

Morning Routines on Bondi Beach

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Introduction

Undertaken between February and September, 2009, this study sought to understand how various everyday routines in which people engage, in the public space of Bondi Beach, give structure and meaning to daily life. The project investigated the idea that communities are not simply based on the logic of an exclusive unity, but, rather, on a sense of open connectedness, an experience of belonging to an emergent whole. We also explored the idea that this sense of emergence is associated with the ritualisation of everyday activities. Thus, the study examined not only the physical aspects of everyday routines, but also the particular states of being these routines evoked in the participants.

The study was based upon two methodological approaches. First, the investigators participated as observers by engaging in their own everyday routines on Bondi Beach. Over the course of 3 months, the investigators recorded their experiences as participants in field diaries. The second component involved the recruitment of 30 volunteers, who generously shared their experiences of everyday routine. These taped semi-structured interviews were conducted on location, and were later transcribed.

The interviewees ranged in age from 25 to 85 years. Most of the interviewees were local, and all lived within 5km of Bondi Beach. A slightly higher percentage of interviewees were male than female. The activities observed include: soft-sand walking and running, swimming, body and board surfing, gym work, running, yoga, walking, surfing, tai chi and meditation. In this report, all names have been changed in order to maintain confidentiality.

The interview questions were compiled by the interviewers in light of their own participant observation: Why do you do this? What compels you to maintain your routine? How do the seasons affect your practice? And so on. Upon close analysis of the interview material, it became apparent that these morning activities are not simply a means of maintaining physical health and vitality, how ever important these may be. The extent to which these practices are ritualised, drawing people to the beach every day, suggests that physical health is just one of many reasons why people practise daily routines with such passion and dedication.

Why do you do this?

Bondi Beach is already a hive of activity at 6am. It is clear that this can be partly explained by the desire of many people to become or remain fit and healthy:

It just gives me a good feeling that I've actually achieved it, that I can still get up and do the exercises, that I am still healthy enough, and that my body can still work or that my legs can still carry me through the six laps of exercise. (Heather)

I go mainly for the reason of health. We are all going to die, and I think that it is helping you to maintain a more fulfilling life and be able to do what you want to do rather than being a burden on other people. (Bill)

Well, I think that it is just the exercise, the exercise and probably the salt water. I just like the feeling after you finish. You feel good. It is just something that I enjoy and it sets you up for the day. (Darren)

As Darren's comment suggests, however, these routines have a significance beyond ordinary measures of physical fitness:

And you can't name it because one name would never be able to explain it, because there is so much involved. There are so many different aspects that if you named it, it would just not be sufficient. We are forever discussing it, because it just seems to come up all the time. It is as though you're forever amazed by it. (Lill)

Running in the sand is a sensual experience and it is almost like, even though we can't fly, it is like being a bird in a sense. Running in general makes me feel that way. (Leanne)

It's the water, it's the people you know saying hello, it's the sand, it's the feeling of well-being when I look out and see the ocean. (Denise)

What I like is having a little bit of my solo time in the ocean, to feel the water and to think about my own thoughts. To go in the water is like a cleansing. You just think of what is on your mind and then, by the time you've walked a few laps, you feel a bit more relaxed. Then you jump in the ocean and you come out and it is like, *ahh*. (Flynn)

It's just a grounding, just a grounding, and what a beautiful spot, really. What a great spot to start the day. (Robert)

I think there is a general consciousness about fitness and I think it is fitness. The people that I see here often, it is not *just* fitness and they are really drawn to it. It is like, yes, you just have to go.
(Ben)

One interviewee reported a comment made to him by a fellow morning beach goer:

Well, he said, I come down to the beach in the morning and I see that ocean and there is that beautiful breeze coming all the way from the south, and, he said, I feel great. (Barry)

Although the physical aspect provides the framework for these daily routines, a wholistic sense of well-being is involved. Interviewees often described their practice as 'meditative'. 'Stillness' was also repeatedly mentioned, a stillness often found during the exertions of physical activity. The interviewees' very commitment to their physical regime seemed to be the vehicle through which clarity and peace were found. Some described this shift as a step *away from* 'everything', and others described it as an openness *toward* everything, revealing an interesting uncertainty about the state of being that is real.

