Included outside: Engaging people from ethnic minority backgrounds in nature

Evidence Briefing

First published September 2022

Natural England Technical Information Note TIN185

www.gov.uk/natural-england

Project details

Engagement with nature has been shown to have a range of health and wellbeing benefits. However, evidence from Natural England's Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE) survey – and its successor the People and Nature Survey – shows that that nature spaces in rural and urban environments are not accessed equally by all and that factors including age, ethnicity and socio-economic status seem to play a role in this picture. Natural England therefore commissioned this series of Evidence Briefings called 'Included Outside' to bring together, in user-friendly formats, existing evidence on barriers to engagement with nature, and lesson from interventions to overcome them for particular under-represented groups.

Each Briefing focuses on a different 'group' that is under-represented in nature and the outdoors (although it is important to note that these groups do overlap, and this is highlighted as well): older people, people from ethnic minority backgrounds, people living with disabilities and people living in low-income areas. The Briefings give an overview of the barriers and enablers for engaging in nature for each group as well as relevant case studies and resources.

The Summary Report looks at the similarities and differences between the barriers and enablers for each group, and explores issues of 'intersectionality' (the ways in which social identities and related inequalities are connected and cross-cutting). It also describes the methodology used for reviewing the evidence sources and highlights key learning for the development and evaluation of inclusive nature engagement.

The aim is for these Briefings to provide a resource for organisations and individuals working to broaden engagement in nature and the outdoors so that they can get a better understanding of what the evidence says about barriers and also build on what works.

Natural England commission a range of reports from external contractors to provide evidence and advice to assist us in delivering our duties. The views in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of Natural England.

This report should be cited as:

Rishbeth, C., Neal, S., French, M. and Snaith, B. (2022) *Included outside: Engaging people from ethnic minority backgrounds in nature*. Evidence Briefing, Natural England Technical Information Note, TIN185. Natural England, York.

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Keywords

Barriers to nature, diversity and inclusion, public engagement, recreation and access, Natural England Technical Information Note

Further information

This report can be downloaded from the Natural England Access to Evidence Catalogue: **http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/**. For information on Natural England publications contact the Natural England Enquiry Service on 0300 060 3900 or e-mail **enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk**.

Contents

Enjoying time in natural environments and nature connections

While it is important to challenge the stereotype of people from ethnic minorities as ‘inherently urban’ [50], there are higher percentages of ethnic minority residents in UK cities and towns [41] which means that urban greenspaces can be especially important for many people in this group. Nature is often experienced as part of everyday journeys and practices, such as walking children to school or shopping [37]. There are distinctions in how individuals from different ethnic minority backgrounds experience nature, and in their preferences for recreational time in natural environments, which often endure in different ways across generations born in the UK [51,54].

Ratna’s ethnographic research details the appreciation of local neighbourhood environments and sociability of relaxed walking by Gujarati Indian men and women now living in England [44]. Being part of a group to enjoy ‘togetherness’ is an important value across many cultures [7, 39] and how greenspace is often appreciated, especially when there is enough space for larger families and gatherings. Multi-use spaces in ethnically diverse urban areas are important, so that children can play while parents meet friends, with opportunities for all to exercise and relax [32,37,54].

Sensory qualities of nature (blossom, birds, water, trees, flowers) as well as scenic views can provide deep cultural connections with nature in a space, providing a sense of identity across the life course, especially for migrants who had childhood experiences in other countries [45,46]. Recently arrived migrants, though facing many barriers, also talk about curiosity and delight in new landscapes, appreciating the seasonal qualities of northern European landscapes [37,45,46].

This is a highly diverse group of people

People from backgrounds of migration heritages have many different life histories and levels of affluence. Yet, there is a persistent pattern of people from ethnic minority backgrounds being more likely to live in low-income and green-deprived areas [41,15], and in England, Black people are four times as likely than White people to have no access to a garden or balcony [40]. However, it is also important to emphasise that there are people from ethnic minority backgrounds across all socio-economic categories, sectors and professions, hence the distinction between this evidence briefing and the one which focuses on engaging people living in lower income neighbourhoods in nature.

