

Valuing Access to the Coast: The Public Value of Coastal Public Spaces in Cumberland

Abstract

This article examines how residents value access to coastal public spaces in Cumberland, England. Using a survey of 326 residents and a framework that combines Meynhardt's public value theory with Schwartz's theory of basic human values, it explores access, use and value. It treats access as part of public value and distinguishes three dimensions of access: formal, practicable and experienced.

Respondents valued the coast and used coastal spaces often. Beaches, footpaths and harbours were especially valued, and coastal spaces resonated most strongly with statements mapped to Hedonism, Self-Direction, Security, Power and Universalism, reflecting enjoyment, freedom to explore, feeling at ease, pride in place and connection with nature. Respondents overwhelmingly linked time spent in coastal spaces to improved wellbeing and quality of life, and quiet, less developed parts of the coast were particularly valued. Access was viewed as important, yet responses noted uneven paths, unreliable buses and the need for improved car parks, toilets and seating. These conditions can limit access for residents, especially those with impairments and non-drivers. The findings suggest that much of the public value associated with the coast comes through individual leisure and connection with nature, rather than explicitly communal or duty-oriented activity. They also highlight the importance of maintaining the practical conditions that allow people to use these spaces. The article concludes with policy recommendations for making coastal access more inclusive.

Key Words

- public value
- human values
- public spaces
- inclusive access
- coastal access
- coastal communities

Introduction

Whilst everyday public spaces might be recognised as sites of meaning and practice (Cattell et al., 2008; Qian, 2020; Staeheli & Mitchell, 2007), how everyday access to coastal places is linked to valued leisure experiences for local residents remains under-explored. The context here is public spaces along a stretch of coastline in the far northwest of England, including beaches, harbours and footpaths. These spaces form part of the broader public sphere, supporting everyday life for residents by providing access to natural spaces, opportunities for leisure, and connection with local landmarks and coastal features. We consider them assets that are embedded in routine local practices.

This study employs a resident survey informed by a dual-theory framework: Meynhardt (2009) and Schwartz (2012). Meynhardt's public value theory is from organisational psychology and public administration, and Schwartz's theory of basic human values was developed within social psychology. Public value refers to the contribution that services, spaces and institutions make to the common good, as judged and valued by members of the public (Wylie, 2020). These theories provide an interdisciplinary lens for understanding how coastal spaces are experienced, accessed and valued by individuals and communities, while also allowing us to identify which human value categories are engaged by these coastal experiences. A particular focus here is access.

Access is treated both as a practical enabler of use and as a component of public value in its own right. Ordinary conditions of use such as reliable public transport, usable paths and car parks that make access practicable for residents are especially important in shaping how opportunity for use relates to perceived value, and how perceived value may, in turn, support continued use. Access is not only about proximity or infrastructure; it also depends on physical, social and perceptual conditions that make participation possible. The linkage between opportunity, use and experienced value is recognised in experiential accounts and in economic approaches that infer value from use (Bateman et al., 2011).

This article distinguishes between three related dimensions of coastal access. Formal access concerns legal rights and official provision, including rights of way and designated coastal routes. Practicable access concerns whether transport and other material conditions make use feasible. This reflects mobility research showing that movement depends on supporting infrastructures and mobility systems, and that the ability to move is unevenly distributed (Sheller & Urry, 2006; Musselwhite & Haddad, 2018). In the present study, practicable access included paths, parking, public transport, toilets, seating and maintenance. Experienced access refers to whether people perceive coastal spaces as realistically usable and available in everyday life. Pot et al. (2021) distinguish accessibility calculated from spatial and transport provision from perceived accessibility, understood as whether people feel

able to participate in available opportunities. This supports the present distinction between formal, practicable and experienced access. These dimensions are connected but not equivalent: formal access may exist without use being practicable or experienced as accessible. The survey provides its strongest evidence on practicable and experienced access among existing users; it does not directly evaluate legal rights or establish how access varies across demographic groups.

The case here is the Cumberland coast, a region shaped by post-industrial transition, strong local identity and everyday engagement with coastal space (Wilson, 2024; University of Central Lancashire & Cumberland Council, 2025). The area is dominated economically by the nuclear industry at the Sellafield site and its associated supply chain. The area also has marked socio-economic inequalities linked to deprivation.

The questions raised here are relevant internationally. Access to the coast is globally uneven, shaped by legal traditions, land ownership and socio-political context (Orchard et al., 2025). In some jurisdictions, public rights are well established; in others, privatisation and exclusion, such as private beaches, are common. Recognising access as a component of public value offers a way to evaluate not only what people use but also what they are able or allowed to use, which is a policy-relevant concern for inclusive coastal governance.

This study contributes to work on coastal governance, public value and spatial inclusion in four ways. First, it frames access as a dimension of public value in its own right. Second, it combines Meynhardt's public value theory with Schwartz's basic human values to indicate which value categories are most salient in residents' accounts of coastal public space. Third, drawing on a resident survey from the Cumberland coast, it identifies the coastal places and access features residents prioritise, and the barriers they report, then links these accounts to Schwartz's value categories. Fourth, it sets out how a public value approach (Wylie, 2020) can support local assessments of coastal access by combining measures of use, perceived ease of access and value.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework: Public Value and Human Values

Access to public spaces is a vital dimension of spatial justice and is discussed in the next section, yet access alone does not explain how shared environments are valued. This study highlights how ordinary, repeated encounters with the coast can generate public value, contributing to the growing literature that views publicness as lived and situated everyday experience and perception rather than in formal civic provision or institutional design (Cattell et al., 2008; Qian, 2020; Staeheli & Mitchell, 2007). It explores the values that resonate through these everyday encounters with

the coast: the meanings, attachments and motivations through which public value is formed. To do this, we follow Wylie (2020) and draw on two theoretical frameworks to support an interpretive analysis of how individuals and communities perceive value in public space.

The first of these two frameworks is Meynhardt's (2009, 2021) concept of public value, which situates value creation within the individual. Public value refers to the contribution made by services, institutions or shared spaces to the common good, as recognised in people's everyday lives. It recognises that what matters in public life is shaped by emotional, ethical and sensory engagement, and resonance with people's values, not only by formal participation but also by informal encounters with everyday environments.

In this sense, public value is not limited to measurable outcomes or economic efficiency. It encompasses how people feel about and relate to spaces and whether these are seen as meaningful, inclusive and supportive of collective life. Such meanings are often missed in technical assessments of coastal zones, yet they are central to how people experience and attribute value (de Freitas et al., 2022). This study treats public value as both a subjective and a shared phenomenon: it arises through personal perception but is also shaped by social meaning and symbolic association.

Public value is viewed here as a contribution to the common good realised when individual human values are positively engaged through experience. As Meynhardt (2009) notes, public value arises from the interaction between individuals and the public sphere, shaped by how basic needs and values are met through services, places or institutions. In this way, value is both for the public and from the public. The frameworks adopted in this study enable value to be understood as lived and relational, not solely defined through institutional performance or policy rhetoric.

Earlier work has largely conceived public value as collectively created through institutions and public services (for example, Moore, 1995; Bozeman, 2007). Qian (2020) conceptualises public spaces, and the publicness they embody, as contingent and lived rather than fixed or given, an understanding that aligns with the experiential basis of public value (Meynhardt, 2009, 2021). This experiential perspective advanced by Meynhardt instead highlights how individuals themselves generate and recognise value through encounters within the public sphere. Understanding this process requires attention to the motivational foundations of value formation. To explore these, this study uses a second framework, namely Schwartz's (2012) theory of human values, which identifies shared motivational goals underlying people's choices and evaluations. This value-based approach enables analysis of how individual experience translates into collectively meaningful perceptions of the coastal environment.

Schwartz's (2012) theory of basic human values structures analysis of motivation and meaning by identifying ten basic value categories: self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity, tradition, benevolence and universalism. These are further grouped into four higher-order sets: openness to change, self-enhancement, self-transcendence and conservation, the first two having a more personal focus and the latter two a more social one (see Table S23 in the supplementary material for a summary of these value sets and their groupings). Uniquely, hedonism lies at the conceptual intersection of openness to change and self-enhancement but is typically grouped with openness to change because it correlates more strongly with self-direction and stimulation (Schwartz, 2012); this is relevant here, as respondents' enjoyment of coastal spaces aligns most closely with hedonism. The categories express the psychological goals that guide how individuals interpret the world, including their use and experience of public space. While these value categories are understood to be universal, their salience may vary between individuals and contexts. Schwartz treats values as enduring motivational constructs that help individuals navigate meaning across different social settings.

Schwartz's theory of basic human values supports analysis of values that extend beyond economic utility or functional use, recognising emotional, ethical and social motivations as part of what people consider meaningful. It can be set alongside approaches in environmental economics, such as revealed preference theory, which infers value from behaviours like visitation or recreational use (Bateman et al., 2011). While such behaviours can indicate perceived value, interpretive approaches are needed to explore the motivations that underpin them. In keeping with this interpretive stance, we acknowledge that people's comments often touched on relationships with nature, place and community, elements consistent with the idea of relational values (Chan et al., 2016).

These theories form the basis for this study and are summarised in Figure 1. Meynhardt's model provides a way to conceptualise how public value is created through experience and contribution to the public sphere, while Schwartz's framework identifies the motivational goals that shape how individuals recognise and articulate that value. Together, they provide a basis for linking perceived value to the motivations and meanings associated with coastal spaces. Public value is treated here as relational and grounded in lived engagement, allowing us to explore how access to coastal spaces is shaped not just by infrastructure and rights, but also by whether and how these spaces resonate with people's values (Rosa, 2019). For Rosa, resonance refers to a relational connection in which people feel moved or affected by aspects of the world around them, including particular settings, rather than experiencing them as distant or indifferent (Rosa, 2019).

