

Pursuing happiness in the 21st century: Connecting with nature to mitigate environmental problems

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As human beings, we all want to pursue happiness in our lives. It is critical to understand how to achieve this goal, particularly in the twenty-first century with a rapidly changing environment. This study will approach this issue methodically by first reviewing the concept of happiness from a utilitarian perspective and adopting the view that happiness is the absence of pain and the presence of pleasure. According to the UNDP 2021 report, the major difficulties facing Thais in the 21st century are environmental problems associated with Sustainable Development Goals 13 (climate action) and 14 (life below water). Therefore, the concept of nature connectedness is proposed as a guideline for resolving those environmental problems, as being connected to nature can create happiness in addition to reducing the pain caused by environmental issues. Moreover, the topic of how to become more connected to nature is also discussed.

Keywords: happiness; life satisfaction; positive psychology; well-being; quality of life

The majority of people believe that if they achieve success, they will be happy. However, recent psychological and neuroscience research has indicated that this formula is incomplete, because happiness is indeed identified as a cause of success. Our brains function in a more motivated, connected, creative, dynamic, and resilient, effective way when we feel happy. Consequently, people who are happier have greater overall health status and live longer than those who are unhappy (Diener & Chan, 2011). They also have a 50% lower risk of catching a cold virus (Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.) and are 50% less likely to have cardiovascular diseases such as heart attack or stroke (Boehm et al., 2011). As a result, happiness is essential for athletes' and sportspeople's health, life, and performance (Williamson, 2014).

Currently, there is a large body of evidence demonstrating the positive effects of happiness on one's health. Positive emotions, for example, are found to be connected to greater health and longer life, while obesity is linked to a shorter lifespan (Diener & Chan, 2011).

Sleeping well, waking up rejuvenated, smiling and feeling content with ourselves, developing strong friendships, and staying well with our families are all signs of good well-being. Happiness makes us concentrate on what we are doing now and in the future. Happiness may have an impact on the future income (De Neve & Oswald, 2012), implying that emotional well-being is important for children and adolescents' future success.

However, happiness is also concerned with the seize the day attitude, believing in ourselves, achieving our dreams, and being genuine. In our lives, we should spend more time with people we like and live in the moment. We should eat healthier and experience more tastes. We should feel more ourselves, offer thanks, be appreciative, celebrate our accomplishments, do what we enjoy and enjoy what we do, look after ourselves, and love ourselves.

When you are happy, you work better

Employee unhappiness in the workplace is a growing concern, as evidenced by recent surveys showing high rates of dissatisfaction globally (Hollon, 2011; Crabtree, 2013). With many people spending half their waking hours at work, addressing this issue is critical for organisations to achieve success and enable employees to thrive. Though some may view the workplace as depressing, it does not have to be this way. Fostering employee happiness and engagement leads to tangible benefits for both workers and companies (Mercer, 2011).

Happier employees have better health, creativity, productivity (University of Warwick, n.d.), cooperation, and job performance. Multiple studies confirm that happiness causally improves productivity, with one experiment showing a 12% increase in output for happy versus control groups (Oswald et al., 2009). At the organisational level, happy workplaces see improved market performance. Firms ranked highly for employee satisfaction had average annual returns 10% higher than the S&P 500 from 1998–2010 (Kiersz, 2014).

The mechanisms behind these benefits are clear. Happier people are more creative, collaborative, focused, motivated, likable, and make better decisions. In contrast, an unhappy workforce wastes energy and potential. With people spending so much time at work, ensuring happy workplaces should be a top priority for organisations seeking to fully utilise talent and outperform competitors. The research shows this is an investment that pays dividends.

When you are happy, you love better

Relationships are vital, and happiness aids in their development. According to researchers at the University of Minnesota, who studied the importance of relationships, when people feel happy, they tend to build balanced relationships where all parties feel satisfied, secure, appreciated, and loved. This is not simply true for one gender; it is true for everyone. People spend more time with others when they have a desire to play, communicate, and enjoy moments with them. They begin to enjoy the silence, as they have experienced emotions. It is possible that they will want to sing at times.

