

Nature-Based Tourism and Mental Health: A Study of “Green Therapy” for Tourists in Bali

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Abstract: This study investigates the relationship between nature-based tourism and tourists’ mental health through the concept of green therapy in Bali, a destination renowned for its diverse natural landscapes and wellness traditions. Green therapy is conceptualized as a psychological restoration process derived from direct interaction with natural environments, where elements such as vegetation, forest ambience, flowing water, and natural sounds contribute to stress reduction, emotional regulation, and improved cognitive clarity. Using a qualitative design, data were collected from fifteen tourists through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, and analysed using thematic analysis to identify core experiential patterns. The findings indicate that engagement with Bali’s natural settings including forest walks, terraced rice fields, meditation, and yoga, significantly enhances emotional well-being, reduces anxiety, and strengthens self-awareness. However, the restorative potential of these experiences is diminished by overtourism and overcrowding in popular destinations. These results underscore the need for sustainable and decentralized destination management that preserves ecological quality while maintaining therapeutic value. The study further suggests integrating green therapy principles into tourism planning to enhance visitor well-being and support long-term sustainable development. Overall, the research contributes empirical insight into how Bali’s natural assets can function as an effective medium for psychological healing.

Keywords: green therapy, mental health, nature based tourism.

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Introduction

Nature-based tourism is a global trend experiencing significant growth (Haukeland et al., 2023). This trend has been strengthened after the COVID-19 pandemic, which has changed the method of travelling and raised awareness concerning the importance of mental health and quality of life (Dam et al., 2020). Many travelers are now seeking deeper and more meaningful experiences, including through interactions with nature to relieve stress, anxiety, and mental fatigue that have increased during the global crisis (Buckley, 2020a; Geng et al., 2021). In this context, nature-based tourism concerned with adventure and environmental exploration has included healing and self-recovery. The research indicators supporting nature-based tourism include the quality of natural elements such as water sounds, wind, and vegetation; direct tourist experiences through forest walks, meditation, and yoga; and psychological impacts such as reduced stress and increased tranquility. In addition, the integration of Bali’s cultural-spiritual elements and sustainable destination management further enhance the therapeutic experience for visitors (Wilks et al., 2021).

Bali has great potential in developing the green therapy tourism segment, considering the diverse natural landscapes, the limitations of this research are only in the Tegalalang and Ubud areas because ranging from terraced rice fields in Tegalalang forests to rivers in Ubud (Wirawan, Ardika, Anom, & Sudiarta, 2022). However, the approach to Balinese tourism tends to focus on economic and cultural aspects. The psychological and therapeutic aspects of nature tourism have not been explored in depth (Ernawati et al., 2018). Various research have shown that exposure to nature can reduce the hormone cortisol, improve mood, and improve cognitive function (Bratman et al., 2019; Corazon, S. S. et al., 2019). Therefore, nature tourism in Bali can be used more optimally as part of a holistic method for tourists' mental health.

The emphasis of this research is in the absence of a comprehensive scientific understanding of nature tourism as a form of green therapy that makes a real contribution to the recovery and improvement of mental health. The mental health indicators in this study include reduced levels of stress, anxiety, and mental fatigue after interacting with nature. Tourists also experience improved mood, tranquility, mental clarity, and better sleep quality. Additionally, they develop a stronger sense of self-connection, enhanced self-awareness, and greater emotional stability. Furthermore, there are limited research directly connecting certain elements of the natural landscape in Bali with the psychological impacts experienced by tourists during and after visit. In the post-pandemic context, the need for tourism experiences that provide healing effects and emotional balance is becoming increasingly urgent (B & Hsu, 2022).

The main problem is related to the lack of research directly connecting nature tourism experiences with mental health benefits for tourists. Most of the literature on green therapy and ecological healing is still dominated by research from Western countries, with little adaptation to the cultural, geographic, and psychological contexts of Southeast Asian communities (Chen et al., 2020). Furthermore, there is no empirical data-based method that captures tourists' actual perceptions and experiences in tropical nature tourism destinations.

