

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ENVIRONMENT DURING THE ISOLATION CAUSED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. A VISUAL ESSAY

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Abstract: *During the state of emergency in Romania, in the first part of 2020, we asked 30 participants from the urban and rural environment in Brasov County to take photographs of what living in isolation means. To our surprise, many of the photographs we received illustrate landscapes that seem to have represented a therapeutic resource, seem to have contributed to maintaining a state of well-being of the participants during quarantine. With the aid of these images, we drew up a visual essay that reflects the particular importance the environment, especially nature and the city, had in a crisis for our participants, generated by the traumatizing experience of isolation.*

Key words: *Photographic diary, photovoice, visual essay, landscape, quarantine.*

1. Introduction

The worldwide crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the world's population on multiple levels: health, economic, social, and psychological. Most states have imposed lock-down periods and numerous restrictions that have fundamentally changed regular social life. People spent weeks or even months in isolation, at home. Numerous professional activities moved online, students attended distance learning, circulation between localities or even within localities was drastically reduced and institutions considered non-essential, especially in the recreation and entertainment sectors (restaurants, bars, and hotels), were closed. During the state of emergency, or "complete lock down", people left home only to go shopping or for short moments of movement in open air, near their dwelling.

These constraints have significantly changed daily life and usual social relations. The pandemic has caused important changes in our interactions and everyday routines (Saggiaro de Figueiredo et al., 2021). In the absence of a vaccine and of efficient medical

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treatment, governments have rapidly and progressively adopted various measures to protect public health (Piovani et al, 2021), the most common being keeping physical distance, wearing a mask, forbidding public gatherings and moving education and work online, wherever possible. New and unusual experiences associated with living during the pandemic have led to “stress, anxiety, and a feeling of helplessness in all” (Singh et al., 2020, p. 1), and social distancing in particular was associated with negative effects on the well-being of people (Ares et al., 2021). The negative social impact of the crisis generated by the Covid-19 virus is already obvious especially regarding the economic situation of vulnerable persons, but also regarding losses of human lives, the suffering caused by sickness or death of the dear ones, as well as other emotional and mental issues (Severo et al., 2021).

2. Healing Nature and Therapeutic Landscapes

20 years ago, *Landscape Research* published the photographic essay of Johan Ottosson (2001) in which the importance of nature in coping with a crisis was rendered. As the editors of the magazine stated at that time, that essay brought “an important contribution to the literature on the links between landscape and human well-being” (p. 165). The editors appreciated “the revelation of the therapeutic aspects of landscape, and of the instinctive responses of the human mind to landscape cues” (idem).

According to Searles (apud Ottosson, 2010), “Nature plays an important role in our mental health. People in crisis need ‘stable’ environments in order to feel well” (p. 172). The relationship with the natural environment is seen, in this perspective, as a simple relationship, as opposed to more complex relationships with other people or with animals; the simple relationship with nature is beneficial for people who live through periods of crisis because it can reduce anxiety and suffering, at the same time improving the perception of the world and of the self.

Ulrich (1984) showed the therapeutic effect of an image of nature seen through the window in a hospital in Pennsylvania, where two groups of patients who underwent a cholecystectomy were compared. Within this comparative analysis, the difference between the two groups of patients was the image they were seeing through the window of the ward, given that other variables were kept under control. Thus, one of the groups was looking at an area of trees through the window, and the other group was looking outside at a wall. Results have shown that patients who benefitted from the window oriented towards the trees had better scores than those who could see only a wall, in all indicators measured in connection with post-surgery recovery.

Other recent research also underlines the importance of the relationship with the natural environment in the healing processes or in those adapting to change.