If I've got any worries I do lose them in the water. A couple of times when things are really on my mind, my swimming will be totally affected by it, but it doesn't last long. I think generally my philosophy of life is that it will be all right in the long run anyway. Whatever it is, you will get over it one way or another. You know that you will be back here tomorrow morning and you will be swimming and the sun will come up. (Glen)

Like meditation, it is about being able to lose yourself. The conversation in your head stops for a little while and that can happen either by being quite still or by having some bodily rhythm like swimming that just calms the mind. (Michael)

I just love the feeling of it. When you are running, it is just beautiful. You're free and happy; running is very meditative, very, very meditative and so you just get into your own zone.
(Delphine)

I can use the medium of the beach to transport me to be mentally away. It is just the rhythmic sounds of the ocean that drown out background sounds. It could be almost like a mantra, which is a regular sound and can bring your brain waves down to a different level. The ocean has movement which allows you to off-load your emotions onto that emotion, and you can be in tune with it. Even the waves that come in and out, that reflects your moods too, as they go in and they go out. (Flynn)

I think it does help you relax a lot and it helps my mind to wander. If there is something on your mind, you will lose it down here and you will relax into whatever you are doing, and physically it is really good for you. I feel great about getting back into the swimming. It just allows you to switch off. (Glen)

I just come down here and I feel a tremendous peace. I think that if you do have any problems, or worries, you just walk along and it is like a therapy to me. In my head I will think about it and think about things and just being here. (Denise)

In the morning you feel pain in your joints, and especially here in my cruciate ligament, and I have to be careful of those things. So you run for 10 to 15 minutes and it is hard, and so for 10 minutes I stop. And then I come back and it is hard, and then I always want to stop but there's a battle with my mind and everything. Then normally the third and the fourth ones are the best ones, and then you get into this breathing and suddenly it is like meditating, and then I don't think about it and I don't hear the people, I don't hear anything, and I just listen to my breathing and that is all. I don't think about anything and it is very good. It is a bit like yoga. (Alvin)

When you are running you are in the moment, although you can wander off and you allow yourself to wander off. So sometimes you are just looking at the wonder and splendour and beauty of being down here and outside. I've never been able to run on a treadmill ever, and I've tried and I just can't do it. I love the outdoors and sometimes you are very here, and often I just go into a zone and meditate. (Denise)

Ah, it is just like that relaxation thing and the peace and being away from everything, which is a general confidence in the water. (Don)

One interviewee commented that, at the conclusion of his practice, he felt:

Euphoric. Stable. If I have any anger it is usually gone. (Mal)

Another communicated this meditative state even more specifically, describing a particular movement in his regime as follows:

A connection can take over just about anywhere, but there is one particular exercise where I close my eyes or follow my hand around and at that point sometimes my tongue goes to the roof of my mouth and everything settles down and that is quite a nice feeling. (Michael)

Many of the interviewees attempted to articulate a notion of 'the point', a moment of complete stillness amongst the chaos of the senses. One referred to this as 'the pocket':

I think musoes use that expression when all of a sudden everyone is jamming and all their instruments come together and they call that the pocket. Everything balances. And it can also be applied to surfing. The pocket is the most powerful and dangerous place to sit on the wave, and if you are going to get a tube you need to be right in the pocket. And having that practice allows you to get yourself into the pocket through meditation, yoga and stretching. And my routine allows me to surf better, it allows you to work better and to focus better and I feel better. (Ken)

A sense of clarity and peace was reiterated by many:

I feel that I'm completely a part of the whole world and the world is completely a part of me and we are one and I'm one with it. It is all sort of good. (Barry)