The novelty of this research lies in the integration of environmental psychology and locally based nature tourism perspectives. Primary data are presented from tourists who witness emotional experiences during visits to nature tourism destinations and explore the potential of a healing-centered nature-based model (Hari Krishna et al., 2023). Therefore, this research fills the gap in scientific analyses and makes a real contribution to the development of more holistic, inclusive, and sustainable tourism destination strategies.

Based on the background and problems, tourist's perceptions and experiences related to the psychological benefits of visiting natural tourism destinations are analyzed in Bali. This research also identifies elements of the natural environment with a significant influence on mental health, as well as formulating recommendations for developing a nature-based tourism model focused on healing. The results contribute to the development of tourism strategies that are ecologically sustainable and effective in improving individual psychological well-being in the post-pandemic era.

Although previous studies have demonstrated that nature exposure can reduce stress, improve mood, and support cognitive restoration, current scholarship has not yet provided a comprehensive scientific understanding of how nature-based tourism in Bali specifically contributes to tourists' psychological healing. Existing literature is still dominated by Western contexts and lacks adaptation to Southeast Asian cultural and ecological settings. Moreover, empirical studies directly linking specific components of Bali's natural environment to measurable psychological outcomes remain limited. This study aims to analyze tourists' perceptions and lived experiences related to the

psychological benefits of visiting nature-based destinations in Bali, identify key environmental elements influencing mental well-being, and formulate recommendations for developing a healing-centered, sustainable tourism model integrating environmental psychology and local cultural wisdom.

Nature-based tourism focuses on exploration and direct interaction with the natural environment, such as forests, beaches, mountains, and conservation areas (Fossgard & Fredman, 2019). In addition to offering aesthetic and educational value, this tourism is also increasingly seen as a method to achieve psychological calm, especially in the post-COVID-19 pandemic context where many individuals experience mental fatigue and stress (Haft et al., 2020).

Several research have shown that nature plays an important role in supporting mental health. The Attention Restoration Theory, developed by Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) explained that the natural environment had the ability to restore cognitive capacity disrupted due to activities of high concentration. Nature offered a light and non-coercive form of attention to reduce mental fatigue. In a broader context, Wilson (1984), through the Biophilia Hypothesis, suggested that humans were biologically attracted to and connected to nature (Wilson, 1984). Empirical support for this theory was strengthened by Bratman et al. (2019), where exposure to natural landscapes reduced cortisol levels, improved mood, and enhanced cognitive function.

The green therapy trend based on contact with nature is starting to grow as part of the practice of wellness tourism focused on holistic recovery. Nature tourism was seen as a recreational activity and an effective medium for mental healing (Avecillas-Torres et al., 2025). Research by Corazon et al. (2019) reported that activities such as walking in the park, being active in the forest, or simply sitting by the lake could have a real therapeutic effect. In the context of tourism, Buckley (2020) stated that national parks and nature destinations had great potential to contribute to the happiness and mental recovery of people post-pandemic.

Ramadhani et al (2024) reported that Bali had long been a place for tourists to seek spiritual balance. However, limited research explicitly connects elements of the Balinese landscape with the psychological benefits experienced by tourists. In this context, research is needed to combine environmental psychology with a tourism perspective in understanding green therapy, specifically within the framework of sustainable tourism and mental well-being.

Methodology

This research used a qualitative method with a case study to examine the relationship between nature tourism and tourists' mental health, and a special focus on the green therapy phenomenon in Bali (Çakar & Aykol, 2021; Risfandini & Adinda Putri Mustika, 2023). The qualitative method was selected because the main objective was to explore in depth the psychological experiences of tourists interacting with Balinese nature (Muhtadi, 2023). In this context, Bali was chosen as the research location considering the diversity of natural landscapes, including tropical forests, terraced rice fields, and beaches, as well as the great potential in supporting tourists' mental well-being through nature-based activities such as yoga and meditation (G. Bagus et al., 2024); Murtono, 2024; Wirawan, Ardika, Anom, Sudiarta, et al., 2022).

The sample consisted of tourists who visited nature tourism destinations in Bali in the last six months, with specific criteria in the form of direct experience. The sample selection used a purposive sampling method, where participants with relevant experiences were interviewed in depth to explore perceptions of the psychological benefits obtained during nature tourism (Bazen et al., 2021). The number of participants

was estimated to be around 15 people considered sufficient to achieve data saturation in a qualitative research (Creswell, 2014).