A series of studies focus on the concept of “therapeutic landscapes”, showing their role in improving physical and mental health. According to Gesler (1992), therapeutic landscapes are places associated with treatment or healing and they can often have an important spiritual dimension. Nature, present in such spaces in the form of gardens, parks or green areas, represents an essential component of this concept, together with other elements that belong to either built or social spaces. Jiang (2014) states that

“green public spaces” and “healing gardens” in China not only have benefits upon health but also encourage social communication. In hospitals, green spaces and even the simple window views of nature can result in a reduction in anxiety and depression.

Sampson and Gifford (2010) showed that “beautiful and green places” represented an important element of the reception environment for young refugees in Australia, contributing to the construction of genuine therapeutic landscapes, which are “important for restoring health and well-being among recently settled refugees” (p.118-119).

Other authors also underline that the connection with nature brings numerous benefits to mental health, and during the Covid-19 pandemic “holding a worldview that humans and nature are best thought of as being harmonious with one another, corresponded to improved psychological health” (Haasa, Hoeft, and Omura, 2021, p. 4). In general, maintaining contact with nature represents a factor that influences health and the state of well-being in a positive way, as well as the behaviors associated with the protection of the environment and sustainability (Martin et al., 2020).

Kolokotsa et al. (2020) enumerate the benefits that the contact with nature can have upon people’s health: “natural environments, such as green spaces and blue spaces, have a significant impact on citizens’ health and wellbeing. Green spaces, such as parks, green urban living rooms, green corridors, gardens, and urban forests, as well as blue spaces, such as rivers and lakes, have been associated with better psychological and physiological health including stress relief, reduction of depression, attention restoration processes, reduction in cardiovascular disease, improvement in pregnancy outcomes and reduction of respiratory symptoms” (p. 2). These authors propose an approach to urban development that takes into account nature-based solutions to a large extent, necessary for improving the quality of environment and social life in urban spaces.

3. Methodology

We tried to find out what the quarantine period meant for the participants in our study, how they lived during isolation (in Romania, the state of emergency lasted two months, from March 16 until May 14, 2020). We had 30 participants, women and men aged between 19 to 71 years old, who live in urban or rural areas of Brasov County in Romania. They were asked to take photographs of what being isolated means, to create a visual diary of the quarantine period. We received 380 photographs altogether that we coded thematically (Braun & Clark, 2012).

Our study was an exploratory one, we used the convenience sampling technique. We tried to have different participants from a socio-demographic point of view but we did not find any major differences between the themes represented in the photos they provided. Participation was voluntary, subjects responded or not to our invitation, some of them sent us a single photo, others sent a few almost every day of their isolation.

Most images received from the participants in our project represent family and various activities carried out together. Many of them illustrate house or garden-related activities for which people had more time during isolation than before. But we were surprised to discover that half of our subjects also provided photographs of landscapes. They showed us they were very attentive to nature, the city, the environment; it seems these helped them during the isolation period.

For this article, we selected the photographs that represented the environment, we analyzed and interpreted them. Landscape photographs that we received have caught our attention, not only through their beauty but also through the high number and the strong idea of importance and indispensability that they conveyed. The surroundings, the city, the window views of nature were indispensable for our subjects in a crisis situation generated by forced isolation from others. As we will show below, the results of our study are in line with those of the studies enumerated in the previous section of the article.

We asked the participants to take photographs because the use of this kind of data “provides access to different types of knowledge, including tacit and experiential knowledge” (Milne and Muir, 2020, p. 285). We should mention that we asked our subjects not only to offer us images, not only to take photographs that would show us how they lived during isolation, but also to add a short, explanatory text, suggestive for each photograph. Therefore, we applied the photovoice technique. As Milne and Muir (2020) mention, “the photovoice is widely recognized as an important participatory research approach with the potential to develop insights into the lived experiences of people and communities” (p. 284). We chose photovoice “to encourage participants to lead the research process as they visually represent and narrate their everyday experiences” (Foster-Fishman apud Sutton-Brown, 2014, p. 171).

Thus, as Wang and Burris (1997) have noted, the photovoice “uses the immediacy of the visual image to furnish evidence and to promote an effective, participatory means of sharing expertise and knowledge” (p. 369).

