The Countryside Agency

Understanding tranquillity

The role of Participatory Appraisal consultation in defining and assessing a valuable resource.

What factors in the countryside detract from or contribute to the experience of tranquillity?

Summary

Tranquillity is considered to be a significant asset of landscape, appearing as an objective attribute in a range of strategies, policies and plans. However, previous attempts to map tranquillity have suffered from expert-driven definitions and a sole focus on factors that detract from tranquillity. Accepting that judgements about landscape are ultimately personal, this study rejected expert-led criteria in favour of using Participatory Appraisal (PA) consultation to develop broader and more inclusive understandings of what tranquillity is, is not, and why it is important. The PA consultation took place in two areas (Northumberland National Park and West Durham Coalfield) in the northeast of England before being extended into a second area, the Chilterns AONB. This allowed for both methodological refinement/development and comparison of responses across space.

Assessing peoples' experiences: using participatory appraisal

Participatory Appraisal is an approach to consultation focused on exploring peoples' perceptions, values and beliefs, and is designed to allow participants to express these in their own words, and to an extent defined by them. Non-directive questions are used to encourage people to discuss their attitudes in ways that do not impose external opinions on them. Participants are encouraged to think through and express what is important to them, in whatever way *they* want to. PA approaches go beyond conventional research methods by using mainly visual and flexible tools such as maps, spider diagrams and charts. The process is interactive rather than extractive, enabling people from all backgrounds and with varying abilities to be involved in its three integral elements: research, education and collective action.

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In both the northeast and Chilterns project areas, and for each of the main themes and questions, a range of tools were identified as potentially being the most fruitful for generating discussion. These included:

- 'Spider diagrams' – where people draw diagrams of ideas that are related to each other.
- 'Graffiti walls/boards' – where people can 'thought shower' and write any ideas about tranquillity.
- Visual representations – asking people to draw a picture of a (real or imagined) tranquil place, and to annotate their picture(s) with further details, if necessary.
- Mapping – asking people to mark on maps where they think tranquil places are, and to add details of what makes that place tranquil for them.
- 'Bean voting' – where people comment on the ideas on the graffiti board and vote for the ones they agree with.
- Unstructured interviews.

In both areas PA sessions were held with groups of key local stakeholders and countryside users. The stakeholders groups included representatives from local government, heritage, tourism and conservation organisations, and environmental groups. PA sessions were also carried out with people at a range of countryside access points. At these, the team set up a stand and invited people visiting those areas to take part in the research. Including these two different 'types' of participant provided a broader response than would have been achieved by simply exploring the concept with members of relevant professional bodies. Almost one thousand people were consulted at the countryside access points across both project areas, with a further 80 at the stakeholder sessions.

The PA sessions were facilitated by trained PEANuT associates. In the Chilterns, it had been intended that members of the local Chiltern Society would trained in the use of PA, and subsequently act as peer researchers. However, due to time and resource constraints this plan was adapted so that PEANuT facilitators undertook the consultation with support from local volunteers.

Verifying the results

A key part of the PA research underpinning consultations is the verification of the initial PA findings. Public events were held in each area to achieve this, providing an opportunity for research respondents to verify or 'check' the provisional research findings whilst also allowing an opportunity for a wider group of people to participate in the research. Finally, verification allows for participants to identify their more favoured responses through simple 'voting' tools, providing a simple quantifiable comparison to the otherwise qualitative-based explorations. Whilst the majority of the actual research phase was similar if not identical in both areas, the Chilterns verification process differed from that used in the northeast. For the northeast work the project manager played a key role in theming all the responses; in the Chilterns, all responses (aside from exact replications) were included for people to view (in an attempt to remove the role of the project team in the theming process).

What is tranquillity?

Perceived links to nature and natural features

A large proportion and a wide range of the responses made during the research linked tranquillity to hearing, seeing and/or experiencing various aspects of perceived 'nature'. These links to 'nature' had aural and visual aspects. Aurally, respondents noted the specific importance of 'natural sounds' – participants suggested that 'hearing wildlife' was important, and 'wind through leaves' was also a popular response.