All of us have the ability to shape our own worlds, enjoy ourselves, and create genuine relationships. We are motivated to engage in more pro-social behaviours such as charitable giving and helping

others. In a family, we are likely to have better relationships with children. We tend to make plans for the future with our boyfriends, girlfriends, or others. When we gain a greater understanding of others, we will be able to communicate with and support them better. Importantly, we should have room to express ourselves.

When people are happy, they tend to have a better quality of life. That could explain why everyone appears to be seeking happiness. In the current world, various countries are dealing with a slew of painful challenges, both old and new, that have yet to be resolved. The goal of this research is to solve Thailand's struggling problems in the twenty-first century and restore the smiles of Thais. This study is based on the utilitarian concept, where happiness is defined as the absence of pain and the presence of pleasure.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Utilitarianism: John Stuart Mills

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) is known as one of the most prominent English philosophers in the nineteenth century. He resisted absolute state power to maintain the liberty of individuals. Mill was also an influential feminist, who published *The Subjection of Women* in order to enhance gender equality in 1869. Apart from working as a philosopher, he also served as a political economist and a politician. Mill was a young prodigy who were taught about utilitarian philosophy by James Mill, his father, and Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism.

Mill's work revolves around the idea that each person should endeavour to advance the common good, improving the lives of all people. Some portions from Chapter 2 of Mill's book concerning utilitarianism (Mill, 2001) are discussed below.

Defining utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is defined by Mill as "the doctrine that the basis of morals is utility or the greatest happiness principle." Actions are considered good or bad, with the amount of happiness or unhappiness produced as the criterion. Happiness refers to the existence of pleasure and the absence of pain, whereas unhappiness refers to the existence of pain and the lack of pleasure. According to this theory, actions that cause a higher level of happiness for a number of individuals are good, but actions that reduce the level of overall happiness in society are bad (Mill, 2001).

Breaking down the definition

The above definition has a few key concepts to consider. Utilitarianism is the doctrine stipulating that one's actions are judged as right when they result in happiness and wrong when they lead to unhappiness. For example, suppose Ken is deciding whether to go to the nightclub tonight or to read a book at home. If Ken enjoys going to the nightclub but not reading, and no one else is impacted, he should go to the nightclub since it makes him happier. When determining what to do, the pursuit of pleasure is the most important factor to consider.

Consider how you can apply this to your own life. Why do you eat hamburgers instead of whole wheat buns for lunch? When you have a headache, why do you pay for medicine? We are always looking for ways to trade in order to increase pleasure and avoid misery.

Utility is the quality of any object, action, or activity that produces happiness. Disutility is the quality that causes the opposite of happiness (displeasure, pain, irritation, and so on). The main purpose of utilitarianism is to maximise utility, resulting in the most happiness for the largest number of individuals.

The greatest happiness principle indicates that we should take actions that lead to the highest level of overall happiness. Significantly, the utilitarian approach specifies that we should pay attention to the utility of people or things that are affected by our decisions. In other words, the overall utility should be maximised.

Pleasure as an intrinsic value

Mill states that all actions have pleasure as the intrinsic value. The details of his statement are clarified below.

(1) Intrinsic value is what motivates someone to do something just for the purpose of doing it.

Example: Mary's favourite hobby is singing. She does not receive any money, recognition, or reward for doing it. She sings simply for the act itself, with no other goal in mind.

(2) Any action is basically derived from a desire for pleasure or a desire to avoid pain.

As another example, while David may be attending post-graduate school in order to obtain a decent career and live a happy life, the ultimate purpose of his actions is to ultimately experience satisfaction and happiness that comes with success. Mill believes that if we persistently ask ourselves "why am I doing this?" we will finally come up with "to achieve pleasure or stay away from pain."

Therefore, based on points (1) and (2), utility is revealed as the intrinsic value behind all actions.

Short-term and long-term happiness

Some people may be concerned that utilitarianism drives us to pursue short-term happiness rather than preparing for more distant goals. According to Mill, the greatest happiness principle should continue to motivate individuals to seek happiness over time, which may include pursuing a variety of non-happiness-based purposes. Mill states that because "happiness is the end goal of all activities" does not rule out other incentives for those same activities. For example, although Paul's primary incentive for becoming a boxer is the joy he derives from the sport, his personal ambitions of making money, staying in top physical form, and gaining popularity are also important. Mill simply argues that they are secondary to happiness, which is the fundamental motivator.

