive theory of ‘enviro-leisure activism’ was presented and discussed in depth in the previous section. From this, two areas for implications derive: coastal tourism management and further research.

**Implications for coastal tourism management** – The Concept-Indicator Model (Figure 2) provides policy makers and coastal tourism managers with a framework to support beach cleaning as an organised activity and, in so doing, contributing to the cleanliness of our beaches. The data has shown that the ‘group’ and ‘events’ concepts provide legitimacy, facilitation and operationalisation of beach cleaning. Beach cleaning could be promoted as an alternative activity to the family segment of beach

visitors, new entrants and curious visitors. Streamlining communication between beach cleaner groups through the use of digital apps is recommended. Furthermore, tourism planners could support beach cleaning event organisers with operational challenges, such as obtaining insurance and carrying out risk assessments. The 'outsider' concept provides tourism planners with the opportunity to acknowledge a multi-sectoral failure in addressing beach litter. The concept presented relationships based on blame, influence and contribution to the littering problem. It is recommended that tourism planners engage in dialogue with beach cleaners to develop solutions for litter-free beaches. Regular town hall meetings or a Litter Summit as was suggested by one beach cleaner provide options for such stakeholder engagement. To date, beach cleaners in Northern Ireland are not given a voice to share their experience, expertise and hope. This leads on to the final group of concepts: 'litter', 'place' and 'beach cleaning'. Tourism planners ought to acknowledge the performing function of beach cleaning as well as the emotional investment. Much of the activity revolves around litter-hunting, storytelling and place attachment. Motivations to take part in beach cleaning surpass environmental motives to include leisure, social and individualistic ones. Environmental NGOs, policymakers and tourism planners are advised to acknowledge the plurality of this activity and broaden their campaigns from a narrow environmental to a wider leisure and recreation message.

**Implications for further research** – The research presents substantive theory on 'enviro-leisure activism', which through the process "theoretical verification" (Rosenbaum and Russell-Bennett, 2019) may be further developed into formal grounded theory. The Concept-Indicator Model (Figure 2) may also be used as a roadmap for further research. The facilitating concepts 'group' and 'events' and related



constructs provide grounding for research into barriers and inhibitors of community volunteer events. Furthermore, by applying the serious leisure perspective (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014) research could investigate how to elevate beach cleaning from low-level activism to more seriously engaged activism. Additionally, this research highlights the role of digital communication in constructing social worlds and contributing to citizen science. There is scope to further expand this angle of research. The 'outsider' concept builds a basis for research into improvement in stakeholder engagement and understanding perhaps why local community groups' voices often remain unheard at policy level. Recent research questions the limitation of taking an industry vs resident – centric approach (Weaver, Moyle, & McLennan, 2021). This research supports this critique by highlighting the leisure component of beach cleaning and advocating networking, a multi-sector perspective and citizen science. Another implication for future research is to study the interaction of beach cleaners with other beach visitors and whether this activity diminishes the visitor experience of those who just want to have a good day out on the beach without any explicitly open demonstration of pro-environmental behaviour and values. Furthermore, the group of concepts related to 'litter', 'place' and 'beach cleaning' and associated constructs build a grounding for research into the affective and behavioural responses to environmental degradation. The findings of this research provide a basis for better understanding solastalgia and activism among residents and recreationists. Finally, although this research is culturally specific to the willingness to engage in 'enviro-leisure activism' in Northern Ireland, it is likely that the results of this research have application in societies with similar social structures and environmental values. This research has provided a substantive theory of 'enviro-leisure activism' which may be compared a disparate set of related substantive theories to abstract formal theory

(Glaser 2008). Beach cleaning should not remain a fringe activity. It is a sign of hope, an expression of care and a force for a better, more valued coastal environment.

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