Primary data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). In-depth interviews aimed to obtain personal information related to tourists' experiences of Balinese nature and therapeutic effects (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). Meanwhile, FGDs included several tourists in discussion session to explore collective views on the importance of certain natural elements in supporting mental health (O.Nyumba et al., 2018). FGDs allowed research to gain multiple perspectives and enrich the understanding of psychological benefits.

Table 1. Key Informants

No	Informant Name	Position/Role
1	I Made Surya	Head of the Tegalalang Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis)
2	Ketut Dharma	Ubud Nature-based Destination Manager
3	Ni Luh Ayu Pramesti	Yoga & Meditation Instructor in Ubud
4	Jero Mangku Sudarsana	Traditional Leader Conducting Nature-based Rituals
5	Putu Arimbawa	Nature Tour Guide (forest walk guide)
6	Putri Apsari	Nature-based Wellness Practitioner
7	Ayu Lestari	Mindfulness Activity Instructor
8	I Wayan Ratna	Ubud Forest Trekking Trail Manager
9	15 tourists	Yoga, meditation and green therapy participants

Source: Wirawan (2025)

Based on the description, this research collected secondary data related to the concept of green therapy, wellness tourism, and nature-based tourism in Bali. Data were collected using thematic analysis, including coding, identification of main themes, and interpretation of meaning from the results of interviews and FGDs (Ahmed et al., 2025). The results contributed to the understanding of nature tourism in acting as mental therapy and providing recommendations for the development of a more sustainable nature-based tourism model.

Results and discussions

Results

Based on the analysis of data obtained from in-depth interviews and FGDs with tourists visiting Bali, most participants felt significant psychological benefits from interactions with nature. Furthermore, nature tourism activities, such as walking in the tropical forests of Ubud, visiting the Tegalalang rice terraces, and relaxing on the beaches of Bali, provided a calming effect (Bray et al., 2022). Most participants described experiences with words such as "finding peace" and "feeling connected to nature". These effects were in line with the Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989), where nature provided a space for cognitive recovery and stress reduction more effective than busy urban environments.

From the interviews and FGDs, natural elements such as the sound of trickling water, the wind in the trees, and the aroma of tropical vegetation had a great influence on tourists' mental health. These elements provided mental calm, increased self-awareness, and allowed tourists to fully absorb the moment. The concept of soft fascination explained by Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) showed that interactions with nature without full attention could reduce anxiety and increase mental focus.

The green therapy experience provided by Bali's nature tourism activities facilitated the recovery process from mental fatigue or burnout. Several participants reported improved sleep quality, better mood, and increased energy after interacting with nature. An Australian tourist (Philip, interviewed in February 2025) stated:

"After doing yoga in the middle of the rice fields and walking in the forest, I feel more refreshed and can think more clearly. This reduces the anxiety that I usually feel."

This result was in line with Bratman et al. (2019), where exposure to natural views reduced stress levels and improved overall emotional well-being (Bratman et al., 2019).



(Source: Wirawan, 2025)

Figure 1. Tourists enjoy the beauty of the rice terraces in Tegalalang, Bali

Even though most participants reported positive psychological benefits, there were several factors influencing the effectiveness of green therapy in Bali. The crowds in some nature tourism destinations, such as Tegalalang and Kuta reduced the tranquility expected. The hustle and bustle of mass tourism could interfere with experience and reduce the therapeutic benefits of nature tourism. This suggested that sustainability and better management of tourism destinations were key to optimizing the positive effects of nature tourism on mental health.

Tourists who engaged in activities such as meditation, yoga, and self-reflection amidst Balinese nature were more connected to the surrounding nature. This underlined the importance of integrating physical and spiritual activities into nature-based tourism experiences (Seočanac, 2022). The activities served as a form of holistic mental therapy, which touched on the physical aspects and had a deeper impact on the emotional and psychological well-being of tourists.