Some communities relevant to this briefing are first generation migrants, often still with important connections to family elsewhere. Many others are born in the UK and have extremely varied ways of identifying -- or not -- with older generations. Individual migrant histories are very important and a sense of local belonging can be informed by specific reasons for settling in the UK, with forced migration shaping very specific circumstances for refugees and asylum seekers [46]. Religious affiliation and faith identities are important for many people from ethnic minority groups, with patterns of religious practice informing daily life in different ways for different people.

Common reasons that limit opportunities for people from ethnic minority backgrounds to enjoy nature

Experiences of unwelcome visibility and racism when spending time in the natural environment. People from ethnic minority backgrounds can feel or be made to feel 'out of place' in many natural environments where the other visitors and/or residents are predominantly White (for example in most rural areas of the UK). The sense of heightened visibility as well as experiences of racism can increase feelings of exclusion and vulnerability in nature spaces and lead to concerns about racial harassment in the natural environment. The data on racism and race hate crime in greenspace show how pressing these concerns are [13,16, 36,39].

Experiences of, and concerns about, racism and racialisation can mean that some nature spaces, particularly National Parks and rural spaces, are under-used as Black and ethnic minority people feel as though they do not belong, are stereotyped, or that they don't fit in with expectations of other users [1,11,32,39]. The Lincolnshire based Black poet, Benjamin Zephaniah, was approached by police while out running in the countryside on account of local reports of 'a suspicious jogger' [8]. Being perceived as 'out-of-place' to the extent of being targeted as a criminal is echoed by many stories across different national contexts where people from ethnic minority backgrounds are assumed not to be legitimate nature enthusiasts or users of natural environments [26].

The ongoing burden for many of needing to avoid racial harassment means that judging whether a place feels ‘safe’ is a key reason in deciding where to spend time [47]. These everyday ‘out of place’ experiences can mean it is easier to engage time and energies elsewhere. This is likely to be one reason why relatively few environmental volunteers are from ethnic minority backgrounds [14,53].

Cultural variation in how people want to spend time in natural environments. Alongside the importance of confronting stereotypes about ‘who is seen to belong’ in nature, it is also important to recognise how different cultural and historical experiences shape what different ethnic communities value and how they spend their leisure time [12,52]. Types of leisure that are relevant and engaging to individuals are, in part, culturally defined [1,32,24]. For instance, Janvaria’s research discusses how cycling by women is perceived to be culturally and religiously challenging by many within the UK Indian ethnic community [23].

Specific differences are sometimes relevant: for example, Snaith [51] found that picnicking in extended family groups was a common activity for British Pakistani people, but not for British Bangladeshi people living in London. From her quantitative analysis, she also found that people from South Asian and Black ethnic minority backgrounds placed a higher emphasis than White respondents on desiring urban greenspace to be clean [51]. Perceptions of dirt and dog mess were likely to deter visiting because of a sense that this indicated a place that is not a healthy environment [17,51].

Free access for dogs to all areas is a problem. While dogs can be ‘contact assets’, generating social interaction between different people in nature spaces, there are many -- especially older people and small children -- who are nervous around dogs. In addition, there are particular issues regarding contact with dogs for many people of Islamic faith due to rules of ritual cleanliness [51]. The UK national context, where there is a common presumption that dogs are allowed to run off-lead, therefore causes specific access issues for some people from ethnic minority backgrounds, particularly if they are Muslim, and can be a significant deterrent in visiting many natural environments and urban greenspaces.

Fitting in can be defined by class, migration histories, colonial legacies and cultural identifiers. Predominantly ‘White’ cultural values in greenspace design and management [2,10,12,51], coupled with the dominant presence of White people in such outdoor spaces, can mean that some natural environments may be experienced as being either irrelevant or exclusionary. While these experiences and perspectives are often not heard, they are increasingly being articulated by people from varied ethnic minority backgrounds living in a range of contexts in relation to different types of green, rural and upland spaces [14,30,31,32,36,39,48,55].

The evidence shows that underlying concerns about ‘fitting in’ are complex. For more recent migrants, it might relate to feeling a need to understand more about expectations about ways of behaving in greenspace and rural areas, knowing how to interpret ‘the rules,’ or concerns about doing something wrong by mistake [46,55]. For some, it may be about clothing, what to wear in more ‘adventurous’ locations [55] or wearing clothes different to other people. Women and girls who wear scarves sometimes feel judged, stereotyped or harassed for this [5] and, though generally accepting summer sunbathing as a usual activity in the UK, some female park users who wear headscarves can feel uncomfortable when other park users are stripping off [51].

