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Emme Vall
Independent researcher

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The Blue Zones and the planet wellbeing

Emme Vall *1 

1 Independent researcher, Spain. Email: emmevall.socialstudies@gmail.com

* Corresponding author

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Abstract: This research note analyses the Blue Zones and its role in future sustainability. Blue Zones are areas of the world where people live longer. The study of their population lifestyles and the dietary patterns is crucial for implementation of policies to increase the wellbeing and the life expectancy of people. There are five areas in the world which are Blue Zones which show a close connection with nature and water, as most of them are located in islands.

Keywords: Mediterranean diet, longevity, regenerative tourism, sustainable development.

Introduction

The planet is worried about its future development and demographics play a crucial role. In particular, societies have been ageing during the last decades, and life expectancy is one of the indicators of the wellbeing of a country. During the last decades, the concept of blue zones coined by Buettner (2008) has appeared to define areas in the Earth that are featured by longer longevity rates which are related to a higher quality of life. This descriptive paper approaches these zones and explains the potential contributions of understanding these areas for past, present and future wellbeing.

The Blue Zones

There are five areas in the world where the quality of life and physical, mental, emotional and global wellbeing mean that people who live in these areas have greater longevity. Most of its population reaches

and exceeds 100 years of life. A healthy lifestyle is one of the key factors that contribute to their longevity. In the today's society, it is necessary to consolidate healthy habits. In this sense, the Mediterranean or balanced diet based on fruits, vegetables, whole grains and nuts, is one of the mainstays, together with physical activity, relieving stress, finding daily motivations, creating quality social and affective bonds, as well as the importance of the environment, contact with nature, creating a peaceful lifestyle as a whole.

According to Buettner (2022):

“life expectancy of an American born today averages 78.2 years. But this year, over 70,000 Americans have reached their 100th birthday. What are they doing that the average American isn't? To answer the question, we teamed up with National Geographic to find the world's longest-lived people and study them. We knew most of the answers lied within their lifestyle and environment (The Danish Twin Study established that only about 20% of how long the average person lives is determined by genes). Then we worked with a team of demographers to find pockets of people around the world with the highest life expectancy, or with the highest proportions of people who reach age 100”.

Figure 1. Blue Zones.



Own source.

Table 1. Blue zones and their features.

Barbagia region of Sardinia	Mountainous highlands of inner Sardinia with the world's highest concentration of male centenarians.
Icaria, Greece	Aegean Island with one of the world's lowest rates of middle age mortality and the lowest rates of dementia.
Nicoya Peninsula, Costa Rica	World's lowest rates of middle age mortality, second highest concentration of male centenarians.
Seventh Day Adventists	Highest concentration is around Loma Linda, California. They live 10 years longer than their North American counterparts.
Okinawa, Japan	Females over 70 are the longest-lived population in the world.

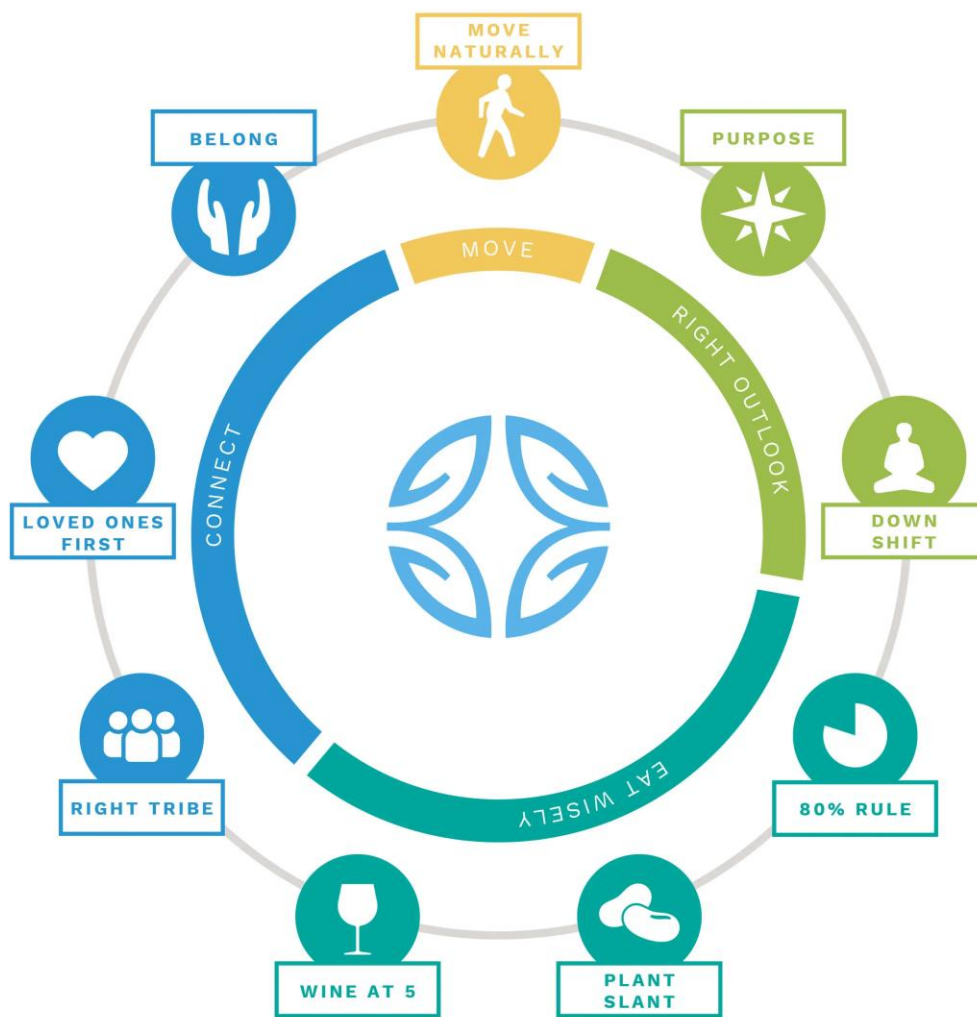
Source: Buettner (2022).