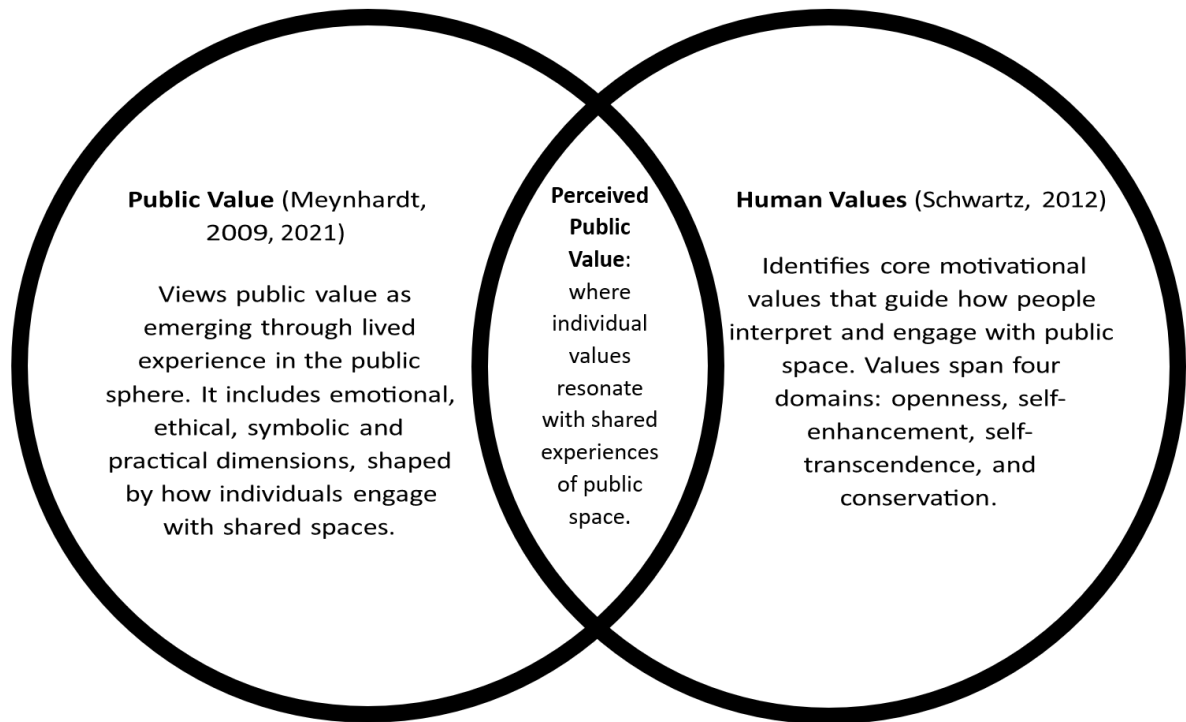


Figure 1. Conceptual model integrating Meynhardt's public value theory and Schwartz's theory of basic human values (based on Meynhardt, 2009, 2021; Schwartz, 2012).

This study builds on earlier work that developed and applied the conceptual pairing of public value and human values as explained above (see Wylie, 2020). Across a number of chapters, each describing a separate topic or case study, Wylie and various collaborators and co-authors apply this approach in a range of organisational and policy settings, including nuclear decommissioning and space. We extend this work by applying the framework empirically to the public sphere (Adut, 2012). Wylie and Howard (2024) suggest public value as a potential way of understanding activity within the public sphere; however, our article offers empirical insights and develops this idea by applying resonance to examine how the public sphere becomes meaningful to citizens in coastal settings (Rosa, 2019). In addition, this article is the first that we know of to use a public value framework to specifically consider access to public spaces or coastal communities in particular. Other studies, whilst not adopting a value-centred approach, have nevertheless highlighted aspects of coastal environments that can be interpreted as aligning with Schwartz's framework. These include shared leisure and social bonding (benevolence), enjoyment and novelty (hedonism and stimulation), and environmental connection (universalism–nature) (Jarratt et al., 2022; Diamond et al., 2024). Yet access is handled as context or implication. Instead, we place access, alongside public value, at the centre of analysis.

Access and the conditions of use in coastal settings

Access is a central concern in understanding the public value of coastal environments. It is supported by enablers such as statutory rights of way, coastal path provision, public transport links, and the social familiarity that makes local spaces welcoming and easy to use. At the same time, it is shaped by social, economic, and perceptual conditions that influence how people make meaningful use of coastal spaces. Recent work in the United States highlights how privatisation, coastal change, and socio-economic inequities restrict opportunities for public access, with implications for attachment and wellbeing (Diamond et al., 2024).

Orchard et al. (2025) identify a set of global challenges to public coastal access that go beyond infrastructure provision, including cumulative loss through development and private claims; tensions with hazard management; coastal squeeze, where sea-level rise and coastal development combine to reduce open and accessible coastal space; the need to recognise customary and long-standing use; and equity concerns. They emphasise that ensuring equity requires attention not only to provision but also to constraints linked to gender, mobility, race, and socio-economic status. These concerns underline the need to view coastal access through the lens of inclusion and context, both central to how public value is experienced.

Even in settings where public access to the coast is comparatively strong, perhaps due to legislation, the existence of a legal right does not necessarily mean that all groups can benefit equally. Sheller and Urry (2006) point out that use is shaped not only by policy, but also by broader mobility systems, infrastructure and patterns of practice, which may advantage some users over others. Practical limitations such as poor transport, unclear signage, or the absence of seating and shelter can also make some spaces less usable or inviting for people with mobility impairments, long-term health conditions or reduced confidence in public settings. Milligan et al. (2004) note that the ageing process itself can reduce opportunities to engage with outdoor environments, especially when support or social inclusion is lacking. Older adults, for instance, may face particular challenges in engaging with coastal environments. Musselwhite and Haddad's (2018) hierarchical model of travel needs highlights that even when practical access is achieved, deeper psychosocial and aesthetic needs such as autonomy, inclusion or enjoyment of place may still go unmet. Identifying where and how access is limited requires close attention to local needs, especially where formal provision does not always account for how people actually use or value coastal space (Pot et al., 2021).

Whilst the focus here is on access rather than wellbeing, much of the literature frames coastal access in terms of health outcomes. Accessing blue spaces (aquatic environments) is associated with benefits such as mental restoration and physical activity (Gray et al., 2023; White et al., 2020). For many groups, opportunities to use coastal spaces underpin reported physical and mental health benefits, reinforcing

how access functions as an enabler of wellbeing and everyday value. Geiger et al. (2023) demonstrate that proximity to, and use of, coastal environments is linked to self-reported health across different national contexts, but caution that those on lower incomes are less likely to benefit. Furthermore, some groups face socio-economic and psychological conditions that can limit use (Gray et al., 2023) because access to these benefits is uneven. Recent work by Lyddon (2026) emphasises that the wellbeing benefits of coastal amenities depend on environmental quality, accessibility and usability.

Coastal public access is a long-standing policy goal in the UK, supported by legislation such as the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009, which has secured a continuous walking route along much of the English coastline, representing a significant enabler of public engagement with coastal environments. However, as England's Chief Medical Officer (Whitty, 2021) and the House of Lords (2019) highlight, physical access alone does not guarantee inclusion. Individuals living in more deprived areas of England are less likely to visit green or blue spaces (Natural England, 2023), with similar inequalities reported for access to coastal blue space in Scotland (Gray et al., 2023). This limits both their use of these spaces and their ability to express or reinforce the value they attach to them. Natural England's People and Nature Survey (2023) found that 94% of adults felt spending time outdoors was good for their physical health, 92% for their mental health, and 82% said being in nature made them very happy. These findings reinforce the importance of opportunities for use in allowing people to experience and value these spaces, while experiences of insecurity and other barriers may inhibit participation.

In England, coastal communities face greater challenges than their inland counterparts. Taken as a whole, coastal towns have more deprived and less healthy populations that have been largely overlooked by national policy makers (House of Lords, 2019; Whitty, 2021). A decline in traditional industries, structural inequality and peripherality have limited opportunities and contributed to persistent disadvantage. Poor transport connectivity, a concentration of houses in multiple occupation, high levels of unemployment and reduced investment all contribute to socio-economic exclusion and health inequalities. Residents also report social and psychological conditions that affect how they use local public spaces, including health conditions, lack of confidence and feelings of exclusion. These factors restrict the ability of many communities to benefit fully from their coastal setting, even where access exists in principle, and contribute to the persistence of poorer health and wellbeing outcomes (House of Lords, 2019; Whitty, 2021). This study therefore considers access as a key dimension of public value on the Cumberland coast, with attention to both the enablers that support everyday use and the conditions that can limit or shape engagement.

The Cumberland Coast



Figure 2. Modern-day Cumberland unitary authority area in Cumbria. Source: *Cumberland UK locator map* by Rcsprinter123 (based on works by Nilfanion), Wikimedia Commons, licensed under Creative Commons Attribution–ShareAlike 3.0 Unported (CC BY-SA 3.0). Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right 2022.

Cumberland is one of two new unitary authorities that form part of the ceremonial county of Cumbria (see Figure 2, where it is shown in red). It is in the far northwest of England, where it borders Scotland. Its coastline is shaped by a distinctive topography: larger towns such as Whitehaven (population ~24,000), Workington (~25,000) and Maryport (~10,000) are bounded to the west by the Irish Sea and to the east by the steep mountains of the Lake District National Park, while further north the Solway Firth is characterised by low-lying coastal plains. This geography compresses much development into a narrow coastal corridor, particularly south of Maryport, with some smaller settlements located inland in valleys and foothills. The result is a linear coastal settlement pattern, running from the Solway in the north to the Millom area further south (see Figure 3), shaped as much by landscape as by historical development (Allerdale Borough Council, 2023).

