

Outdoor Swimming Research Forum 2026 - Programme

Venue: Windermere Jetty Museum (Wolfson Learning Centre). **Date:** 9-10th September 2026

Day 1: Wednesday 9th September 2026 (09:00 – 16:00)

Guests Check-in (09:00)

Introduction (09:20-09:30): Taylor Butler-Eldridge

Early Career Research (9th September 2026, 09:30 – 11:00): 8 Flash Talks.

8-minute talks. No Q&A. Chaired by Ronan Foley

1. **Safia Bailey (Cardiff University): Hope Afloat: Encounters and Care in a Polluted Thames**

This talk draws on a year swimming with people in the River Thames, from its freshwater source to its tidal estuary. Through these swims, my PhD questions what the Thames means to its swimmers and, in turn, what they mean to it. As Rebecca Olive captures, swimming is “a set of relations to ourselves and to what else is there.” I centre these relations to critically reflect on swimmers' capacity to care for the Thames. Outdoor swimming continues to grow in popularity, bringing connection and joy to millions; in 2026, three new bathing water sites were designated along the Thames alone. Yet the river faces numerous threats, from flows of forever chemicals and sewage effluent to agricultural runoff. Against this context, I explore how swimmers encounter the more-than-human worlds of the Thames, sharing stories that range from swimmers' delight in spotting kingfishers to their navigation of sewage-contaminated water. I argue that through these encounters, swimmers develop an attentiveness to "what else is there", fostering emplaced care for the river. While such care is imperfect and partial, it nevertheless offers a basis for re-imagining our relations to rivers, keeping hope afloat.

2. **Abi Lafbery: Immersive Knowledges: Swimming with Creatures, Climate, and Contamination**

My work has explored how outdoor swimmers develop feelings of connections to their bodies, sense of selves and the outdoor swimming assemblage, how swimmers conceptualise and experience wildness, and the ways in which outdoor swimmers might develop knowledges and environmentalisms as part of their practice, and how it this is complicated by commodification. This talk would introduce my concept of 'Immersive Knowledges', which argues that swimmers' knowledges of flora and fauna, water and weather and climate represent an alternative way of knowing a swimmers' surroundings than in everyday life. I will then focus on issues of climate change and water quality, discussing how swimmers are both immersed and implicated in these issues. Overall, I argue that outdoor swimmers are entangled (Evers, 2019; Neimanis, 2024) and materially linked (Alaimo, 2016), with all the constituents of the outdoor swimming assemblage, sharing in the vulnerability (Olive, 2023) of ecological crisis. Therefore, the outdoor swimming inspires thinking differently with (Bates & Moles, 2023), and through (Neimanis, 2024) watery relations.

3. **Lucy Barnard (University of Sheffield): The Facilitating Act Framework: A new insight into cultural ecosystem services through investigating women, wild swimming and community**

The Facilitating Act Framework challenges linear ways of thinking about cultural ecosystem services by using relational, participant-led processes to investigate how values emerge through engaging with nature. The FAF has three pillars: participant autonomy, open-ended parameters, and process over

outcome. A case study of women and wild swimming in Scotland, illustrates how each of the pillars can be applied in practice. Using a mixed methods approach including Q methodology, I identified four groupings, the 'competitive edge', 'connection-to-nature seekers', 'sharers and carers', and 'enablers', characterising what was important to women when they participated in the 'act' of wild swimming. We revealed the importance of community and the social dynamics through which values emerged and connected people to nature, bridging relational thinking to policy. Linking policy makers and individuals by utilising informal networks around acts in nature, can hold regulatory bodies accountable for bathing quality or to share local safety knowledge. Understanding values emerging through interactions with nature, better embeds relational thinking in the context of cultural ecosystem services.

