

English Nature Research Report 567

Nature for people: the importance of green spaces to East Midlands communities

Report Authors : Simon Bell, Nina Morris, Catherine Findlay, Penny Travlou, Alicia Montarzano, Diana Gooch, Gemma Gregory and Catharine Ward Thompson.
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Introduction

The social agenda is as important as the economic, yet it has proved difficult to ascertain how the environment contributes to people's social well-being and quality of life. The aim of this study was to specify this contribution by selecting a number of green spaces across the East Midlands region and detailing the relationship that people have with them.

What was done

English Nature commissioned the OPENspace Research Centre at Edinburgh College of Art/Heriot Watt University to carry out research in the East Midlands. This consisted of a scoping meeting with 10 people working in nature conservation and 6 focus groups, with around 10 people per group, in locations throughout the region in order to obtain qualitative information and develop a questionnaire. This questionnaire was used at 16 sites representing a range of green space types. Over 460 people were interviewed. The data were analysed to explore the relationships that people have with nature. These were examined in relation to different characteristics of the people (gender, age, social class, ethnicity) and the character of the different sites (nature reserves, country parks, forests, local areas, town parks etc). Questions were designed to differentiate between aspects relating to the character of sites, the activities that people do in such places and the perceptions they have of them.

Results and conclusions

1. Many people of both sexes and all ages visit all type of sites. However, there are low numbers of people from black and ethnic minorities and people with disabilities. Couples and families make up the majority of visitors, especially to country parks. Women are less represented than in the general population, and children formed a smaller proportion than expected. A lot of retired people but small numbers of unemployed people visit.
2. The main reasons for visiting are to walk the dog, for exercise and for the pleasure of being in a park or close to nature. Dog walking is popular at local sites, woodlands and country parks but less frequent at nature reserves. Reducing stress and relaxing provide some of the main social values.

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3. Quite a lot of people are members of conservation organisations but do not necessarily take an active part in conservation activities.
4. People find the term "green space" difficult. "Nature" includes physical characteristics, wildlife and perceptions or emotions, especially feelings of peacefulness and the calming or de-stressing value of nature. Professionals have different views, eg between "nature" and "countryside" and use the term "green space" more widely.
5. People tended to focus on "anti-social uses" rather than "social values". Sites need to be well managed (but not over managed), welcoming, provide information and have a natural appearance if people are to obtain the best value from them.
6. Sites close to home are preferred, especially by those who visited a lot when children.
7. There are significant associations between the type and degree of use by people now and their frequency of use when children. This suggests that if children are not allowed to visit natural areas or parks by themselves they are less likely to develop a habit that will continue into adulthood. Those who had visited a lot as children were more likely to find nature magical and to develop a close relationship with it.
8. There was greatest agreement in the questionnaires with the statements that green spaces are important for local communities, for feeling peaceful and free and with having an affiliation with or closeness to nature.
9. A sense of community ownership of green space, together with good accessibility and a sense of welcome were rated highly. While a site may be legally owned by someone else, such as the local authority or English Nature, if people feel that it is also "their" place, this is a valuable social benefit.
10. The sense of feeling uncomfortable or vulnerable was not very widespread, although it was most significant amongst women and older visitors.
11. The sites that received the most positive perceptions were nature reserves, woodlands and urban parks. Local areas were important for some activities but country parks were viewed less positively. Nature reserves are consistently seen in the most positive light. This is partly because of being able to see wildlife, but other values, such as magic, freedom from stress and feeling energetic are also associated with nature reserves.

Lessons for planners and managers

1. Urban parks were highly rated in this study. There are implications for their future funding/regeneration/management, and their role in addressing quality of life issues in regeneration initiatives.
2. The implications for regional environment strategies need to be considered. Country parks emerged from the research less favourably than some other areas and there are implications for their future development.

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3. More and better information is needed, orientated towards different groups, such as black and minority ethnic groups, disabled people, older people, disadvantaged people etc. This may need to be in different languages, presented and distributed differently in order to meet the needs of those not reached at present.
4. Good information at sites is important, possibly presented in new ways and aimed at different groups in what is clearly a fragmented, not a homogeneous population.
5. More activities and means of engaging children in green spaces should be considered, so that they develop a life-long habit, and appreciation of green space. Working with parents and police/rangers etc to help develop a safer environment for children to go out by themselves would be very helpful.
6. Educational programmes seemed not to be widely enough available. Using green areas near schools should be considered, especially if children could visit the same areas to play in them at other times.

English Nature's viewpoint

This research presents some valuable findings about people's relationships to nature and about the importance of a wide range of sites, not just nature reserves, although these do have very positive associations. These findings have a range of messages for providers and managers of green space that need to be addressed to improve peoples quality of experience and engagement with their green space.

Selected references

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Further information

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