

# Trends in Outdoor Swimming Report



Outdoor Swimmer has been publishing inspiring content  
about all aspects of swimming outdoors since 2011.  
[outdoorswimmer.com](http://outdoorswimmer.com)

# Foreword



I am delighted to present our first “Trends in Outdoor Swimming Report”. I hope you find it as fascinating to read as we did in putting it together.

This year, 2021, marks 10 years since I launched H2Open Magazine, and four years since we rebranded to Outdoor Swimmer. While there have been plenty of ups and downs along the way, 2020 presented us with our biggest challenges yet. I’m proud of how the Outdoor Swimmer team stayed focused on producing timely and relevant information to swimmers in a fast-changing environment. The events of last year also prompted us to dig deeper and take an in-depth look at trends in outdoor swimming, and the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. We wanted to improve our understanding of who swims outdoors and why. As you will see, outdoor swimming is an activity that brings its participants a long list of benefits and much joy. It’s uplifting to be part of such an exciting, vibrant and positive sector.

An argument for learning to swim is that it could save your life. However, our findings suggest that this may be the tip of the iceberg when it comes to reasons to learn to swim. We show, for example, almost everyone who swims outside says it supports their mental and physical health, it keeps them fit and is important for their social lives. Being able to swim gives you access to a lifetime supply of self-administered mental and physical health support, a means to exercise at almost any age and it is a source of great friendships. Moreover, becoming an outdoor swimmer may change how you think about

a range of issues such as climate change, the environment and pollution. It could make you a more caring person as well as a healthier and happier one. We also learn that it could provide you with a career.

I want to share one finding from our survey with you in this introduction. We asked: “How important is outdoor swimming to your sense of identity?” People could answer from (1) Not Important to (5) Most Important. The average came in at 3.8 with 64% ascribing it 4 or 5 and just 6% of people saying it wasn’t important. I find this amazing. Outdoor swimming is not something you do. Being an outdoor swimmer is something that

**OUTDOOR  
SWIMMING  
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THAT YOU ARE**

you are. It is something that shapes your life and the decisions you make, from what you eat and wear to where you go on holiday and, for some people, even where they choose to live. Outdoor swimming is important. We hope this report helps raise awareness of this in governments, National Governing Bodies, Sport England (and its equivalents around the world),

health authorities, tourist boards, local and regional authorities and anywhere else that has a decision-making role that can impact outdoor swimming.

The other audience for this report is those who work in sectors that supply products and services to outdoor swimmers throughout the world. We know 2020 was a massively challenging year for everyone, and financially more difficult for some than others. I hope our findings give you cause for optimism in 2021 and will be useful in supporting your marketing and product development in this sector.

If you have questions or suggestions for further areas of research in future reports, please be in touch.

Swim wild and free  
Simon Griffiths,  
Founder & publisher, Outdoor Swimmer





# Executive summary

Both anecdotal evidence and the available data paint a picture of growth in outdoor swimming around the world in 2020, especially in the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

Two big themes emerge from our survey of swimmers.

Firstly, there is a growing recognition of the importance of swimming outside for mental and physical health and for general wellbeing. Secondly, and perhaps related to the first, has been a big jump in interest in winter swimming. We also observed that the proportion

of female swimmers has increased, and women appear to be swimming more frequently than men. In addition, swimmers care about the environment and take active measures to improve the quality of the water they swim in and the surrounding areas.

However, despite the growth, businesses serving outdoor swimmers have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic in widely different ways. Event

companies and swim travel businesses have suffered most with very few outdoor swimming events going ahead and most travel cancelled. The first lockdown was devastating for many swimming coaches, but some managed to recover during the second half of the year. Product suppliers first saw demand evaporate and then, for certain products at least, come flooding back.



Swimmers estimated they spent £200 each, on average, on swim-related kit in 2020

**45%**

of swimmers increased how much they swim outside in 2020

60% of swimmers are worried about pollution and the risk of getting ill

**20%**

of outdoor swimmers started to support their mental health and general wellbeing

**42%**

of outdoor swimmers say that cold water is not a barrier to swimming as often as they like

## KEY STATISTICS

We estimate participation in outdoor swimming in the UK has increased by between 1.5 and 3 times since 2019

**Female participation in outdoor swimming has increased from roughly 50% in 2017 to 65% in 2020**

52% of people who tried outdoor swimming liked it more than they expected (and 47% liked it as much as they expected)

**75% of new outdoor swimmers said they wanted to continue swimming outside through winter**

69.4% say outdoor swimming is essential or very important to their mental health

**43.4% say "health and wellbeing" is the main reason they swim outside**

70% of people say that being an outdoor swimmer has made them more concerned about water pollution

**When they travel for non-swimming reasons, 78% look for opportunities to swim in open water**

With direct retail being extremely challenging in 2020, many pivoted to increase their online sales. Unpredictable demand also caused supply chain issues. Meanwhile, despite having to delay opening and put in place extensive Covid-measures, venues have had a great year.

Looking forward, we see a mixture of optimism and

caution. There is widespread recognition that outdoor swimming is something that people want to keep doing once they discover it. However, we are clearly not yet out of the woods with coronavirus and this will continue to present challenges to businesses and individuals going into next year.



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Katia Vastiau

# Background

## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY OUTDOOR SWIMMING?

We take the broadest possible definition of outdoor swimming to include any swimming that takes place in water that isn't covered by a roof. This covers a large range of activities and participants from swimming in remote and untamed bodies of water, to triathlon style racing, long distance challenges such as English Channel crossings and cold water dipping. We most definitely include lidos in our definition as we're well aware those places inspire a unique devotion from their fans.

Other terms we might use, loosely, but not completely interchangeably include:

- **Open water swimming** – primarily referring to events and racing, often in wetsuits.
- **Wild swimming** – swimming in unsupervised locations in seas, rivers and lakes etc.
- **Marathon swimming** – either the 10km marathon swim distance and Olympic distance open water event, or longer (solo) swims across large bodies of water such as the English Channel or Catalina Channel.
- **Winter swimming** and cold water swimming – swimming outside, in natural water temperatures in winter, either for recreation or in competition.



Katia Vastiau

This report looks at trends and participants' attitudes in all these areas of swimming.

## WHO SHOULD READ THIS REPORT?

Our aim with this report is to provide relevant and up-to-date information for anyone involved in the world of outdoor swimming, from swimmers to brands offering products and services to swimmers, businesses interested in entering this space or associating with it and organisations whose work is in some way connected to outdoor swimming. In addition, the findings in this report are relevant to people who care about societal health and wellbeing (including mental health), the environment, the importance of blue spaces and the value of being active in nature.



## OUR OBJECTIVES IN CREATING THIS REPORT

We researched and wrote this report in order to:

- Improve our understanding of the scale and rate of growth in outdoor swimming around the world.
- Understand more about why people swim outdoors and the benefits of outdoor swimming to individuals and society.
- Learn about what swimmers think about a range of topics from their kit choices to travel destinations and support for environmental activism.
- Collect evidence for the benefits of investing in and supporting outdoor swimming.
- Increase our knowledge of how the coronavirus pandemic impacted outdoor swimming.

We hope this report helps broaden and deepen readers' understanding of outdoor swimming and will be a valuable guide to businesses and organisations connected to this wonderful activity. We intend to publish updates to this report annually to track the changing shape of outdoor swimming around the world and look forward to working with all stakeholders in the outdoor swimming space to track trends and collate data and empirical evidence as, hopefully, ever more people take to the water.

## HOW HAVE WE CREATED THIS REPORT?

The core of this report is based on findings from our "Attitudes to Outdoor Swimming Survey" that we ran in November and December 2020, and through which we collected 2196 responses. This was supplemented by separate surveys of businesses connected to outdoor swimming, desk research and interviews with key players in the sectors.

Thanks are due to Swim England who helped refine the survey questions and shared it with their database, ensuring a large response.



Katia Vastiau

# Section 1:

## How the coronavirus pandemic affected outdoor swimming

### *The pandemic has encouraged more people to swim outside*

Let's start with the positives. The consensus is that outdoor swimming is growing, that it has been growing for a number of years and that the coronavirus pandemic gave it a boost. In fact, every single one of the respondents to our survey of swimming-related businesses said they thought the pandemic had made outdoor swimming more popular and 87% think it's growing rapidly.

To build a picture of how much outdoor swimming has grown and how many people swim outside, we turned first to Sport England and their Active

Lives Survey. This survey is sent out to around 175,000 people and gathers data on sport and physical activity. The findings are then scaled to produce estimates at a population level. At the time of writing, Sport England had only released data on open water swimming for the period up to November 2018 to 2019. The survey asks what activities people have done in the previous 28 days. For outdoor swimming, it estimated participation at 444,900. This suggests a pre-Covid baseline of just under half a million people who frequently participated in outdoor swimming. Based on our subsequent research, when figures for 2020 are released, we fully expect this number to be significantly higher.

Next, we looked at Google. The

charts opposite show Google searches for three relevant key phrases, "outdoor swimming", "wild swimming" and "open water swimming".

As well as a higher peak level (38,300 searches in 2020 compared to 22,400 in 2019 and 25,600 in 2018) it's worth noting that the 2020 peak came in August rather than July as it did for the preceding two years. Total searches throughout the summer period (May to September) were 90% higher in 2020 than 2019 (and 83% higher than in 2018).

Globally, the trend is similar, although this isn't surprising as almost two thirds of searches are from the UK. The only other English-speaking country where we saw significant growth in relevant Google searches was

"There's been a massive uptake in outdoor swimming. Numbers are through the roof!"

**Leon Fryer,  
SwimYourSwim**

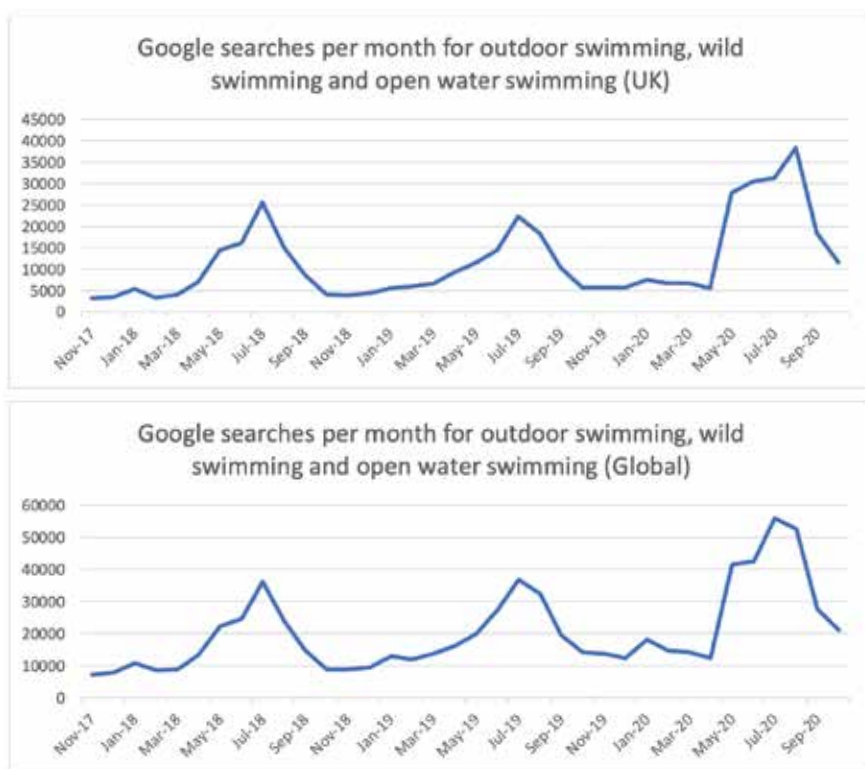
"Open water swimming is the saviour of our sanity in 2020. The number of people outdoor swimming in Wirral is through the roof!"

**Liam Hanlon, organiser of the  
Across Mersey Swim (one of the  
few outdoor swimming events that  
took place in 2020)**

"I think it's boomed."

**Chris Malpass,  
organiser of the  
BLDSA Windermere  
swim**





the Republic of Ireland.

Just taking the search term “wild swimming” and the period April to October, there were 71,000 searches in 2020 compared to 36,600 in 2019 – an increase of 94%.

Another angle we looked at was social media activity. The Social Media Analysis Toolkit (SMAT at [smat-app.com](http://smat-app.com)) reveals the number of uses of specified key words or phrases – see chart on next page.

Superficially, there is little difference between 2019 and 2020 based on the combined total, but that’s because mentions of “open water swimming” decreased, while those of wild swimming and outdoor swimming increased. This makes sense in a year when most races were cancelled

“There was already long-term growth in outdoor swimming and Covid accelerated the change.”

**Rosie Cook,  
founder and CEO  
Deakin & Blue**

“It’s growing and growing, and there is a big increase in demand for outdoor swimming coaching.”

**Dave Candler, CEO STA**

“I’m seeing more people swimming than ever in my lifetime.”

**Bryn Dymott, lifelong  
outdoor swimmer**

“It’s exploded.”

**Dan Bullock, founder  
Swim for Tri**

and the phrase “open water swimming” is more closely connected to racing than the other two.

## BOON FOR VENUES

But while many events were cancelled, this didn’t put off swimmers flocking to open water swimming venues. Despite having to operate with booking systems and reduced capacity, we know many of these were full to capacity through the summer. For example, Bill Richmond, who runs TriFarm, a swimming venue in Essex, told us: “In the immediate 6-8 weeks after the lockdown was released, we were absolutely inundated. We were sold out with 150 swimmers a day during the week, and 200 per day at the weekend. At least double a normal year.”

At Queenford Lakes, an outdoor swimming venue in Oxfordshire, they reached 95% of the swims they’d had for the previous year by the first week in August, despite opening five weeks later and limiting the number of swimmers in the water. Katia Vastiau, Queenford Lakes safety team, says: “Most sessions were fully booked.”