For many people, experiencing 'the landscape', a 'natural landscape', or elements of it, was a key component of tranquillity. Some respondents focused on general, or large scale features, suggesting 'beautiful scenery' and 'wild landscapes'. Others focused on elements of a 'rolling countryside' some identifying a range of additional landscape 'types' or key characteristics such as 'fields', 'glades' and 'moors'. Some responses focused on even smaller scale features, such as 'beautiful flora and fauna'. The 'sound of water, rivers, waves' was the highest ranked response at verification and 'the sea' was also strongly supported as something you hear *and* as something you see in a tranquil place. Many respondents focused on greenery, noting the importance of 'natural colours' and 'plenty of greenery'. Others focused on the importance of views, far horizons and open landscape, space, and remoteness. Respondents also commented on more human-related aspects, suggesting tranquil places would be safe and well maintained.

Peace, quiet and calm – tranquillity of the mind

Tranquillity was also considered to be extremely important by many respondents for a range of personal reasons. Respondents repeatedly suggested that tranquillity is about peace, calm and quietness, incorporating the notion of peace as an absence of noise, and about being 'at peace'. As one respondent argued, 'it's a place where you feel at peace, that is a 'feeling' rather than absolute peace'; another described it as a 'state of mind when in nice surroundings'. The importance of 'solitude' in having a tranquil experience was frequently mentioned.

What is not tranquillity?

A large majority of the responses to the question 'what is not tranquillity?' focused on the impact of humans in a variety of different forms. At a general level, it was the mere presence of humans that detracted from tranquillity for many respondents, particularly 'too many' people. Certain types of behaviour and activities undertaken by people were considered as detracting from tranquillity, much of which revolved around the issue of unwanted noise and disturbance (both visual and aural).

The negative impacts of various forms of transport and vehicles were commented upon by a number of respondents. Car noise was repeatedly identified as something you do not hear in a tranquil place. Motorbikes, quad bikes, aeroplanes and military aircraft were also often mentioned. A more general form of negative impact concerned various forms of 'development' in the landscape, particularly any that was perceived to be 'too commercialised' and 'industrial sounds'.

Results from verification

The verification events largely confirmed the primary themes apparent in the main research, and suggested that there is considerable agreement amongst the respondents concerning core perceptions of what tranquillity is and is not. For example, in the northeast some responses received a greater than equal share of participants' votes: the top 5 per cent of the responses received 23 per cent of the votes cast. There were 382 different responses, and 16 of them received more than 50 votes, with 366 scoring less. The more commonly chosen responses tended to be those of a more general nature, with the 'tail' being comprised of a range of more specific responses.

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Reflections on work to date and methodological development

There are a number of issues concerning adequate planning and preparations that require addressing in future work based on experiences from the Chilterns extensive work. Experiences there have highlighted that it is hard to find locally-based volunteers to act as trained facilitators unless sufficient preparation time (4-6 months) is included, especially when a significant time commitment is required (to attend a training course in PA for example). Moreover even after a 5-day course local volunteers need support to ensure consistency of approach in interviewing. However, beyond the ethics and principles of including/empowering local people, from a practical perspective such local knowledge is vital for knowing where and when to go. Such issues have clear implications for commissioners of any future work regarding the need for accurate and supportive project timetabling, and financial support.

Initial face-to-face meetings in the local area are essential, with free flowing channels of communication and a detailed mutual understanding of what is being committed to, and expected of the local volunteers. The latter should be advertised for and should not all be from one society or source. It is envisaged that future work will largely follow the Chilterns 'model' unless sufficient time and resources are identified to allow for sufficient local preparations – external facilitators will carry out the PA work, taking volunteers along with them and mentoring them, with the training course at the end, to leave the skills behind. This should also allow a consistent approach between different areas.

Finally, and whilst removing the 'subjectivity' of the researcher, the Chilterns verification approach left too many options to choose from, and meant that participants were bewildered, bored or did not have the time to vote on more than one section. Reflections on both these approaches have pointed towards a combination of a final event and more rigorous theming of responses by research participants themselves during the research phase.

Conclusions

The Mapping Tranquillity project set out to develop a methodology that was robust and had the potential to support a range of activities, particularly land-use and landscape planning and Environmental Impact Assessment. The approach developed to date (and it is still developing) both meets these requirements and satisfies the criticisms that have been made of previous approaches to tranquillity mapping. It is founded in broad-based consultation of countryside users as well as stakeholder groups. While tranquillity may be a personal experience, there are places where it is more likely to be experienced. Although tranquillity merits a mention in a variety of documents, policies and reviews, unless the experiential or 'felt' aspects of landscape are considered alongside more easily quantified characteristics, landscape, countryside and environmental quality can only be partially accounted for.

Further reading

Countryside Agency Research Notes can also be viewed on our website: www.countryside.gov.uk