

Included outside: Engaging older people in nature

Evidence Briefing

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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.

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Natural England Project managers

Cheryl Willis -- Principal Adviser, Connecting People with Nature programme

Alexia Coke – Senior Specialist, Social Science team, Chief Scientist's Directorate

Contractor

University of Sheffield, UK

Authors

Clare Rishbeth – Senior Lecturer, Department of Landscape Architecture

Sarah Neal – Professor, Department of Sociological Studies

Morag French – Research Associate, Department of Landscape Architecture

Bridget Snaith – Lecturer, Department of Landscape Architecture

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Further information

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Enjoying time in natural environments and nature connections

Many older people are frequent users of natural environments, but ways of using these and the value of time in nature can often change in later life [20]. This can be due to taking on different care responsibilities (partners, grandchildren), adjusting to more limited personal mobility, reducing or stopping driving, and adapting to new social patterns due to bereavement or through moving into supported residential settings [4].

At a time in life where it is often easier, and sometimes expected, to spend more time indoors, spending time outdoors can mitigate a sense of being lonely and ‘shut away’ [1]. For older people with fewer daily responsibilities, the way that known local greenspaces and gardens change seasonally can provide continual interest and create shared talking points with others [14,22,24]. This connection to a place and to nature can be important to many, especially so perhaps to those who are living through loss and grief [15].

Clearly not all older people are socially isolated, and the social context of parks and local nature spaces can be highly valued as places to spend time with others including partners, friends and extended family [29]. Retirement can be a life stage with more time and varied opportunities to continue interests in natural environments or engaging with nature, whether gardening, fishing, birdwatching, enjoying local heritage or simply relaxing in natural spaces [3].

This is a highly diverse group of people

'Older' can be defined differently in different contexts, sometimes from fifty years on, but also many years older, given the increasing number of people who are centenarians (have reached the age of 100). In this briefing note, we focus on the experiences of people who are past retirement age, though the evidence base will include research with a range of age boundaries. Within this wide age span, there is significant diversity of life experience, with many healthy and financially secure individuals being comparatively high users of natural environments.

However, there is increased likelihood of older people experiencing limiting factors related to visits to outdoor locations - such as illness, limited walking range, poverty, no access to a car – as well as changes over time related to these issues, especially in later life. Life histories, cultural background, care responsibilities, residential location and local geographies are important differentiating factors. Information and priorities outlined in the Evidence Briefing on engaging people living with disabilities in nature within this 'Included Outside' series of information notes will be particularly relevant for many older people and their engagement in nature.

Common reasons that limit opportunities for older people to enjoy nature

Older people often have to adjust to changes in living circumstances. It is important to understand how this informs individual choices and wellbeing priorities [7]. Diminishing social circles resulting from relocation to be nearer family or living alone after loss of a partner or the death of close life-long friends can result in increased social isolation and loneliness. Not knowing anyone else who wants to join you for a walk can limit confidence to venture into natural environments [14] and can lead to a sense of a decline in relevant skills and abilities [20].

At a broader scale, the under-representation of older people in nature spaces can contribute to social perceptions of a lack of interest in nature within this group, and stereotypes that outdoor activity is therefore unimportant to older people. This can be particularly the case for people living with life-limiting illnesses such as dementia [11,13].

Growing older can sometimes be accompanied by a loss of self-confidence and feeling 'low'. This can be triggered or exacerbated by individual concerns about physical limitations such as fear of falling, toilet requirements and decreasing stamina [28]. Anxiety about weather, particularly cold and rainy days, is known to reduce participation in outdoor physical activity in this group [14]. Some older people might also perceive elements and activities as 'socially frightening' (loud music, young people gathering, dogs off a lead), in part because they reduce a sense of tranquillity [21].

All these factors can combine to negatively impact on how greenspace wellbeing opportunities are perceived and experienced by older people [7]. This can reduce both the

number and duration of visits to natural environments by some older people, especially if a place is unfamiliar [14,18] and it is not easy to access relevant information about the site in advance.

Transport is a key issue for this user group. Many older people do not have access to a car and may be reliant on family or friends to give them lifts. Living at a distance from greenspace makes it more challenging to incorporate visiting into daily life [5,9,26]. While the cost of public transport is currently helped in part by free bus passes for older adults, routes to more rural areas are often infrequent and unreliable or simply don't go to preferred places [8,9].

Public transport can often be awkward to access with wheelchairs or walking frames and particularly difficult for those with mobility scooters, with spaces limited often to only a single mobility aid. Issues of physical access are often greatest for those who can least afford to find ways around them (for example, travel costs) but who may gain particular benefits [20,21].

Lessons from the evidence for supporting better access and meaningful inclusion



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Prioritise nature near home. To respond to some of the substantive mobility issues that many older people experience, it is important to support initiatives which improve ways to be close to nature near home. This requires recognising that older people live in many different locations: cities, towns, coastal and rural areas. Facilitating short visits to nearby greenspace can build confidence and social connections, for example through group walks that are designed to be appropriate to the levels of stamina of those involved [14].

Small nature-themed activities or short visits act as stepping stones to longer sessions outside. Taking part can help foster a core part of self-identity when an older person has a longstanding fascination with nature. Planting seeds, potting plants and eating outside in fresh air are some examples of activities to involve people who are living with dementia [11,18]. The 'Wild at Heart' case study below has many useful ideas.