4. Pamela Barrett (University College Dublin): The 'Social' in Social Sea Swimming

This thesis aims to offer insights into the lived experience of women who social sea swim in Ireland. The core aim is to understand the role of social in social sea swimming from a sociocultural aspect regarding their interaction with each other and the environment, from an embodied sensorial perspective. The theoretical framework that underpins this thesis is communities of belonging. The methods to be used to gather data include a semi-structured interview, employing the emerging 'go-along' method of swim-along interviews. The swim-along method enables the research to gain rich qualitative data with the added depth of recording participants' lived experiences. The aim is to document the voices of the women who social sea swim before, during, and after their swim experience. A particular gap identified is how the social aspect of swimming is under-researched and how the concept of pleasure is also overlooked. Therefore, my research aims to contribute to geographical and sociological swim research by introducing and exploring the possibility of my conceptual idea of 'social sea swimming' within women's lived experience, and to examine the role of pleasure in the practice.

5. Nicola Lewis-Dixon (Manchester Metropolitan University): Hydrofeminism, Wild Swimming, and Thin Places after Cancer and Hysterectomy

My practice-based, autoethnographic PhD research draws on hydrofeminist theory developed by Astrida Neimanis. I argue that wild swimming operates as a methodology for producing alternative knowledge of post-hysterectomy experience that exceeds medical narratives of recovery and bodily control. Through immersion in cold water, the body is encountered as unstable and unruly, allowing experiences of hysterectomy, cervical cancer, and trauma to be reconfigured through practice rather than clinical representation. Using wild swimming as both a method and a site, my research employs alternative photographic techniques, alongside foraged plant matter and water samples, to explore how knowledge is generated through sensory engagement with water. Within this framework, "thin places" are understood as liminal environments generated through hydrofeminist encounters, in which bodily and ecological boundaries become fluid and unstable. In doing so, the project positions wild swimming as a site of feminist inquiry where understanding emerges through material, sensory, and environmental entanglement.

6. Sadie Rockliffe (University of Brighton): Swimming Beyond Sight: Risk, Freedom and Belonging in Outdoor Swimming

Outdoor swimming research has increasingly explored the embodied, social, and environmental dimensions of swimming, while recent scholarship has called for greater attention to diverse swimming bodies and experiences. Responding to these conversations, this presentation draws on doctoral research developed alongside visually impaired swimmers across the UK. Through shared swims, walks, conversations, and ongoing engagement with swimming communities, the project explored experiences of lakes, rivers, coastal waters, and organised swimming events. Swimmer's spoke of challenge, competition, freedom, belonging, environmental immersion, and identity continuity. Water often

enabled a shift away from the vigilance required in everyday navigation and towards the pleasures, rhythms, and possibilities of swimming itself. At the same time, participation emerged through relationships with guides, communities, organisers, and dynamic environments, highlighting the collective conditions that make swimming possible. By centring visually impaired swimmers' experiences, this presentation offers new insights into risk, freedom, participation, and community in outdoor swimming.

7. Lena Ferriday (Newcastle University): Murky Waters: Intimate Histories of Sensing, Acting and Belonging on Dartmoor, 1951-present

Can I swim here? This is a question frequently asked by outdoor swimmers in the UK draws the desire to swim into relationship with the legal opacity around public access to inland water, issues of pollution which responds to approximations of 'safe' levels of water-quality, and implicit questions about who has the social capital to make claims to 'belonging' in these spaces. This paper offers a cultural history lens to redress these complexities, arguing that they are connected by who makes claims to knowledge about the environment, and by the bodies and experiences of the swimmers themselves. Using 'intimacy' as a framing, I explore how the practice of outdoor swimming in south-west England since the mid-twentieth century. This history of swimming sits at the intersection of many of different types of intimacy: the vulnerability of undressed bodies, the raw interactions between skin and water, the supportive communities that form between swimmers, the passionate love for the act of immersion. I suggest that it offers opportunities to consider the interactions between private affairs and public legalities and opens new questions about bodies and blue environments in modern Britain.

8. Reid Allen (City St George's, University of London): Wild in the docks: the unauthorised swimmers reclaiming London's blue spaces

Described as "Britain's new craze", 'wild' swimming has become a buzz-word in recent years and risen to a mainstream pastime. The 'wild' swimming community, however, is overwhelmingly white, female, middle-class and middle-aged (Bates & Moles 2022). In London, many bodies are excluded and locked out of the commodified 'wild' swimming spaces due to exorbitant paywalls and pre-booking systems. As the summers get hotter and anthropogenic climate change accelerates, Londoners are turning to trespass or breaking the rules. There has yet been critical consideration of unauthorised outdoor swimming in urban contexts. This paper focuses on my ongoing ethnographic research at Shadwell Basin, an ex-dock basin in East London. Despite a byelaw banning swimming, on a summer's day the basin is a lively, convivial, multi-use and multicultural space. It is exactly where those locked out of sanctioned outdoor swimming sites are reclaiming space and getting in the water. This paper explores the motivations and embodied experiences of those that swim unauthorised at Shadwell Basin, and what these can tell us about the access to and experience of water leisure and public spaces in post-modern London.