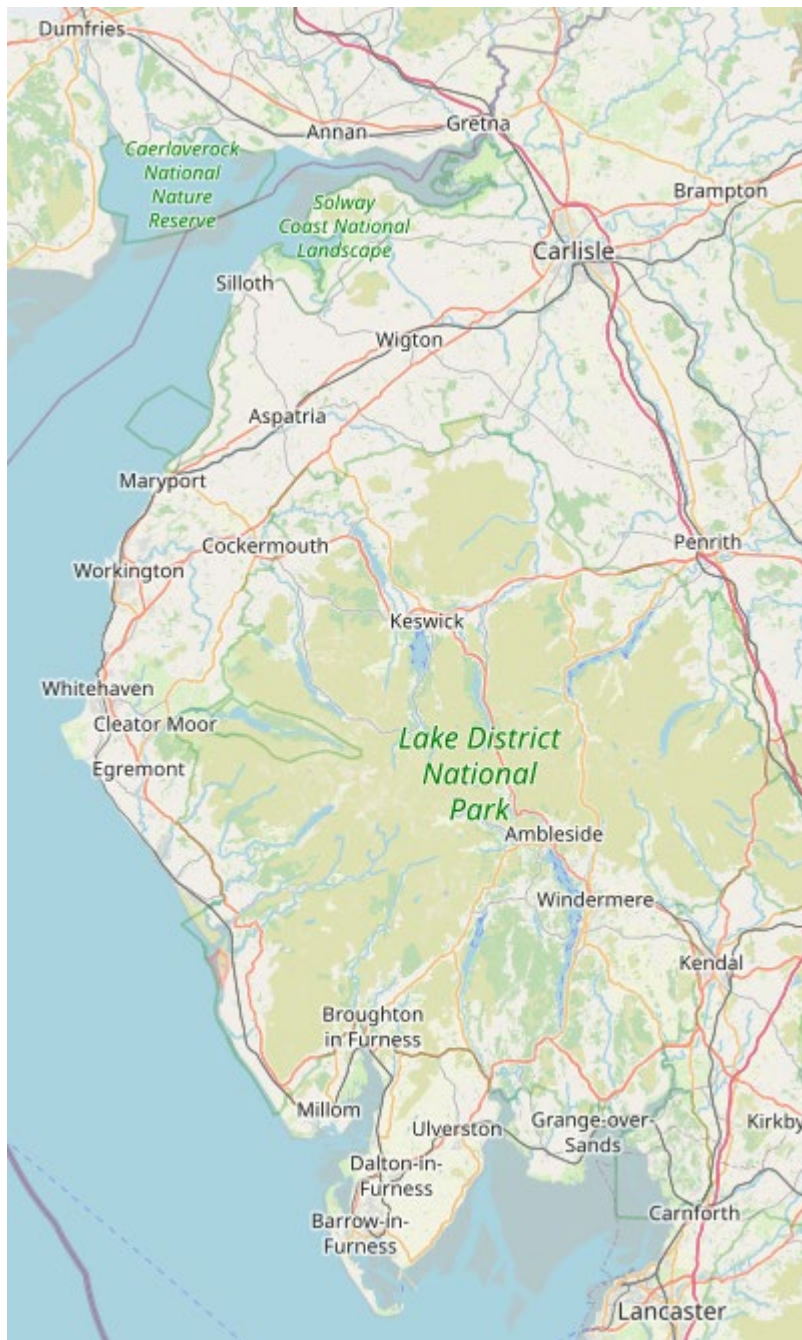


Figure 3. Map of Cumberland and the surrounding area (OpenStreetMap base). © OpenStreetMap contributors. Data available under the Open Database Licence (ODbL 1.0) at www.openstreetmap.org.

The Cumberland coast has experienced long-term social and economic challenges associated with industrial decline, geographical peripherality and constrained transport links. Coal and iron ore mining, steelmaking and shipbuilding have disappeared, while the nuclear industry and its supply chain now dominate the local economy. This creates a distinctive pattern of comparatively well-paid employment in one sector (Sellafield Ltd., 2022) alongside persistent unemployment and neighbourhood deprivation.

These inequalities are reflected in health outcomes. Coastal towns including Maryport, Workington, Whitehaven, Egremont and Millom face long-standing health challenges, including higher rates of long-term conditions, mental health difficulties and reduced life expectancy, particularly in more deprived neighbourhoods (NHS North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care System, 2025; Institute of Health Equity, 2022; Bidmead & Stuart, 2021). Residents in towns such as Millom have reported feeling excluded from decisions about service provision and continue to encounter obstacles when trying to access appropriate care (Institute of Health Equity, 2022; Bidmead & Stuart, 2021). These issues reflect and are compounded by wider structural disadvantage in English coastal communities such as poor housing conditions and poor access to services (Whitty, 2021).

There are various ways in which locals can access the Cumberland coast. The area is served by the Cumbrian Coast Line railway and has road and footpath infrastructure that connects coastal areas with surrounding communities. There is a publicly accessible walking route along most of the shoreline. However, this study reveals that there are some perceived challenges in accessing the local coastline, especially for certain groups. Furthermore, there is a clear and more universal challenge in reaching the Cumberland coast from outside areas; journeys can be time-consuming due to topographical constraints and a relatively slow rail service.

The University of Central Lancashire and Cumberland Council (2025) identify four interrelated dimensions of peripherality relevant to coastal Cumberland: persistent structural inequality, a deep-rooted collective history, perceived political marginality and strong local identity. In relation to political marginality and identity, Wilson (2024) shows how perceived distance from civic institutions can reinforce feelings of exclusion, although her focus was not on physical access to outdoor spaces. At the same time, Wilson documents substantial relational wealth in the area, including relationships of trust, care and reciprocity that provide resilience. Emotional attachment to place, everyday interaction with the natural environment, and narratives of endurance or belonging to a local community are likely to contribute to how residents understand and express public value.

Study aims and questions

This is an exploratory and descriptive study. It does not test causal hypotheses or seek to identify independent predictors of access. Instead, it examines how local respondents value coastal public spaces, and how this reported value relates to patterns of use and conditions of access.

Specifically, we ask:

1. Which coastal places and access-related features do respondents value most?
2. How do reported coastal experiences resonate with Schwartz-informed value categories?
3. Which practical and perceived conditions facilitate or hinder use where formal coastal access exists?

We also asked about future priorities for protection, improvement and investment, including views on economic development, leisure and tourism; these results are reported in the findings.

Methods

A structured resident survey was used to capture individual evaluations of shared coastal spaces, consistent with Meynhardt's (2009, 2021) experiential conception of public value. Residents of Coastal Cumberland were surveyed as the relevant public because, within this framework, value arises through the perceptions of those who engage with shared environments. The online survey, hosted on Qualtrics, was designed to take around five to seven minutes and was piloted informally to ensure clarity and accessibility. During piloting, a smartphone respondent noted excessive scrolling with a five-point scale; a three-point scale was adopted to improve usability. The survey was kept concise and did not request demographic information beyond confirmation that respondents were local; this maintained anonymity and kept the survey brief.

The survey was structured in thematic blocks. Respondents answered:

1. Respondent status; identifying them as residents rather than tourists.
2. Valuation of coastal features; perceived value of coastal public spaces and priority types of spaces or infrastructure, including beaches, footpaths, natural areas, heritage sites and amenities, with an open 'other' option.
3. Access and use; whether respondents accessed coastal public spaces often, occasionally or not at all.
4. Value statements; ten items were developed by the researchers to reflect Schwartz's (2012) framework of basic values, adapted to the context. Each was aligned to one of the ten value domains (Self-Direction, Stimulation, Hedonism, Achievement, Power, Security, Conformity, Tradition, Benevolence and Universalism). Respondents indicated their agreement on a three-point Likert scale (agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree). The statement mapping and brief justification can be seen in Table S24 in the Supplementary Material. The items were used as theory-informed, context-specific indicators

and were not intended to constitute a validated psychometric scale of basic human values.

5. Wellbeing; whether time in coastal public spaces supports wellbeing and quality of life, and views on whether leisure time in these settings is valued.
6. Leisure and tourism; views on investment, tourism's benefits, and whether new developments should reflect local needs.
7. Open questions; two prompts inviting views on what should be protected, improved or invested in along the coast, and an opportunity to add further reflections regarding access.

All items were optional, and response rates were generally high. Around 90 per cent of respondents answered the question on the value of coastal public spaces; completion on other closed items was mostly in the mid-80s to mid-90s, with the lowest at 81 per cent. 'No answer' categories are reported in tables in the supplementary files for transparency.

The survey opened in June 2025 and was publicised through local press and social media (Facebook, LinkedIn and X). The News & Star and Cumbria Crack ran short online stories on it. The first author also joined local Facebook groups to improve reach. This approach proved effective in securing community-based responses. It closed in September 2025.

Of the 334 responses received, eight were from visitors outside Cumberland; they were excluded from analysis. The landing page of the survey made clear that the study was local in nature and aimed at those who know the coast well, which, along with how the survey was distributed (see above), accounts for the low number of visitor responses. This left 326 valid responses from people identifying as local to coastal Cumberland. Only one respondent reported not accessing coastal spaces, citing lack of easy access (transport, mobility, time, awareness). This case was retained in the dataset, although the single case did not allow for meaningful comparative analysis.