Another feeling commonly expressed was that, through their meditative aspect, morning routines help people put their lives into a clearer perspective:

Oh, I just relax. It is a very good way to put things back into perspective. You realise that this place is going to be and these rocks are going to be here a long time after I'm gone, and it will still be here a long time after my great grandchildren will be gone, and it is a humbling sort of experience. It just makes you realise that things are not so important. (Jon)

It gives you clarity and broader perspectives. You meet a lot of people down here, and everyone is from a different walk of life, and even though we are all similar in that we all love exercise and love being down here, we all come from different places and different angles, so you get a broader perspective from that. (Delphine)

Your mind switches off and you go into that sort of contemplation where it is not actual thinking, but somehow or another your mind, and I'm not too sure how I can describe this, but your mind seems to be free of boundaries, and sometimes all sorts of inspirational thoughts will come into your mind. (Jack)

You are in this great big wide-open space and your little problems, they just suddenly become very tiny. You are away from where these problems exist usually, because they are somewhere else, and so you can see them in a better perspective. (Lill)

I love the water and for me it is calming and I feel open and free and expansive. I don't like being closed up. I can think, not the way I think when doing a mathematical problem, but in a way where I become more open, more creative, more intuitive. I think my intuition becomes stronger when I'm near the ocean, and so I go there and I just really feel refreshed. (Leanne)

It is a real release. You know it is a real relief and release. Yeah, it is like a cleansing effect on your body and soul, and you feel, your body feels clean, and your mind does too. It's funny: if I have any problems I've got to work through, then I always work through them better down here when I'm running. Maybe it's the oxygen, but you think more clearly. (Jon)

You get into a zone or whatever and suddenly all these ideas start flowing and you become really creative. It is just a chance for me to think. You know how you have different stages where you get clutter in your mind? Well I do anyway, lots of clutter, and I'm all over the place, as you can probably imagine, but this gives me a lot of clarity. It is a chance to dream in a daydream-like state. (James)

A sense of community

The experience of calm described by the routine beach-goers seems quite extraordinary when one observes Bondi Beach at 6am. One can be literally overrun by fitness devotees. As one interviewee commented:

When I come down here with a group to swim, there are always the same people here, especially in the middle of summer when the sun's up by 5 o'clock. You come down here and there are people doing things on the exercise stations, there are people swimming out in the water, there are guys on the surf skis paddling out wherever they go and then coming back, there are people building camps in the park, there are people doing yoga, and there is everything. (Glen)

However, it seems that the diversity of activity enhances a sense of belonging and community:

It is a fabulous beach because there is always something going on, always something happening. When you come down here all the time, you know 20 or 30 people just to say G'day to or have a chat to and see what is going on in life. And so yes, it is a really interesting place and there is an amazing range of people that get down here, all races and ages, and I just feel part of it. (Glen)

You just enjoy the beauty of the morning and you have a chat to a few people - Hello here, there and everywhere - and so it is quite a busy morning. (Kathy)

I like it too because it is like you are part of a community. In a way it is like a community centre on the beach. I don't know if people are conscious of it, as I just thought of it, but you look for it and you like it. (Leanne)

There is a sense of belonging, of always seeing somebody you know. (Bill)

It is a community that is more based on place rather than on familiar faces. You get to know a few people. When you run the same path nearly every day for two years, you know people, and people have nicknames for you, and so there is that sense of community. There are people who must be just travelling through, but they are all enjoying the same space and when you meet them, there is that Hello. (Katrina)

I am proud of Bondi being a national symbol, and I wish more people could realise what an amazing sight this is, just the beauty of it. I think people see different things and people come for different reasons. But where else in the world would you get such a long stretch of beach close to all the amenities? They were talking about building a train line here and I thought that it was such a good idea because it would just allow more people to use it. I don't want to keep it away from people. (Ben)

Bondi Beach is renowned for its diversity, and all interviewees welcomed this as an aspect of the openness of the beach community. A number linked the acceptance of diversity to a sense of belonging:

At Bondi, which is very big and diverse, there is no such thing as an outsider. It is not just one clique, you know. I don't know what the equivalent is. It is here and open and it is everyone's, and one of the things I often say and the beauty of it is that on Bondi you can be the richest person and the poorest person, the most unfit person and the fittest person, and it is just open for anyone to come down here and enjoy it in exactly the same way. It doesn't matter what you are or who you are: if you want to enjoy it, it is open and available to you. (Delphine)

The thing that I find about Bondi is that the great diversity of people somehow allows me to be any kind of person I want to be. It is like you are allowed to be anyone you want. We can do the most weird sort of exercises and I can do these really funny walks, and someone started singing some song the other day. You see people doing all the most unusual things on Bondi. (Lill)

Respect for the beach

All interviewees expressed a gratitude for their relationship with this beautiful beach. Belonging to the beach involves respect: you care for it as you would care for yourself.

The only thing that bothers me sometimes is when I see garbage. You would see a lot of people here on the beach collecting garbage because there is a sense of belonging, and there is a sense of 'I want to look after the place', and I don't know whether in the afternoon it would be the same, but in the morning you see people come here specifically to exercise and they really care about the place. It feels like a community. And I've seen people a lot of times picking things up and cleaning the sand. (Edward)

We all pick up any rubbish on the beach and we pick it up as we walk along. After the holiday time there is so much rubbish on the beach and everyone picks up their little bit, and that is nice, and it helps and keeps it clean for yourself. (Kathy)

As a life-saver not only are you patrolling the water but you are patrolling the sand and the beach. Many times I've pulled people up who have been sitting there for a while and left rubbish; as they are walking away I grab hold of them and ask them to have a little more respect and put all the rubbish in the garbage bins that are provided. But even if I wasn't on patrol, if I was down here, I would pull people up if they were doing things like that. It is the same in the water: if people are interfering with others or if board riders are swimming in between the flags then I will pull them up. (Julian)

Connection in solitude

Interviewees were unanimous about the sense of community at Bondi, but many linked this to a certain lightness or impersonality, to a capacity to share solitude and accept the difference in people. Interviewees commented that, with such a regular practice, they had come to know the way others liked to practice -- that some people were happy to chat in the middle of their routine while others preferred to make contact at the end – and they simply accepted these quirks. All spoke of the importance of shared smiles and greetings as they crossed paths, but a glance was all that was necessary to connect beach-goers in their shared enjoyment. People said they did not need to perform for themselves or for others; they could be as they were and still feel accepted:

It is a community but, having said that, it is a funny thing, because you don't necessarily socialise with them. They have their own lives and social lives. (Bill)

Bondi Beach I like because it is a community, and I find it at different levels. If I come in the morning about 6 it's one way, and if I come at 9 it's another way, and by the time it gets like 11 it is totally different. I see the same guys and the same people and, even though I'm in my bathing suit, I still have privacy, because that's not the point of the people out there. The point is they are working out and I'm working out, in my own space. Yeah, so everyone is focussed and that is the thing I like about Bondi Beach. (Leanne)

The regular people who know me won't even look at me if I'm practising and they'll know that I'm in my space. (Sam)

Oh, you just don't talk to others if you don't want to. You just keep going and say you'll see them later or you can't stop right now. I mean everyone is the same: they know. And if I really want to have a talk with someone, I'll say, 'Let's walk a bit'. So you would walk before or after but not in the middle. (Denise)

I'm someone who can be by themselves, and I'm happy to be by myself, but not all the time. So I do like people around. It is the same down at the Surf Club on a Sunday: I always go down there, and there are always people around and you can sit and have a yarn for a while. (Glen)

It is all the locals in the morning, all the local people in the morning, and you get, Hi, Hi, Hi, and that is nice. (Mal)