Break (11:00 – 11:20)

9. Deborah Aydon (Future Lidos): Lidos as a vital access point for outdoor swimming

The UK's lido building boom of the early C20th provided an opportunity for people of all ages and backgrounds to enjoy healthy outdoor activity in a safe and social environment. Policy and funding shifts from the 1960s to the 1990s meant that two thirds of our lidos were lost. But we are now seeing a resurgence in public outdoor pools - and this is driven by community demand. Research by Active Insight has found that the top three barriers to outdoor swimming are 1) it's too cold, 2) concerns about pollution, and 3) lack of swimming confidence. Swim England reports that 27% of children leave primary school unable to swim 25m, and this is 35% in lower-income households. 14% of adults in white communities cannot swim 25m, and this rises to 49% in ethnically diverse communities. Lidos offer an affordable, accessible, inclusive and - most importantly - joyous opportunity to discover and enjoy outdoor swimming. They are vital third spaces for social connection, and can act as a springboard to open water. Many are now community-run, with highly responsive models that cater to a wide range of access needs. They have a powerful role to play in widening access to outdoor swimming.

10. Haynes Collins (University of Leeds): Who Gets to Swim? The Politics of Access, Inclusion and Shared Swimming Space

The growing popularity of outdoor swimming has generated significant awareness of the need for clean and accessible swimming spaces. While this momentum remains insufficient to ensure widespread access to swim spaces for all, further challenges extend beyond resource constraints and instead concern the politics of shared space and the interactions between swimmers. In this presentation, I draw on interview data from swimmers at the Kenwood Ladies Pond on Hampstead Heath in London where the pond's inclusive admission policy has recently been contested. The data reveals a diverse range of experiences and stances on the admission policy which contrast sharply with its portrayal in media coverage. While the research does not seek to offer prescriptive recommendations, it demonstrates that the challenge of providing accessible swimming spaces for everyone is not solely environmental or resource based. Rather, it also requires the maintenance of a swimming culture that prioritises the comfort, inclusion and experiences of all users. Achieving this depends on nuanced discussions and delicate cooperation although such efforts may ultimately be superseded by top-down legislation.

11. Sue Wilbraham (University of Cumbria): Disability inclusion and OWS: "I'm not part of the audience, I'm part of everything that's going on!"

Our study sought to explore experiences of open water swimming (OWS) for people with disabilities, including factors that impacted participation, environments that enhanced wellbeing, and conditions which were salutogenic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 swimmers who self-identified as having disabilities, impairments, cognitive differences, or chronic health conditions. Four key themes (and nine subthemes) were identified using reflective thematic analysis: 1. Sensory experience and shifting attention (Somatic experience; Multisensory blue spaces); 2. Outwitting impairments and escaping confines (Creativity and outmanoeuvring, Barriers and accessibility, Liberation); 3. Awareness of nature (Environmental quality and nature connection, Caution and vigilance); and 4. Understanding and expression of self (Self-concept, Autonomy and independence). Across the themes, swimmers emphasised the importance of OWS in managing their health and wellbeing, so access and environmental degradation were matters of significant concern. Swimmers described the effort and energy needed to identify and reach swim sites, and manage kit or healthcare equipment.

12. Lewis Winks (Right to Roam): Access, rights and the politics of river ownership in England and Wales

Outdoor swimming has grown rapidly in popularity, yet access to rivers and water bodies in England and Wales remains shaped by a complex and often poorly understood landscape of property rights and land ownership. This presentation explores how such structures influence opportunities for outdoor swimming, drawing on research into riparian ownership along the River Dart in Devon alongside wider debates about river and reservoir access. Using examples from the Dart and beyond, the presentation examines how access is negotiated between river users and landowners, and what role legal rights play in shaping experiences of belonging, participation and stewardship. It explores how legal and cultural approaches to access influence people's relationships with water, and considers what lessons might be drawn from alternative access frameworks in the UK and beyond. In doing so, it asks how opportunities for outdoor swimming can be expanded in ways that support both wider participation and responsible care for freshwater environments.