Although the sample was self-selecting and convenience-based, the number of responses provides a meaningful indication of respondents' value and concerns. The design suits the descriptive aims of the study, while recognising that it does not support statistical generalisation to the wider population.

Quantitative items were summarised using descriptive statistics, reporting frequencies and percentages. For clarity, figures in the main text present valid percentages (that is, percentage of valid respondents); the valid *n* is reported for each item where relevant. Each figure corresponds to a supplementary table or tables (Tables S1–S22) reporting the full distribution, including non-response ('No answer'), with counts (*n*), percentage of the total sample (*n* = 326), and percentage of valid respondents as appropriate.

Alongside the descriptive statistics, a limited set of exploratory associations was examined to assess relationships between reported ease of access, frequency of use, importance of access, overall value and valued leisure time. Spearman's rank-order correlation was used because the measures were ordinal and several distributions were strongly concentrated in the most positive response categories. Higher scores indicated greater ease, frequency, importance, value or agreement. Analyses used pairwise complete responses. Given the exploratory purpose, interpretation focused on the strength and pattern of associations rather than statistical significance alone. These analyses do not establish causal direction.

Open-ended responses were analysed manually. Responses were read closely and grouped inductively by subject matter into recurring themes, with coding refined through comparison of similar responses. Responses could be assigned to more than one theme, and access themes were compared descriptively by reported ease of access. Illustrative quotations are used to highlight key points.

Ethics approval was granted by the XXXX (removed). All responses were anonymous.

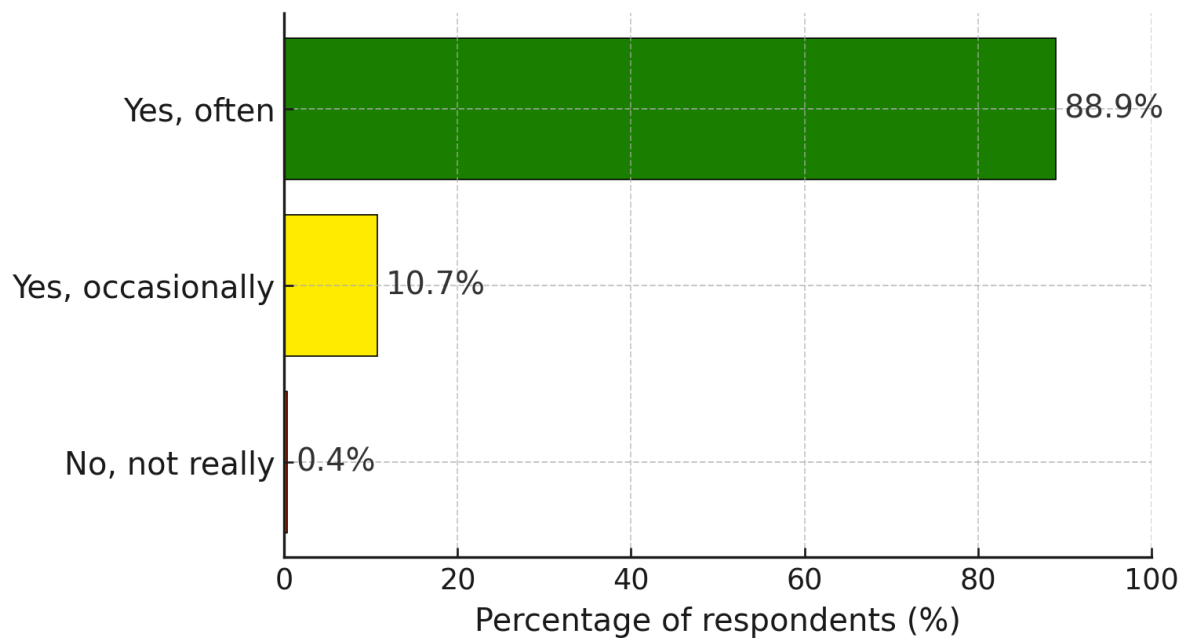
Analysis of Findings

Frequency of visits to coastal spaces

Survey item: "Do you visit coastal spaces in Cumberland?" (response options: "Yes, often", "Yes, occasionally", "No, not really").

Most of the respondents (valid responses, meaning non-responses excluded, n=280) reported visiting coastal spaces regularly: 88.9% visited often, 10.7% occasionally, and 0.4% (1 person) not really. Full response distributions, including non-response, are provided in Supplementary Table S1.

Figure 4. Frequency of visiting coastal spaces in Cumberland (% of respondents)

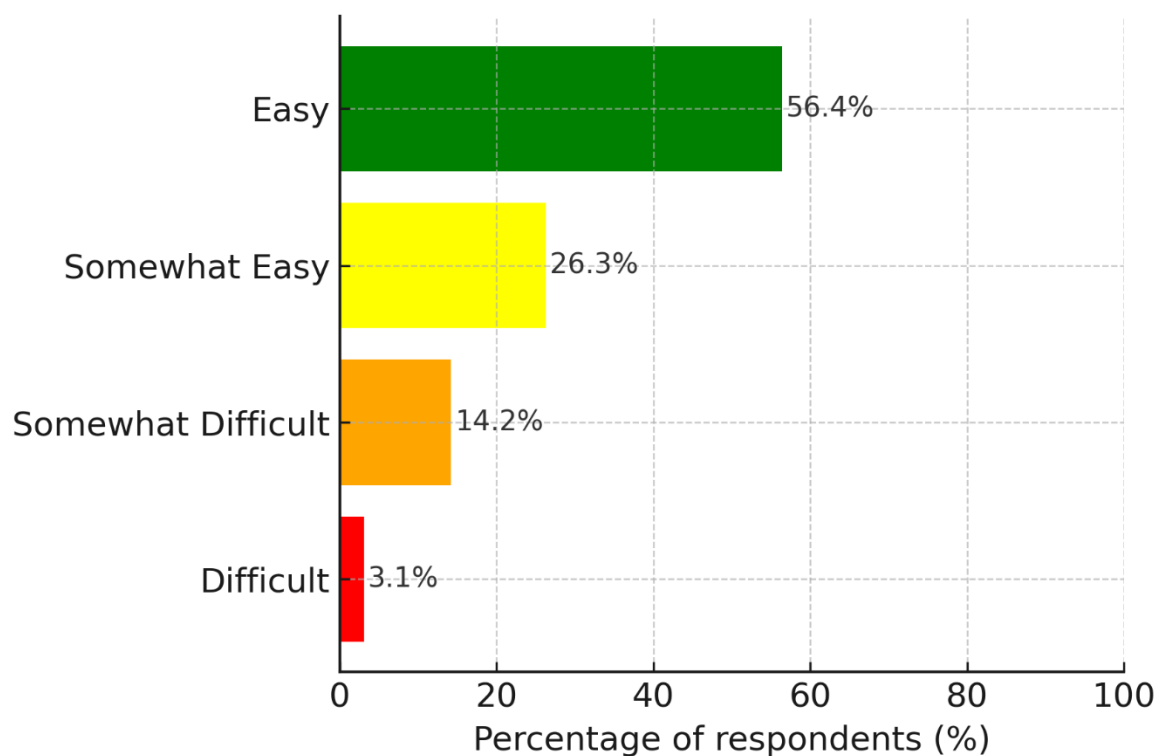


Reported ease of access to coastal spaces

Survey item: "In general, how easy is it for you to access these coastal spaces?"

Among valid responses (n = 289), 56.4% reported access as "Easy", 26.3% "Somewhat easy", 14.2% "Somewhat difficult", and 3.1% "Difficult"; overall, 82.7% rated access as easy or somewhat easy. Full response distributions, including non-response, are reported in Supplementary Table S2.

Figure 5. Reported ease of access to coastal spaces (% of respondents)

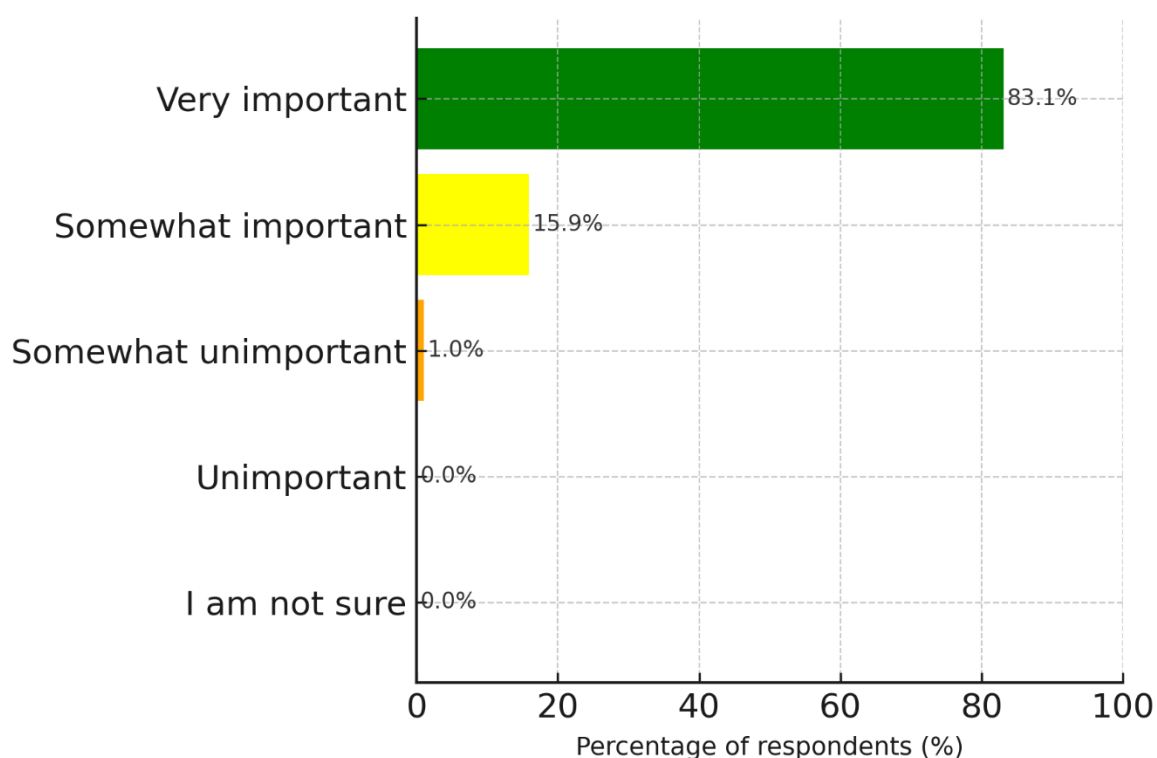


Reported importance of access to coastal spaces

Survey item: "How important to you is access to these coastal spaces?"