Green therapy in Bali was influenced by the natural landscape and accompanied by social and cultural context (Dewi et al., 2023). Most participants who engaged in activities including Balinese cultural elements, such as meditation and spiritual rituals in temples or yoga activities in the middle of rice fields reported that the experience deepened therapeutic effects. These activities allowed tourists to experience a deeper sense of spirituality and calmness in line with the concept of biophilia expressed by Wilson (1984), where human connectedness with nature was influenced by cultural and spiritual elements. This showed that Bali provided a natural environment supporting mental recovery and offering a cultural layer to enrich tourist experience.

The spiritual concept in green therapy emphasizes a deep interconnectedness between humans and nature as a source of inner healing. The healing process occurs not only through exposure to green environments but also through contemplative experiences that evoke awareness, tranquillity, and harmony with the natural world. Interactions with natural elements such as trees, flowing water, and sunlight create

space for inner reflection, reduce psychological burdens, and strengthen feelings of gratitude and life meaning. Thus, green therapy offers a holistic healing approach that unites the physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions within a harmonious human-nature relationship.

Several participants stated that nature tourism in Bali provided a chance to escape from the demands of fast-paced daily life. A participant stated, *"I came to Bali to forget about work and stress, but what I found here was more than just relaxation. I felt like there was a change in the way I looked at life."* This change in perspective led to increased self-awareness and decreased anxiety in line with Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). Therefore, nature tourism in Bali facilitated physical and emotional recovery as well as possessed a deeper impact on self-awareness and life understanding.

In terms of long-term impacts, several participants who had traveled to Bali felt more "connected" to nature after several visits. Bali was described as a "healing place", where each visit provided an opportunity to renew intentions and life goals. Green therapy experience formed positive behavioral patterns in daily lives after returning to usual routines. This was related to the concept of wellness tourism proposed by Konstantopoulou et al (2024), where tourism experiences focused on health and wellness had a long-term impact on well-being.

Some tourists did not feel the same benefits from interacting with Bali. The participants complained about the impacts of mass tourism and commercial facilities disrupting tranquility, such as traffic congestion and crowds in popular tourist destinations. Sustainable and decentralized destination management was suggested to enhance the green therapy experience and maintain the quality of the natural environment. This showed the importance of sustainable management in creating a therapeutically effective nature tourism experience.

Participants opened to spirituality-based tourism concepts, such as yoga and meditation, reported significant changes in managing stress and anxiety after interacting with Balinese nature. The activities were viewed as an integral part of mental recovery, rather than simply a physical or recreational event. This experience reflected the holistic aspect of wellness tourism as proposed by Buckley (2020), where the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of tourists interacted simultaneously to have a greater impact on overall well-being.

Discussions

This research explores the impact of nature-based tourism on the mental health of tourists in Bali, focusing on the phenomenon of green therapy. The grand theory of this study is grounded in the *Attention Restoration Theory* (ART), which propose that humans possess an inherent tendency to seek natural environments to restore cognitive clarity, reduce stress, and enhance emotional well-being. These theories emphasize that direct interaction with natural elements such as: water, vegetation, and green landscapes produces significant therapeutic effects on mental health. Therefore, they serve as the foundational framework for understanding how nature-based tourism in Bali functions as a form of green therapy that supports psychological recovery for visitors.

The experience of nature tourism has a significant impact on psychological well-being through in-depth interviews and FGDs conducted with tourists. These results support previous results on the benefits of nature therapy shown to reduce levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Bratman et al., 2019; Buckley, 2020) However, the discussion will expand the understanding by exploring the various dimensions during

data collection and the contribution of the methodology to deepening the analysis (Konstantopoulou et al., 2024).

An important result from the interviews is the importance of natural elements in creating a therapeutic experience for tourists. Participants identify natural sounds, such as the trickling of water and the sound of the wind blowing through the trees, as factors with a calming effect. The sense of calmness felt when being in nature is described as "a release of tension" during busy daily lives. A British tourist (Sabrina Cathrine, interviewed in February 2025) who visited Ubud reports that:

"I feel calmer after listening to the sound of water and wind. It's as if the burden I've been carrying all my life is starting to disappear little by little."