The photographs taken by the subjects and explained in a few words proved, in many research situations and of communicating the results of research, to have a great impact. Photovoice is a way of making images talk and introducing themselves on their own. There are more and more foundations and non-governmental organizations that use this technique because it is an efficient way to raise the public’s awareness (either the public who makes decisions, or the public at large). Most times, it is applied to produce impressions regarding various themes of social assistance like poverty, work exploitation of children or discrimination of persons with disabilities.

Practically, by photovoice, people whose voice is never heard have the opportunity to express themselves through photography; thus, the change of numerous situations in which those who benefit from social policies are not required to participate in their creation is tried. Here are a few examples of such projects in which photovoice was used: people record and reflect on images the shortcomings and worries related to their own communities (Holm, 2008) or people are invited to be the lawyers of their well-being or of that of the community they are part of (Kolb, 2008) or single mothers take photographs of aspects considered important for the quality of their life (Duffy, 2010).

In visual research in which participants are asked to reflect in photographs various social aspects relevant for the objectives of the research (see provoked visual documents), things proceed in a similar way. If within research, interviews (of the visual elicitation type) are not scheduled, in which the participants explain the photographs they took, then they are asked to provide an explanatory text or at least a title for the images caught so that researchers ensure that they are not mistaken in their processing, analyzing, and interpreting.

Therefore, to be sure we understand the meaning of the images caught by subjects on our request, but also to give photographs more expressive force, we also collected images taken by the participants, accompanied by texts written by the participants.

Thus, in this article, we try to show (not only in words but also in pictures) the role that nature played in the lives of our subjects during a difficult time when they tried to face an unprecedented challenge - isolation from other people.

3. Findings – The Voice of Our Photos

Each photograph received from our subjects was accompanied, thus, by an explanatory text. We discovered that the voice of photographs related to nature was not extremely powerful. We believe that our participants considered (and they were right) that nature “speaks” for itself, through images, much better than those who rendered it would do. Of all the images we received in our project, those which illustrated nature were accompanied by the fewest words. Also, in most cases, words would not greatly enhance the power and intensity of the visual message.

Nevertheless, we performed a thematic coding of the messages that accompanied the photographs representing landscapes. Here are the things that the voices of the environment-related images wanted to transmit.

3.1. Without nature, no matter how little, isolation would have been inconceivable

Participants were very happy that they live in a house and that they have a garden that allows them to get close to nature, or that they live on an upper floor and they can thus see, panoramically, the surroundings (*I look as far as I can*, VS, man, 68 years old, day 34 of isolation). They were happy that they had a field, a forest or a park near their block of flats, that they could see and where they could walk (*What a luck that I live on the edge of the town! Near the block of flats, we have a field, which, though is not too looked after, has become the favorite place for getting out around the house*, CC, woman, 46 years old, day 22 of isolation, *I enjoy spring from above*, VS, man, 68 years old, day 39 of isolation, *Trees in blossom seen from the sixth floor*, VS, man, 68 years old, day 40 of isolation). If they did not have all these, they were happy they could isolate outside the town, close to nature (*Isolation in the countryside! They left Bucharest. They play a lot outside, they forget thus about telephones and the Internet...* VP, woman, 71 years old, day 4 of isolation) or that they could arrange a small corner of nature into their balcony (*A little nature at the block. I take great care of it*, MS, woman, 67 years old, day 10 of isolation).

If they couldn't be close to nature otherwise, they tried to fulfil their daily tasks as close to it as possible – they made it such way that the way to work passes through nature or that on their way to the market, they could linger near a tree, on a bench in the sun (*I chose Penny Market and not Astra Market because the first part of the road is in the sunlight*, FN, man, 50 years old, day 30 of isolation, *A break on the way home from the market. More because it is sunny than because the bags are a bit heavy*, FN, man, 50 years old, day 33 of isolation).