Pain points of people in the twenty-first century

The UN announced 17 goals and 169 targets in September 2015 as part of the Post-2015 Development Agenda, which aims to steer global policy toward a sustainable development agenda that incorporates social, economic, and environmental factors. Through 2030, this global framework will guide governments, international organisations, and civil society in a collaborative endeavour. The SDGs build on the Millennium Development Goals by focusing on the activities of developing nations while also asking powerful developed economies to reform their social, environmental, and economic policies to promote greater equity and long-term sustainability. The SDGs were established in accordance with the key statement that "We are committed to preventing environmental deterioration, particularly through sustainable consumption and production, sustainable natural resource management, and swift action on climate change, so that it can meet the demands of current and future generations. We are committed to ensuring that all people live happy and fulfilled lives, and that economic, social, and technical progress occurs in balance with nature" (United Nations, 2015: 2).

Pain points of Thais from the Thai perspective

Based on the Voluntary National Review (VNR), Thailand has placed a high priority on achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, especially within the context of the Decade of Action for the SDGs (VNR, 2021).

In the context of COVID-19 and the Decade of Action, the SDGs will not be achieved without significant transformation and robust stakeholder collaboration. The 2021 VNR focuses on Thailand's implementation of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy, a domestic strategy that pays attention to resilience, local empowerment, and environmental protection, as well as the use of local wisdom and modern technology to handle development difficulties and promote recovery efforts. This issue of the VNR emphasises the relevance of a holistic societal approach and the interconnection of the SDGs by highlighting major examples of the private sector, civil society, academic institutions, youth networks, and general people working together to advance the SDGs at the national level. Stakeholders have been able to interact and discuss SDG implementation through the VNR.

Thailand's SDG landscape has been established successfully. The SDGs have been incorporated into the country's key development framework, called the 20-Year National Strategy. The Prime Minister chairs the National Committee for Sustainable Development (CSD), which is the fundamental mechanism for achieving all of the 17 goals. The CSD has determined government focal points for all of the 169 targets. The four subcommittees were appointed to be in charge of SDG implementation, the application of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy, monitoring and evaluation, and environmental evaluation. Thailand's SDG Roadmap provides a benchmark for progress in six main areas: policy integration and coherence, mechanism enabling, partnerships, pilot projects, monitoring and evaluation, and awareness raising.

The 2021 VNR features examples from a wide range of industries. As part of SDG 1, the Thai government has made significant progress in reducing severe poverty, and it is working to build a national multi-dimensional poverty index. SDG 2 progress is aided by projects focusing on increasing schoolchildren's nutrition and food security. Concerning SDG 3, the country's Universal Health Coverage and Village Health Volunteers performed an effective management role during the COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of SDG 4, poor students have been provided with financial assistance through the Education Equality Fund (EEF) and the application of digital technologies (e.g., Relajo-Howell, 2022). Regarding SDG 5, gender equality programs have been undertaken, together with anti-domestic abuse efforts.

In regards to SDG 6, access to safe drinking water and sanitation has improved. A SMART Grid is being developed to boost energy efficiency in compliance with SDG 7. For SDG 8, the capacity of personnel has been continually strengthened to meet the global needs. SDG 9 will be advanced through the construction of sustainable infrastructure with the Bio-Circular-Green Economic Model (BCG). In order to accomplish SDG 10, the Thai government has implemented the Thai People Map and Analytics Platform, which helps identify disadvantaged populations in need of assistance. In terms of SDG 11, community upgrading schemes, such as Baan Mankhong, enable poor people to attain safe and sustainable settlements.

