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| **Aussie beaches as blue space: An equitable and inclusive place for older men’s health and well-being** |
| **Background/Objectives**Having access to the countryside, urban parks, beaches and rivers is a significant determinant of health. Natural environments provide a low cost setting for recreation, physical activity, and social engagement. However, the benefits individuals accrue through their access to ‘blue space’ remain less studied than that of ‘green space’.**Methods**This focused ethnography explored the experiences of a group of older Australian men who were members of informal swimming groups at three beaches in Perth, Western Australia. Along with individual interviews (n =10), the ethnographer observed their activity and participated – ‘hanging out’ and swimming in the thick of winter. They eagerly shared photographs and other group artefacts with her during the study.**Results**The findings revealed that participants’ regular open-water swimming was critical to maintaining their fitness and health as they aged, with swimming viewed as an appealing low impact exercise suitable for those with health or injury concerns. Membership of the group provided a non-work identity and a sense of focus, purpose and structure valued by retired participants, similar to Men’s Sheds. Not wanting to ‘let others down’ also reinforced individual participants’ commitment to their daily swim, even if was cold or they were unwell. Findings highlighted how the social connections and support offered through the group mediated participants’ experiences of the ocean as an inclusive, safe and restorative blue space. They described how as new members and relatively weak swimmers, their swimming skills had been developed through peer support, mentoring and friendly rivalry. Group values of egalitarianism provided a space for men from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds to come together: “there’s no status or anything, everyone is equal.” This equitable and inclusive space was sustained through post-swim coffee and conversations. Friendships, camaraderie and social support extended well beyond group swimming activities, enhancing participants’ lives and wellbeing.**Discussion**Research findings suggest the benefits of low cost informal open-water swimming groups could be extended to marginalised groups of men (e.g. refugees, men from non-English speaking backgrounds), through schemes offering mentoring by welcoming, experienced swimmers.**Keywords**Blue spaceMen’s healthEquityEthnography |