We just sort of say hello in passing, or we'll turn around and walk together. I've got a couple of girlfriends that walk the Promenade, and they'll stop and talk to me and I'll stop and talk to them, but we don't make it a big session because it is very hard to get your rhythm back. So we just say, 'I'll see you later on when I finish' and they go, 'Yeah, fine'. (Heather)

Sometimes you just enjoy the beauty of the morning and you have a chat to a few people -- Hello here, there and everywhere -- and so it is quite a busy morning. It can become quite social even if people don't stop and it is just a wave and 'How are you?' (Kathy)

Another day in paradise

Although the interviewees were describing their exercise routines, their descriptions were punctuated with recollections of wonder in this beautiful natural environment. They often commented on a sense of protection provided by the architecture of the beach itself. The north and south headlands envelope, like a gentle embrace, and, yet, also open, giving a sense of expansion:

The nicest thing about Bondi is that it is a bay, you know, so it is sheltered. (Sam)

Bondi is the perfect beach, in the sense that it is such a beautiful beach. It is long, and the sand is perfect. I don't like rough seas and it is pretty calm most days, and there are always pockets of calm particularly, at the northern end there where it is always protected and sheltered. (Delphine)

The beach faces slightly south and is a little skewed. It's got what for me are encompassing arms of sandstone, so it is an embrace rather than the extent of Manly [Beach], which doesn't hold you the way that this does. There's also this sense of amphitheatre, which is very comforting to me and my sense of geography. (Michael)

I enjoy it all, the whole thing. I have a special feeling when I sit and look at the sea. I like it and I watch, you know, and you can see the horizon, with nothing to block my view. (Edward)

Nothing is nicer than a beautiful sunrise on a cloudless horizon, and after you have practiced for a little bit and no one has spoken to you and you are upside down [in a headstand]: that is as magical as it gets. (Sam)

I just like being near the water. Isn't it beautiful here? Look at the gulls and the sound of the surf. I just like looking at it. (Leanne)

It is magic, you know, the ocean. It's fantastic. (Don)

But just to see the water and walk along the water's edge, to me is like magic and I just love it. (Denise)

I swim that way and so I am looking in but every now and again I turn around and I swim that way and I look at the whole environment and just think how wonderful the whole thing is. (Justin)

Everyday ritual: every day is different

It was not simply the picture perfect mornings that engaged the interviewees. Rain, hail or shine, the beach was simply perfect however it was. For many, wild winds and rain were another aspect of the beauty of the beach. All interviewees were very aware of elemental changes in the beach, from day to day. Every day, same time, same routine, yet the experience is always different:

Every day is different. I talk to different people, I do some things slightly different and I do the same exercises and that is repetitive in a way. This morning I thought that, as it is such a nice day and they were forecasting rain, maybe I don't need to do as much weights today, so I'll just do my walk and not my swim and that is a bit different. (Denise)

I see the beach and everyday it looks different. The water is different everyday. Sometimes it is really blue and white and the other day it was deeper, the colour was deeper, and the water wasn't so white and the waves were deeper. Sometimes the waves are not as strong and then sometimes it is calm and like a lake. I am aware of it. If there are clouds, and if the sand is packed or if it is soft. (Leanne)

The ocean always reminds me about change because when I come here, it is never the same, its movement is never ending. It never, never, never, never ever stops. Even when it looks still, there is always movement. There is something about waves and noise and the sunrise which gives you lots of lovely little reflections on the surface and it is never a static thing so you never see the same thing twice. (Flynn)

Can I say that it is different every morning? Oh, the colours are different, the water, the pitch of the sand. The colour stays pretty much the same unless you've had a lot of rain or there have been heavy seas and you get a bit of rubbish along the edge. At the moment the tide is way out and it is really flat and calm and it just goes on. (Robert)

Well, it is just such a nice way to start the day and it is free, fresh air, and it doesn't get better does it? I never take it for granted, and it changes every day. (Kathy)