3.2. Getting close to nature was not exceptional but rather a recipe of well-being in isolation, pretty generalized

The participants in the study noticed that the areas close to nature, normally untrodden, which were deserted before the pandemic, have become very popular during the isolation period with the inhabitants of the town: *Open space near the block of flats. There is already a path created where almost nobody would go before Covid*, CC, woman, 46 years old, day 42 of isolation.

3.3. The environment was important for people, they observed it carefully, they noticed any changes that it underwent during isolation

The participants observed nature and its changes (*It snowed in the mountains again but now summer is coming*, VP, woman, 71 years old, day 60 of isolation.), the town life or the lack of it: *The town comes timidly to life again*, CC, woman, 46 years old, day 64 of isolation, *Without people and noise, the town seems more present but also more abstract and more creepy in its silence*, CR, woman, 40 years old, day 22 of isolation. They went to work and came back on the same routes, attentive to the nature around them: *It looks greener than eight hours ago, Things happen more rapidly outside*, FN, man, 50 years old, day 31 of isolation. *Today we were riding bikes and we noticed that the chestnut trees have turned green*, MP, man, 42 years old, day 52 of isolation.

3.4. People have missed nature a lot, are more frequently drawn closer to it; they missed it so much when they did not have it around; they missed outdoor activities they could do unhindered before the pandemic; they appreciated it, in its absence, more than ever

The participants in our project have regretfully thought that they would miss the show of nature offered each spring (*I'm afraid this year I won't be able to enjoy spring*, FSD, woman, 43 years old, day 8 of isolation), that they would not be able to go on the usual hikes (*We see the Red Mountain only from the balcony. We miss hiking so much!*, FSD, woman, 43 years old, day 36 of isolation). When they were permitted to go again to well-known areas, situated farther, in the center of the town, not only around the house, they acted as if they had seen something extraordinarily beautiful for the first time (*I took photographs as if I were in Piazza Navona in Rome!*, FN, man, 50 years old, day 55 of isolation).

3.5. The environment took them out of sadness, offered them therapeutic occupations, small joys extremely welcome, almost the only ones in a period of a major crisis for them

I was looking at the pear tree in blossom and I told myself it was not worth being sad, lamenting over isolation (IA, woman, 40 years old, day 39 of isolation), *In the forest, for a walk, in the sun* (PIA, woman, 36 years old, day 8 of isolation), *I lie in the sun in my "garden"* (MS, woman, 67 years old, day 25 of isolation), *We planted grass* (FSD, woman, 43 years old, day 23 of isolation), *Today I planted carrots and radishes* (MP, man, 42 years old, day 8 of isolation), *Beauty through the window* (VS, man, 68 years old, day 42 of isolation), *In the evening, I wait for the lights to switch on* (VS, man, 68

years old, day 35 of isolation), *Today we wandered and isolated ourselves in the forest* (MP, man, 42 years old, day 9 of isolation).

As we have shown photovoice is a spectacular technique that reveals a lot, that generates emotion and that invites reflection. Photovoice-type studies offer numerous and rich visual materials that may be used in different forms to catch the public's attention. For example, exhibitions may be organized (see the exhibition of photographs of people with disabilities coping with situations in which physical arrangement of the town restricts mobility at Pink 2008), photograph albums (see the album of successions of photographs of the type before and after the destructions suffered by the Dresden town in the bombardments in WWII in Christmann, 2008) etc.

Another expressive way, of great impact, for communicating the results of photovoice-type projects is the visual essay. If individual photographs are spectacular, their arrangement in succession with meaning generates even more interesting products, with an amplified message. We have also tried such a visual essay that we render below.

4. A Visual Essay

Our visual essay documents the way in which the natural environment represented a therapeutic resource during the crisis period caused by the Covid-19 virus. The photographs presented in the essay illustrate the relationship of individuals or families with the natural environment and landscape resources during the social isolation imposed by the pandemic in the first part of 2020.