In addition, Thailand has undertaken a variety of measures to promote climate change mitigation, consumption and production sustainability, marine and coastal ecosystem conservation, and stakeholder participation in forest management in order to attain SDGs 12, 13, 14, and 15. In light of SDG 16, Thailand prioritises ensuring that everyone has equitable access to justice, increasing stakeholder engagement in human rights advocacy, and implementing anti-trafficking and anti-corruption initiatives. Finally, Thailand has developed successful collaborations among the private sector, civil society, and educational organisations in order to accomplish SDG 17. Thailand's role as a development partner has grown as a result of the sharing of expertise, experience, and information with other nations.

Based on the above examples, Thailand intends to continually advance the implementation of SDGs by adhering to a holistic societal approach and complying with the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy in order to achieve the ultimate goal of harmonious and sustainable development.

Pain points of Thais from the UN perspective

Thailand has sought to undertake numerous initiatives with the aim to accomplish all of the 17 SDGs by 2030 at the qualitative level. The government believes that the country is making satisfactory progress toward the SDGs. When considering Thailand's progress on the SDGs from 2000 to 2020 based on the UNDP report (Meyer, 2021), all SDGs are advanced, especially SDG 1 (no poverty) and SDG 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure), except for SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 13 (climate action) and SDG 14 (life below water). It is worth noting that achieving zero hunger is less advanced. SDG 14 (life below water) and SDG 13 (climate action) are considered the most regressive goals. In terms of SDG 13, fuel combustion produces more greenhouse gas (GHG) and carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions. Effective measures must be taken in order to reach the national goal of lowering GHG emissions by 20-25 percent by 2030. In the case of SDG 14, there has been an upsurge of marine pollution. Thailand's government is working with the corporate sector to implement a plastic waste reduction roadmap starting in 2020. It should be noted that of all 5 pillars (prosperity, people, planet, peace, and partnership) of the 17 SDGs, the planet pillar, comprising climate action and life below water, is the most difficult for Thailand to achieve. There are a variety of approaches that can be used to address the major problems and challenges that Thais are facing in the twenty-first century. In

this study, the concept of nature connectedness is proposed to encourage Thais to adopt green behavior, which helps to reduce environmental issues while also promoting happiness.

Nature connectedness as a source of happiness

According to Wilson (1984), people have an innate desire to pay attention to and connect with other living beings. The biophilia hypothesis, coined by Kellert and Wilson (1993), suggests that people tend to be attracted to nature and other forms of life, which can be explained through an evolutionary interpretation. On an evolutionary basis, humans spend most of their lives in nature and have only recently moved to cities. Although they live in cities, their attraction to nature and their psychological need to engage with nature still persist (Kellert and Wilson, 1993). In other words, it can be said that being connected to nature would have been evolutionarily beneficial for our forefathers in order to live and prosper in their immediate surroundings. Our forefathers' daily activities, including locating sufficient food, drinking water, and housing, keeping track of time and geographical position, and keeping themselves safe from predators, depended largely on the observation of natural cues. As a result, people who were more linked to nature would have had a huge evolutionary advantage over those who were not.

People who are more connected and attracted to nature are likely to have consistent behavioural, character, cognitive, and well-being distinctions. Those with higher levels of nature connectedness seem to be more open, diligent, confident, and amiable (Acharya & Relojo, 2017; Nisbet et al., 2009; Tam, 2013). In addition, nature connectedness is related to stronger pro-environmental beliefs, more readiness to participate in sustainable activities, and heightened worry about the detrimental environmental effects caused by human conduct (Mayer and Frantz, 2004; Leary et al., 2008; Nisbet et al., 2009; Tam, 2013). People with higher nature connectedness tend to spend time in nature and participate in a variety of pro-environmental activities, such as purchasing ecological products (Mayer and Frantz, 2004; Nisbet et al., 2009; Tam, 2013). Importantly, nature connectedness is associated with mental and emotional well-being (Nisbet and Zelenski, 2013).

