

Research notes

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“What about us?”

Diversity Review evidence – part one

Challenging perceptions: under-represented groups' visitor needs

Summary

The Rural White Paper (2000) identified that certain groups are under-represented amongst users of the countryside and green outdoor spaces. People from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds, disabled people, young people, people who live in inner cities, women, older people and people on low income all make limited use of the countryside and green outdoor spaces. This research examined the reasons for under-representation of three key groups and found that while sharing a common representation of the countryside, their specific attitudes to dimensions of this common representation varied significantly. They all thought that making more use of the countryside would be beneficial to them, but there were significant factors limiting their access and use. These factors affected different groups in different ways and had to be understood in the context of each individual group.



Main findings

Research method: The research carried out during 2004, investigated the views of three under-represented groups:

- People from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, including Indian, Pakistani and Black-Caribbean people;
- Disabled people, including people with ambulatory problems (all were wheelchair users); people who were blind or visually-impaired (all were registered blind); and people with mental health problems (all had a clinical diagnosis);
- Young people: 14-16 year-old boys and girls and 17-20 year-old young men and women.

All research participants were selected from inner city areas in London, Birmingham and Bradford. For analytical purposes, all the groups included in the sample of lay people were mutually exclusive.

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The aims of this research were to explore the reasons for the current under-representation and to answer four key questions: How do under-represented groups perceive the countryside? What do they think are the benefits of countryside use? What are the factors that restrict their use of the outdoors? What needs to be done to diversify and increase use of the countryside?

The research design combined a literature review, 15 interviews with experts on countryside use amongst under-represented groups and 32 individual interviews with countryside 'non-users'. In addition, there were 24 focus groups with countryside 'non-users' and 8 focus groups with countryside 'users', as well as 14 escorted visits to country parks with 'non-user' families. In total, nearly 300 people took part in the study.

"I don't want my community to just look at pretty pictures of the English countryside. We have been here long enough. Now we have to build that emotional connection which says this is my countryside, this can be my home too."
(Black Caribbean woman from London)

Representations of the countryside: People from all under-represented groups shared a common underlying representation of the countryside. They

- opposed the countryside to the city;
- construed the environment of the countryside as natural and green; vast and open; pure, healthy and clean; and far away from cities;
- interpreted the way of life of the countryside as slow and simple; based on traditional English values; set in close-knit communities; and for an elderly and socially conservative population.

In each under-represented group, people had different attitudes towards the various dimensions in this common representation of the countryside. People from ethnic minority backgrounds valued the dimensions related to the natural environment and the perceived slow and simple life of rural communities. However, they also expected to feel excluded and conspicuous in what they perceived as a solely English environment.

Disabled people valued the way of life of rural communities and generally anticipated being made to feel welcome. Like people from ethnic minority backgrounds, they also valued the natural or physical environment, but expected to feel vulnerable because of the inherent unpredictability of the landscape. In contrast, young people had very mixed views in relation to the natural environment. They were very negative about the way of life in the countryside and believed there was nothing for young people to do, since it lacked anything of interest or excitement for their age group.

"I don't picture the countryside as a great expanse of openness. In a way, I picture it as a series of physical experiences... I like to deal with what I can touch and taste and feel and experience. For me, it only stretches as far as my body can reach."
(Visually-impaired man from London)

Figure 1

Countryside	City
• Rural	• Urban
• Natural	• Unnatural
• Green	• No specific colour/grey
• Vast and open	• Enclosed
• Healthy	• Unhealthy
• Pure	• Polluted
• Peaceful and quiet	• Hectic
• Slow	• Fast
• Clean	• Dirty
• Simple life	• Complex life
• Englishness	• Multiculturalism
• Far	• Near
• Timeless	• Historical/Contemporary
• Conservative	• Progressive

Figure 1: Dominant constructions of the countryside.

The three different user groups examined in the research perceived the countryside in a variety of positive and negative associations. For instance, the slow and simple life was viewed negatively by young people, while black and minority ethnic people remarked on factors such as its inherent Englishness and conservativeness.

Perceived benefits of countryside use: Across all under-represented groups, people thought that making more use of the countryside and green outdoor spaces would be good for them.

- **People from ethnic minority backgrounds** perceived benefits in relation to physical health (breathing fresh air and taking light exercise); psychological health and emotional well-being (getting away from the stresses and strains of everyday urban life, reconnecting with nature, finding inner peace, and recreating with family or friends); personal identity (reminiscing about life 'back home' and establishing psychological continuity between their former and current 'self'); and social inclusion and civic participation (meeting people from other social and cultural backgrounds, learning about English society, and feeling integrated, respected and empowered as ethnic minorities).
- **Disabled people** also perceived physical health benefits (breathing fresh air and taking light exercise); plus psychological health and emotional well-being (getting away from the stresses and strains of everyday urban life, reconnecting with nature, having new and varied sensory experiences, finding inner peace, and recreating with other people); personal identity (establishing psychological continuity between people's non-disabled and disabled days, having a sense of achievement); social inclusion and civic participation (meeting non-disabled people, and feeling integrated, respected and empowered as disabled people).
- **Young people** identified benefits for their physical health (breathing fresh air, taking light exercise and engaging in sports and challenging physical activities); psychological health and emotional well-being (getting away from various social pressures - family, peer, school and work - finding inner peace, and recreating with friends); personal identity (establishing psychological continuity between their childhood and early adulthood, exploring new identities, developing new skills). While young people themselves did not discuss benefits of countryside use in relation to social inclusion and civic participation, there were some references to these in the literature and in interview with experts.