Lunch (13:00 – 14:00) Includes 3 films, informal networking, and a group photo outside.

- Bodies of Water (re) collection - Nicola Lewis Dixon
- Amy Ennion Swim Loch Ness - Red Equipment
- The Thames Swim Against Sewage - Surfers Against Sewage

People, Practice, and Policy (9th September 2026, 14:00 – 15:40): 4 talks.

12-minute talks. 2-3 audience questions per speaker. Chaired by Heather Massey.

13. Emma Boocock (Northumbria University): Navigating Grief: An autoethnographic tale of open water swimming and grief

The benefits of open water swimming have been documented throughout the literature (e.g. Foley *et al.*, 2017). Although previous literature has allowed us to acknowledge these benefits, it has only provided surface level reasonings for utilising open water swimming. There are few accounts of personal narratives which provide the true, lived experience of the influence and transformative nature of blue spaces, especially in association with grief. Autoethnography was chosen as a method to present my experiences of living through and navigating grief. I have chosen to share my experience of using open water swimming, as a transformative practice which helped me find hope after the loss of my father. Personal stories, such as this one, have been claimed to offer a new vantage point from which to make a unique contribution to social sciences (Laslett, 1999; Wall, 2008). Alongside my presentation I will be showing a short film I have developed which aligns to this paper, showcasing the embodied affect of water immersion and grief.

14. Mark Harper and Hannah Denton (NHS): Active mental health interventions for men: insights from outdoor swimming

There is emerging evidence that outdoor swimming may be an effective intervention for depression and anxiety. The proportion of men engaging in the activity generally – and participating in our clinical studies specifically – is significantly lower than the proportion of women. We are presenting a preliminary analysis of the qualitative feedback from an all-male group which was part of the Outside 2 (Outdoor Swimming as a nature-based Intervention for Depression) study. We use these insights to address some of the challenges in engaging men in active mental health interventions and discuss possible solutions.

15. Caroline Scarles (Brunel University) and Joe Swift (Environment Agency): Blue Space in UK Policy

Blue Space in UK Policy rethinks how policy engagement is practised; moving beyond consultation toward an envisioning-led approach that creates space for co-constructed intersectoral conversations, creative engagement, and long-term policy innovation. Building on the Environment Agency's Blue Space Forum (BSF) (2022–23) and national reports, including the BSF Health & Inequalities Project (2024), Source to Sea (2025) and Cunliffe Reports (2025), the project responds to evidence that access to clean, safe blue spaces is inseparable from environmental resilience, public health, and social inequality. Working with over 70 organisations spanning community groups, NGOs, third sector partners, academics and UK Government (e.g. DEFRA and DHSC), the project convenes diverse perspectives from a cross-sector community to reimagine blue space governance for all users, of which outdoor swimming is key. It facilitates practitioner-led knowledge exchange and participatory envisioning to co-design a Blue Space Policy Futures Framework; a forward-looking model grounded in equity, accessibility and environmental justice to generate collaborative, actionable pathways for fairer and more resilient blue space futures.

16. Kerry Watkiss and Andrew Skea (Swim England): Influencing policy: lobbying for cleaner water and better access

Despite the ever-growing popularity of open water swimming, many waterways are off limits or unsafe to swim in. And only 14 per cent of the country's rivers are in a 'good' ecological condition – a figure that has not changed since 2009. Swim England, National Governing Body for aquatics, will talk through the sectors collective efforts to form one voice to lobby for cleaner waters, better access and increased safety for open water swimmers. We'll talk about successes, research that has helped to influence, and what more is needed.

Recap of Day 1 (15:40 – 16:00): Taylor Butler-Eldridge

End of Day One (16:00).

Note: Those swimming need to meet at Rayrigg Meadow (16:30). The Jetty Museum car park shuts (17:00).

