

The impacts of leisure travel

Natural England works for people, places and nature, to enhance biodiversity, landscapes and wildlife in rural, urban, coastal and marine areas; promote access, recreation and public well-being; and contribute to the way natural resources are managed so that they can be enjoyed now and in the future.

It is recognised that leisure travel (defined for the purpose of this report as ‘people travelling to access and enjoy the natural environment in all its forms’) results in a range of impacts on both the natural environment and on people’s enjoyment and tranquillity. These impacts include, amongst others, congestion, loss or damage to biodiversity, noise pollution, visual pollution, carbon emissions and a reduction in local air quality. At the same time, more environmentally sustainable forms of leisure travel can deliver a range of social and economic benefits.

It is within this context that Natural England set out a target within its 2006-2009 Strategic Direction document to ‘Develop a plan to reduce the transport impact of nature-based tourism’. The vision is to make leisure travel more environmentally sustainable with the majority of trips being made by low carbon, high health forms of transport, such as walking, cycling, horse-riding and un-powered boats with longer trips being made by rail and public transport. Encouraging people to make more use of their local greenspace in order to reduce their carbon footprint and other adverse environmental effects is a key element in this vision. This shift to more sustainable leisure travel would result in fewer adverse effects on the environment and increased social and economic benefits. This objective lies firmly within Natural England’s overall mission statement “...to conserve and enhance the natural environment, for its intrinsic value, the wellbeing and enjoyment of people and the economic prosperity that it brings”.

The aim of this report was to identify and quantify the impacts of leisure travel on the natural environment and the social and economic benefits of sustainable leisure travel. The report also identifies a number of measures which can mitigate these impacts and outlines some potential funding sources for more sustainable leisure travel.

What was done

This research identified a range of environmental and social impacts of leisure travel on the natural environment. The evidence is based on secondary data sources such as national transport statistics and travel surveys, leisure visits and tourist surveys. Research and

analysis of key environmental and social impacts was undertaken. Environmental topics included climate change, air pollution, biodiversity impacts and human impacts included visual pollution, noise pollution, accidents and congestion.

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Following the identification of the environmental and social impacts of increased leisure travel by motorised transport, the report attempts to estimate the approximate scale of these impacts. In order to estimate the impacts of leisure travel, information on the number and type of trips undertaken, data for each destination in terms of the mean distance travelled and the mode of transport has been used. Research was also undertaken to identify and attempt to quantify the social, health and economic benefits of increased sustainable leisure travel.

The report also identified mitigation measures which could reduce the adverse effects of leisure travel and help Natural England to achieve its goal of encouraging more environmentally sustainable access to the natural environment. Good practice examples of successful mitigation measures were identified and summarised. Furthermore, a range of potential funding options for improved sustainable leisure travel were discussed.

Results and conclusions

This research concludes that the private car is the dominant mode of travel used for leisure trips to the natural environment in England and is a significant negative impact of visitor activity. There is a cumulative effect as the demand for leisure travel increases and more people access the natural environment by car; this increases pressure on resources and means that there is more pressure to provide more roads and more car parks. Recreational driving and car related access to natural environments is responsible for producing around 0.9% of the total contribution of CO₂ transport emissions in England. Leisure travel in all its forms accounts for 6.7% of the total CO₂ transport emissions. Whilst these figures would suggest that leisure travel to access the natural environment has a limited impact on CO₂ emissions overall, leisure travel as a whole (including travel to the cinema, visiting friends, shopping etc) does have a more significant impact on carbon emissions.

The most significant impacts of car related travel on the natural environment appear to be at the local level and mostly relate to biodiversity, air pollution and congestion. These impacts of leisure traffic all have a knock-on effect on

people's enjoyment of the natural environment and the character of the natural environment. In addition to the harmful effects that traffic congestion has on the biodiversity and air quality of the local environment, it also increases the risk of accidents on country roads and fear of personal safety among people using them.

The impacts of leisure travel appear to be seasonal and spatial (for example, tourism 'honeypots') as demonstrated by visitor activity in National Parks. A majority of visits to English National Parks are made in the summer season with a significant seasonal impact on congestion, noise and visual pollution, local air pollution and accident rates.

With the predicted growth in traffic congestion on rural roads and the impacts of leisure travel in mind, there is a strong case for improving sustainable access to the natural environment. There are a number of environmental, social and economic benefits associated with increased use of sustainable modes of transport for access to the natural environment. For example, walking and cycling have been shown to improve quality of life, reduce stress levels and reduce the risk of heart disease. More sustainable leisure travel has been shown to generate additional rural income and bring other economic benefits.

There are a number of successful measures in England that have resulted in a positive modal shift from car to sustainable modes of travel for accessing the natural environment. These measures are highlighted in this report and in other good practice guides by Natural England and Defra. A critical success factor has been good partnership working e.g. between local authorities, national park authorities, transport operators and local businesses to promote and deliver sustainable travel schemes for accessing the natural environment.

Funding is a key challenge for improving sustainable leisure access to natural environments and lessening the negative impacts of car related access. Whilst funding sources for sustainable transport have been identified in this report, they offer very little funding for sustainable access to the natural environment. The most significant funding stream is likely to be through Local Transport

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Plans (LTP's). The introduction of strategic environmental assessments, accessibility strategies and Rights of Way Improvement Plans in LTP2 has widened the scope for improving access to natural environments. While this has led to an increased acknowledgment of the importance of sustainable access to the natural environment in LTP's, this awareness has not carried through to any real actions or deliverables.

This report has identified that there are significant negative impacts of leisure travel by car and significant benefits of increasing sustainable leisure travel to the natural environment. It is therefore recommended that increasing sustainable leisure travel be given more priority in policy making and funding allocations.

Natural England's viewpoint

Natural England recognises that car-based travel for leisure-related trips based around the natural environment results in a range of adverse environmental effects. At the same time, more sustainable forms of recreational travel can deliver a number of social and economic benefits.

The purpose of this piece of policy-based research was to undertake a short-desk-based review of the impacts and benefits which result from the ways people travel to access the natural environment. The report highlights the range of direct and indirect impacts on the environment and captures some of the wider social and economic benefits. It confirms that carbon emissions are only part of the environmental footprint from travel for recreational purposes and that local impacts can be just as significant. It describes some ways of mitigating these impacts, especially through the use of various funding mechanisms.

The report confirms that there are gaps in the evidence base, especially relating to the lack of availability of quantitative data. It has also revealed that any analysis is made more difficult by the fact that separating leisure trips based on the natural environment from other forms of leisure travel (eg for shopping or visiting friends) is not an easy task. The caveats identified at the end of the report are important, therefore, and

should be noted. The report concludes by highlighting where further research would be most valuable.

Selected references

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Further information

For the full details of the research covered by this information note see Natural England Research Report NERR014 *The impacts of leisure travel*.

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