(Source: Wirawan, 2025)

Figure 2. Tourists doing meditation activities in Ubud, Bali

This is in line with the Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989), where exposure to natural scenery restored cognitive abilities and reduced mental stress. In-depth interview methodology allowed participants to express personal experiences in detail, providing deeper insight into perceptions of the therapeutic effects of nature (Perry & Bigelow, 2020).

Socio-cultural factors in Bali influence experiences in gaining mental health benefits from nature-based tourism. Several participants reported that activities combining local culture, such as yoga and meditation in the Balinese spiritual realm, increased the intensity of the therapeutic impact felt. This is in line with Wilson's (1984) result in the biophilia theory, where human connectedness with nature can be strengthened by cultural and spiritual contexts (Wilson, 1984). An Australian participant (Patrick James, interviewed in February 2025) who participated in a yoga class in the expanse of Ubud rice fields stated that:

"Apart from the beautiful nature, the atmosphere of Bali and the philosophy taught make me feel more connected to myself."



(Source: Wirawan, 2025)

Figure 3. Tourists doing yoga in Ubud, Bali

Bali, with strong spiritual culture, enriches the experience of nature therapy with a holistic method, including physical elements as well as emotional and spiritual aspects of tourists. However, the results also show challenges considered in managing nature-based tourism. Several participants stated that the crowds in certain tourist attractions reduced the level of peace obtained. In some popular destinations such as Tegalalang and Kuta, the large number of tourists can disrupt the peace needed to feel the benefits of therapy (Triyuni et al., 2019). An Australian tourist (Ethan Jimm, interviewed in February 2025) who visited with the family stated that:

"In some places, there are too many people, and it takes away from the sense of peace that I am looking for. I prefer quieter, more natural places."

The results suggested that more sustainable and decentralized destination management was essential for tourists to experience the maximum therapeutic effects of nature (Romão et al., 2021). Therefore, this research recommends the need for destination planning considering the development of tourism infrastructure and quality of the natural environment supporting a more effective therapeutic experience.

Nature-based tourism can be an effective method to improve tourists' mental health, especially through green therapy experiences enriched with cultural and spiritual elements. However, wise and sustainable management of nature tourism destinations is essential to maintain the quality of tourist experience and ensure optimal mental health benefits. Bali's nature tourism experience offers beautiful natural scenery, as well as facilitates spiritual and emotional connections (Clissold et al., 2022).

Conclusions

In conclusion, this research explored the impact of nature-based tourism on tourists' mental health, especially in the context of green therapy in Bali. Based on the results of in-depth interviews and FGDs, the experience of nature tourism in Bali had a significant positive impact on tourists' mental health. Activities such as walking in tropical forests, enjoying the beauty of terraced rice fields, and participating in cultural activities such as yoga and meditation provided a sense of calm, reduced stress, and improved emotional well-being. This answered the first problem formulation regarding the function of nature tourism as a mental therapy supporting tourists' psychological well-being. Social, cultural, and destination management factors played an important role in determining the perception level of green therapy by tourists. Crowds in some popular nature-based tourist destinations, such as Tegalalang and Kuta, reduced the therapeutic benefits of nature-based activities. Therefore, more sustainable destination managements were required to optimize the positive impact of nature-based tourism and pay attention to the balance between development and nature conservation. This result answered the second problem formulation about the challenges in optimizing the positive impact of nature therapy. Overall, Bali had great potential as a green therapy destination but required better management to obtain optimal and sustainable benefits for tourist's mental health.

Despite these findings, this study has several limitations inherent to qualitative research, including the limited number of participants, the use of purposive sampling that restricts generalizability, and the reliance on subjective narratives that may introduce participant and researcher bias. The study's geographical focus on Ubud and Tegalalang also narrows the range of natural contexts that might influence therapeutic experiences. Therefore, future research is recommended to adopt mixed-methods approaches that integrate qualitative insights with quantitative measures such as stress

scales or physiological indicators, expand the research locations to include diverse nature-based destinations, and involve more varied tourist segments. Longitudinal studies are also needed to examine whether the psychological benefits of green therapy persist over time. Further exploration of how Balinese cultural and spiritual elements strengthen the healing process will contribute to developing a more holistic and sustainable nature-based tourism model.

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