Among valid responses (n = 290), 83.1% rated access as "Very important", 15.9% "Somewhat important", and 1.0% "Somewhat unimportant"; overall, 99.0% considered access important. Full response distributions, including non-response, are reported in Supplementary Table S3.

Figure 6. Reported importance of access to coastal spaces (% of respondents)



Open-ended responses on access to the coast

Respondents were asked why access to the coast is easy or difficult, and whether it matters to them. Overall, the coast was seen as easy to reach for most respondents, though concerns were raised about disabled access, car parks, public transport, facilities, and footpath condition. The coast was also highly valued. Theme counts are shown below.

Table 1. Access - theme counts

Theme	Count (n)
Ease of access - incl. proximity/walkability/cycle routes/car parking	33
Limited access for impaired/disabled specifically	29
Valuing the coast - attachment to it and wellbeing benefits	25
Car parks – the need for improved condition and capacity	25
Poor/unreliable public transport – especially buses	24
Lack of toilets and other facilities such as seating	12
Footpaths in need of maintenance/surfacing work	11
Pollution and industrial development	5
Improvements needed to wayfinding and signage	4
Lack of funding and investment in general	2

Note: Responses could be coded to more than one theme, so totals exceed $n = 144$, the number of respondents who answered this optional question.

Ease of access was the leading theme, often described positively: many could reach the coast by car, on foot, or by bike. Parking was frequently mentioned, usually as a barrier rather than a benefit, with comments highlighting capacity, charges, and surface condition: "Although I find it easy to access the beaches, the car parks I used leave a lot to be desired... Silecroft and Allonby are the worst." Overall, parking was seen as a key factor influencing access.

Footpaths were also important but often criticised for overgrown vegetation or uneven surfaces, especially by those with limited mobility. Cycle paths were mentioned positively.

Public transport was a frequent concern: "It is easy for me as I drive but can be difficult for some due to poor transport links." One framed it as a class issue: "Access can often be limited to the middle classes who can afford to travel to the coast." The local bus services were mentioned more frequently than other aspects of public transport; they were depicted as infrequent and, above all, unreliable. Also, replacement bus services (mini-buses) were said not to accommodate wheelchair users. Train services were mentioned less often and generally more favourably.

Access for disabled and impaired people was a second major concern, largely focusing on uneven paths, lack of dropped kerbs, and difficulty getting onto sand at places such as Silloth: "Some of the nicest coastal seating areas do not have level paths leading to them."

A smaller number mentioned the need for more toilets and seating, while a few referred to pollution, signage, and lack of funding.

Alongside these practical points, some expressed how they valued the coastline. Many expressed wellbeing benefits linked to leisure time and walking in particular: "Fresh air, great walks, helps both my physical and mental health so accessing the coast really matters". "It is lovely to be able to be by the coast for health and healing reasons and simply to enjoy being by the sea to hear it to feel the breeze." Attachment to these places was also expressed: "It matters because it's part of my identity."

Comments also differed according to reported ease of access. Among the 143 respondents who both rated ease of access and provided a comment, those reporting somewhat difficult or difficult access more frequently referred to disabled or mobility access, parking problems, path condition and wayfinding. Disabled or mobility barriers were mentioned by 41.7 per cent of this group, compared with 13.1 per cent of those reporting easy or somewhat easy access. By contrast, respondents

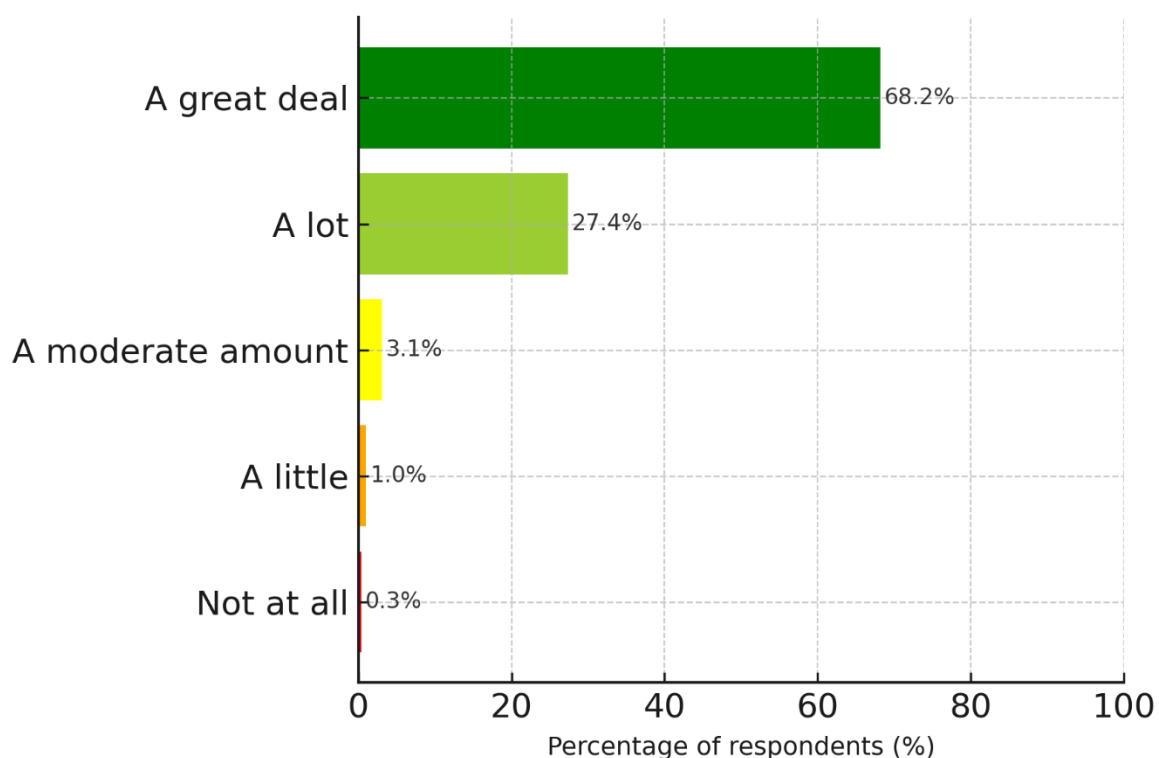
reporting easier access more often described proximity, walking, cycling or car availability, as well as the value and wellbeing benefits associated with coastal use. Public transport concerns occurred in both groups but were more prominent among those experiencing difficulty. These descriptive patterns further illustrate how formal provision may not translate into practicable or experienced access for all users. Full theme comparisons by reported ease of access are provided in Supplementary Table S25.

Reported value of coastal public spaces

Survey item: “How much do you value the public spaces (such as those mentioned in the last question) on the Cumberland coast?”

Among valid responses (n = 292), 68.2% rated coastal public spaces as “A great deal”, 27.4% “A lot”, 3.1% “A moderate amount”, 1.0% “A little”, and 0.3% “Not at all”; overall, 95.6% rated them “A great deal” or “A lot”. Full response distributions, including non-response, are reported in Supplementary Table S4.

Figure 7. Reported value of coastal public spaces (% of respondents)



Exploratory associations between access, use and value

A limited set of theoretically relevant ordinal associations was examined to explore relationships between access, use and value. Results are reported in Table 2. The analysis used five survey measures: frequency of use, ease of access, importance of access and overall value of coastal public spaces (Figures 4–7), and agreement that time spent in these spaces is valued leisure time (Figure 10).

Table 2. Exploratory associations between access, use and value

Relationship	n	Spearman's ρ	p
Frequency of use and importance of access	280	.390	< .001
Overall value and importance of access	287	.314	< .001
Frequency of use and valued leisure time	274	.303	< .001
Frequency of use and overall value	277	.292	< .001
Ease of access and frequency of use	280	.206	< .001
Ease of access and overall value	286	.076	.198

Note: Higher scores represent more frequent use, easier access, greater importance, greater overall value and stronger agreement. Each analysis includes respondents who answered both items in that comparison.

More frequent use was moderately associated with the importance placed on access and modestly associated with overall value and valued leisure time. Overall value was also modestly associated with the importance placed on access. Ease of access was weakly associated with frequency of use but was not significantly associated with overall value. Within this self-selected sample, which had strongly positive response distributions, ease of access therefore appeared more closely related to frequency of engagement than to the strength of value attached to the coast. These associations do not establish causal direction.