More broadly, colonial legacies and historic understandings of a less diverse ‘national identity’ have shaped perceptions and experiences of the English countryside [36,13,22], and these are not often openly discussed. These can continue to shape lived experiences of trauma and exclusion, and a sense that the complexity of social history and landscape is not being fully discussed [18,30].

Lessons from the evidence for supporting better access and meaningful inclusion

Representation matters in challenging assumptions. One priority is to increase awareness within the environmental sector of how people in nature spaces are represented so that meaningful and practical inclusion becomes the norm [55]. Increasing the range of ways in which different people might enjoy natural environments, broadening a sense of what is interesting and relevant often leads to a more diverse visitor profile [39 and case studies]. One key tool is through more considered use of images as discussed in Natural England's 'Nature Visuals' guidance[1].

More fundamentally, training and awareness-raising within organisations about inclusion, recreation and nature engagement, as well as increasing the ethnic diversity of staff in the sector is vital [6,9,28, see also Mya-Rose Craig's work in 'further reading']. Urgent action regarding leadership representation is needed, with Backbone being a primary enabler in this area [25]. Another important dimension is the visibility and acknowledgement of different and sometimes problematic histories [22,30,31], and finding creative methods in which people can engage with this.

[1] Nature visuals: Diversity in images of England's green and natural spaces - NECR375 (naturalengland.org.uk)

Free access for dogs to all areas is a problem for many (human and non-human), and a specific equality issue for some. Ensuring dogs are kept on leads or there are dog-free areas is a key mechanism for increasing greenspace visits by people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds [54]. While there can be resistance from dog owners, often such initiatives also align with biodiversity goals, and it is helpful to state this where relevant [35].

Dog management is increasingly being used as a proactive conservation measure, and depending on type of greenspace, location and biodiversity needs, may include dog-run areas in parks (rather than a small dog-free area), seasonal dog-free zones (many beaches, moorlands), or restrictions on dog walking at particular times of the year and/or day [4,21,35]. It's important that dog control policies are clearly communicated not just to dog owners on site but also as part of the 'what to expect' information available to all potential visitors.

Increase the diversity of ways in which people can spend time in nature spaces. Leisure preferences and practices do change, so diversifying activities on offer in natural spaces is an on-going beneficial strategy, and many spaces such as country parks are extremely good at innovating in this regard. A good starting point is understanding the range of interests and needs of a wide range of people and increasing the diversity of recreational options and variation of programming in nature spaces [42,7,20]. It may also mean "open the doors in the evening when they want to visit" [27].

Connecting with people's identities, preferences, and aspirations is best developed through discussion and ongoing engagement, including gradually changing perceptions that you don't need to be "outdoorsy" to enjoy spending time in nature [55]. For example, over the summer months Newham Council campsite in Epping Forest has a 'day field' (no overnight stays) with BBQ stands, which is regularly open to people to drive in and picnic next to their cars. Music is allowed and all dogs need to be on leads. This nature space provides the comfort and ease of one's own small 'base' and has proved to be a highly attractive day out for people from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, distinctly different to the user profile found elsewhere in the forest.

Accepting diverse perceptions and enjoyments of what is 'nature'. Culture and nature are in continuous interaction and can be defined in varied ways, with many people enjoying the 'non wild' form [51]. In particular, valuing urban everyday nature is important in reflecting the genuine nature connections of communities who are less able or interested in visiting rural areas [5,20, case study London National Park City].

However, greenspace design and management can sometimes represent a narrow view of what qualifies as desirable 'taste' [19,51, 53] or lack critical reflection on assumptions about the uses and users of greenspace and what is 'normal' [10,14,26,39]. The video series made by City Girl in Nature (see further reading) highlights how an openness towards widely varied ways of engaging with nature allows diverse community heritages to be reflected.

