FINAL CfP - RGS-IBG Annual International Conference, 31st August – 3rd September 2021. Further details are available online at: https://www.rgs.org/research/annual-international-conference/

EXTENDED DEADLINE FOR ABSTRACTS – **1st MARCH 2021**

**Nature, Health and Digital in Times of Crisis: Transcending Borders of Exclusion into Nature Through Innovation in Digital and Immersive Solutions**

The session is co-sponsored by the Digital Geographies Research Group (DGRG) & the Geographies of Leisure and Tourism Research Group (GLTRG)

The significance of the physical qualities of nature for the promotion of health and well-being, through healing places (Gesler 2003), therapeutic landscapes (Gesler 2005) or green and blue spaces, has been well established (cf. Rosenberg 2017a). During the current COVID-19 global pandemic, and the range of associated temporal and spatial restrictions that have been imposed during this time, the importance of such connection has become increasingly pronounced as green and natural spaces become vital for recreation to support mental health and wellbeing (Natural England, 2020; Sport England, 2020; Academy of Medical Sciences, 2020). However, not all socio-demographic groups in society have the capacity or resources to travel to these places for recreational or leisure and for many, this has been compounded during the pandemic. For example, it is known that elderly populations can experience increased social isolation as they spend up to 90% of their time indoors (Bamzar & Hous, 2016). Indeed, reduced access to recreational activities impacts people's physical and emotional well-being, preventing them remaining active and connected in later life (Scottish Government, 2016). Recognising this and the benefits of access to nature on mental health and well-being for those who are socially isolated for a wide range of reasons, this session asks: What is the potential of digital representations of nature for the promotion of health and well-being?

By now, diverse studies have started to venture in an ever-changing and transforming array of possible digital solutions for the promotion of health and well-being. Among these, are studies that have looked into the benefits of 2D- or 3D-nature-based virtual environments (VEs, cf., e.g., White et al. 2018, Yu et al. 2018, Kucher et al. 2020) for restoration or rehabilitation. Interventions using virtual reality (VR), partly, but not always using Head-Mounted-Display-based VR (HMDs), have shown significant success in the context of pain or stress management, physical rehabilitation, and the treatment of trauma, anxiety, phobia, eating disorders, and tobacco addiction through VR exposure therapy (cf., e.g., Morie and Chance 2011, White et al. 2018, Yu et al. 2018, Kucher et al. 2020). Again, another field of virtual interventions, the positive effects of the social environments of multi-player online gaming virtual worlds (VWs), e.g. Second Life, in either motivating participation in treatment programmes, or of acceptance of care work through these worlds (Gorini 2007, Morie and Chance 2011) has been analysed.

Technological advances have made solutions such as HMDs affordable and decreased potentially adverse effects such as motion sickness or stress. It is to be expected that customisation of virtual environments will increasingly be technically feasible and improve virtual experiences. At the same time, differences not only in the infrastructural and financial access, but also the operational, formal, informational and communication skills needed for making an effective use of these technologies result in digital inequalities between individuals, groups and places (Dijk 2005, Kleine and Poveda 2017). Furthermore, the use of digital technologies does not come without risks. As Poland (2005: 175) noted, "technology may both empower and disempower its users […, it] often generates […] profound symbolic effects on the definition of the self and the identity […], personhood […] and inheritance and kinship." Any virtual health intervention must be balanced with patients' real lifeworlds. Technological development is usually ahead of the development of best practices and

guidelines for the adequate use of technologies. Ever more important are critical and qualitative ventures into potentials but also limitations of digital solutions.

In the face of these developments, we invite submissions that respond to such issues by addressing the following areas in the context of the current global pandemic:

- The effect of digital representations of nature on emotional-affective and sensuous experiences of nature
- The opportunities afforded for connection to nature through a range of digital solutions
- The geographies of place creation and engagements with nature in digital content creation
- The application of digital methods/methodologies in understanding the emotional-affective connection to, and benefits of, nature for those with limited mobility
- Digital entanglements with nature as increasing accessibility or opening new challenges of access and increasing inequalities

Please note that these are indicative rather than exclusive and we welcome submissions that attend to wider issues related to the theme of digital engagements with nature.

The closing date for abstract submissions is the 1st of March 2021. All submissions should be sent to the session convenors as follows:

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We look forward to receiving your abstracts.