NOWCA, whose lake management system is used at venues around the country, also say they’ve seen an overall increase in membership during 2020. Other venues have reported an increase in numbers of between 30 and 50% on 2019. Leon Fryer, who runs swimming sessions at two lakes

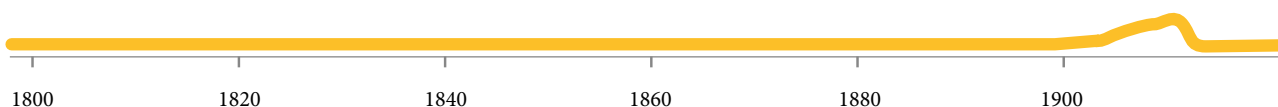
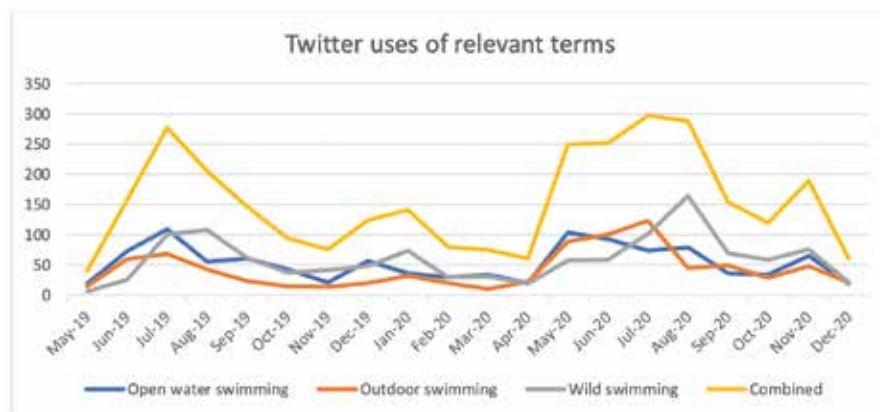
in Yorkshire, says: “Our Tuesday evening sessions were all taken up. We ran four sessions with 25 people each and all 100 slots were full. Last year, we’d be lucky to get 80 swimmers on a good night.”

Some of this surge was driven by pool swimmers, desperate to swim anywhere and therefore willing to try swimming in lakes and rivers while pools remained closed in lockdown. Sport England published a Covid-19 Briefing covering the period 3 April to 25 May looking at people’s attitudes to physical activity. One of the questions was: “What physical activity are people most looking forward to resuming once restrictions are lifted.” In top place, on 14%, was “gym work in general”. Second, at 13%, was swimming. The report also highlighted that people had concerns about returning to pools, and once the tightest restrictions ended and pools started to re-open, (pool) swimming numbers did not recover to the levels expected.

Whether or not that was because so many people had discovered outdoor swimming in the meantime was not addressed by Sport England, but it’s an interesting speculation. What we do know is that lots of people tried outdoor swimming and, as we shall see later, many of these may now be permanent converts.

## CONNECTING THROUGH FACEBOOK

Another place we’ve seen growth is with informal Facebook groups. By “informal”, we mean groups of swimmers connecting through the social media platform that aren’t formalised as clubs with paid-for membership and a constitution. Several swimmers told us that there were big increases in membership of their local groups. Stephen Gould, who swims in Oxfordshire, says that membership has increased by 64% in 14 months across 12 Facebook swimming groups that he monitors for a personal project. Bryn Dymott, another





long-term outdoor swimmer, says that 10 years ago there were maybe 10 other outdoor swimmers in a 15-mile radius of where he lives. "There are now five or six local Facebook groups for swimmers, some of which have more than 500 members," he says. Keri Hutchinson created a Facebook group for like-minded swimmers in Cardiff, the Barrybados Bathers, several years ago. At the beginning of lockdown, membership suddenly jumped from around 250 to more than 600. This prompted concerns about safety and liability to such an extent that Keri no longer felt she could remain a group admin. Some, such as the OSS Windsor and Maidenhead Facebook group, which has 766 members, has stopped taking new members. A pinned post on their page says: "We are not accepting new members during lockdown as the river is very busy. Please come back later."

Colin Hill, who created the Great Swim Series and now runs swimming sessions in Ullswater out of Another Place Hotel in the Lake District, says outdoor swimming has changed beyond recognition since he was first organising events. "Nobody was swimming outdoors then. Now I see individuals and small groups almost every morning. I also have more people who were never swimmers as youngsters coming for tuition. The Lake District used to be about tea shops. Now people are coming here to swim."

Search phrase	2018	2019	2020 (to 14/12/20)
<i>Outdoor swimming</i>	3160	4060	5320
<i>Wild swimming</i>	763	1550	2400
<i>Open water swimming</i>	5340	6410	5800
<i>Winter swimming</i>	718	562	2580
<i>Cold water swimming</i>	324	377	720
<i>Totals</i>	12323	14978	16820

Number of stories found by Google by search term.

## MEDIA COVERAGE

The growing interest in outdoor swimming is reflected in an increase in mainstream media coverage. The table above shows the approximate number of news articles found by a Google search for each of the last three years. We shouldn't read too much into the precision of these numbers as Google gives slightly different results each time, but the general trend corresponds to our perception, and that of the many people we've spoken to, that there is increased mainstream media attention in all things outdoor swimming. Swim coach Dan Bullock, for example, said: "You can't get it out of the press!"

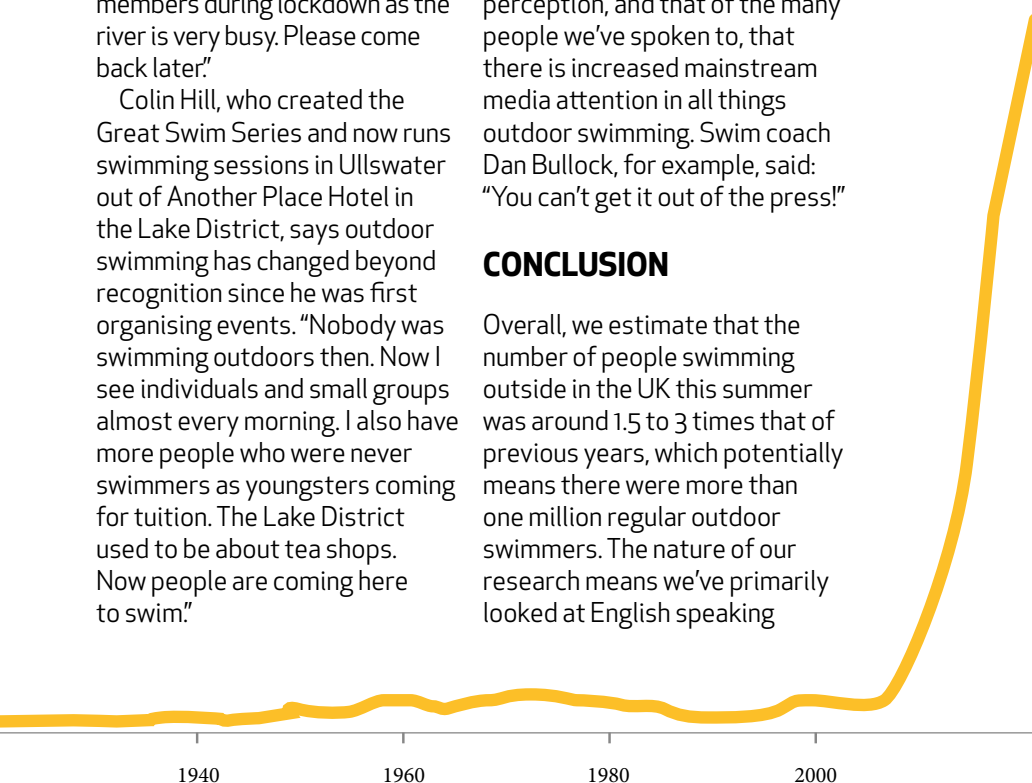
## CONCLUSION

Overall, we estimate that the number of people swimming outside in the UK this summer was around 1.5 to 3 times that of previous years, which potentially means there were more than one million regular outdoor swimmers. The nature of our research means we've primarily looked at English speaking

countries. From this, it appears growth in the Republic of Ireland has also been strong. Language differences mean the tools we've used won't capture trends across Europe, but brands active in these markets told us they have seen good demand for entry-level outdoor swimming products, suggesting a similar pattern. Elsewhere, while there is steady long-term growth in outdoor swimming, Covid hasn't had the same impact. Swimmers from the US say there has been some growth with regular pool swimmers trying to maintain swim fitness in open water, but that these have returned to the pool as soon as they could. Australia and New Zealand were hit by the first coronavirus wave during their winter, which possibly resulted in a different response to outdoor swimming.

Finally in this section on growth, we take a step back and look at the frequency of use of the phrase "wild swimming" in books written in English up to the end of 2019 from Google Ngram Viewer. Clearly, its use has increased substantially since the mid 2000s, but the phrase is not new with uses being recorded more than 100 years ago.

"Wild Swimming"  
in books written in  
English up to the  
end of 2019 from  
Google Ngram  
Viewer



## **SWIMMING HOLIDAYS AND EVENTS THE BIGGEST CASUALTIES IN 2020**

While participation has increased, event organisers and swimming holiday businesses have had a horrendous year. Despite venue operators demonstrating that outdoor swimming can be adapted to operate safely under most of the restrictions put in place to contain the pandemic, events and holidays face additional constraints around travel and accommodation. Consequently, the majority of outdoor swimming events in the UK were cancelled and very few people managed a swimming holiday.

As Thomas Bevan from SwimTrek explained: "The biggest issue has been unpredictable travel restrictions, and being unsure trips would be able to run. However, in general our product lends itself well to being Covid-secure, as it's outdoors, with small groups in relatively remote locations."

Several organisers demonstrated impressive resilience and creativity in rescheduling events to that brief period towards the end of summer when restrictions were most relaxed and devising Covid-secure processes. These included online briefings and rolling starts. The latter proved so popular as an alternative to the mayhem of mass starts that some organisers may retain them post Covid.

We also saw an explosion of virtual events and swim challenges, which enabled both event organisers and

swim holiday companies to maintain engagement with their customers.

Alice Todd from SwimQuest has managed to remain optimistic despite the cancellations. "People are realising the barriers to entry to outdoor swimming are low (both in physical ability and cost) and there is less stigma about adults not being able to swim and wanting to learn. Exercise isn't scary and swimming is inclusive in terms of body shape and size. Hopefully this means outdoor swimming will continue to grow."

## **A MIXED YEAR FOR OUTDOOR SWIMMING COACHES**

The majority of outdoor swimming coaches operate independently, as self-employed or as small businesses. The closure of pools in the first wave of lockdowns stopped many of these from working. Even those who provide one-to-one

tuition from private or endless pools or in public spaces were forced to stop. Some turned to YouTube to produce land-training videos to encourage their customers to retain some swimming fitness while cooped up at home. However, even though this retained connections to customers, in most cases it didn't replace lost income. One coach described the impact of the first lockdown as "devastation" for his business. Another, that operates out of a privately owned endless pool, was unable to work for more than five months.

After Boris Johnson's possibly off-the-cuff remark in Parliament that outdoor swimming would be allowed coming out of the first lockdown, even though pools remained closed, there was something of a turnaround for coaches. Jason Tait, who runs South West Swim said he has had his busiest year ever for one-to-one sessions, although he couldn't run group



Luke Schuberth



sessions. He found that whereas in previous years he had swimmers turning up for maybe one or two sessions before they did an event, this year it was different.

"There was no pressure to do events and that seemed to make coaching sessions more relaxed. Swimmers were more willing to take the time necessary to work on improving their technique over the longer term and tended to book more lessons – often six or more."

However, Paul Fowler, from 100% Swimming, had a different experience: "We had a lot of people who just wanted an induction to open water. They didn't want stroke improvement. They just wanted to know how to access the water safely and simply enjoy outdoor swimming as a meaningful activity."

As things began opening up, coaches found they had to put in place new procedures to remain Covid-secure. Dan Bullock, who runs Swim for Tri, put a positive spin on it. "The extra admin and Covid procedures have been a hassle," he says, "but they've also forced us to streamline some processes so we'll probably retain some of the changes. In addition, he says, "it was worth hanging in there. People wanted us to survive. Swimming is a lovely sport and there is a lot of sincere goodwill."

In some cases, the pandemic was the impetus for a career change. We spoke to one person who was made redundant from their regular job during the first lockdown. Already a qualified coach, outdoor swimming coaching moved from being a weekend hobby to a full-time

source of income as soon as the most extreme lockdown measures were lifted.

Along similar lines, Olympic marathon swimming silver medallist Keri-anne Payne, who runs courses to qualify coaches, says she has "seen a massive rise in the people wanting to become outdoor swimming coaches." This year, she hopes to qualify more than 100 new coaches. Typically, she says she works with three types of people:

- Swim teachers looking to add more strings to their bow and perhaps having more time this year to gain additional qualifications.
- People who love outdoor swimming, who are frequently asked to take other people swimming, and want to make sure they are doing it safely, and possibly creating a business.
- People looking for a career change, moving away from a hectic lifestyle to spend more time in open spaces. They may be adding outdoor swimming to a series of complementary activities such as paddle boarding, yoga and therapy.

### **SPIKY DEMAND, SUPPLY CHAIN ISSUES, LOSS OF RETAIL OUTLETS**

Every business serving the outdoor swimming community is unique and each faced its own set of issues this year. For some, it's been a disaster. We heard from one, a business offering outdoor swimming experiences, who just said: "It killed our business. We have not traded since March and have no funding." Another, a kit and

accessories supplier, reported that overall sales were down by 85% between April and November compared to the same period in 2019.

Other businesses have been able to pull through with a mixture of government support through furlough schemes and emergency funding, as well as, in some cases, strong sales in selected areas. In fact, sales of some products have done so well that it resulted in supply issues. This was the case at Decathlon, which saw triple digit growth in demand for wetsuits and other kit for open water swimming (and watersports in general). On the other hand, sales of goggles and swimwear for pools sunk.

Sam Chapman, international Marketing Manager for Zone 3, says that overall the year has been good, especially at the entry level end of the market with wetsuits between £100 and £200 selling well. Other wetsuit brands provided similar reports, and also spoke about supply issues. This showed up on social media where we several times saw swimmers complaining about not being able to get hold of neoprene accessories such as gloves and socks.

The closure of traditional offline retail outlets and the absence of events clearly impacted sales potential and forced businesses to increase their efforts at online sales. For some, such as Andrea Hall, who creates swimming art, this proved to be a successful strategy.

# Section 2:

## Who swims outdoors and why?

### *The proportion of women swimming outside is increasing*

In a reader survey we did in 2017, exactly half the people who responded were women, in our 2018 survey it was 55%. In our 2020 survey, 65% of respondents were female. We are not the only ones to have noticed the growing participation of women in outdoor swimming. One coach we spoke to said that on a recent introduction to outdoor swimming session, all of the participants bar one were women. Keri-anne Payne, who

now runs courses for people wanting to become outdoor swimming coaches, says about two thirds of the people she has qualified are women.

Norma MacLeod, from Immerse Hebrides, says: "The rise in recreational swimming is huge but it's mostly women. I sent out a general survey of my services and to determine the effects that sea swimming has had on their lives: 92% of the returns were from women."

We will also see later that there are differences in men's and women's attitudes to outdoor swimming and motivations for doing it.