The linkage between nature connectedness and well-being is a topic of interest among researchers in related fields (Mayer and Frantz, 2004; Howell et al., 2011; Nisbet and Zelenski, 2011). The concept of well-being and how to achieve well-being has been defined by philosophers and psychologists in one of two ways (Grinde, 2012). According to the hedonic viewpoint, well-being refers to the pleasant quality of one's experiences that can be attained through the fulfilment of pleasure and desire (Kahneman, 1999; Fredrickson, 2001). The hedonic approach indicates that subjective well-being, or happiness, is made up of two main components: 1) affective component such as the existence of pleasant affective experiences and the lack of unpleasant ones; and 2) cognitive component such as the assessment of life satisfaction (Diener and Lucas, 1999; Diener, 2009). The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson et al., 1988), the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985), and the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky and Lepper, 1999) are examples of specific measures that can be employed to evaluate hedonic well-being (Diener et al., 1985). On the other hand, well-being is described as the pursuit of one's values and the realisation of one's full potential, according to the eudaimonic perspective (Ryff, 1995; Waterman, 1993). Psychological well-being comprises six dimensions of actualisation, namely mastery, autonomy, self-acceptance, positive connection, life purpose, and personal progress, and is regarded to be associated with eudaimonic well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Although there are disagreements between hedonic and eudaimonic viewpoints, hedonic and eudaimonic well-being indicators are highly connected and can affect each other, showing that they are overlapping but different (King et al., 2006; Waterman, 2008; Huta and Ryan, 2010). Moreover, those with strong hedonic and eudaimonic motives are said to be happy and have better well-being (Huta & Ryan, 2010; Forgeard et al., 2011).

Situations may affect a person's emotional status, but the majority of them have a limited effect on a person's happiness in the long run (Steel et al., 2008). Actually, subjective well-being is quite consistent across time (Diener and Lucas, 1999; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Nes et al., 2006). In addition, subjective well-being is related to certain personality qualities. Subjective well-being is similar to nature connectedness in that it has a consistent positive relationship with outgoingness, carefulness, and agreeableness. However, it has a negative correlation with neuroticism, which is different from nature connectedness (Steel et al., 2008). Subjective well-being also has the ability to predict major life outcomes such as sickness, health status, and lifespan (Williams and Schneiderman, 2002; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Chida and Steptoe, 2008).

There are various reasons to believe that nature connectedness has a positive relationship with subjective well-being. To begin with, feeling connected is generally predictive of well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Considering the concept of social connectedness, genuinely happy people tend to have a prosperous and rewarding social life as their common feature (Diener and Seligman, 2002). Similarly, people who are more outgoing and agreeable are likely to have more positive emotions, compared to those who are less outgoing and agreeable (Steel et al., 2008). Individuals' subjective well-being can be predicted by daily oscillations in emotions about social connection (Reis et al., 2000). On the other hand, happiness has an inverse relationship with loneliness and timidity (Booth et al., 1992). Furthermore, it has been discovered that social isolation stimulates brain regions similar to those activated by physical suffering (Eisenberg et al., 2003). As a result, some researchers believe that social connectedness is a basic human need that can lead to happiness (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Nature connectedness may potentially have similar effects and can contribute to well-being. It is worth noting that the association between natural connectedness and happiness cannot be easily explained by simple subjective connectedness alone. However, nature connectedness remains a major predictor of happiness, when other factors such as culture or family are taken into account (Zelenski & Nisbet, 2014).

People who are more connected to nature may pursue more opportunities to receive the psychological advantages of exposure to nature or to fulfil the need to engage with other living beings, according to a biophilia standpoint. According to Nisbet et al. (2009), nature connectedness has a positive relationship with nature exposure, such as time spent outside in natural settings, and engagement with other living beings, such as pet raising. Moreover, several studies have indicated that nature exposure contributes to a greater level of happiness (Berman et al., 2008, 2012; Mayer et al., 2009; Nisbet and Zelenski, 2011; White et al., 2013).