Optional Group Swim (Dip) at Rayrigg Meadow Designated Public Bathing Site (16:30)

Swim Guides

Lauren Munro-Bennett, Gilly McArthur, Vicki McCreadie, Niamh Lewis, and Amber Keegan.

Optional Social in Bowness-on-Windermere

Day 2: Thursday 10th September 2026 (09:00 – 12:50)

Guests Check-in (09:00)

Introduction (09:20 – 09:25): Taylor Butler-Eldridge

Water Quality (10th Sep 2026, 09:25 – 10:55): 4 talks.

12-minute talks. 2-3 audience questions per speaker. Chaired by Taylor Butler-Eldridge.

17. Kate Herridge (Bangor University): Norovirus in Recreational Waters: Linking Sewage Pollution to Human Health Risk

Recreational waters are impacted by sewage pollution, with both untreated and treated wastewater introducing microbial contaminants into rivers, lakes, estuaries, and coastal waters. Human viruses such as norovirus (NoV) are frequently detected in receiving waters, highlighting ongoing risks to public health. This research explores the relationship between sewage pollution, water quality, and viral health risks using case studies from Cardiff Bay, two rivers, a freshwater lake, and monitored triathlon events. Water samples were analysed for NoV with concentrations reaching up to 6,000 gene copies/L at some sites. Post-swimming health surveys were conducted to assess self-reported illness following recreational water exposure. The viral data were incorporated into a probabilistic quantitative microbial risk assessment (QMRA) to estimate swimmer infection risks. Estimated risks ranged from approximately 50–0.01% chance of illness. These findings demonstrate how environmental virology can strengthen water quality assessments and support evidence-based risk communication for swimmers, event organisers, and local authorities managing sewage-impacted recreational waters.

18. Ruth Forrester and Liz Cheslett-Davey (Love Windermere Partnership): Delivering actions to improve water quality

Ruth and Liz will provide a little background to the Partnership, introduce the Action Plan published last November and share progress against the 33 actions across 3 themes of sewage, land management, and information all designed to improve water quality and increase public understanding. The Partnership is keen to understand how they might engage with the swimming community in the future.

19. Sylvia Hayes (University of Exeter): UK Media coverage of outdoor swimming 2019–2025

News media continue to be key ways in which the public engage with environmental issues. They allow communities to learn about and understand impacts or issues affecting places outside of their own local environment. This presentation will report findings from the ACCESS-funded project investigating UK wide media coverage of outdoor swimming in UK. The project is a collaboration between ACCESS, the Centre for Climate Communication and Data Science (C3DS), and the Environment Agency (EA). We have analysed over 19,000 online news articles from a range of national and local news outlets over the time period 2019 – 2025 using a combination of AI-assisted taxonomy development methods at scale and in-depth qualitative thematic analysis, guided by collaborative conversations with stakeholders. Findings suggest media coverage of the issue of outdoor swimming and particularly pollution is varied and complex, representing a diversity of perspectives on the issue. We discuss in-depth findings on pollution, responsibility, and governance of outdoor swimming.

20. Heather Moorhouse (UKCEH): Our changing lakes: the value of long-term monitoring

UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology have been monitoring the water quality in the Windermere basins and the smaller lakes of Blelham Tarn and Esthwaite Water for over 80-years. This monitoring first

began to better understand the seasonal changes and drivers of microscopic algae in the water, instigated by John Lund a scientist from the Freshwater Biological Association. The wider value of this work was quickly realised, providing new insights into the physical, chemical and biological interactions of lake ecosystems. Now, the NC-UK Cumbrian Lakes Monitoring Programme is revealing that like many lakes around the world, our lakes have been impacted by anthropogenic activity from climate change to nutrient pollution. Average water temperatures are over 1.3°C higher compared to those when monitoring first began. Whilst warmer temperatures may appeal to swimmers who prefer more comfortable dips, such conditions may increase the risk of blue-green algae blooms and the spread of non-native invasive species. In this presentation, we outline how the NC-UK Cumbrian Lakes Monitoring Programme is developing to better understand the changing lake ecology, and what swimmers can do to help.

Break (10:55 – 11:10)

Negotiating Pollution (10th Sep 2026, 11:10 – 12:40): 4 talks.