The average age of swimmers

also appears to have increased since we last asked the question in 2017. Then, the average age of women was 47.7, while men were two years older at 49.6. This has now shifted to 49.8 for women and 53.2 for men. In fact, only 13% of our survey sample are below 40, while 20% are above 60.

However, while younger people didn't respond to our survey, other evidence suggests increasing numbers are taking part in outdoor swimming. Ricky McMin, General Manager at West Reservoir in Hackney, shared data showing that 12% of their swimmers are under

# How much did you enjoy outdoor swimming?

47%  
As much as expected

52%  
More than expected

1%  
Less than expected

30 and an additional 30% are between 31 and 40 years old. Laura Owen Sanderson, founder and director of We Swim Wild, runs the #Waterloggers project, which asks participants to take twice yearly samples from their local waterways to be tested for microplastics and other silent contaminants. A quick scroll through the list of people involved suggests many fall into younger age groups. A similar search on Instagram reveals that users of relevant hashtags such as #wildswimming and #outdoorswimming look younger than the average revealed by our survey – although this naturally reflects the demographic of Instagram too. At the very least, it reveals a passionate and committed, and potentially influential, following of outdoor swimmers in younger age groups.

## THE PANDEMIC WAS A KEY DRIVER IN STARTING PEOPLE ON THEIR OUTDOOR SWIMMING JOURNEYS

Roughly 1 in 5 of the people who completed our survey started outdoor swimming in 2020, and 23% of those said their local pool was closed and they were desperate to swim anywhere they could. A further 30% had been thinking about it for a while and circumstances in 2020 gave them the push they needed to give outdoor swimming

a go. Almost 20% said they started swimming outdoors to help their mental health and wellbeing – and it turns out this is an important theme for all swimmers. Other reasons people gave for starting outdoor swimming were “encouraged by a friend” (14%) and “just felt like giving it a go” (15%).

As Jane Hansom from Sponge PR, an agency specialising in sports and travel, put it, “2020 provided a brilliant sampling opportunity for outdoor swimming.” Our survey suggests many new swimmers will stick with it as very few had a negative experience and over half enjoyed it more than they expected.

Here, and as we shall see later in the report, there is a divergence between men’s and women’s experiences. Among women, 56% said they enjoyed outdoor swimming more than they expected and fewer than 1% said they enjoyed it less than they expected. The corresponding figures for men were 45% and 2%.

Interestingly, a mere 2% of new swimmers said they stopped swimming outside as soon as pools re-opened. This perhaps reflects a point made by swimmer Stephen Gould who said: “Outdoor swimming is a one-way journey”. Once people discover outdoor swimming, they stick with it. This is reinforced by another finding from our survey, that almost half of respondents to our survey have been swimming outdoors for five years or more.

Dave Welensky

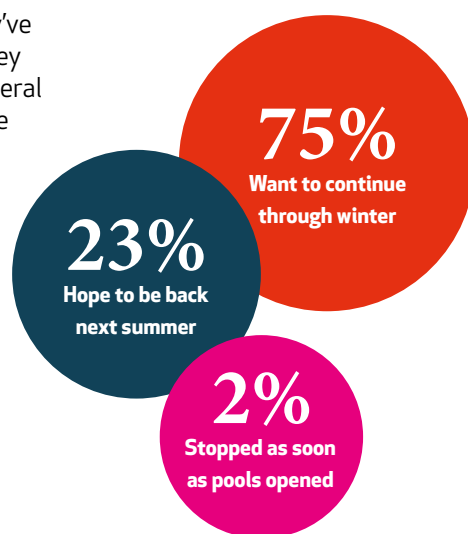


*Despite the growth in numbers, 25% of swimmers have reduced participation because of coronavirus*

While we've seen that the pandemic, pool closures and other measures have been an impetus towards increased outdoor swimming participation, one in four people say they have reduced the amount they swim outside in 2020. Further research would be needed to fully unpick the reasons behind this but factors include health worries (especially for those with underlying health conditions or living with vulnerable people), travel restrictions, advice from Swim England and other organisations during the first lockdown not to swim outdoors, and financial hardship. While celebrating the overall growth in outdoor swimming, we should keep in mind that this year has been extremely challenging for some people.

Meanwhile, 30% say their outdoor swimming was largely unaffected by coronavirus while a further 45% say they've increased how frequently they swim outside. Here, as in several other cases that we'll explore later, there are marked differences between men, where 37% have increased their outdoor swimming, and women, of whom 49% have upped the frequency of their outdoor swimming.

## If you started in 2020, how do you feel about outdoor swimming?



## WINTER SWIMMING, MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING ARE THE BIG THEMES FOR 2020

The two themes that jump out most strongly from both our survey and discussions with swimmers are the growing popularity of winter swimming and the increasing recognition of the importance of outdoor swimming to people's mental health and general feelings of wellbeing. The two are of course related with cold water immersion in particular being associated with boosting your mood. We are not the only ones to spot this. For example, Norma MacLeod from Immerse Hebrides told us: "The top scoring reason for continuing sea swimming was for overall general health and mental health reasons."

### WINTER SWIMMING

Let's look first at winter swimming and what people who started in 2020 think about it.

While we were aware that winter swimming had become more popular, this figure still surprised us. Three quarters of new outdoor swimmers say they want to continue through the winter, and we did this survey in November when UK waters were already chilly. Still, evidence from elsewhere supports this finding. From our discussions with venues, we know there is demand for winter swimming sessions and many venues extended their season in 2020, with several planning to stay open through the winter until those plans were thwarted by the



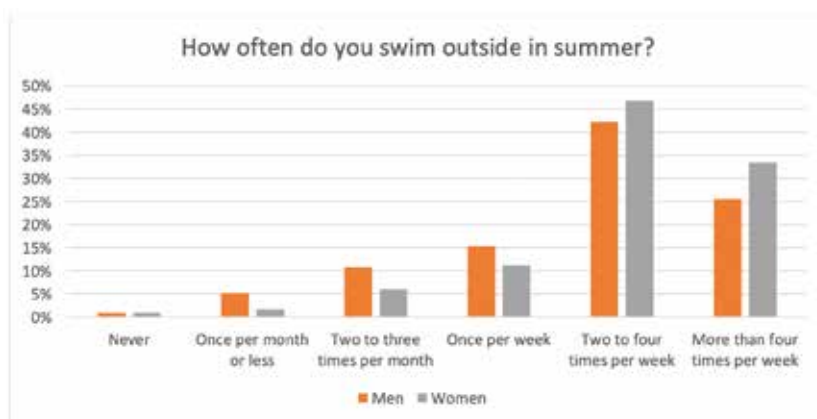
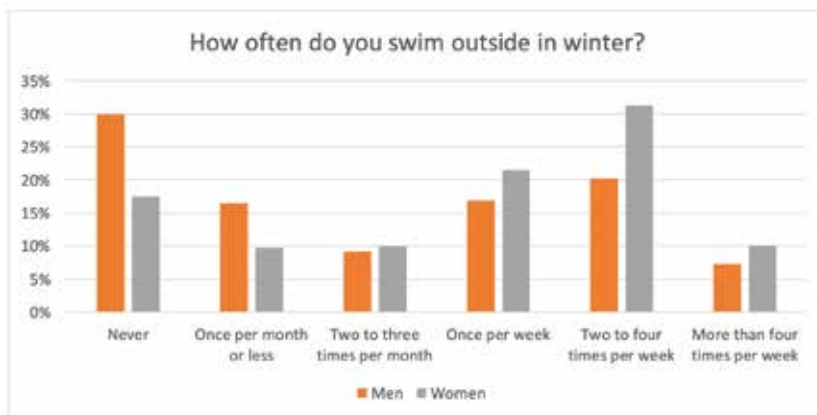
Peter Springett

second lockdown. At Queenford Lakes, in Oxfordshire, Katia Vastiau says that they reopened after the second lockdown and every session they put on, keeping to the same Covid-safe procedures as in the summer, has been fully booked. Ricky McMinn, General Manager of West Reservoir Sports Centre in Hackney, which opened for winter swimming for the first time in 2020, says they had on average more than 1400 swimmers a week, which is a better than he expected. Since re-opening after the second lockdown, they've registered around 6000 swims for December, a surprisingly small

drop from the 7000 they had in October. Paul Fowler, who runs swimming sessions at Activities Away in Lincolnshire, says "winter swimming is through the roof."

Helen Bowker-Steer, Commercial Manager, Royal Life Saving Society, told us: "There's been a massive upturn in people wanting to continue running safe outdoor swimming sessions past the end of summer this year." (A key point Helen wanted to highlight was the importance of keeping open water lifeguards acclimatised as the water cools. A lifeguard in cold water shock would be unable to perform a rescue.)

When we analysed our data more closely, we found that women are more attracted to winter swimming than men, with 79% planning to continue, while the percentage of men was 66%. Katia Vastiau says that winter swimming at Queenford is more popular among women, who make up around 70% of the total at a typical winter session compared to an even 50:50 split in the summer. At West Reservoir, around 75% of the winter swimmers are women. Juliet Hume, operations director at Henley Swim, says that 80% of the swimmers who signed up for their winter Brass Monkeys



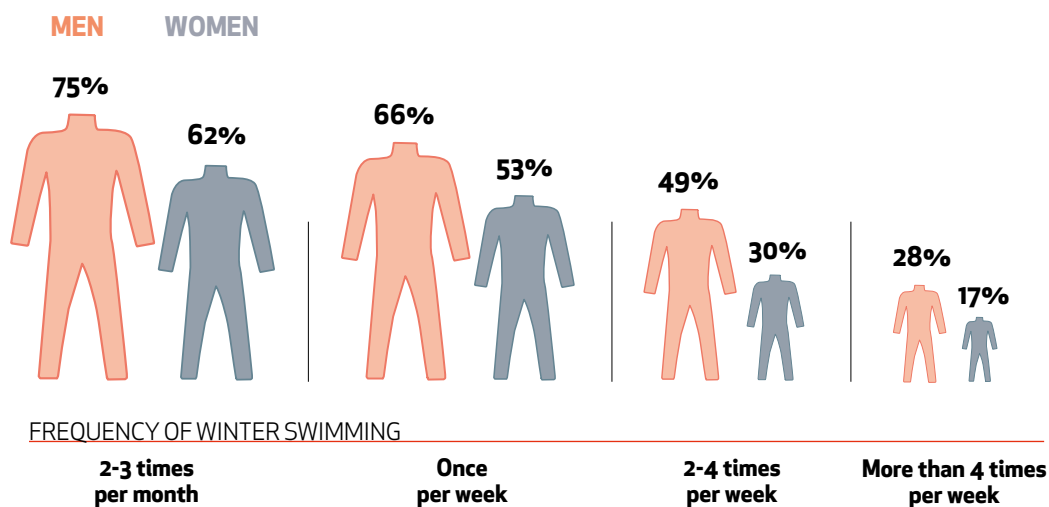
swim challenge are women.

It's worth spending a moment comparing the two charts to the left, showing frequency of outdoor swimming in winter and summer. Note that 63% of female swimmers say they swim outside once per week or more often in winter compared to just 44% of men. Almost one third of male outdoor swimmers never indulge in cold water swimming. Naturally, both men and women swim outside more in summer, but women swim more frequently than men both in winter and summer.

We will have more on kit choices later but as a small aside here, we found that 50% of swimmers say they use a wetsuit for winter swimming and that breaks down as 64% of men and 44% of women (the figures for summer are 50% and 31%). For both men and women, the more frequently they swim outside, the less likely they are to wear a wetsuit (see graphic, below left).

Finally, on the subject of winter swimming, we asked whether cold water was a barrier to swimming outside as much as people would like. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the discussion above, 45% of women and 36% of men say

## Do you wear a wetsuit when you swim outside in winter?





the cold is not a barrier, and fewer than 8% of both say it's a big worry.

We dived into the data more closely on this one and cross-referenced it with people's use of wetsuits in summer and winter. It turns out that the swimmers who worry about the cold most are those who wear wetsuits in summer. Of men who wear a wetsuit in the summer, only 23% say the cold is not a worry. In contrast, among men who don't wear wetsuits in

summer, 48% say the cold is not a worry. The figures are similar for women (28% and 52%).

A possible direction of causation here is that people who choose to wear a wetsuit do so because they are worried about the cold. It is possible however, that wearing a wetsuit causes you to be more concerned about the cold. Another factor could be that some people wear wetsuits for the speed and performance benefits, and those swimmers are less interested in recreational winter swimming. We'd need to do detailed interviews with swimmers to be sure.

When we talk to people who don't yet swim outdoors, they frequently tell us that the cold is a barrier. It turns out that once people start swimming, they find it less of an issue than they thought it would be.

## HEALTH AND WELLBEING

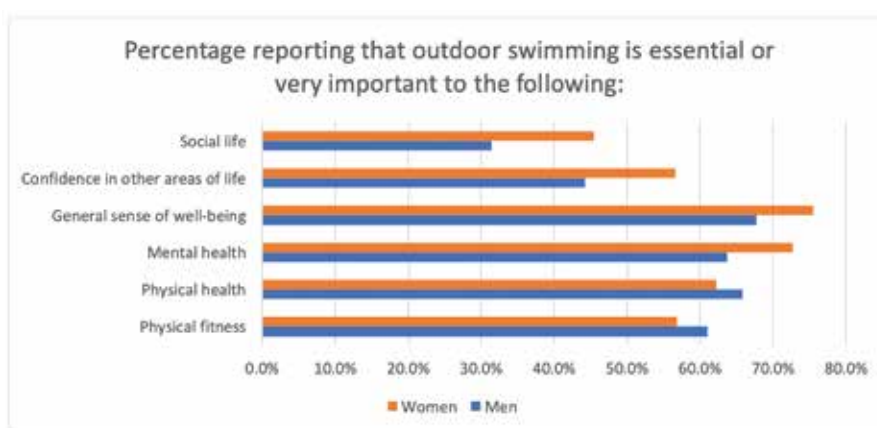
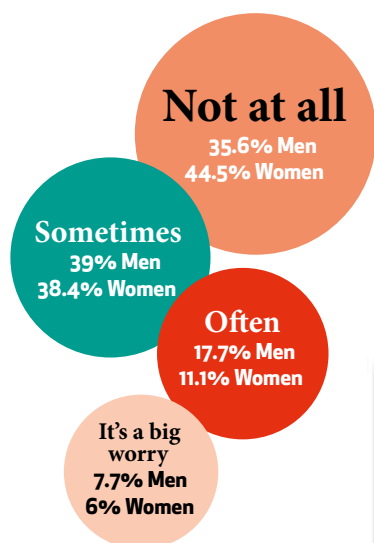
We asked our survey participants how important outdoor swimming was across

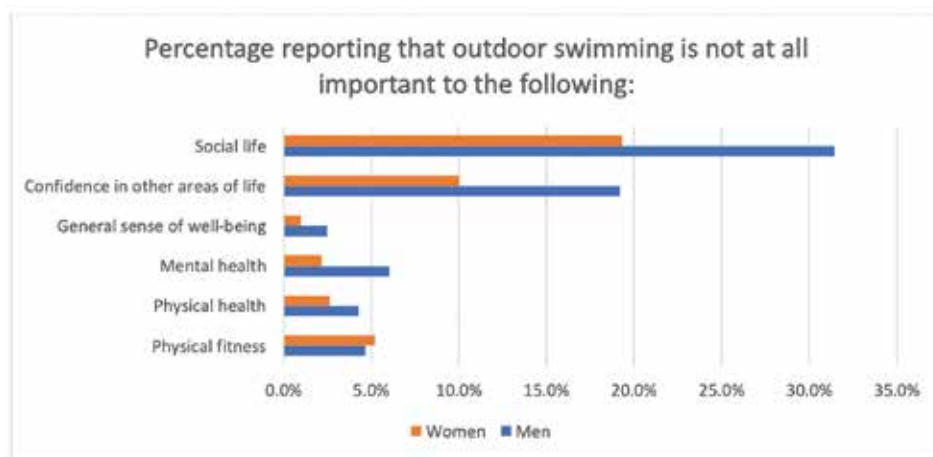
## Women are more attracted to winter swimming than men

six aspects of their lives: physical fitness, physical health, mental health, general sense of wellbeing, confidence in other areas of life and their social life. We gave the options to answer as "essential", "very important", "fairly important" and "not at all". The chart below shows us the level of importance outdoor swimming plays in people's lives.