Factors limiting use of the countryside: Amongst people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, these involved the cost of visiting the countryside and problems linked to transport; a lack of knowledge of the English countryside and lack of 'cultural habit' of visiting. The fear of discrimination was a real issue, but different patterns of use and a lack of culturally-appropriate provisions also played their part.

Amongst disabled people, problems linked to transport and the cost of visiting were also found to be important factors restricting use of the countryside. A lack of knowledge of available facilities for disabled people, as well as a basic lack of provisions for disabled people, were also significant. Social isolation and a feeling of vulnerability due to the inherent unpredictability of the countryside were also cited.

The factors restricting young people's use of the countryside, were different again. Issues such as their negative perceptions of the countryside were important, as well as other priorities, peer pressure and dependency on adults. A lack of appropriate facilities for young people hindered access, plus problems linked to transport and the expense of visiting the countryside.

It is important to note that the research focused on people's views and experiences in relation to the outdoors. The perceived benefits and factors limiting use of the countryside were therefore discussed with the remote and open countryside in mind. Many of the views expressed may have been different had research participants been asked to consider 'outdoor green spaces' more generally.

"It's like someone has taken a concrete jumper off you. In town, you feel like a prisoner. This has been a fantastic, mind-blowing day! If I were a bird, I would be right up there, flying." (Man with mental health problems from Bradford, speaking after visiting the countryside)

"You just sort of feel free because you can go through the woods and stuff like that. There's no boundaries really. You can go wherever you want to go, you won't get told you can't go there, you can't do this, you can't do that." (Young man from Birmingham)

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Recommendations: The report concludes with a number of strategic recommendations designed to increase and diversify participation in outdoor recreation:

- **Service planning:** The collection of baseline data by service providers needs to be prioritised, guidance needs to be provided on monitoring and evaluation, and potential organisations mapped out for multi-agency partnerships;
- **Site design and management:** There is a need to focus on spaces for people that encourage under-represented users, providing a range of experiences and appropriate on-site information;
- **Staffing:** The diversity of staff and volunteers needs to be enhanced, as well as basic diversity awareness;
- **Information and communications:** The terminology of outdoor recreation providers needs to be made more user-friendly. A diversity strategy needs to be adopted that takes into account people's perceptions in a more customer focussed way. A centralised database on green outdoor spaces and routes would help maximise access to information;
- **Building foundations for the use of green outdoor spaces:** More support for access to outdoor learning is necessary, including facilitated and escorted visits, well-advertised special events and long-term projects;
- **Rural attitudes:** A greater diversity awareness in rural communities is required so that welcoming attitudes are promoted.

Finally, the report identified research priorities aimed at improving the evidence base in relation to under-represented groups. These include 'action research' encouraging providers to integrate rather than segment existing functions, such as training and community consultation, education and outreach work.

This research was undertaken by Ethnos Research and Consultancy. www.ethnos.co.uk

For further reading:

BEN and Countryside Agency (2003) *Capturing Richness: Countryside visits by black and ethnic minority communities*, Cheltenham: Countryside Agency.

Burgess, J. (1995) *Growing in Confidence: Understanding People's Perceptions of Urban Fringe Woodlands*. Cheltenham: Countryside Commission.

Leisure Industries Research Centre (2001) *Southeast Hampshire Young People's Countryside Recreation Demand Survey: Final Report*. A report by the Leisure Industries Research Centre, Sheffield Hallam University. Hampshire County Council.

Price, R. & Stoneham, J. (2001) *Making Connections: A guide to accessible greenspace*, Bath: The Sensory Trust.

Rishbeth, C. (2001) 'Ethnic minority groups and the design of public open space: an inclusive landscape?', *Landscape Research* 26 (4) pp. 351 - 366.

Slee, B. (2002) 'Social exclusion in the countryside', *Countryside Recreation* 10 (1) pp. 2-7.

- 1 The relationship between exclusion, participation, and under-representation lies in the distinction between people's observed behaviour and how people feel.
- Participation measures observed behaviour - it is the percentage of all people doing a certain activity who belong to a specific group.
 - Representation is a meta-statistic - it is the ratio of 'the participation of a specific group in a certain activity' to 'the proportion of that group in the background population as a whole'.
 - Exclusion expresses how people feel (their perceptions). Countryside Agency (2004)

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