4.1. The environment in which Brasov inhabitants isolated themselves and how important it was for them

Even if they stayed longer inside, they looked through and took photographs of the view from the windows...

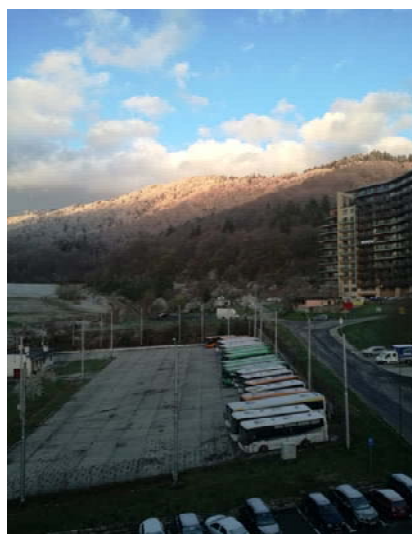


Fig. 1A. FN, man, 50 years old, day 33 of isolation



Fig. 1B. FSD, woman, 43 years old, day 36 of isolation



Fig. 1C. VS, man, 68 years old, day 42 of isolation

...they captured in images their yards and gardens, newly blossoming flowers, the nature that lived near them...



Fig. 2A. MB, woman, 52 years old, day 43 of isolation



Fig. 2B. RT, woman, 38 years old, day 14 of isolation

...they took photographs of the surroundings of their house, when they got out nearby for shopping or short walks. They had access only there for a while and they cherished each centimeter available.



Fig. 3. CC, woman, 46 years old, day 42 of isolation

If they had to go to work, they looked for detours, throughout nature.

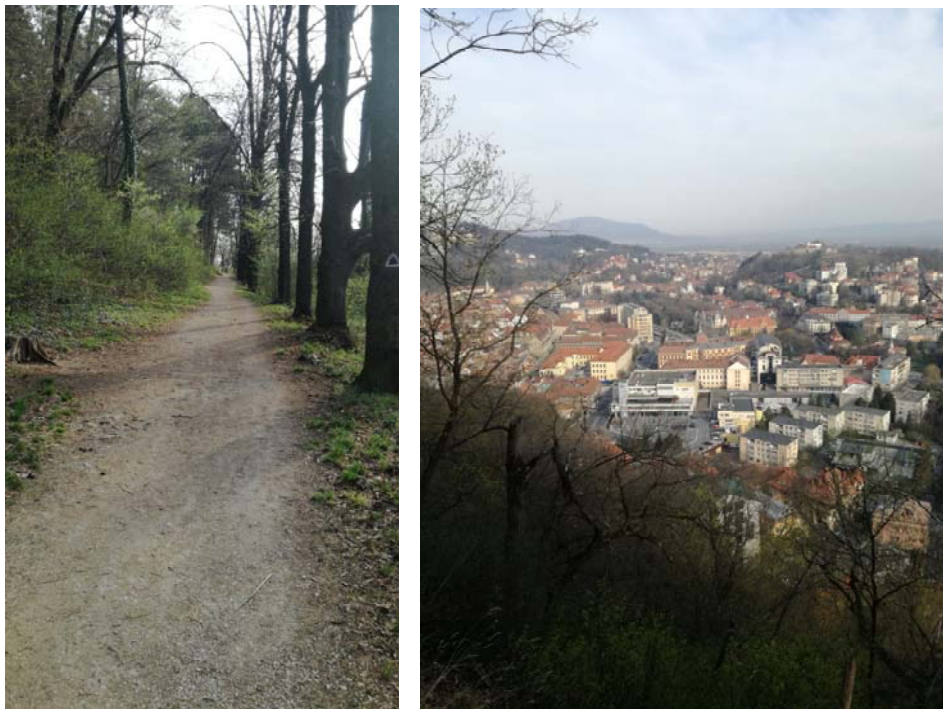


Fig. 4A and Fig. 4B. FN, man, 50 years old, day 31 of isolation

When they got out of their homes, they looked again for the company of nature. There were no other people around but they did not feel alone at all.