While there are again gender differences, it is clear outdoor swimming plays a key role across all these areas of people's lives. It provides substantial support to their mental and physical health and more than 70% say outdoor swimming is essential or very important to their general sense of wellbeing.

## Does the cold stop you swimming outside as much as you would like to?





Although there is widespread support for the idea that outdoor swimming, and particularly swimming in cold water, provides mental and physical health benefits, the scientific literature is sparse. In a paper titled: “Cold water immersion: kill or cure?”, published in *Experimental Physiology* in August 2017, Professor Mike Tipton and his co-authors reviewed the existing evidence on both the dangers and potential benefits of cold water immersion (CWI). They found that belief in the benefits of cold water swimming date

back centuries. For example: “As early as 1750, published work recommended sea swimming for the treatment of a range of diseases, with winter considered the best time to engage in the activity.”

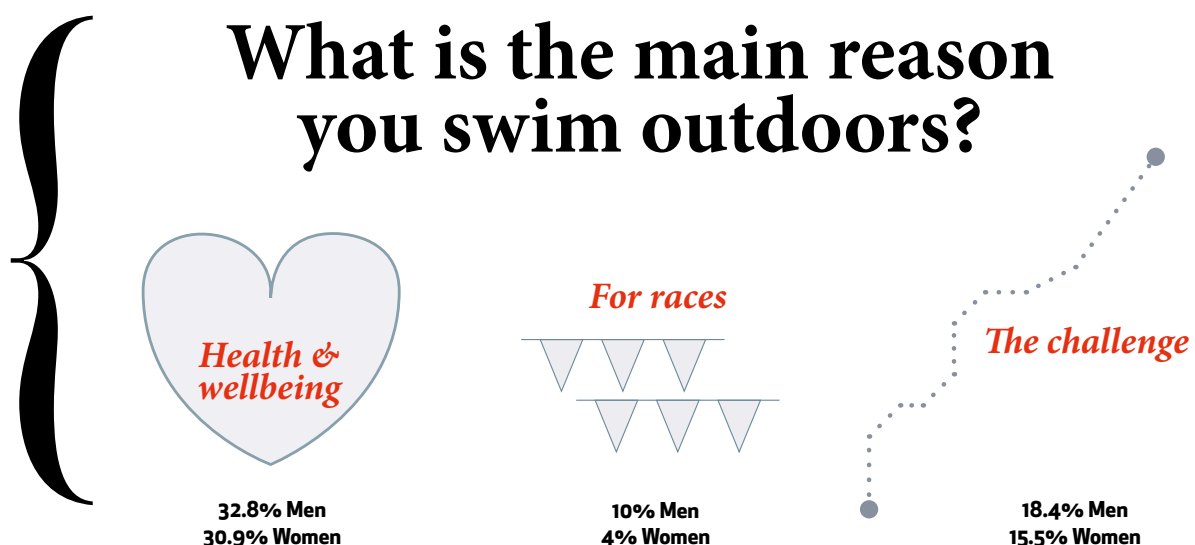
The paper further states: “These health benefits are believed to be a consequence of the physiological responses and biochemical milieu that occur from exposure to cold water. Physiological changes occur acutely during CWI, with repeated bouts of CWI adaptive responses develop that may

also impact upon indices of health.” They go on to describe a scientifically plausible mechanism by which CWI could reduce depressive disorders and reported one experiment on rats where swim training reduced “depression-like symptoms.”

As is often the case in science, the paper concludes that more research is needed and our current level of knowledge does not yet “unequivocally support the use of cold water adaption for therapeutic purposes.”

Separately, there is a published case study supporting

## What is the main reason you swim outdoors?



the fact that cold water swimming specifically can help with mental health (BMJ Case Reports, Open water swimming as a treatment for major depressive disorder, August 2018) and in 2020 a team from Cambridge University revealed that a group of frequent cold water swimmers had an elevated level of the protein RBM3, which they labelled as the “cold-shock protein.” This protein has been found to have protective effects against brain cell deaths linked to Alzheimer’s and prion diseases (progressive neurodegenerative disorders) in mice. It’s not known whether the same mechanism works in humans but the widespread reporting on these findings seem to be, in part, behind the recent growth in interest in outdoor swimming.

However, as Tipton and co. point out, it is possible that, rather than the cold, some other mechanism is responsible for the health benefits that appear to be linked to outdoor swimming. This could include the exercise itself and exposure to green spaces (open land that is primarily

vegetation) and blue spaces (bodies of water). We know that regular physical activity, such as swimming, can reduce the occurrence of chronic diseases by 20 to 40% (Swim England, Value of Swimming report).

Whatever the science says, it’s clear most swimmers perceive there are multiple health and wellbeing benefits to the activity as we can see if we examine the number of people from our survey reporting that outdoor swimming is “not at all important” to these various life factors (see opposite).

The remarkable thing is how small these percentages are. A mere 1% of women said that outdoor swimming was not at all important to their general sense of wellbeing. Nearly everyone who swims outside believes it is beneficial to their physical and mental health to some degree. The implication here is that places like lidos and sea pools, that allow people to swim outdoors safely but are only borderline commercially viable, are deserving of government funding given the massive health benefits they support.

*Nearly everyone who swims outside believes it is beneficial to their physical and mental health to some degree*

Many of the people we spoke to for this report commented on the health and wellbeing aspects. Colin Hill, for example, says in the groups he takes swimming, people always talk about the health and wellbeing benefits of outdoor swimming. “It’s become part of the Zeitgeist,” he says.

On a related subject, we asked people to tell us the main reason that they swam outside. Here, for once, men and women agreed that health and wellbeing topped the list.

**Connect with nature**



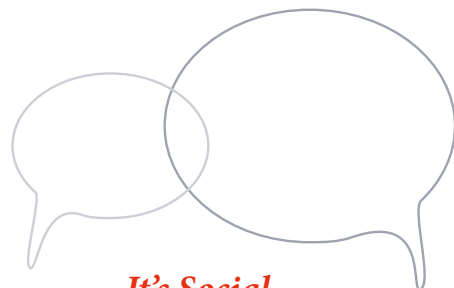
16.3% Men  
21.7% Women

**Fun**



18.3% Men  
18.8% Women

**It's Social**



4.3% Men  
9% Women






# Section 3:

## Outdoor swimmers and the environment





## *Becoming a swimmer pushes people to care more about the environment*

Not surprisingly, swimming in natural waters changes how people feel about them. More than 70% of people say that being an outdoor swimmer has made them more concerned about water pollution and only 1% have become less concerned.

The issue hit the mainstream press when the Guardian published an article on 1 July 2020 highlighting the large amount of untreated sewage that runs into England's rivers each year. It said: "Guardian data reveals 6,508 inland CSOs released untreated sewage into rivers 204,134 times in 2019. The spills discharged for 1.53m

hours across the nine English water companies."

A CSO is a Combined Sewer Overflow. In a combined sewer system, rainfall runoff mixes with domestic sewage. If the flow in these combined sewers is too high, then CSOs, carrying untreated sewage, can spill into the environment. Untreated sewage is only permitted to be dumped into rivers in exceptional circumstances – but, the Guardian and others argue, this many discharge incidents looks routine rather than exceptional.

The problems were earlier highlighted by Marinett, an independent non-profit campaigning organisation, which published a report in early 2020 called Sand, Sea and Sewage. In it, they argued that UK bathing waters are not as clean as the EU Bathing Water Directive's grading system suggests. It says UK sewerage infrastructure is woefully inadequate and that the country

performs poorly against other European countries. Moreover, it claims the Environment Agency engages in legal but manipulative sampling practices to paint a better picture than is really the case.

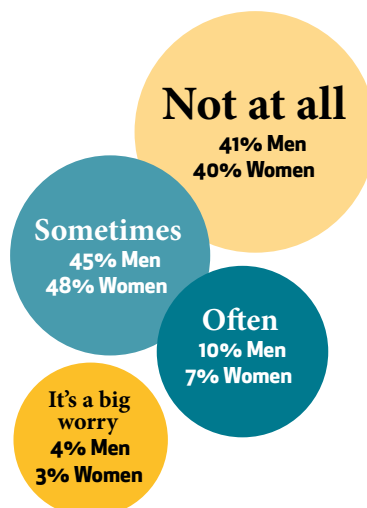
## NEW LEGISLATION

There are hopes that this issue will be tackled through new legislation in the form of the Environment Bill 2019-21 which includes a requirement for water companies to produce management plans that they will submit to the Secretary of State for the Environment. These plans will set out how the companies will manage and develop their drainage and sewerage systems. We shared their campaign to encourage swimmers to write to their MPs asking them to support an insertion into the bill that will require these plans to report on "the quality and impact of the discharges of the undertaker's drainage system and sewerage system."

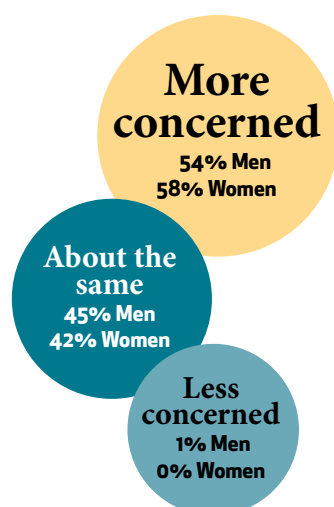
Given the above, it is perhaps surprising that as many as 40% of swimmers say they that concerns about pollution are not a barrier to swimming in any way – perhaps these are the lucky ones that have easy access to well managed swimming venues where the quality is regularly checked. On the other hand, 60% do worry to some degree about pollution. A question to consider is: Should we, as a society, tolerate polluted waterways at all?

Some swimmers in Ilkley,

## Does pollution and the risk of getting ill stop you swimming outside as much as you would like to?



## How does being an outdoor swimmer change how you feel about wildlife and nature conservation?



Yorkshire, decided they wouldn't. The Ilkley Clean River Group ran a successful campaign to improve the water quality in the River Wharfe, a popular swimming spot. It was announced in December 2020 that a stretch of the river will now be awarded bathing water status. This is the first time bathing water status has been awarded to a river in the UK and it means the Environment Agency will be required to test the water regularly and provide water quality information to the public. The decision paves the way for campaigners to have other inland swimming spots designated as bathing waters. In a press release, the group said: "We expect the designation to trigger a clean up of the sewage system, including investment in the sewage infrastructure."

## HIDDEN POLLUTION

It is not just the pollution that we can see or smell that's a problem. Laura Owen Sanderson created We Swim Wild to highlight issues with the environment. In particular, she is working her way through a list of adventure swims during which she collects water samples to test for micro-plastic pollution. As part of We Swim Wild, she launched #WaterLoggers to bring in other volunteers to collect water samples from their own local swimming spots. Her aim is to build a picture of the extent of micro-plastic pollution across the UK and then push the government to take action to do something about it. She





is funding the campaign from her own resources and says she receives about 50 to 60 enquiries each week from people wanting to become water loggers.

"You would think I was giving away gold dust," she says. "Everyone wants to protect and know about their own local swimming spots."

This is backed up by environmental science researchers Louisa Wood from CEFAS (Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science) and Ross Shackleton from the University of Lausanne who are working on a project to measure the value of the non-material benefits we obtain from interacting with nature through activities such as outdoor

swimming. Preliminary results for a survey they carried out this summer suggest that around 75% of people who responded said they picked up litter from their swimming sites. In addition, 20% were members of a general conservation organisation while 7% were part of a formal environmental group at their own swimming site.

Being an outdoor swimmer also increases people's concern for climate change, ethical sourcing of products, recycling and nature conservation, with significant numbers feeling more concerned about all of these, with barely any becoming less concerned.

See Appendix 3 for more of our survey results relating to environmental issues.

*More than 70% of people say that being an outdoor swimmer has made them more concerned about water pollution*

# Section 4:

## Plans on hold for 2021?

We know coronavirus crushed the travel and tourism industry in 2020. We wanted to know what it has done to swimmers' attitudes to travelling. Will people be cautious or is there a flood of pent-up demand waiting to be unleashed?

Before finding out how swimmers feel, we turned to Alistair Turner, author of the IBTM annual Global Trends Report, which looks in detail at the worldwide travel business industry. We were looking for some insight into wider sentiment towards travel in the wake of coronavirus and other industry factors. His view is that the data he's seen suggest people are mostly cautious about leaving their homes, areas and countries at the moment (even if they were allowed to). But that this confidence is intertwined with the rates of infection and spread of the coronavirus.