12-minute talks. 2-3 audience questions per speaker. Chaired by Kate Moles.

21. Clifton Evers (Newcastle University): Polluted, Smelly, and Emotional

We are told blue spaces help us feel good. I agree, sometimes. But what happens when the water smells 'funny'? When blue space channels eco-anxiety through our nose? This talk draws on ethnographic and arts-based research with recreational sea users on an industrial northeast England coastline to explore how smell is connected to complex eco-emotions as people live with polluted waters. Through perfume workshops and smell walks, I've been learning about how a group of working class men have developed sophisticated olfactory competencies to continue their 'polluted leisure'. Through this sensory know-how a complex eco-emotional life takes shape: eco-anxiety, disgust, precarious hope, and solastalgia coexisting with joy and place attachment. In these waters the men enact a messy, everyday, quiet, resigned form of activism often unrecognised as a politically helpful environmental response. I conclude that interactions of smell and eco-emotion deserve a place in how we think about wellbeing, participation, and environmental justice advocacy in compromised blue spaces.

22. Miriam Snellgrove (University of Glasgow): More than Human, Less than Welcome: Jellyfish in Outdoor Swimming Cultures

Jellyfish are abundant in seas and oceans, yet they are often regarded as unwelcome presences in recreational waters. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with outdoor swimmers, this paper explores how encounters with jellyfish generate feelings of disgust and shape understandings of acceptable leisure environments. Swimming is often promoted through narratives of health, wellbeing and connection to nature, positioning blue spaces as sites of restoration and pleasure. However, encounters with jellyfish reveal the fragility of these imaginaries. Their gelatinous bodies, unpredictable movements and potential to sting are frequently discussed as contaminating otherwise desirable swimming environments. Despite being a natural part of marine ecosystems, jellyfish are often experienced as intrusions that disrupt swimming practices. This paper argues that reactions to jellyfish reveal how ideas of cleanliness, comfort and safety underpin outdoor swimming cultures. As difficult companions, jellyfish challenge expectations of what nature should provide and expose tensions between wellness narratives and the ecological realities of sharing the water.

23. Louise Reddy and Kirsty Davies (Surfers Against Sewage): From the beachfront to the frontbench – campaigning to end sewage pollution

Surfers Against Sewage's aim is to end sewage pollution. As water users we know the impacts of poor water quality, that is why we are campaigning to stop it. Through community engagement, advocacy, and growing public awareness we have helped to bring the issue to the top of the Government agenda. Now we want them to tackle the problem. This talk will shed light on some of the tactics we use from applying for bathing water designation and building an army of citizen scientists, to sharing real time pollution data with water users through our Safer Seas & Rivers Service App. We will share where we think the next big opportunities are for improving the UK's water quality, including the Government's new Clean Water Bill. And most importantly, we will discuss how everyone can get involved. It is about time the front benches of Government listened to those on the beachfront. Join us to find out how we can make that happen.

24. Amber Keegan: The Thames Swim Against Sewage: Exploring Sport as a Vehicle for Collaborative Research, Community Engagement, and Policy Advocacy

I am a retired Great Britain open water swimmer and Policy Officer at Surfers Against Sewage. In September 2025, I organised a non-stop relay swim of over 200 km from the Thames source to Westminster – a project which combined research, communication, and advocacy. The swim incorporated real-time water quality monitoring en route, with further sample verification across key sections. Findings revealed significant variability in pollution level – a complexity that local swimmers often know, but that less-often appears in the advisory data many people rely on, with implications for safe and equitable access to the water. But the *E. coli* counts were only part of the story. The swim generated national media coverage, policymaker engagement, and connected different citizen science communities along the Thames. We also produced a film about this project which went on to inspire new grassroots water quality monitors too. This talk considers what research can look like when community, communication, and action are built in from the start. Doing research this way produces more than data. It builds relationships, shifts narratives, and drives the conditions for policy change.

Final Reflections from Day 2 (12:40-12:50): Taylor Butler-Eldridge

Forum Close (12:50)

Note: All guests need to leave by 13:15. The venue must be cleared by 13:30.

Programme subject to change – visit: www.outdoorswimmingresearch.com for the latest updates.

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