There are reasons to believe that the influence may be in the other direction as well. As stated before, being connected to nature predicts pro-environmental views and environmental care (Mayer and Frantz, 2004; Leary et al., 2008; Nisbet et al., 2009; Tam, 2013). People who embrace nature in their lives probably perceive natural destruction as a threat to their own lives (Mayer and Frantz, 2004). A greater level of nature connectedness could potentially hinder happiness rather than promote it because of growing awareness of and worry about the detrimental effects of climate change on the environment and living creatures (Doherty and Clayton, 2011). In reality, one-fourth of Americans are unhappy about and culpable for global warming. People who are most concerned about the issue of climate change tend to be fearful, furious, melancholy, and displeased (Maibach et al., 2009). Some in the media industry have coined the word "eco-anxiety" to describe people's worries and concerns about climate change that come together with self-reported symptoms like insomnia, lack of appetite, weakness, impatience, and severe anxiety (Nobel, 2007). In addition, mourning after a loss is considered a behavioural model that has been applied to people's reactions after understanding and accepting climate change and changing their daily activities to reduce their carbon footprint (Ogwuche et al., 2020; Randall, 2009). Negative moods and sadness may be more commonly experienced by people with a higher level of nature connectedness, as greater environmental concern appears to occur with a psychological connection to nature.

DISCUSSION

The disconnect between our early evolutionary surroundings and current life in terms of nature exposure is palpable and seems to be widening. Compared to past generations, children in the current world spend less time in nature (Clements, 2004; Louv, 2005; Natural England, 2009), and adult populations in industrialised countries spend nearly all of their waking hours in buildings (Evans and McCoy, 1998; MacKerron and Mourato, 2013). To a greater extent, it is the first time in history that urban regions house a greater proportion of the global population than rural regions (United Nations Population Division, 2002). As nature exposure has been linked to a higher level of happiness, the aforementioned physical separation from nature where we evolved may be affecting our emotional well-being (Berman et al., 2008, 2012; Mayer et al., 2009; Nisbet and Zelenski, 2011; MacKerron and Mourato, 2013; White et al., 2013).

In the twenty-first century, the urbanisation trend is approaching in Thailand and other nations throughout the world. In this condition, urban farming, preferably organic farming, is one strategy to address nature disconnect in urban places such as Bangkok. Besides, urban farming also aids in the accomplishment of zero hunger, the UN's SDG 2. Another option is to go to the up-country green areas for relaxation and reuniting with nature.

While we may have an inbuilt desire to engage and connect with nature, it could be influenced by our social background and early life experiences. Orr (1993) proposed that there could be one point during developmental processes when a person's pleasant experiences in nature are required to form biophilic attitudes, values, and dispositions. Kellert (1997) also suggested that despite the innate nature of biophilia, it might be changed by culture and experiences. Tam (2003) similarly indicated that adults who are more connected to nature remember spending more time in natural settings during their childhood, compared to those who are not as attached to nature. According to Bang et al. (2007) and Unsworth et al. (2012), some cultures, such as the Menominee tribe, tend to perceive human beings as part of nature and have a closer psychological relationship with nature even at quite early stages of development compared to other cultures, such as the European American tribe. This demonstrates how cultural background and developmental processes can influence our evolved need to interact with nature.

Young people who have more access to and familiarity with nature have a stronger sense of nature connectedness (Barrable & Booth, 2020). As a result, encouraging youngsters to participate in outdoor events is considered more appealing. On the other hand, low levels of nature connectedness during childhood are associated with greater time spent indoors watching television, playing online games, and engaging in social media (Michaelson et al. 2020). As previously said, the benefits of spending time in nature as a child carry over into adulthood. More access to and engagement with nature throughout childhood is linked to a stronger connection with nature in adults. Therefore, it can be said that people should have been urged to access and spend time in nature since childhood.

CONCLUSION

From the utilitarian perspective, happiness is the absence of suffering and the presence of pleasure. According to the UNDP 2021 report, Thailand's pain points in the twenty-first century cover environmental problems associated with SDG 13 (climate action) and SDG 14 (life below water). Nature connectedness is suggested as a strategy to address those pain points through environmental problem mitigation because people who are connected to nature are more likely to act in an environmentally friendly manner. In addition, nature connectedness is considered a source of happiness that can bring joy and pleasure to people.

Due to the urbanisation trend in the twenty-first century, the formation of nature connectedness is difficult these days. We should make efforts to get connected to nature by doing urban farming or taking a break from everyday urban activities to visit natural places in the up-country. The sense of nature connectedness does not emerge from nowhere; it is formed and cultivated throughout our lives. Thus, it is better to instil a nature-connectedness character in children from an early age by encouraging them to spend time outside rather than staying indoors watching electronic screens.

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