If and when restrictions are eased, there is a big question over the cost and availability of flights and accommodation. "What we do know is that a lot of the low budget airlines have gone into liquidation, and even some of the bigger airlines have had to rely on massive national government bailouts to ensure their longer-term futures. This

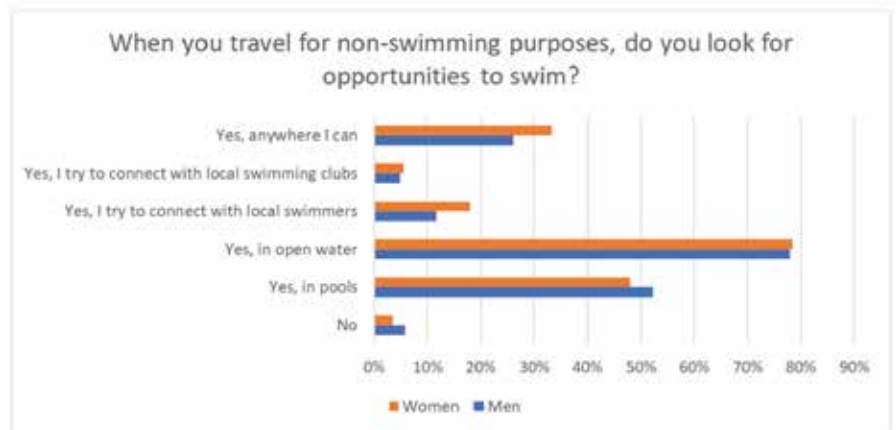
means the supply and demand equation is incredibly turbulent. It will take time to settle down as the market returns and we see a clearer picture of the choices – in terms of carrier, price and destination – for travellers," says Turner.

When people do travel, it seems they will be more likely to look for family escapes in rural areas rather than city breaks – which may be good for some outdoor swimming businesses at least.

This hesitancy was reflected among swimmers in our survey, with nearly 1 in 5 saying they can't see themselves travelling in the next 12 months. On the other hand, a similar number are keen to travel and are looking at options while about a third want to travel but aren't ready to commit.

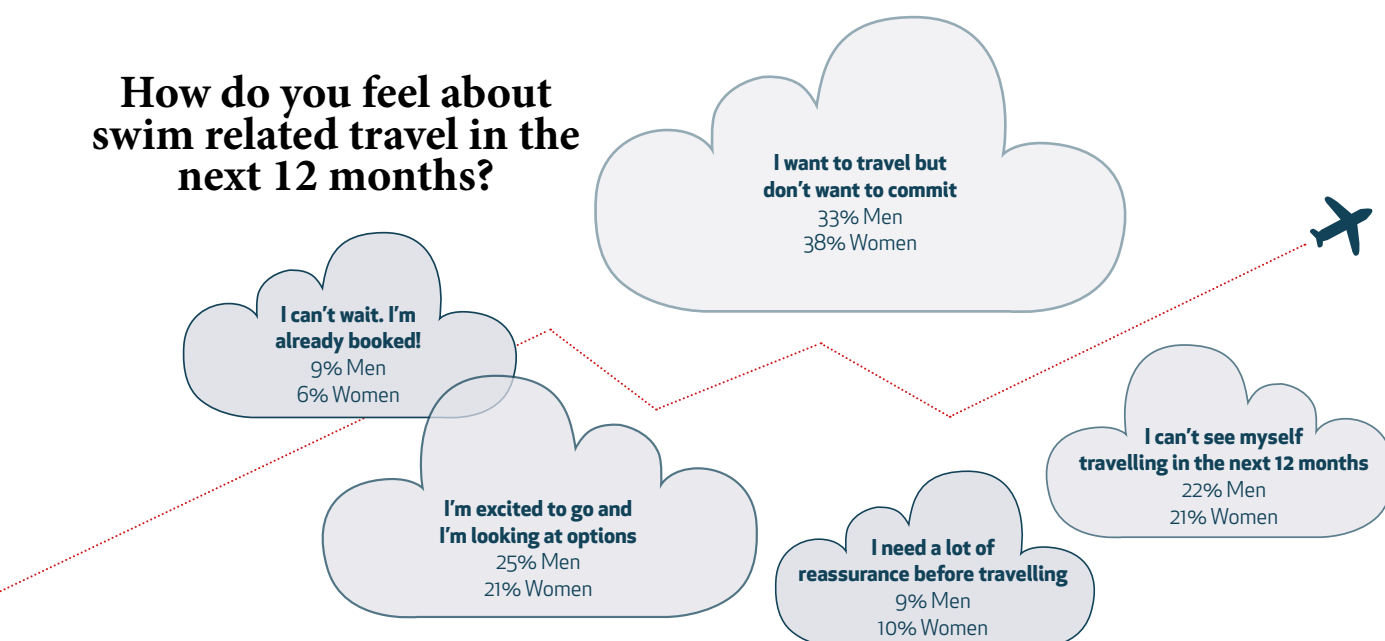
Putting aside the question of how people feel about travelling at the moment, we asked what would motivate them to take a swimming related trip both in their own country and in a different country. Exploring wild swimming spots, taking part in swimming challenges and meeting groups of other swimmers all scored highly. Taking part in indoor swimming events didn't excite. The full results are in Appendix 5.

We also asked our readers if they look for opportunities to swim when they travel for other purposes (see above). The results demonstrate how important swimming is to people who do it.





## How do you feel about swim related travel in the next 12 months?





# Section 5:

## Swimmers and gear



Pip Raud

### *Are swimmers taking 'skins swimming' too literally?*

Our survey questions on kit revealed something a little strange: only 90% of people said they wore a swimming costume in summer.

In the winter, it was only 88% of people (after adjusting for those who don't swim outside in winter). This raises the question: is 1 in 10 of our readers a skinny-dipper?

The truth is probably less exciting. Firstly, there was a big gender difference, with 97% of women saying they wear a costume and only 78% of men. The reason – for some people,

'costume' is associated with women's swimwear. Men wear trunks, jammers or budgie smugglers. We perhaps worded the question badly. The second explanation is that not everyone wears a costume (or a pair of trunks) under their wetsuit. Some wear nothing, others might wear a tri-suit. But it doesn't mean they are swimming naked.

Despite that, when we asked how much do you intend to spend on swimming kit in the next 12 months, one respondent did say: "Nothing. I'm a skinny dipper, so that's it for me."

Regarding goggles, those are worn by 93% of men and 83% of women in summer, and marginally fewer of each in winter. These numbers are

less surprising than those for swimming costumes once we appreciate that a significant part of the outdoor swimming community are more likely to engage in recreational wild swimming, and doing head-up breaststroke to enjoy the views, rather than head-down freestyle.

Wetsuit use showed the biggest difference in use between men and women, with 50% of men saying they use a wetsuit in summer compared to 31% of women. In the winter, these numbers are 64% and 44%. The only other item of kit with similar levels of discrepancies between genders was for changing robes (45% of men to 61% of women) perhaps because it's easier

for men to change under a towel than women.

Many venues made the use of tow floats or safety buoys compulsory in 2020 and that, presumably, has impacted how many people use them. Overall, 47% of swimmers say they use them in summer, with an additional 21% saying they use tow floats with bags. The numbers are 51% and 21% in winter.

Incidentally, Jon Harris at Swim Secure says from May, when outdoor swimming was allowed, through to the end of November, sales of tow floats were 122% up on the same period last year. In addition, he says that strong

sales continued long into autumn and winter, reflecting the growth in popularity of winter swimming.

We also asked swimmers which items of kit they intend to replace in the next 12 months. Top of the list was goggles, at 53%, closely followed by swimming costume (50%) – maybe some of those skinny dippers have decided it's time to cover up. One in five say they intend to replace their wetsuit (that's one in five of all swimmers in our survey, not 20% of those who have a wetsuit). A further 18% of people are keen on getting a changing robe and 19% want a tow float (either

## Proposed expenditure on kit over the next 12 months ranges from zero to £1500

with or without a bag). Proposed expenditure on kit over the next 12 months ranges from zero to £1500, with an average of £164. A number of people commented that their kit is relatively new so they are not yet planning to replace anything. Estimates for what people spent in 2020 range from zero to £3000, with an average of £200.

## What items of kit do you regularly use for outdoor swimming?

	In winter			In summer		
	All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women
Costume	88%	73%	95%	90%	78%	97%
Goggles	82%	89%	79%	86%	93%	83%
Swimming hat	82%	79%	83%	78%	74%	79%
Wetsuit	50%	64%	44%	37%	50%	31%
Safety buoy / tow float (with bag)	51%	49%	52%	47%	45%	47%
Safety buoy / tow float (without bag)	20%	19%	20%	21%	20%	22%
Towel	87%	86%	88%	89%	89%	90%
Sports tracker	42%	45%	41%	43%	46%	42%
Changing robe	73%	64%	77%	56%	45%	61%
Changing mat	35%	30%	37%	21%	18%	22%
Neoprene hat	38%	46%	34%	9%	10%	8%
Neoprene gloves	47%	40%	51%	8%	6%	9%
Neoprene socks or booties	56%	45%	60%	13%	10%	15%
Flip flops	29%	32%	28%	54%	49%	57%
Warm clothes	89%	79%	93%	44%	39%	46%
Woolly hat	82%	72%	87%	26%	24%	27%
Flask for hot drink	82%	67%	88%	40%	34%	44%
Earplugs	35%	34%	35%	28%	28%	28%
I don't swim outside in winter	26%	42%	20%			

(Percentages adjusted for people who don't swim outside in winter)

# Section 6:

## Black and ethnic minorities in outdoor swimming

### *Removing barriers to participation*

We didn't collect ethnic information in our survey. If we had, it would surely show that Black and ethnic minority swimmers are massively under-represented in outdoor swimming. Sport England figures show that 95% of Black adults and 80% of Black children in the UK do not swim. In a year where the Black Lives Matter movement rocked our collective conscience, and one in which people from BAME groups had between 10 and 50% higher risk of death from Covid than white people in the UK, we wanted to at least look at some of the

barriers and consider how they might start to be dismantled.

We spoke to Ed Accura, Head of Corporate Partnerships at the Black Swimming Association and producer of the film "Blacks Can't Swim". It's his belief that Black youth culture could bring the end to the generation-long issue of a disproportionate amount of Black people not swimming. He is about to release a follow up to Blacks Can't Swim (Blacks Can't Swim The Sequel) which combines acting with real interview footage of various young adults from the Black and ethnic minority communities voicing their thoughts on the subject. "This opens up some difficult conversations on their fears, anxieties and personal stories

### *More Black communities are engaging in swimming*

around swimming" says Ed.

He adds: "I think it's safe to say that swimming as a life-skill alone may never be a reason for there to be an uptake in swimming within the Black community."

Ed aims to bring about change by focusing on 16 to 25 year-olds and suggests that learning how to swim with a career in focus may just be what it takes to change the narrative. However, before that can happen there are a number of behaviours that will have to be addressed.

In a survey carried out by the BSA, 25% of 16 to 25 year-olds said they didn't swim while the majority of those who could swim quoted rarely or never as their frequency of swimming.

The most common reasons given for not swimming in no particular order included that it is not interesting, not relatable to Black culture, parents don't swim, friends don't swim, not as inviting as other sports, fear of drowning, hair issues and



Adobe Stock





conscious-of-body issues.

What interested Ed the most was the answer to the question: 'With training and a job option, would you consider a career in aquatics such as a coach or lifeguard?' 17.5% answered yes and a further 28% responded maybe.

"This supports my theory that making swimming welcoming, relatable, and financially viable to Black youth culture could be what changes the narrative," says Ed. "During the filming of The Sequel, there was a swimming pool scene that was met with some resistance. The scene was to be filmed in a swimming pool to the reluctance of most of the

cast, even those that said they could swim. We turned the issue around by creating a relatable atmosphere, got everyone in the mood, and into the pool where we filmed the scenes. I ended up having to request extra pool time, not because we were running behind schedule but because the cast was having so much fun in the water they didn't want to get out."

## BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

Regarding the hair issues, one person's problem is another's potential business opportunity. Spying a gap in the market,

Michael Chapman and Toks Ahmed started Soul Cap in 2017, a swimming cap business for people with thick, curly and voluminous hair. In three years, they have shipped more than 30,000 caps. Speaking to Outdoor Swimmer magazine in December 2020, the founders said: "Our market is growing, and more people and more Black communities are engaging in swimming." While the brand was initially targeted at pool swimmers, Soul Cap has now partnered with Olympic marathon swimming hopeful Alice Dearing and are planning the launch of a bright neon-coloured range of open water swim hats in 2021.

# Section 7:

## What happens next for outdoor swimming?



Basil Arden

### *Are there down-sides to growth?*

During the UK's first lockdown, with indoor entertainments cancelled, national parks and beauty spots received unusually high numbers of visitors. When good weather arrived, this extended to swimming spots that might previously have just been known to a handful of locals – and resulted in social media complaints and mainstream media about overcrowding. Unfortunately, additional visitors resulted in traffic jams, littering and sometimes damage

to fragile ecosystems.

Overcrowding may also result in complaints from local residents or even direct action. We heard of residents near a popular swimming spot in Henley grumbling about being awoken by early morning swimmers and BBC Cumbria reported how two swimmers (naturally) felt scared and threatened after their tyres were slashed while they were swimming in Windermere.

To some extent, this problem may be self-correcting. As we saw, for the most part being a swimmer increases your concern for the environment.

Swimmers, hopefully, will see when overcrowding is becoming an issue and seek different spots or return at another time. Given the extent of coastline in the UK, plus our large number of lakes and rivers, there really should be enough space for everyone to swim. However, not all of our waters are accessible to swimmers – but that's a topic for a different investigation.

### **WILL SWIMMERS STAY SAFE?**

Given the growth in outdoor swimming, and especially winter

swimming, a number of the people we interviewed raised concerns about safety. Will more people in the water inevitably result in more people getting into difficulties? Several people we interviewed said they are worried that someone will die this winter from hypothermia after staying in the water too long.

Provisional statistics from the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) reveal a “dramatic increase in the number of water users needing to be helped by local lifeboat crews compared to 2019.” While this appears to confirm people’s worries about swimmers, the RNLI figures cover people who got into difficulty while participating in a wide range of water-based activities such as bodyboarding, using inflatables, kayaking, kitesurfing, paddleboarding, rowing and surfing. However, the biggest increase was for rescues involving the use of inflatables.

Mike Alexander from WeSwimRun doesn’t think we need to worry too much about swimmers, even those with little experience of the activity. “Although you see people asking what might be considered ‘dumb’ questions on social media, swimmers (even newbies) tend to make good decisions about swimming safely. Outdoor swimmers aren’t the people who usually get into trouble.”

This doesn’t mean the issue of water safety can be ignored. “We will always have people getting into trouble because of tomfoolery, and that’s an issue that needs to be addressed, but if swimmers are on an outdoor

swimming Facebook Group asking questions, they are in the right place.”