Confidence for accessing 'wilder' or 'remote' natural environments. Increasingly people from ethnic minorities are defining and facilitating their own contact and connection with nature through the use of socially safe spaces, whether defined by gender, religion, ethnicity or overlaps of these [29]. In the case studies in this briefing, we highlight some of these initiatives and the role of community leaders in instigating and maintaining them. Working long-term and with meaningful input into decision making with diverse groups of local residents or potential visitors can lead to better representation [6,14]. Group activities are a way to ensure safety and quality [6], and to build individual confidence and skills [49], especially where communities have historically experienced high levels of exclusion [2,39].

Confidence for making full use of 'near home' natural environments. Prioritising safety and perceptions of safety need to be integral to greenspace provision for communities who have good reason to be wary of harassment [47]. Stories and memories of what has happened in a place can be very powerful. If a crime has happened in a specific location that story will be retold and shared for many years, and new community narratives of reclaiming spaces may be needed [38].

Design which allows people to feel safe [47], such as clear and well-used pathways through a nature area, are important to reduce fear of criminality, both in urban greenspace and in rural areas [43]. This does not mean that everywhere needs to be busy to feel safe, however. Finding tranquillity and privacy is also valued as a quality of spending time in natural environments [5,38]. Spiritual and religious dimensions of these, such as praying outdoors, were also discussed as important during interviews with first generation migrants living in Sheffield [45].

Case Studies

Croydon "Destination Parks" Equalities Impact Assessment

An Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) of proposed landscape and policy changes formed part of a wider study commissioned by the London Borough of Croydon (2017). The council was seeking to investigate the potential for change in the context of increased population growth and diminishing funding. Six 'destination' parks were investigated, ranging from neighbourhood spaces to historic urban recreation grounds, and from spaces for borough-wide sporting and cultural events to wooded Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in the chalk downlands.

There was widespread resident and stakeholder engagement, from in-depth interviews and workshops to large-scale surveys with local residents. The project team engaged with over 1,000 people in face-to-face surveys and received input from over 2,000 residents online. Engagement reached not only park users, but included people who rarely visited or made little use of Croydon's greenspaces. The EIA process revealed that early stages of

the study had not reached a representative sample of participants by age, ethnicity or gender, and that this was skewing baseline information. Further baseline engagement work resulted, targeting particular sectors of the community who had so far been under–represented.

Ethnicity, age and gender were shown to influence reasons for park visits, preferred activities and infrastructure, disliked features, and the likelihood that dislikes would limit the frequency of visits. The EIA and community engagement therefore allowed Croydon to understand what was important for different residents, and to prioritise investment accordingly.

Takeaway point: Equalities Impact Assessments can be hugely valuable in understanding how places are valued and perceived by different visitors and potential visitors and in helping providers be accountable and equitable in setting their priorities. However, they are only as good as the care taken to ensure representative sampling of respondents.

Lloyd Park EIA example: Croydon Destination Parks Masterplanning: Lloyd Park

Dadima's Countryside Walks and Talks

Dr Geeta Ludhra (Chilterns Conservation Board Member) leads the innovative walking group 'Dadima's Countryside Walks and Talks', which are designed to change the narrative of the countryside.

"Walking is my form of gentle activism, as I create a space that I never saw or felt part of, and slowly change the narrative. I hear new stories, notice new beauty, and put modern-day life challenges into perspective. […] When I see communities enjoying Dadima's walks, I know that Mother Nature is smiling upon us, laughing with us, and protecting us - through her wise elements."

These free walks, offered within the overall programme of the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), create a welcoming space for people from diverse backgrounds to walk and talk together, share stories, and enjoy a connection with nature. They are intentionally intergenerational, inviting children, grandparents and people of all ages to join in - enhancing health and wellbeing in many ways, these walks encourage the sharing of personal stories as well as learning about the countryside in which they happen.

The cultural dimension of these walks distinguishes the programme somewhat from peer-led walking groups. Participants are encouraged to bring and share home-cooked heritage recipes, promoting cooking from scratch "like our grandparents and ancestors did". Dr Ludhra also invites a range of experts and enthusiasts along to take part in different walks, share their expertise, and stimulate additional discussion and co-learning.