Fig. 5A. *FSD*, woman, 43 years old, day 8 of isolation

Fig. 5B. *GB*, man, 53 years old, day 8 of isolation



Fig. 5C. *SS*, man, 19 years old, day 15 of isolation

And when they arrived again downtown, they took photographs of it like mere tourists, like some people who had never seen it before or who had missed it a lot.



Fig. 6A. FN, man, 50 years old, day 61 of isolation

Fig. 6B. GB, man, 53 years old, day 8 of isolation

The environment was an important part of all of them during isolation, they found support and hope in its beauty.

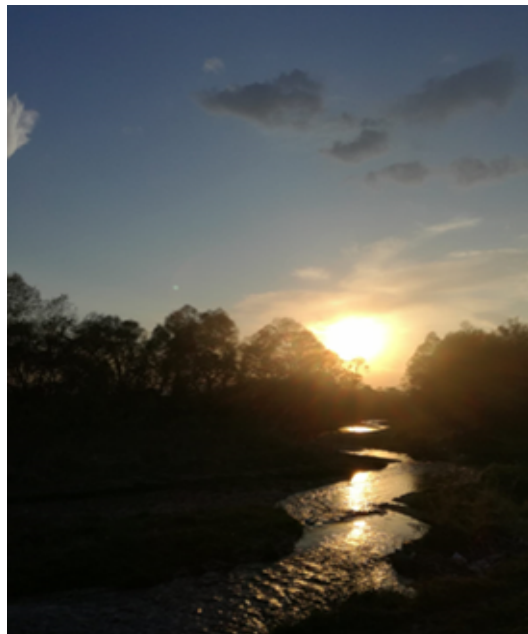


Fig. 7A. MG, woman, 44 years old, day 40 of isolation



Fig. 7B. *The sun rises towards a better day.*
MB, woman, 52 years old, day 33 of isolation

5. Conclusion

In the first part of the article, we described a visual essay by Ottosson (2001). Even if the crisis which the above-mentioned essay mentions is of another nature (the period of rehabilitation following a traumatic head injury) than that to which our essay refers, we have discovered that the unique experience of isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic generated in our subjects a similar closeness to nature. They also lived through a crisis, and the relationship with nature also had a therapeutic effect on them.

In agreement with what Ulrich (1984) states, exposure to images of nature can be a predictor of improvement in the emotional state. Although the participants in our research were not patients but ordinary people who expressed through images their states of mind during the period of social isolation, their situation may be considered similar. Patients are persons found in a close environment (the hospital) for a certain period, far from relatives and friends. But our subjects also have lived through an unnatural state, of isolation and distance from those close to them, being forbidden to go out to public spaces or undertake various entertainment activities that are so necessary for relaxation and for mental and emotional well-being. Contact with nature seems to have had curative effects in their case. As Ulrich (1984) showed, “it is possible that a hospital window view could influence a patient's emotional state and might accordingly affect recovery” (p. 420).

Nature-based solutions (Kolokotsa et al., 2020) can be thus considered as having a significant role in improving the state of well-being during personal or social periods of crisis that require social isolation and the reduction of meetings specific to human sociability.

Therefore, our article confirms what is supported in the literature and extends the idea of healing nature to situations unrelated to illness or physical and mental health but rather to what we might call social discomfort. We believe that nature could be more often involved in the descriptions and explanations given by sociologists to the various social phenomena and processes they study. We also believe that the inclusion of images in our studies has great advantages in terms of diversifying the data collected and the accuracy of the results.

Of course, our study should have followed the rules of theoretical sampling to make our conclusions more general and we should have included visual elicitation interviews so that the explanations of our subjects are broader and the results securer.

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