Paul Fowler, from 100% Swimming, is also optimistic. “The people coming to swimming now are mindful and intelligent. They are asking questions and taking advice. They aren’t just jumping in.”

We can also see from our website traffic that swimmers want to inform themselves about safe swimming. In the six months from 1 May to 31 October 2020, more than 20,000 people visited the safety information page on our website and spent an average of four and half minutes reading the content.

Another promising sign that people are taking outdoor swimming safety seriously can be seen in the sales of


*The people coming to swimming now are mindful and intelligent. They are asking questions and taking advice. They aren’t just jumping in*



Outdoor Swimmer







safety equipment such as tow floats, as we saw in our discussion on kit above. This, in part, has been driven by increasing numbers of venues encouraging or requiring their swimmers to use them, but it's also evident in wild swimming locations.

## WHAT WILL 2021 OFFER?

Among the people and businesses we interviewed for this report there is widespread optimism that outdoor swimming will remain popular in 2021. However, it's less clear whether the growth we've seen in 2020 will continue. Given its visibility and widespread media coverage, the act of plunging into lakes and rivers has become normalised. Some of the fears people had about outdoor swimming proved to be unfounded. We didn't all succumb to heart attacks on first contact with cold water, we didn't all fall ill because of pollution and we didn't all get dragged down by hidden undercurrents. We know from this survey that most people who tried outdoor swimming had a positive experience. These factors all favour continued growth next year. In addition, we know that many people are introduced to outdoor swimming through friends, so the more people who already swim, the more people are likely to come along.

However, we shouldn't discount the possibility that the popularity of outdoor swimming in 2020 was in part due to limited options for alternatives. If and when those other options come back, we may find people drifting back to entertainments and activities they engaged in before the pandemic. In addition, swimmers will want something to do with their new-found hobby.

Recreational swimming is all very well but there will be plenty of people who have taken up outdoor swimming, as well as people who have been doing so for years, who would welcome the opportunity for swimming events, challenges and holiday adventures to retain their interest. While we hope that the vaccine will make all of these available in 2021, it might take longer than we hope. It's also possible that venues may have to continue operating with restricted capacities. If there are no events or swimming holidays for people to work towards, and if venues have to restrict numbers, that could be a constraint on further growth.

A third scenario is that hesitancy in taking up the vaccine means it takes longer to get the pandemic under control than we hope. It is also likely many economies around the world will be in recession. Pay squeezes, job cuts and tax hikes seem inevitable. Government support schemes

*Given its visibility and widespread media coverage, the act of plunging into lakes and rivers has become normalised*

will be phased out. This will leave less discretionary spending for hobbies, even relatively low-cost ones such as swimming. Even worse, economic pressures could lead to political or even civil unrest, with new disruptions to travel and sporting activities.

From a commercial perspective, around a quarter of those we spoke to were pessimistic, saying the pandemic will continue to be a drag on business. Some refined that to say they expect a difficult first quarter to 2021, with some improvement later in the year. About another quarter expect at best to recover the ground they lost in 2020. However, that still leaves almost half who say they think business will take off in 2021.

Overall, we are quietly optimistic about the medium to long-term future of outdoor swimming but remain aware that everything could change, as we found out this year.

Ali Grindley Hyde

# Section 8:

## Closing remarks

It's clear to us that outdoor swimming grew significantly in 2020 but we have to question whether that growth is a transient fashion linked to the coronavirus pandemic or a long-term trend. What our research shows is that outdoor swimmers perceive a wide range of benefits from their activity and, although the science is still underdeveloped, the indicators are that these benefits are real. The pandemic has shown us many things, good and bad, but perhaps one of the better things to come out of it is the growing recognition of the importance of looking after our physical and mental health. This bodes well for the future of outdoor swimming. It's a widely accessible activity, with low entry costs and huge potential benefits. Our vote is for long-term growth rather than fleeting fashion.

While outdoor swimming has been an activity for millennia, the industry supporting it is still young. There is an expectation of future growth and development and further opportunities. We expect more businesses to enter the space, providing increasing choice for swimmers but also more competition for the existing brands.

We have highlighted some of the potential challenges to growth in this report and

swimmers will need to become increasingly aware of how their activities could put excessive pressure on fragile natural environments. On the other hand, outdoor swimming has already shown itself to be a fantastic vehicle for campaigning and highlighting broader issues such as climate change and pollution, and there is every likelihood that this will continue.

Putting this report together has been a fantastic learning experience for the team at Outdoor Swimmer. While we anticipated many of the findings, it's reassuring to see them backed up by strong data and supported by a wide range of people involved in outdoor swimming.

If you have any questions about the findings or our conclusions, or have suggestions for research topics for next year's Trends in Outdoor Swimming report, please get in touch.

Finally, a big thank you to everyone who completed our surveys or took the time to share their views and experiences for this report. For a list of contributors, please see appendix 8.





# APPENDICES

## 40 **Appendix 1: Frequency of participation in outdoor swimming related activities**

- How often do you swim at an supervised venue?
- How often do you go wild swimming?
- How often do you take part in open water races?
- How often do you take part in long distance challenges (>5km)

## 42 **Appendix 2: Where do you normally swim when there are no pandemic restrictions in place?**

- 1) Indoor pool 2) Outdoor pool 3) Lake, reservoir or dock (unsupervised)
- 4) Lake, reservoir or dock (supervised venue) 5) River 6) Sea or estuary

## 44 **Appendix 3: How has being an outdoor swimmer changed how you feel about things?**

- How has being an outdoor swimmer changed how you feel about climate change?
- How has being an outdoor swimmer affected how you feel about ethical sourcing of products?
- How does being an outdoor swimmer affect how you feel about recycling and re-use of materials?

## 45 **Appendix 4: Barriers to outdoor swimming**

- Do worries about tides and currents stop you swimming as much as you would like to?
- Does not having people to swim with stop you swimming outside as much as you would like to?
- Does lack of access to suitable swimming spots stop you swimming outside as much as you would like to?
- Does fear of sharks stop you swimming outside as much as you would like to?
- Does a fear of jellyfish stop you swimming outside as much as you would like to?
- Does the quality of local commercial venues stop you swimming outside as much as you would like to?
- Does a lack of supervised swimming sessions stop you swimming outside as much as you would like to?

## 47 **Appendix 5: Motivations to travel**

### **PART 1: What would motivate you to take a swimming related trip in your own country?**

- 1) To explore a wild swimming location
- 2) To take part in an outdoor swimming event or race
- 3) To take part in an indoor swimming event or race
- 4) For a short or weekend swimming break (paid for)
- 5) For a swimming holiday (5 days or more)
- 6) To meet and swim with a group of outdoor swimmers

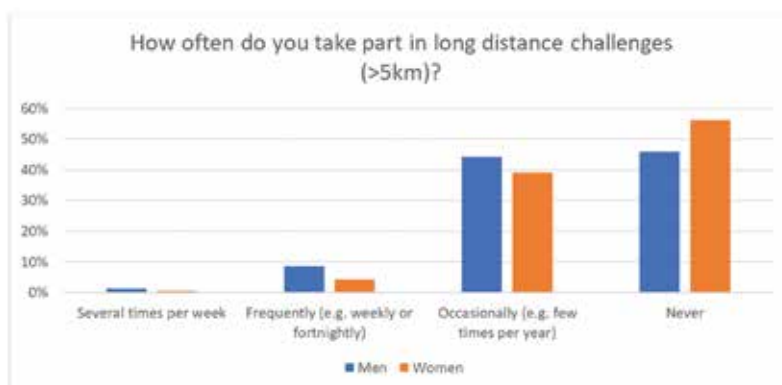
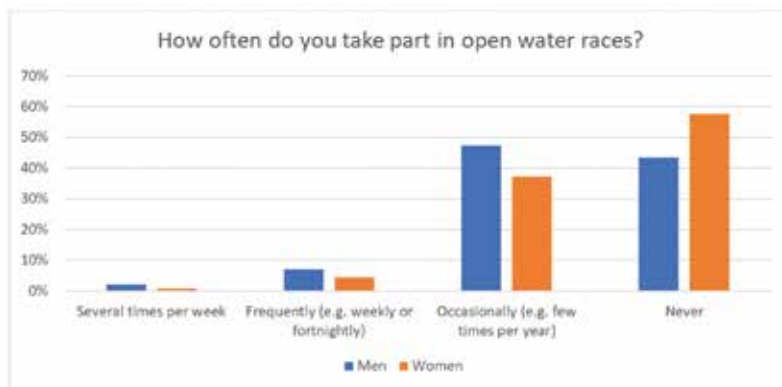
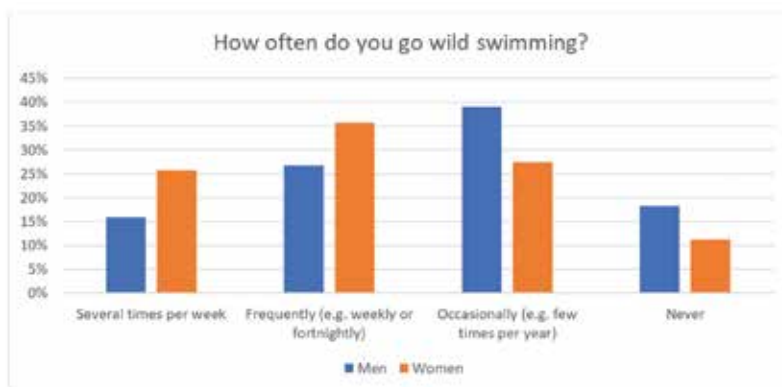
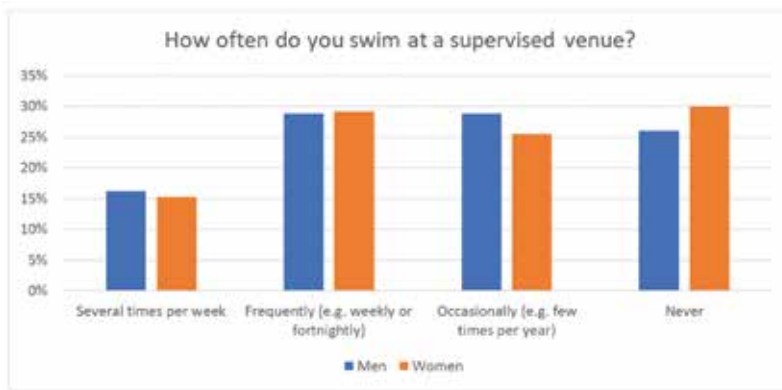
### **PART 2: What would motivate you to take a swimming related trip in another country?**

- 1) To explore a wild swimming location
- 2) To take part in an outdoor swimming event or race
- 3) To take part in an indoor swimming event or race
- 4) For a short or weekend swimming break (paid for)
- 5) For a swimming holiday (5 days or more)
- 6) To meet and swim with a group of outdoor swimmers

## 50 **Appendix 6: Summary demographic information**

## Appendix 1

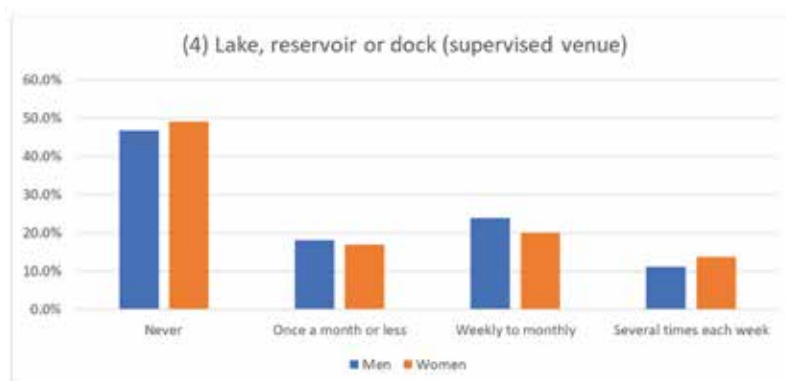
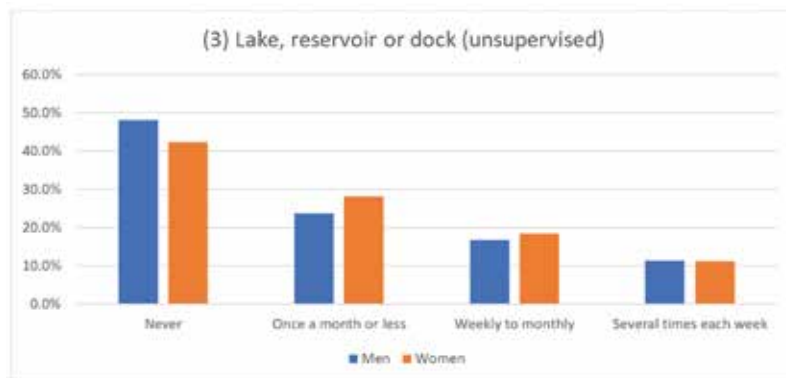
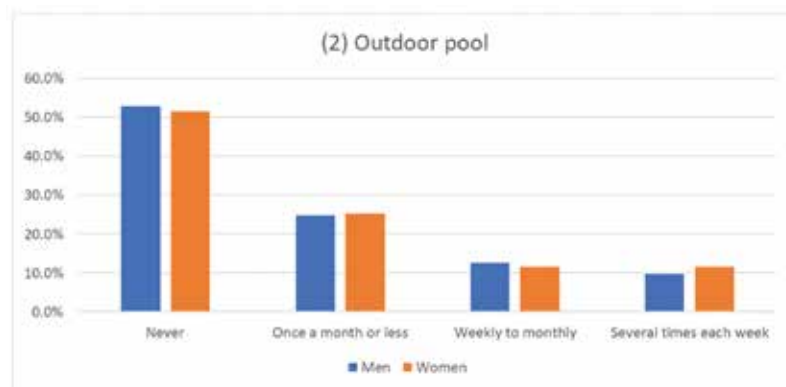
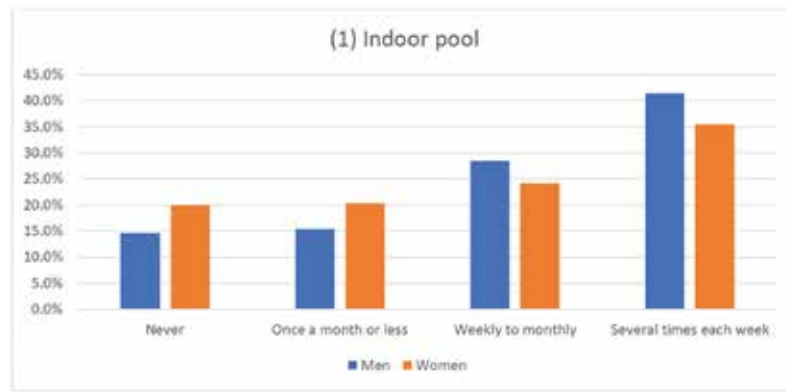
*Frequency of participation in outdoor swimming related activities*

