

Psychological Implications of the Gross Happiness Index and Environmental Degradation & Sustainability

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Abstract: *This paper explores the psychological implications of the Gross Happiness Index (GHI) in the context of environmental degradation, emphasizing the symbiotic relationship between human well-being and environmental sustainability. The Gross Happiness Index, designed to measure the holistic well-being of populations beyond economic growth, serves as a paradigm that biodiversity loss threatens individual and collective mental health, undermining the very principles of happiness as envisioned by GHI. The paper examines both the theoretical and practical aspects of this relationship, diving into how environmental degradation impacts psychological well-being, social cohesion, and ethical considerations of intergenerational equity. It calls for a reimagination of happiness indices and policymaking that actively integrate ecological preservation into frameworks for human flourishing. Finally, suggestions are proposed for creating sustainable approaches to happiness that respect both human psychology and natural ecosystems.*

Keywords: Gross Happiness Index, Environmental Degradation, Mental Health, Sustainability, Human Flourishing, Psychological Implications, Bhutan, Climate Change

I. INTRODUCTION

The link between human mental health and the environment is clearer than ever today. With the world facing serious environmental problems like climate change, resource exhaustion, and unsustainable development, an important question arises: how does environmental damage affect human happiness, well-being, and mental health? Bhutan's unique concept of the Gross Happiness Index (GHI) challenges the usual focus on economic growth, measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Instead, GHI emphasizes a broader approach to well-being that includes mental health, spiritual and cultural values, and environmental care. However, these ideals face significant challenges due to the global environmental crises. This paper explores how the GHI framework applies to human psychology at a time when environmental degradation is worsening, combining insights from psychology, sustainability, and policymaking.

The Gross Happiness Index: An Overview of its Psychology and Philosophy

The Gross Happiness Index was introduced by Bhutan's King Jigme Singye Wangchuck in the 1970s, with the belief that happiness matters more than just economic progress. Unlike GDP, which measures financial output, the GHI focuses on nine key aspects of well-being: psychological health, cultural preservation, education, health, use of time, environmental balance, social connections, and governance. The GHI shows that happiness depends on many factors, including societal conditions and the surrounding environment.

From a psychological perspective, the GHI aligns closely with humanistic theories, such as Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. While basic needs like food and shelter are essential, true happiness is rooted in factors like a sense of belonging, purpose, creativity, and reaching one's potential (self-actualization). Psychological health also depends on stability, safety, and harmony—all of which are deeply tied to nature. Nature provides a healing influence, helping to reduce stress, improve focus, and strengthen emotional resilience. Therefore, environmental conditions are closely linked to the mental well-being measured by GHI.



Unfortunately, achieving these psychological goals has become more difficult in today's era, known as the Anthropocene. This period is defined by large-scale harm to the environment, including deforestation, pollution, loss of biodiversity, and climate change. These environmental problems not only threaten human survival but also damage emotional well-being by harming the ecosystems that humans rely on for stability and peace of mind.

Environmental Degradation and its Psychological Effects

Mental Health Issues

Environmental damage significantly impacts both individual and community mental health. Research shows that exposure to pollution and climate-related disasters can lead to higher rates of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For example, areas regularly hit by natural disasters like hurricanes, floods, or droughts often report increased cases of climate-related PTSD and generalized anxiety among the local population. Similarly, in cities with high levels of industrial pollution, children exposed to harmful substances like lead and mercury often experience developmental delays and problems with brain function.

Environmental destruction also increases feelings of helplessness and a lack of control over one's circumstances. These stressors can lead to long-term mental health challenges. For instance, Indigenous communities forced to leave their ancestral lands due to deforestation or mining often suffer from deep grief, identity loss, and cultural trauma. These experiences harm both their mental health and social well-being.

Ecological Grief and Eco-Anxiety

"Ecological grief" refers to the sadness and sense of loss people feel due to the destruction of the environment and loss of biodiversity. This grief is particularly strong in communities that have close connections to nature. Additionally, "eco-anxiety," growing especially among younger generations, is the worry and fear linked to the uncertainty of climate change and its future impacts. A 2017 report by the American Psychological Association emphasized that if eco-anxiety isn't addressed, it could develop into more severe and long-lasting mental health issues.

These psychological impacts not only harm individuals but also affect entire communities. Increased stress, fear, and dwindling resources can lead to social unrest, conflict, and a breakdown of trust within societies.