These five zones (Figure 1) are called Blue Zones (Buettner, 2008) and are Barbaglia (Sardinia), Okinawa (Japan), Icaria (Greece), Loma Linda (California) and Nicoya (Costa Rica). Table 1 shows the features of the zones according to Buettner (2022).

As seen in Table 1, the Blue Zones are characterized because they are communities with a much higher life expectancy, lower mortality, and a higher percentage of centenarians. In addition, these communities have a good quality of

life and health problems are fewer (for example, lower rates of dementia). Cities and communities that are concerned with being healthier should, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), take into account the creation of blue and green zones that promote rest and favor mental health care (WHO, 2022). Undoubtedly, as stated by López-Otín et al. (2023) the best way to stop aging is to live serenely, reducing cortisol levels and improving the immune system. This affects the quality and life expectancy.

Figure 2. Lifestyle Habits in the Blue Zones.



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Source: Buettner (2022).

Previous research indicates the importance of healthy lifestyles which are based on local food production (Poulain et al., 2013), and also a direct contact with nature, especially the water landscapes, as most of the Blue Zones are islands. All these elements are directly linked to sustainability, where the close origin of food is sought, together with a balance between all personal, social and environmental elements. Sustainability, according to Rogers et al. (2013) also covers aspects related to healthy communities, and the sense of community is also important. Figure 2 shows the *Power 9* values described by Buettner as a result of his work with National Geographic (2017).

The synergy of the 9 values can be grouped around the importance of spiritual aspects (“belong” and “down shift”), social aspects (“right ribe”), personal aspects (“love ones first” and “purpose”), and style of healthy living in all senses, as reflected in the “80% rule” and “plant slant”, which mean, respectively, consider eating until you feel 80% full, and basing your diet mainly on plant-based foods. Imperial College London (2023) agrees that eat more plant-based equilibrates the diet and have multiple health benefits. In relation to this, and therefore, as part of the 9 values, dietary patterns (Appel, 2008) and its influence on people health are important to understand the long-lived populations. In this sense, “beans, including fava, black, soy and lentils, are the cornerstone of most centenarian diets” (Buettner, 2022). According to Pes et al. (2022), “research on the BZ diet was stimulated by the hope of identifying specific food patterns capable of slowing down the aging process and transferable to the general population” (p.31). However, they state that eating habits in Blue Zones are *models in progress* because they are the result of both traditions and evolution which are also the source of future sustainable development.

Conclusion

This research note analyses the Blue Zones as areas for future sustainability. Future research should describe and understand the characteristics of these areas, to get closer to their way of life, which can be useful to apply or consider in other regions of the world concerned with improving the quality of life of their inhabitants (see Buettner and Skemp, 2016). Therefore, this is one of the theoretical-practical implications of this research note, together with the need to define and continue advancing in the specification and decoding of terms such as well-being (del Corral et al., 2023). There are many factors to take into account. None of these factors should be understood separated from the others. The more one investigates around these concepts and factors, the more one can know about their importance and take them into account at a personal, social and community level. In addition, well-being is related to aspects as sustainability “to increase the chances of a transition to sustainability, it is necessary to enrich the understanding of wellbeing on the basis of a relational paradigm, in which the dependency of human wellbeing on the health of the ecosystems is internalized” (Helne and Hirvilammi, 2015, p.1). According to Buettner (2022), “the average person’s life expectancy could increase by 10-12 years by adopting a Blue Zones lifestyle” (Buettner, 2022). Future studies can also analyse Blue Zones in the context of regenerative tourism (see Hussain, 2021; Fusté-Forné and Hussain, 2022), where the understanding of regenerative tourism can also expand the role of Blue Zones in tourism.

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Author profile



Emme Vall is an independent researcher based in Catalonia. She is a professional cook and has worked in rural restaurants. Her research is focused on the environment and the relations about people and places. She is interested in the sustainable relationships between the environment and the planet in Blue Zones. Also, she develops projects around plant-based diets.