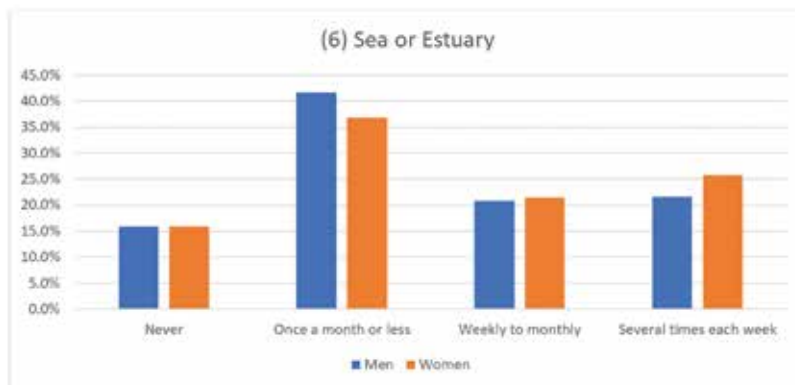
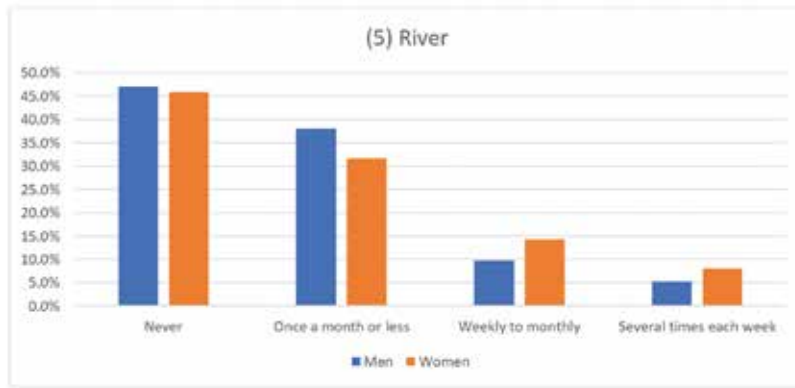




## Appendix 2

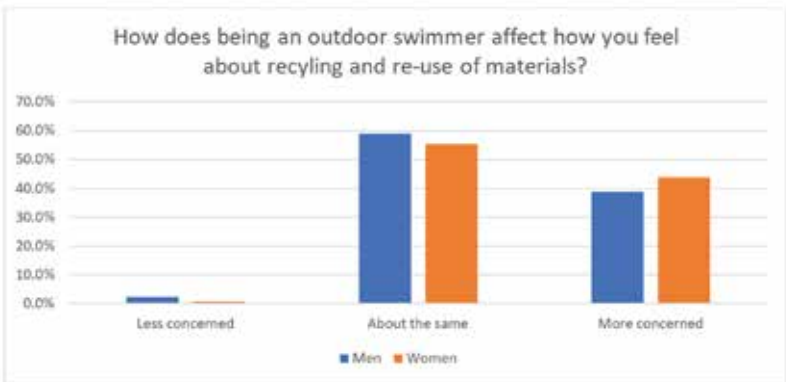
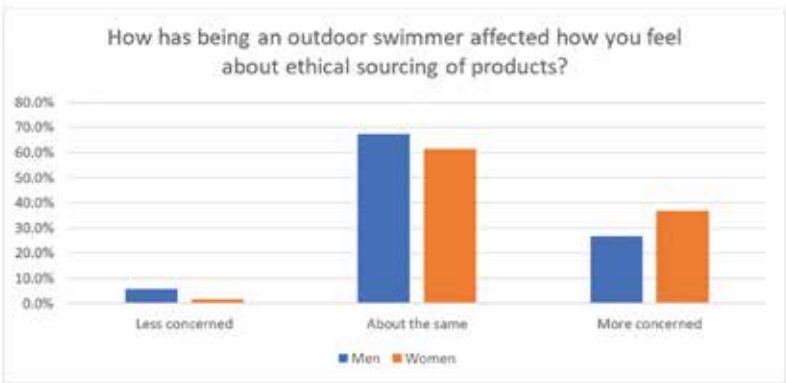
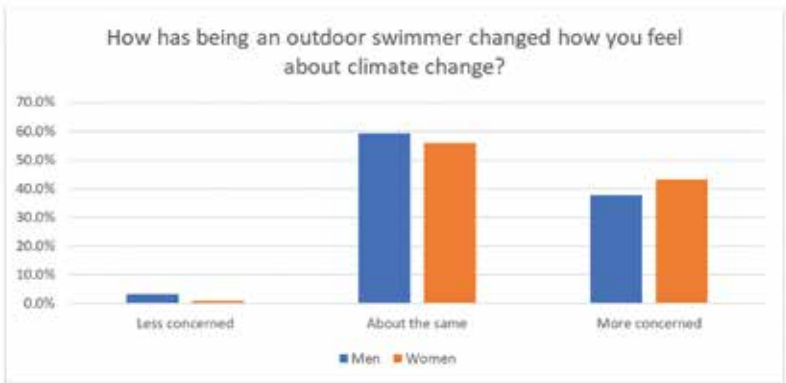
*Where do you normally swim when there are no pandemic restrictions in place?*





# Appendix 3

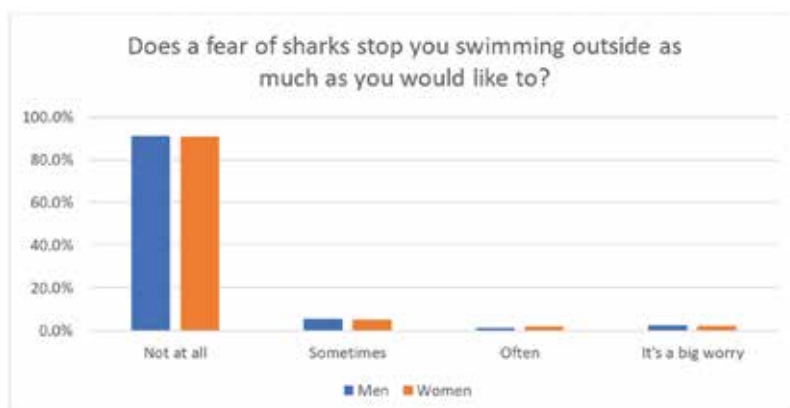
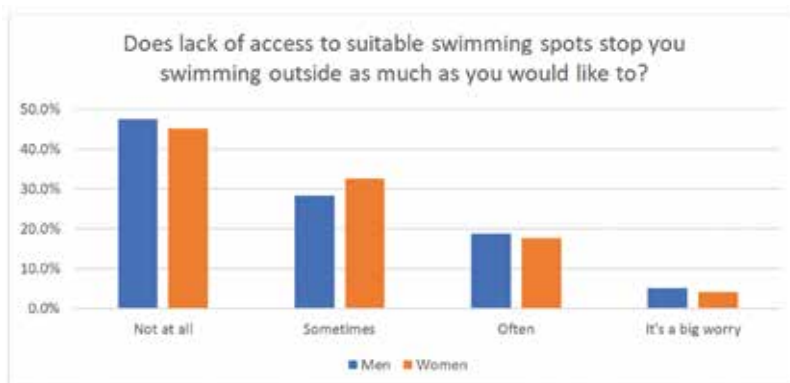
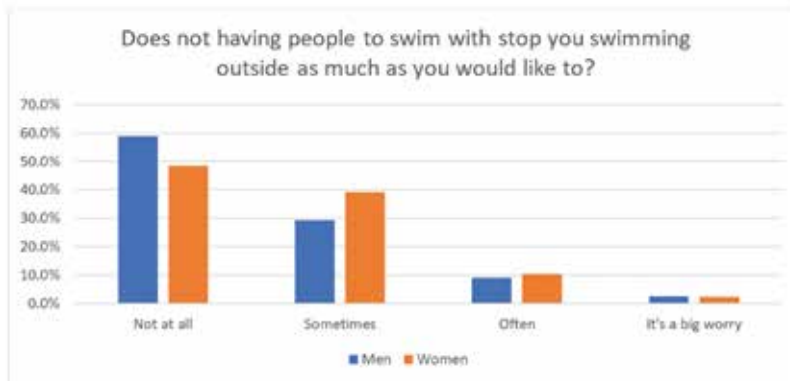
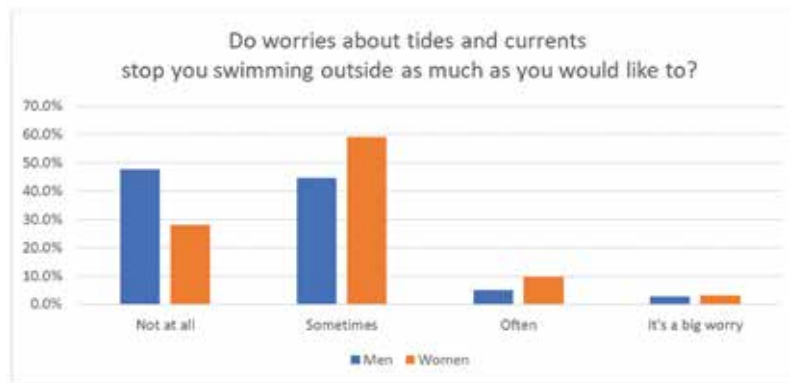
*How has being an outdoor swimmer changed how you feel about things?*



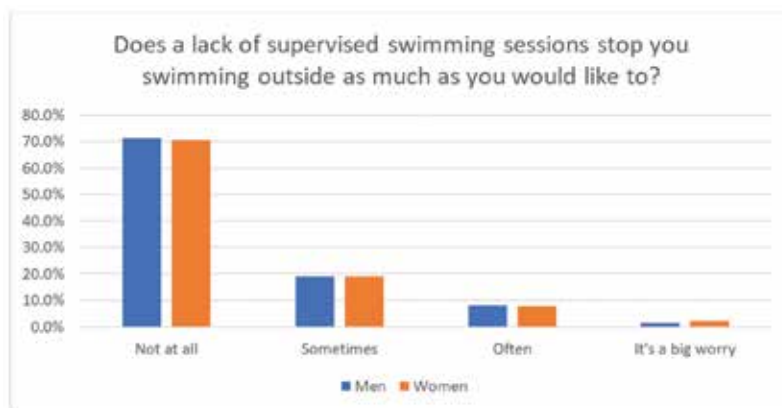
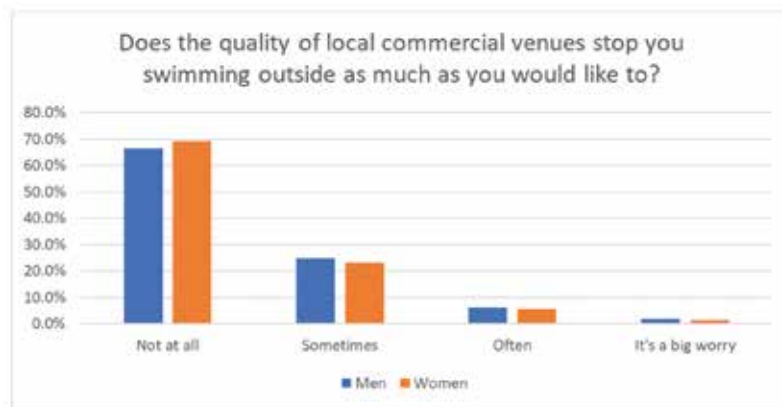
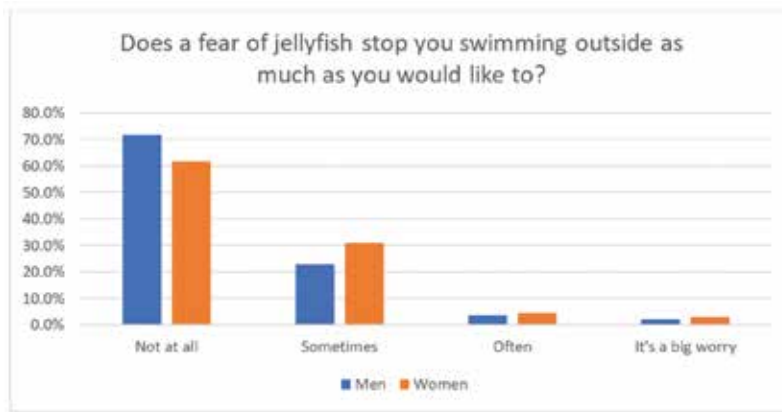