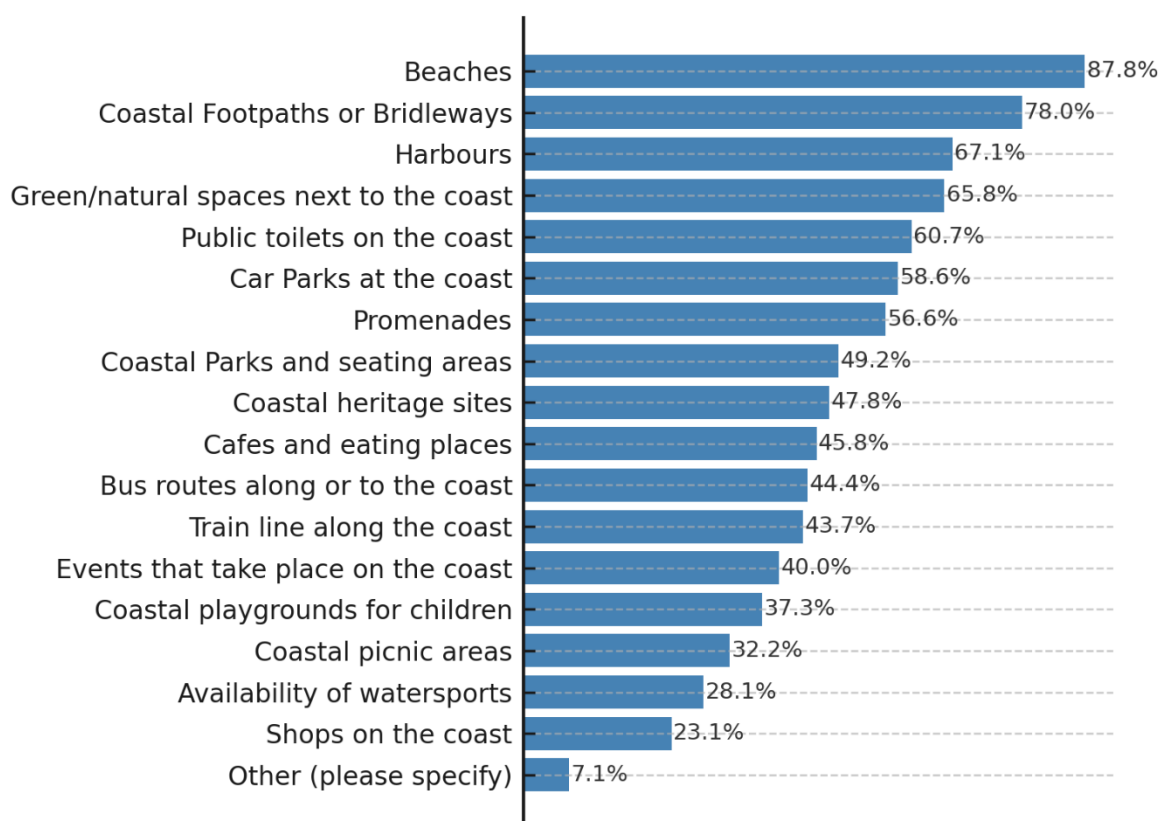
Places that mattered most in coastal Cumberland

Survey item: "Which of the following matter to you the most in Coastal Cumberland? Tick all that apply."

Among respondents (n=295; multiple responses permitted), natural settings and walking routes dominated: beaches 87.8%, coastal footpaths or bridleways 78.0%, harbours 67.1%, green or natural spaces next to the coast 65.8%, and promenades 56.6%. Supporting facilities followed: public toilets 60.7%, car parks 58.6%, coastal parks and seating areas 49.2%, and cafés and eating places 45.8%; movement to and along the coast included bus routes 44.4% and the coastal train line 43.7%. Mid-lower selections were events 40.0%, playgrounds 37.3%, picnic areas 32.2%,

availability of water sports 28.1%, and shops 23.1%. Full response distributions are reported in Supplementary Table S5.

Figure 8. Places that mattered most in coastal Cumberland (% of respondents; multiple responses permitted; excluding non-responses; n = 295)



Topics specified under 'Other' included: clean seawater; harbours; health and safety, and a pleasant environment for communities; low-cost housing available only to locals; coastal cycle routes; wheelchair accessibility; wildlife.

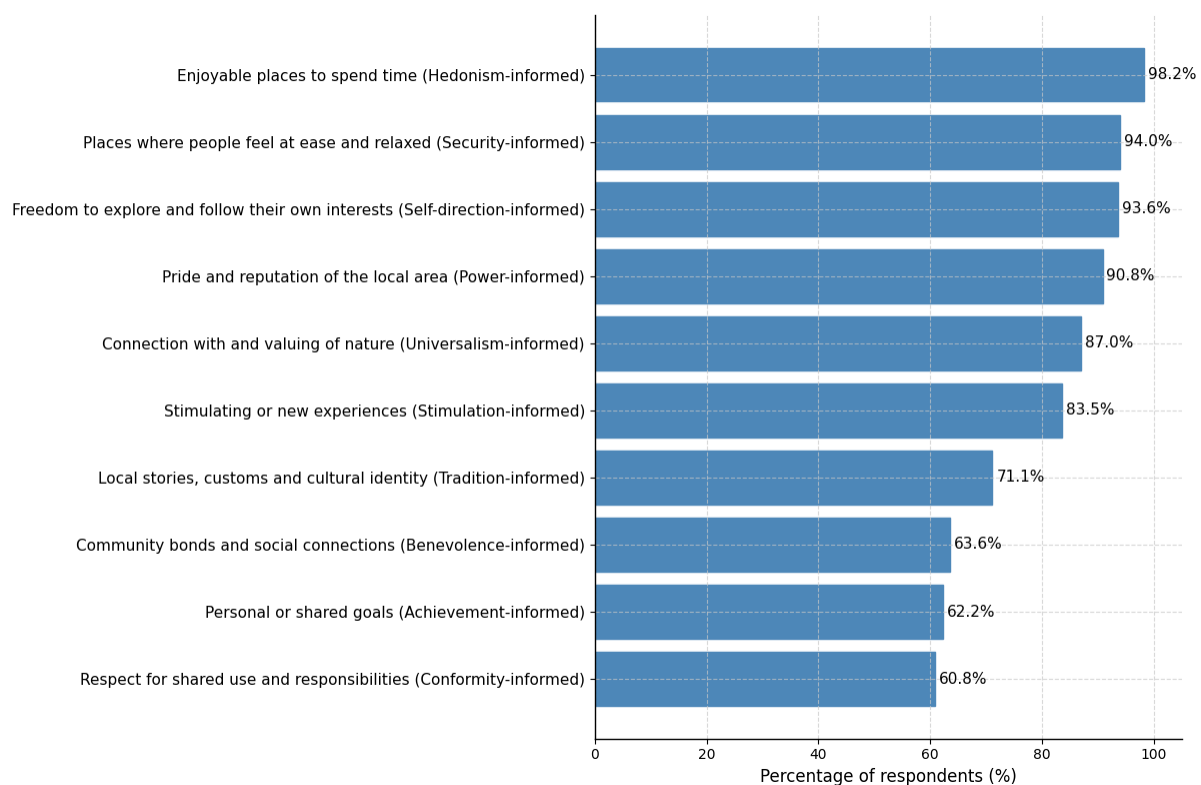
Agreement with Schwartz-informed statements about coastal public spaces

Survey item: "Thinking about how people use coastal public spaces in Cumberland, do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Select one answer per row."

Respondents' perceptions of public value were explored through ten context-specific statements informed by Schwartz's value categories. Among valid responses, with n ranging from 280 to 284 depending on the statement, all ten attracted majority agreement. Agreement was highest for coastal public spaces being enjoyable places to spend time (Hedonism-informed, 98.2%), followed by feeling at ease and relaxed (Security-informed, 94.0%), freedom to explore and follow one's own interests (Self-

Direction-informed, 93.6%), pride and reputation of the local area (Power-informed, 90.8%), and connection with and valuing of nature (Universalism-informed, 87.0%). Agreement was also high for stimulating or new experiences (Stimulation-informed, 83.5%), connection with local stories, customs and cultural identity (Tradition-informed, 71.1%), stronger community bonds and social connections (Benevolence-informed, 63.6%), achieving personal or shared goals (Achievement-informed, 62.2%), and respect for shared use and responsibilities (Conformity-informed, 60.8%). Overall, the strongest responses concerned enjoyment, relaxation, freedom, pride in place and connection with nature, while statements concerning community bonds, goal achievement and shared responsibilities attracted lower, although still majority, agreement.