Swimming is something I enjoy, and I just like the feeling after you finish. It is just something that I enjoy, and it sets you up for the day. (Darren)

Well, it is a bit like this: if you don't exercise, if you experience what the day's like without that start, then it is like, 'What do I want today? Do I want a great start or do I just want to roll through

the day? Do I want to fire up and really get into it?' So once you start asking yourself those questions you get up and come to the beach, and after a while you are waking up at that time anyway, and it doesn't take long to form a habit. (Robert)

Every day we go 'How lucky we are' and you go to the beach, rain, hail or shine. (Delphine)

I come to the beach every day, every morning at 7 o'clock. Every day, religiously, rain, hail, snow. Well, that air is just gorgeous. It comes off the water every morning and it is a really beautiful place to go and embrace the world first thing. You wake up in the morning and the first thing you go down there, and it is different every day, so when it's raining or if it's cloudy, the weather is always different and the waves are always different and the ocean's a different colour, every day. (Barry)

If you don't see me down here for a while, I am either very sick or I'm dead, because it is an integral part of my life. I just love it. There is just the feeling of well-being and being over the moon, just sheer enjoyment, the sense of enjoying the open and enjoying nature. (Jack)

Well, hey, anything to do with the water. You are always responding to something and swimming is not just repetitive actually: you are responding to the waves, responding to the conditions, and sometimes you might be training with someone else. If you're surfing, you are always pushing yourself physically and also responding to the environment, and that is what makes it really different and special, unlike just going for a run on the road or going to the gymnasium. (Paul)

I think the repetition of it is actually quite good once you get into it. I think that you definitely do need some routine. Some days when you've been here in the afternoon, when the sun's going down, the ocean will go dark and the shadows will come, but then North Bondi will be lit up by a golden sun and it is so spectacular. Then you have nights where the full moon will rise and it is amazing. If I can get my life organised to see a sunrise every day, I would be so happy. (Ken)

I hate to say it, but yeah, because I am an addict and I can't help myself, I come down here, rain, hail, snow, shine, and I still run. It is the start of the day and it is a routine that I do every day. There was a big southerly blowing one day and you could hardly head that way, and people must have thought that I was mad, but I just have to do it. I'd never miss a day's exercise, never. If I'm away, I exercise; if I'm sick, I'll walk instead of run, but I would never miss it. (Anton).

A lot of it is repetitive and that familiarity is part of the joy of it. After a while you start to develop a sacred site like mentality about things. You do the same run and you find that your feet are

going down in the same place and so you sit for a rest and your hand goes down and it is on the same rock and you say, 'It is only you and me', and this is my place, and you feel bonded to it. You feel like it owns you more than you own it. (Katrina)

Conclusion

This study was based on one particular group of beach-goers, and it cannot be assumed that their experiences are shared by the many other groups that come to Bondi and engage with it in different ways. We hope to extend our research to these groups in the near future.

The research highlighted the ways in which everyday beach rituals transform people. This is what delights and amazes our interviewees. They have fitness projects that motivate them to come to the beach, but what is most important is what happens to them that they did not intend. They talk about this transformation in different ways: they gain perspective; they enter their zone or the pocket; they fly; they gain clarity and stillness; the voices in their heads stop; they have creative intuitions; they realize how lucky they are to be alive; they rediscover the beach as if for the first time.

The daily sense of amazement is associated with repetition of a practice. As many of the interviewees observed, there is a parallel with meditation practices here: the discipline allows people to let go of their personal problems and be present to what is unique to this day, the colours of the ocean, the quality of the light, the feel of the sand, the people whom they greet. Described as openness, this is a state of connection in solitude. It points to the larger meaning of the term fitness: the beach routine allows people to find where they fit in a larger whole, to be most themselves through their open connection with the world.

A sense of community is very important to our interviewees. This community does not arise simply because people are the same, but rather because they share a respect for each other's difference. Moreover, this is not just a community of humans, but includes also the environment in which our interviewees live.