## Appendix 4

### Barriers to outdoor swimming



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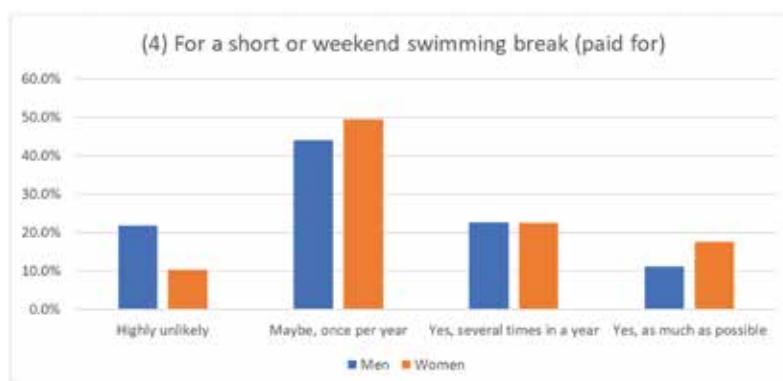
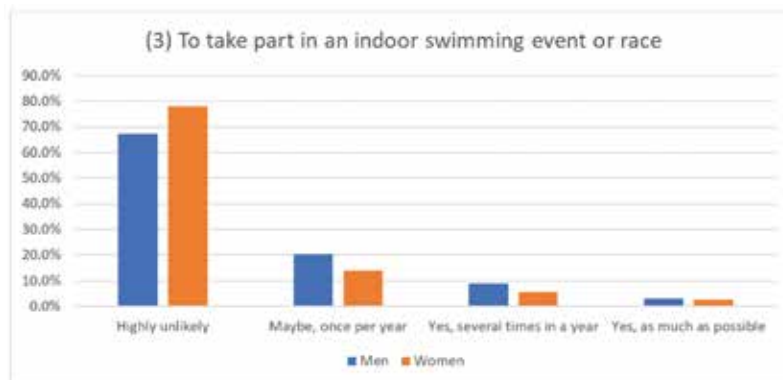
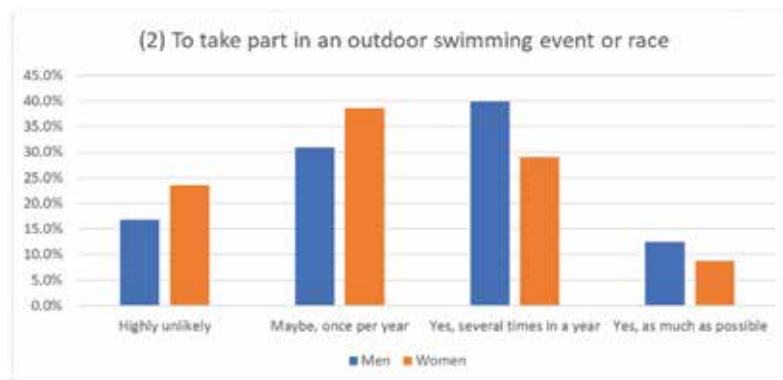
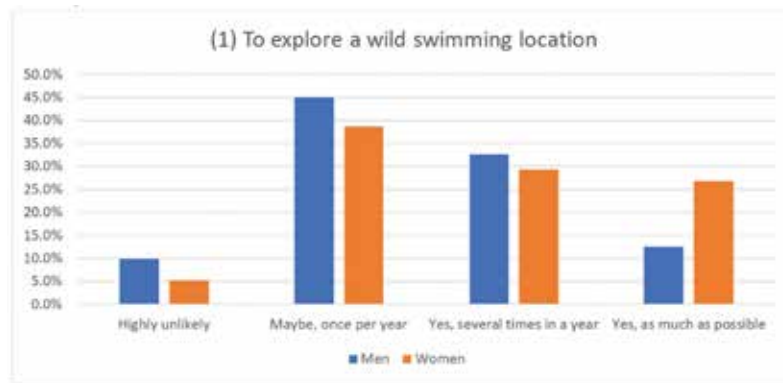


## Appendix 5

### Motivations to travel

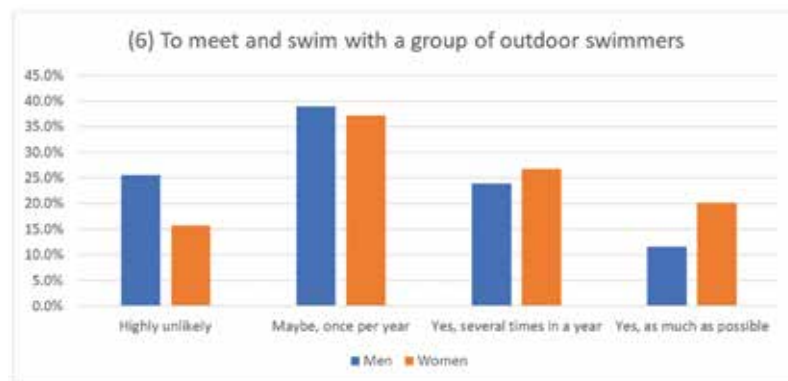
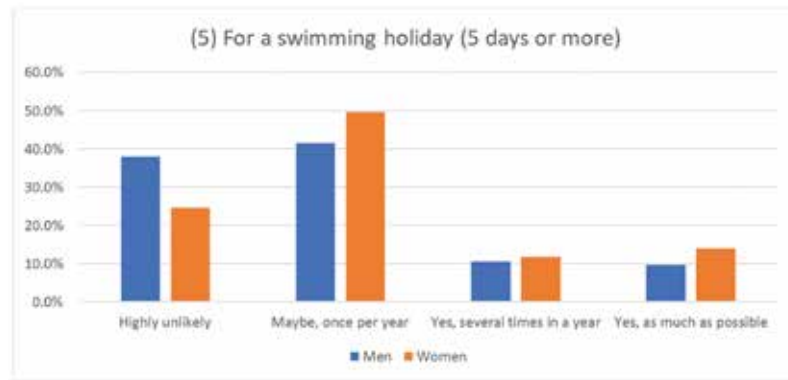
#### PART 1:

What would motivate you to take a swimming related trip in your own country?

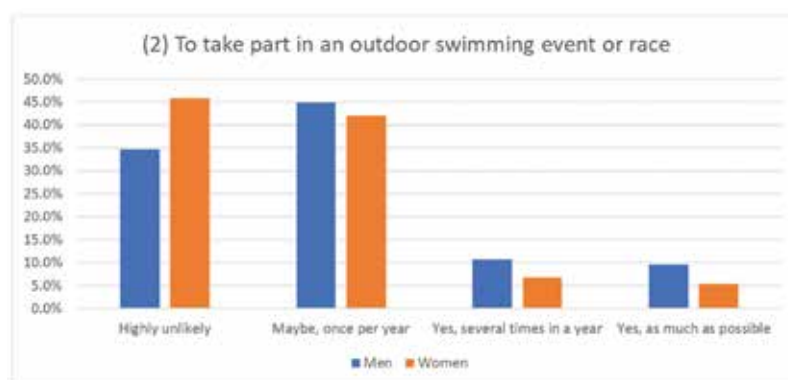
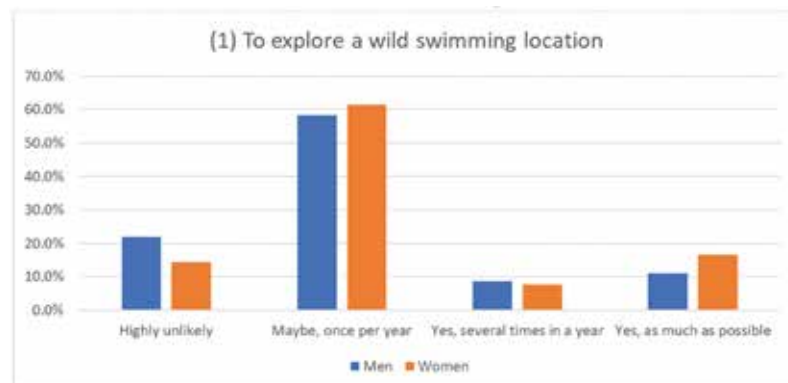


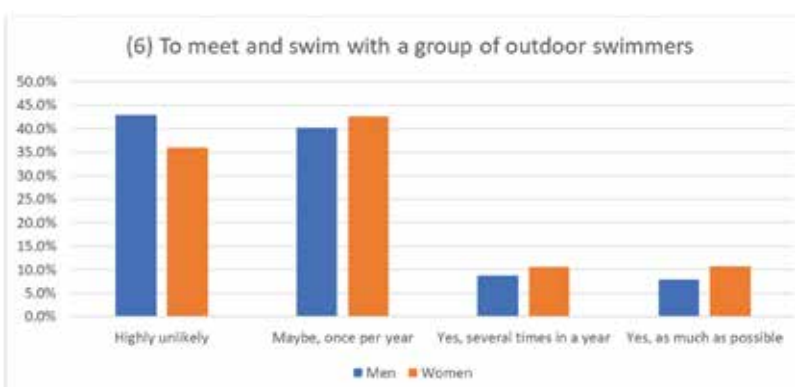
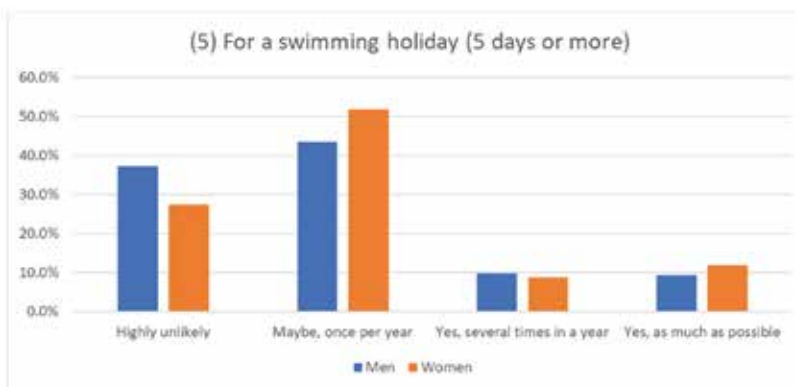
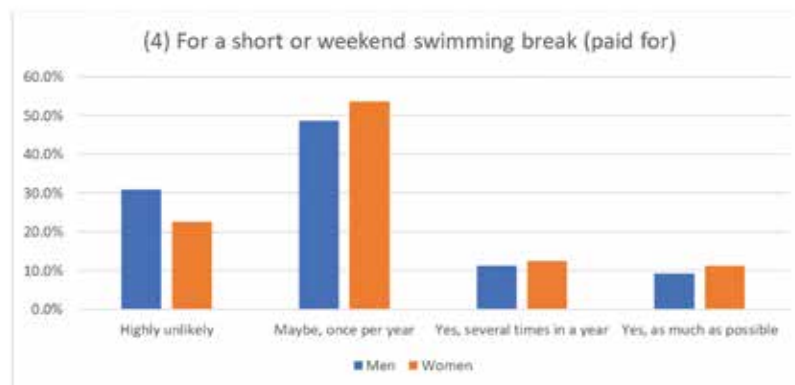
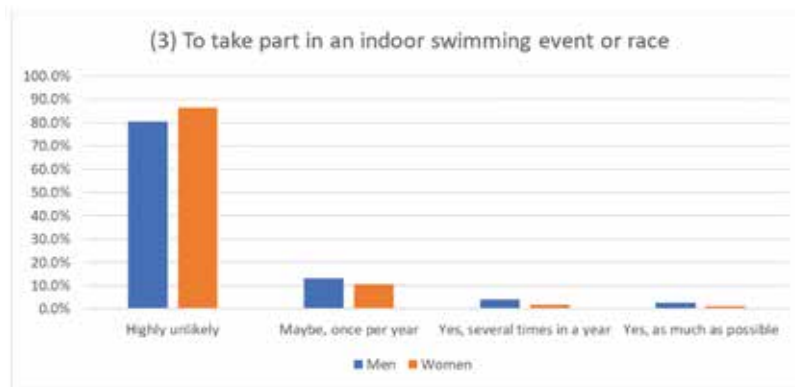


## Appendix 5 (cont.)



**PART 2:**  
What would  
motivate  
you to take  
a swimming  
related trip  
in another  
country?





## Appendix 6

### Summary demographic information

Age	All	Male	Female	Location	
Prefer not to say	1%	1%	0%	England	69.3%
Under 20	1%	1%	0%	Republic of Ireland	8.9%
20 to 29	3%	2%	4%	North America	6.5%
30 to 39	10%	7%	12%	Scotland	6.4%
40 to 49	29%	24%	31%	Europe (excluding RoI)	3.7%
50 to 59	36%	39%	35%	Wales	2.9%
60 to 69	17%	21%	15%	Northern Ireland	1.0%
Over 70	4%	6%	3%	Australia or New Zealand	0.8%
				Africa	0.3%
				Asia	0.3%
Average age: 51 (men 53.2, women 49.8)					

## Acknowledgements

*Many thanks to the following who provided information for this research project.*

<b>Alice Todd</b> – co-founder, SwimQuest	<b>Emma Pusill</b> – swimmer and author of The Lido Guide	<b>Mark Hammersley</b> – Zoggs
<b>Andrea Hall</b> – swimmer and swim artist	<b>Fergal Somerville</b> – organiser of Eastern Bay Invitational Ice Mile	<b>Mark Johnston</b> – swim coach and former committee member of US Masters Swimming Association
<b>Andrew Ogierman</b> – Aspire	<b>Gaby Hay</b> – Swim England	<b>Mike Alexander</b> – Aberdovey Swim, Tal Y Llyn Swim
<b>Angus Greenwood</b> – Yonda	<b>Gary Roethenbaugh</b> – TIA	<b>Norma and Neil MacCleod</b> – Immerse Hebrides
<b>Bill Richmond</b> – TriFarm (open water venue)	<b>Helen Bowker</b> – RLSS / Sh2out	<b>Ollie Griffiths</b> – marketing manager, Great Swim Series
<b>Brian Adcock</b> – owner, Castle Triathlon	<b>Ian Clarke</b> – marketing manager, Orca	<b>Paul Fowler</b> – swimming coach, venue operator, event manager
<b>Bryn Dymott</b> – long-term outdoor swimmer (The Pied Piper of Winter Swimming)	<b>Jai Evans</b> – swim coach / Stanton Lakes Open Water (venue)	<b>Rosie Cook</b> – founder and CEO, Deakin & Blue
<b>Cath Mather</b> – sports psychology researcher (report into banter)	<b>James Ewart</b> – Two Beat Kick (swim coaching)	<b>Sam Chapman</b> – marketing manager, Zone 3
<b>Chris Malpass</b> – swimmer, event organiser, BLDSA committee member	<b>Jane Hansom</b> – founder, Sponge PR	<b>Simon Murie</b> – founder, SwimTrek
<b>Claire Huggins</b> – RLSS	<b>Jane McCormick</b> – swimming coach, venue operator	<b>Stacey and Max</b> – WayOutside
<b>Clare Lewis</b> – Sureswim Kernow	<b>Jason Tait</b> – swimming coach	<b>Stephen Gould</b> – swimmer
<b>Colin Campbell</b> – Scottish Swimmer (swim coaching)	<b>Jenny Vincent</b> – British Triathlon	
<b>Colin Hill</b> – swimming coach, FINA rep, founder of Great Swim	<b>Jon Harris</b> – Swim Secure	
<b>Compton Verney</b> (outdoor swimming venue)	<b>Juliet Hume</b> – Director of operations, Henley Swim	
<b>Dan Abel</b> – swimming coach, swim trip organiser (NZ)	<b>Katia Vastiau</b> – Queenford Lakes safety team	
<b>Dan Bullock</b> – founder, SwimforTri	<b>Kenton Ward</b> – open water swimming organiser at Hever Castle (started this year)	
<b>Dave Candler</b> – CEO, STA	<b>Keri Hutchinson</b> – swim group organiser, swimmer, swimming parent	
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<b>Dawn and Gill</b> – Tri N Swim Well (swim coaching)	<b>Kerry Watkiss</b> – Insight team, Swim England	
<b>Dean Jackson</b> – Huub	<b>Kornel Pintara</b> – watersports manager, Decathlon	
<b>Dianne Raine</b> – Action Watersports	<b>Laura Owen-Sanderson</b> – founder and director, We Swim Wild	
<b>Ed Accura</b> – BSA	<b>Leon Fryer</b> – swimming coach, venue operator, event organiser	
<b>Elaine Howley</b> – marathon swimmer, writer (US)		

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