The cultural heritage of her walkers is entwined in the ethos of all the walks, and sometimes given centre stage through walk titles such as 'Saris, Salwaars & Boots: Samosas, Chai & Chutney', through activities highlighted "sharing migration stories… and

cultural wisdom/heritage", and by the encouragement of sharing food "bring vegetarian Indian snacks to share if you wish".

Takeaway point: Walking together is a simple act and can mean different things at different times. Explicitly including personal stories within the setting acknowledges diverse cultural heritages, can surface a more complex and honest relationship with changing rural landscapes, and allows for diverse ways of belonging.

Website: Dadima's Countryside Walks & Talks: 2022 Programme

Blak Outside (Carole Wright)

Blak Outside is a multi-disciplinary creative collective founded by urban activist, community gardener, and beekeeper Carole Wright. Building on thirty years of Carole's community work advocacy and engagement with nature and growing in inner city social housing areas, Blak Outside is embedded in cultural experiences of urban life and outside space. The collective brings together around 50 practitioners, working across art, spatial politics and community practice to provide culturally diverse and inclusive events, and the annual grass roots, intergenerational Blak Outside Festival. The collective, their outputs and the events they produce are actively supportive of working class social housing residents, and the QTIBIPOC (queer, trans, intersex, Black, indigenous, people of colour) community.

Wright's creative work includes community projects, growing, cooking, walking, mapping and walks exploring connections with and experiences of being outdoors, with charities, organisations and institutions like Whitehouse Dagenham, Tate Modern, the Landscape Institute, Peabody Trust, or St Mungo's. Wright currently manages two community gardens in Southwark, South London, where she regularly works with primary and secondary school students, housing estate residents and housing managers and local councillors.

Recent projects include a Serpentine Fellowship "Support Structures for Support Structures" 2021-22, Blak Outside 2021 Creative Resilience; Blak Outside 2020 Festival (The Garden Museum and Peabody Blackfriars, London, 2020); Walking my Manor (Cordwainers Grow, London, 2020); Walking whilst being Blak Outside (Industria Publication, 2020); IFLA World Congress (Oslo, Norway, 2019), The Big Lunch (Eden Project, 2019); Penfold Medicinal Garden (The Showroom, London, 2018).

Takeaway point: find out who is doing excellent work and see how you might be able to support them, join in, add value and increase their resource. Nature here is not confined to an 'environmental sector' but part of local cultural activity.

Instagram: @blak_outside

Facebook page: Blak Outside

Further readings and resources

#RefugeesWelcome in Parks

This resource book gives an insight into the experiences of refugee and asylum seeker park users, highlights relevant barriers and expectations, and offers ideas for engagement and inclusion approaches.

Website: Refugees Welcome in Parks

See also Gardens of Sanctuary website: Gardens of Sanctuary

Peer-led outdoor activity groups

These groups are increasing in number, increasing in diversity of outdoor activities, and increasing in profile. However, they are often not necessarily increasingly well-resourced; so, if reaching out, it is important to think about what your organisation has to offer.

Websites:

- Boots and Beards
- Black Girls Hike UK
- Muslim Hikers
- Black Unity Bike Ride

Web article from Now Then, a Magazine for Sheffield: Peaks of Colour Walking Group

Black2Nature

This is a Visible Minority Ethnic (VME) led organisation set up by Mya-Rose Craig to support young people from VME communities to learn about nature and spend time in natural environments. Mya-Rose also campaigns for more diverse and equitable representation in the environmental sector.

Webpage: Black 2 Nature

The Museum of English Rural Life (MERL): changing perceptions in the countryside

The Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) is located within the University of Reading and has an extensive online presence. This resource is a series of conversations with people of colour about their experiences in the countryside.

Webpage: Changing Perspectives in the Countryside

Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh

Ideas of collecting, alien plants and colonial histories are increasingly being considered in horticultural contexts, with the Royal Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh setting out some of the challenges and approaches here.

Webpage: Edinburgh Royal Botanic Garden's Work on Equity and Access

Access to nature in the countryside – Campaign to Protect Rural England 2021 report

There are a wealth of insights and findings relating to access to the English countryside for people of colour, informed by participant-led research and including many accounts by people from varied backgrounds and heritages.

Webpage with link to pdf of the report: Access to Nature in the English Countryside research report

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ISBN 978-1-78354-981-8

Catalogue code: TIN185

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