Figure 9. Agreement with Schwartz-informed statements about coastal public spaces (% of respondents)



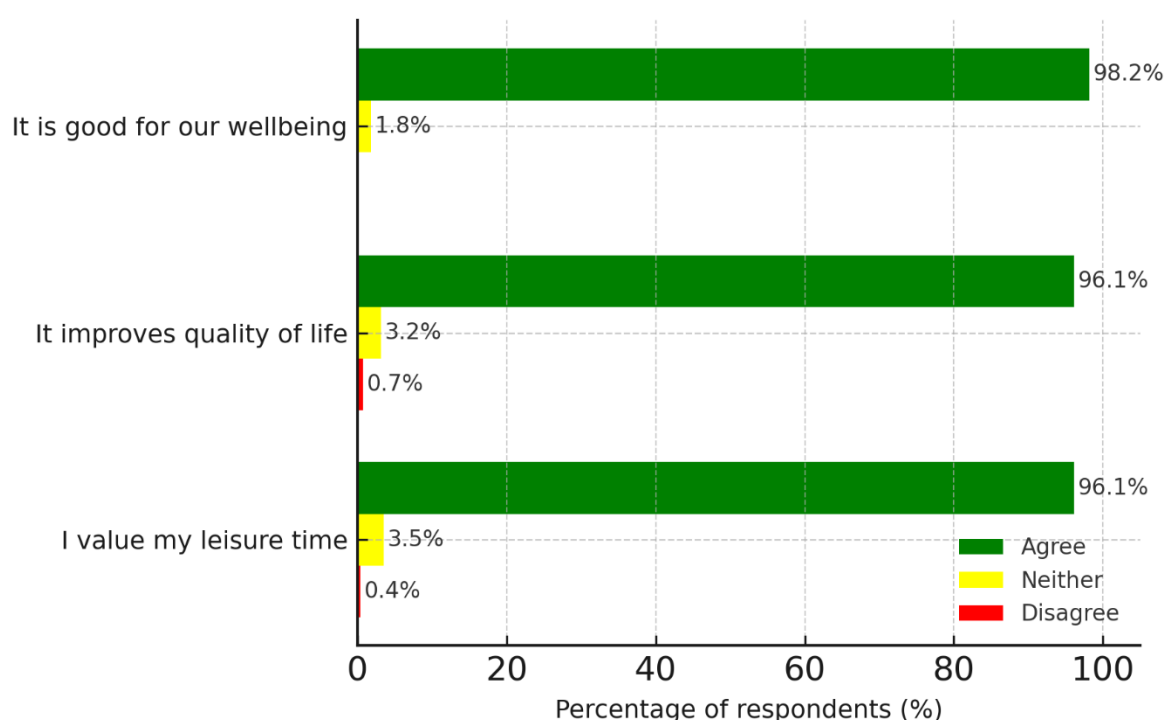
Each statement was associated with one category for interpretive purposes rather than used as a validated measure of respondents' underlying value orientations. Full response distributions, including non-response, are reported in Supplementary Tables S6 to S15.

Associations between the coast and wellbeing, quality of life, and leisure time

Survey item: “Thinking about spending time in these coastal spaces, do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Select one answer per row.”

Across three statements, respondents reported very high agreement, with valid n ranging from 274 to 283. Agreement was strongest for “Spending time in these coastal spaces is good for our wellbeing” at 98.2%, followed by “Spending time in these coastal spaces improves quality of life” at 96.1%, and “I value my leisure time in these settings” similarly at 96.1%. Neutral responses ranged from 1.8% to 3.5%, and disagreement from 0.0% to 0.7%. Full response distributions, including non-response, are reported in Supplementary Tables S16 to S18.

Figure 10. Agreement with statements about spending time in coastal spaces (% of respondents)



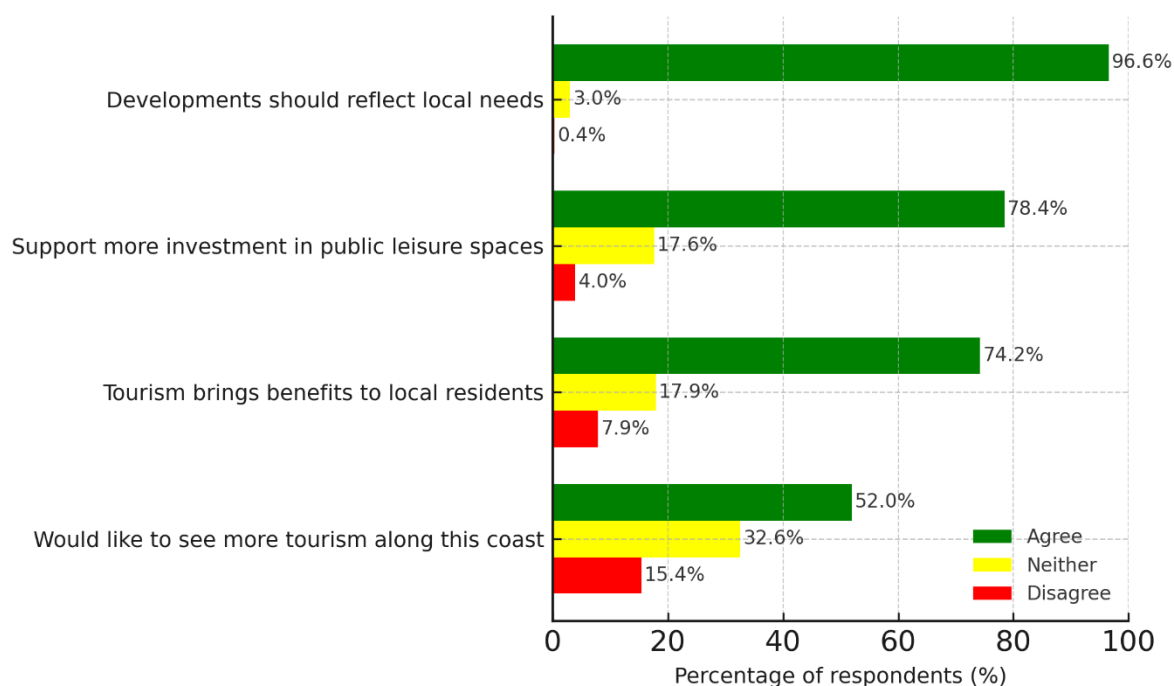
Attitudes to development, investment, and tourism locally

Survey item: “Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Select one answer per row”.

Across four statements, agreement varied, with valid n ranging from 264 to 279. Agreement was highest for “New coastal developments, particularly those affecting public spaces, must reflect local needs” at 96.6%. Most respondents also supported “more investment in public leisure spaces on the Cumberland coast” at 78.4%, and agreed that “tourism brings benefits to local residents here” at 74.2%. The lowest

agreement was reported for “I’d like to see more tourism along this coast” at 52.0%. Full response distributions, including non-response, are reported in Supplementary Tables S19 to S22.

Figure 11. Agreement with statements on development, investment, and tourism (% of respondents).



Open-ended responses on the future of the Cumberland Coast

Respondents were asked what they would like to see protected, improved, or invested in along the coast. In broad terms, the findings aligned with the earlier open-ended responses and reinforced the patterns already outlined. Practical concerns were raised about access and supporting facilities, environmental risks were frequently noted, and tourism remained divisive. Theme counts are shown below.

Table 3. Future concerns - theme counts

Theme	Count (n)
The need to protect wildlife, natural habitats and landscapes	38
Concerns for coastal erosion & sea defences	26
The need for (more) public toilets	19
Tourism/development – caution / no more development	19

Footpaths/promenades/cycleways – the importance of provision and need for maintenance	18
Public transport – frequency & reliability concerns	18
The importance of access and its protection	18
Car park concerns – condition & capacity	15
Litter/dog fouling/BBQs – concerns & enforcement	15
Harbours & waterfronts – the importance of these spaces and their upkeep	14
Heritage/local identity – their value & protection concerns	14
Tourism/development – support & proposals	12
Wayfinding/interpretation – better signage & boards needed	11
Camping/motorhomes – control of overnight use & waste concerns	10
Pollution - water quality/sewage concerns	7
Town centres/shops – attractiveness & upkeep	6
Disabled/impaired access concerns	6
More seating needed, especially along paths	5
Funding/maintenance – sustained investment needed	5
Play park investment and upkeep needed	4
Pollution – nuclear industry concerns	3
Housing – affordability & local needs	3

Multiple coding was used, so totals exceed n = 157 (the number of respondents). Non-response is not shown for this open-text item.

Many respondents focused on protection, emphasising the safeguarding of natural spaces, coastal landscapes, and the heritage and character of coastal places. “Protecting nature is paramount.” This was the most prominent theme and often sat alongside concerns about pollution. Protection was also framed in terms of identity and access: “Protect the many archaeological features and history of the Solway.” “All access should be protected in all areas for all users.” The second major theme was repeated calls for action on coastal erosion, particularly where flood risk threatens roads, access, and amenities: “There needs to be investment in the prevention of the coastal erosion.”

On improvement and investment, comments centred on practical enablers of access and quality: more reliable public transport, car parks in better condition, public toilets kept open, well-maintained footpaths and promenades, clearer wayfinding, and attention to harbours and waterfronts as community spaces. A number of people also called for ongoing maintenance and funding. Typical comments included: “Public transport must be improved and invested in.” “Public toilets within Cumberland are atrociously lacking.” “Footpath management is poor. Many are overgrown and inaccessible.” Practical concerns extended to managing overnight motorhome use in car parks and the waste associated with it.

Several respondents expressed concern about overdevelopment, especially tourism-led schemes in sensitive areas. These comments focused on protecting the natural environment and local character, avoiding large-scale attractions, and ensuring that change occurs in suitable locations and at an appropriate scale. Typical comments included the view that the “quiet” coastline should be “protected from overdevelopment... amenities should be directed towards the local residents.” “As we have seen in the Lakes, more tourists can lead to more problems (litter, fires, antisocial behaviour etc).” Some supported tourism where appropriately located and scaled, preferring activity focused on existing hubs and away from quieter stretches of coast.

Discussion

The Public Value of accessing the coast

Public spaces and their public value are lived and contingent, expressed as value-in-context (Meynhardt, 2009, 2021; Qian, 2020; Staeheli & Mitchell, 2007), in this case along the publicly accessible Cumberland coast. Practical affordances were frequently mentioned in open responses as features that could either impede or improve access and are discussed in the next subsection. Moreover, the findings revealed that respondents valued the coast a great deal and used it frequently; public value here is created chiefly through everyday usage of shared spaces (Cattell et al., 2008). The places that were most valued were beaches, coastal paths, and adjacent natural areas; promenades and harbours were also important, while cafés, shops, and events were secondary.