Impact on Happiness and Well-Being

Environmental problems reduce happiness and quality of life, particularly in aspects measured by the Gross Happiness Index, such as environmental resilience, community strength, and emotional well-being. For instance, access to clean air and water is essential for physical and mental health. Likewise, spending time in nature is known to boost happiness, mindfulness, and reduce stress hormones like cortisol. When environmental degradation reduces these opportunities, overall happiness and life satisfaction suffer, undermining the goals of happiness-focused models such as Bhutan's GHI.

The Importance of Protecting the Environment for Mental Well-Being

Since mental health and the environment are closely linked, protecting nature becomes essential for achieving the goals of the Gross Happiness Index (GHI). Healthy ecosystems not only provide basic necessities like food and water but also offer emotional and cultural benefits that improve life satisfaction and mental health.

Nature as a Source of Mental Health

Spending time in nature has been shown to improve mental well-being. Research highlights that being in green spaces can reduce anxiety, depression, and stress while boosting creativity and clear thinking. Practices like shinrin-yoku (forest bathing) in Japan demonstrate how connecting with nature can lower stress and promote overall happiness. By ensuring the environment is preserved, future generations can also enjoy these psychological benefits, aligning with the GHI's long-term focus on fairness between generations.



Building Strong Communities Through Environmental Protection

Environmental damage often weakens community connections, which are essential for collective happiness. For example, when resources like water or land become scarce, competition and conflict can arise, leading to social breakdown and mistrust. On the other hand, when communities work together on projects to restore the environment, they strengthen both local ecosystems and social bonds. These efforts give people a sense of purpose, belonging, and shared achievement, boosting happiness for individuals and the community as a whole.

Incorporating Psychology and Sustainability into Policy

To reduce the mental health impacts of environmental damage, policymakers should treat protecting nature as a key part of happiness and well-being strategies. Mental health should be supported from all angles—by ensuring access to green spaces, preparing for climate impacts, and educating people about sustainable living. This approach helps create a healthy environment while equipping individuals and societies with the tools they need to adapt and thrive in an ever-changing world.

Evaluating the Gross Happiness Index (GHI)

While the Gross Happiness Index provides a meaningful alternative to using GDP as a measure of societal progress, it has some limitations. One major issue is that environmental damage makes it harder to fully achieve GHI's goals. The index includes "ecological resilience" as one of its key pillars, but it doesn't outline specific, enforceable actions to prevent environmental decline on a global scale. Additionally, other psychological aspects of the GHI, such as community well-being and emotional health, are negatively impacted when the environment deteriorates. This reduces the effectiveness of the GHI in places facing serious ecological crises.

Another challenge is adopting the GHI on an international level. Many governments prioritize short-term economic growth over environmental sustainability and may resist incorporating ecological measures into their development plans. Furthermore, developing countries, which are often the most affected by climate change, face greater challenges in balancing ecological responsibility and economic needs. These global inequalities make it harder to implement happiness-focused policies across nations.

Moving Toward a Comprehensive Model of Well-Being

For the GHI to genuinely promote overall well-being, it must be closely tied to global environmental sustainability. Incorporating eco-psychological models—systems that explore the connection between humans and nature—would strengthen the GHI by offering practical methods to protect mental health in an era of environmental challenges.

The Role of Green Infrastructure

Green infrastructure is essential for achieving the dual goals of mental health and environmental preservation. Features like urban parks, conserved natural areas, and climate-resilient farming systems provide key ecosystem benefits that support both psychological well-being and ecological balance. Governments should include GHI principles in their city planning, conservation efforts, and climate adaptation projects to ensure that environmental health supports human happiness.

The Need for Global Cooperation

Tackling environmental issues and improving happiness on a global scale requires nations to collaborate, as environmental problems like climate change and biodiversity loss affect everyone. Cooperation in cutting carbon emissions, protecting key ecosystems, and advancing renewable energy will reduce environmental and psychological harm on a worldwide level. Including frameworks like the Gross Happiness Index in international agreements, such as the Paris Climate Accord, can help align global policies with the shared goal of improving both the environment and human well-being.



II. CONCLUSION

The Gross Happiness Index offers a vital framework for measuring human well-being in a manner that transcends purely economic indicators. However, its aspirations are increasingly threatened by environmental degradation, which undermines critical components of happiness such as mental health, social cohesion, and ecological resilience. The symbiotic relationship between human psychology and the natural world necessitates urgent measures to protect environmental integrity as an essential factor in achieving happiness.

Policymakers must recognize that psychological well-being is intricately connected to environmental sustainability and adopt multi-dimensional strategies to promote happiness that integrate mental health and ecological preservation. Only by addressing global environmental degradation and creating resilient ecological systems can the noble ideals of the Gross Happiness Index be fully realized, ensuring intergenerational happiness and thriving for all.

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