The findings can be understood through the distinction between formal, practicable and experienced access. Although the Cumberland coast has comparatively strong formal provision, respondents focused mainly on the conditions that make access practicable, particularly transport, paths, parking, toilets, seating and maintenance. These same conditions shaped experienced access, including places or facilities that were formally available but difficult to use in practice (Pot et al., 2021).

This distinction also shows that access is significant in two different ways. It shapes whether and how often people use the coast, but it is also valued in its own right. Frequency of use was associated with the importance attached to access, overall value of the coast and valued leisure time, while ease of access was only weakly related to frequency and was not significantly related to overall value of the coast. The open responses help explain this distinction, with respondents repeatedly referring to transport, paths, parking, toilets, seating and maintenance as the practical conditions that make coastal use possible. Formal provision is therefore only part of the picture. People may value the coast highly even where access is awkward, but poor practical access can still affect how often, and on what terms,

they use it. Access should therefore be understood both as a condition of coastal engagement and as part of the public value attached to the coast.

These coastal spaces resonated most with enjoyment, freedom to explore, feeling at ease, pride in place and connection with nature. When considered alongside Schwartz's theory of basic human values, summarised in Table S23, the strongest agreement was with statements informed by Hedonism, Self-Direction, Security, Universalism and Power. The individual statements informed by Openness to Change attracted consistently high agreement, particularly those concerning enjoyment and freedom to explore. These should be understood as broad patterns of resonance rather than direct measures of respondents' underlying value orientations. The findings are consistent with valued elements of leisure experiences in natural settings, including relaxation, enjoyment and connection with nature (Gray et al., 2023; Jarratt et al., 2022; Natural England, 2023). This is also reflected in the very high levels of agreement that spending time in these spaces is good for wellbeing (98.2%), improves quality of life and represents valued leisure time (96.1% for both).

This pattern, as well as open question responses, suggests that public value is realised mainly through individually experienced leisure; overt civic-duty framings are secondary. Respondents emphasised enjoyment, freedom, relaxation and connection with nature more than civic duty or interaction with the wider public. These are public spaces but leisure, place and nature, rather than other people, appear more central to how these spaces are valued.

These findings partially align with work that treats value as emerging from relationships with nature, place, and community, including senses of care and stewardship, rather than only from transactions or formal participation (Chan et al., 2016). Social interaction can be an important element of this (Cattell et al., 2008). In this study, however, there was less emphasis on community, possibly reflecting the individual nature of leisure activity here, typically walking along beaches, promenades, or coastal paths (places highlighted by residents). Respondents emphasised individual or household use and relaxing quieter settings; social bonding was evident but less prominent. The quiet/relatively remote nature of this coast was widely seen as a positive attribute, contrasted with the neighbouring Lake District which was perceived as much busier with tourists. This reinforces Qian's (2020) view of publicness as contingent and situated, produced through lived engagement, here expressed through individual leisure pursuits in mostly natural settings. It also aligns with studies that interpret the coastline as a space of calm, peace, and solace for leisure users (Diamond et al., 2024; Jarratt et al., 2022). These more natural stretches of coastline were what respondents most wanted to protect, and concerns about their erosion or pollution were frequently raised.

In summary, the findings indicate that in this particular coastal public sphere, public value is most often realised through personal connection with nature and place rather than interaction with the wider public. This refines an experiential view of

public value (Meynhardt, 2009, 2021) by showing that value-in-context may arise through environmental relations as much as through social ones.

The findings on tourism also fit this pattern, in which people seek restoration in natural and blue spaces, autonomy, and nature connection, rather than large-scale development and social interaction. Economic benefits of tourism were recognised in principle; yet support for more tourism was the weakest attitudinal signal, reflecting concerns that additional development could bring environmental and social challenges and, quite simply, more people. Open responses tended to prioritise protection of natural spaces and everyday affordances, and to favour development that reflects local needs and appropriate scale, preferably in larger settlements rather than along quieter stretches of the coast. Environmental quality, including water quality and pollution control, was also important to routine use and public value. More broadly, protecting these and other ordinary conditions of use is central to how public value is realised.

Implications for practice/policy

Whilst respondents discussed these coastal places in terms of heritage and local identity, they were chiefly considered as (natural) settings for everyday leisure. This is relevant for policy because coastal access and leisure are strongly linked to population health and subjective wellbeing (Gray et al., 2023; Geiger et al., 2023; Jarratt et al., 2022; White et al., 2020). In the survey 98.2 per cent agreed that time by the coast is good for wellbeing. Use was widespread despite obstacles, with 88.9 per cent visiting often and 10.7 per cent occasionally. Access was rated important by 99.0 per cent, and 82.7 per cent found it easy or somewhat easy; yet open responses pointed to unreliable buses, uneven or rutted surfaces, and difficulties for wheelchair users and non-drivers. This implies that to protect and widen these health gains, improvements should ideally be made to the conditions that make regular use possible. This reinforces the assertion that everyday public spaces can hold therapeutic properties that improve wellbeing and make them relevant to policy makers (Cattell et al., 2008).

Within constrained budgets in local government, the priority could be the routine measures that make access work in practice: keep public toilets open and in good order; repair car park surfaces and manage capacity at pressure points; maintain continuous, well-kept footpaths and promenades; refresh essential wayfinding; and provide seating where needed. Buses were a particular concern; reliability could be addressed first. These are modest, cumulative adjustments, but they are the conditions through which people experience nature connection, and the wellbeing benefits associated with it. Strengthening them could help narrow the inclusion gap for non-drivers, older residents, and people with impairments. If funding becomes available, targeted upgrades should focus on these services, with checks such as

ensuring that replacement buses can accept wheelchairs and prams. Respondents also raised longer-term environmental risks, notably coastal erosion and the protection of valued natural places; within the scope of this study, safeguarding essential routes and facilities where risk is greatest is a way to sustain everyday access while longer-term solutions are considered.

Views on future development were mixed. Most respondents wanted new coastal development to reflect local needs and supported investment in public leisure spaces, while support for more tourism was comparatively weaker. Open comments also favoured locating any additional activity in established hubs, for example Whitehaven Harbour and Silloth, and avoiding larger schemes along quieter stretches. Practice should therefore steer investment to places with supporting infrastructure and opportunities for visitor spend, whilst protecting quieter areas that respondents valued and wished to protect from overdevelopment. In practice, this points to a zoning approach that concentrates activity in established hubs while conserving quieter stretches.

Limitations and future directions

The study provides a descriptive snapshot of how a substantial self-selected sample of residents experience and value the Cumberland coast. While the findings are not statistically representative, they demonstrate consistently high levels of reported value of the coast among respondents. Similarly, while the correlations are exploratory and should not be seen as establishing causality, they allow us to identify relationships between access, frequency of use and perceived value that help to interpret the wider survey findings.

Further work could consider non-users of coastal spaces, perhaps reaching them via collaboration with community intermediaries. It could also combine survey evidence with ethnographic or reflexive, place-based approaches to deepen understanding of lived experiences of coastal value. Research in other coastal areas could explore whether similar patterns of public value are found elsewhere.

Conclusion

The survey indicates that respondents highly valued access to the coast. They used these public spaces regularly; beaches, coastal paths, harbours and adjacent natural areas were most valued. These places resonated most strongly with enjoyment, relaxation, freedom to explore, pride in place and connection with nature. Respondents almost universally linked spending time in coastal spaces to improved wellbeing, quality of life and valued leisure time, with quieter, less developed

stretches resonating in particular for their restorative and nature-based qualities. They wanted these places protected, especially from erosion and development; some pointed to concentrating investment and development in established hubs.

Interpreted through Meynhardt (2009, 2021) and Schwartz (2012), the findings indicate that value is realised chiefly through everyday leisure in blue spaces when the conditions of use are in place. The distinction between formal, practicable and experienced access clarifies this contribution. Legal rights and official provision establish formal opportunity, but paths, toilets, surfaces, wayfinding, transport and environmental quality determine whether access is practicable and experienced as a realistic everyday possibility. The survey provides its strongest evidence on these latter two dimensions. Viewing access as part of public value therefore highlights how local conditions may shape patterns of use and the terms on which people engage with coastal spaces.

A simple test for policy and practice follows from the findings. Proposals can be considered publicly valuable when they sustain or improve the conditions that make everyday use possible, when they protect environmental quality and other conditions that support use and when they locate additional activity where supporting infrastructure already exists. Viewed in this way, maintaining the conditions that support access is integral to public value creation because it enables people to continue using and valuing the coast.

While the study is situated in Cumberland, the approach is usable elsewhere. Applying a combined public value and human values lens enables decision-makers to judge plans by their effects on conditions of use and on the experiences through which value is realised. This provides an evidence-informed way to align coastal governance with how people actually derive value from public spaces. This sits with coastal studies linking blue-space access to restoration and everyday wellbeing (White et al., 2020; Jarratt et al., 2022), and with national evidence on pressures in coastal communities and the need for locally appropriate provision (House of Lords, 2019; Whitty, 2021).

The contribution of this article to public value scholarship is twofold. First, the findings characterise a relational publicness in which enjoyment of individual leisure experiences and access to nature in shared public spaces register more strongly than overt duty-oriented frames, without excluding them. Second, the study shows how access can be understood as part of public value by identifying the conditions that shape use and inclusion. These two points provide a way to analyse coastal public spaces as lived and relational, linking human values, access and leisure activities associated with wellbeing, while also identifying where interventions may strengthen public value.

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