Cafes in natural environments can provide useful starting points. Spending time inside the café can provide nature connection benefits when there are good views out. A building with good vantage points and information resources can be helpful in being able to pre-view possible walks, so that individuals can make or adapt plans depending on their energy levels that day and the current weather conditions. Walking in nature with a dog can also be enjoyable and therapeutic for older people, especially when other aspects of life are hard, such as during times of grieving or ill-health [17,15].

Views of nature from windows from both public and home buildings are important to many older people, and small interior or exterior adjustments (position of seating, bird feeders) can enhance these [22] (see Stepchange Design resources in 'further reading' below). Nature-themed activities can also be held indoors (as in the Wild at Heart case study below). Many older people enjoy television programming related to wildlife, gardening and natural environments as ways of continuing their own nature interests, and there are increasingly innovative ways to embed and enhance the 'outdoors but indoors' experience through technologies such as live streaming webcams.

Provide a way to be sociable in nature. Facilities that allow a 'stop for a cuppa', use of a toilet and companionship at tables can be the highlight of a day out: "a loo, a brew and something to do" [12]. Meeting and chatting with other similar aged participants can often be important to encourage people to try new things: different routes, different distances and different types of nature space [14].

Enhancing an older person's expectation of what a full and interesting life can include may build their connections with nature in a way that also encourages social connections, being active, taking notice of the present, learning, and giving -- all of which have been shown to be important pathways to wellbeing [25,27]. Carers are also important to consider and offering activities that carers can do alongside the person they are caring for (rather than having to be the responsible one) can take some of the pressure off and give a small period of respite [11].

Ensure good site infrastructure and information. High quality infrastructure is important for many people and the presence of cafes, toilets and outdoor seating are key considerations for many older people in deciding whether to visit a place [23]. Lack of toilets is a significant barrier to visiting many natural environments, especially those which are more remote. Café provision is extremely welcome, both due to reduced physical endurance that limit more active ways of spending time in a location, and as a way of supporting socialising for many older people. Buildings such as cafes are also significant as places where everyone knows it is possible to receive help if encountering difficulties.

Outside, consideration should be given to the need for benches to enable older people to take short breaks as they walk around a site. These are appreciated by many people but can be fundamentally linked to how far an older person is able to explore [10]. Good quality paths (surfaced, free of obstacles) were found by researchers to be crucial in enabling older people to spend longer periods of time in parks [19]. In addition, accessibility information needs to be available in a range of formats to support decision-making in advance of visits as well as on site [11].

Case Studies

Wild at Heart

‘Wild at Heart’ is a programme delivered by Sheffield & Rotherham Wildlife Trust which provides nature-based activity sessions for older adults (over fifty years of age, mostly located in low-income areas). The aim is to support this age group in connecting with nature, and through this to boost their wellbeing. Individuals are signposted from a community organisation or healthcare professional or can book themselves onto a group at minimal cost.

One key distinction of Wild at Heart compared to many other nature engagement initiatives is that many of the sessions are indoors. This makes it highly accessible for people who would find it initially challenging to spend longer outside. Nature Connection Activity Sessions take place at a range of local venues and include nature-based arts and crafts, wild-inspired cooking, wildlife gardening, and learning to look after local nature. Sessions are adapted to reflect the changing seasons and take a hobby-based approach to give people opportunities to try new things, gain the confidence to continue on their own, with family or friends, or with an environmental group.

The programme design builds on the 5 Pathways to Nature Connection - Sensing, Beauty, Meaning, Emotion and Compassion - to promote a meaningful and active relationship with nature (as informed by the University of Derby’s Nature Connectedness Research Group). The sessions are run by staff members from the Wildlife Trust, but many of the activities and places visited are suggested by participants or co-facilitated with them. Their local knowledge and personal interests are incorporated so as to celebrate the community’s heritage and to offer opportunities for individuals to reconnect with nature-based hobbies which hold personal meaning.

Takeaway point: Nature connection doesn’t have to be outside. Starting inside can build confidence and social connections before the uncertainties of outdoor visits. Engagement with and co-development of nature-based activities helps older people feel in touch with nature in ways that encourage shared personal stories and ongoing friendships.

Webpage: [Wild at Heart](#)

Stepping into Nature

Stepping into Nature is a project funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, which is based in Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and focuses on giving older residents enjoyable experiences of their rural and coastal heritage. They specialise in supporting people living with dementia, as well as their carers. The activities they facilitate, often working with local organisations, aim to enable 'positive risk taking' as well as draw on the varied sensory opportunities of the local landscape, history and wildlife. They have learnt not to inadvertently stigmatise their activities, noting something as 'dementia-friendly' rather than as 'a dementia walk'.

They also provide training and support to staff and volunteers, particularly from environmental organisations, about how best to engage people living with dementia in natural environments. In addition, they offer grants to community and local organisations who are seeking to improve the inclusivity and accessibility of their 'nature space'.

Takeaway point: Sharing expertise on inclusion with other organisations may be just as important as delivering services directly.

Webpage: [Stepping into Nature](#)

DalesBus

DalesBus has developed an integrated network of about fifteen bus routes during the summer months providing access for visitors into the heart of the Yorkshire Dales National Park, and Nidderdale and Forest of Bowland AONBs. It runs mainly on Sundays and Bank Holidays, providing car-free access from nearby cities and towns such as Leeds and Middlesbrough as well as providing much needed weekend transport for local residents. The DalesBus is not specifically targeted at older people, but demonstrates one format for providing a local bus service to nature sites from major towns at times when no other service is available, which is likely to be of particular benefit to older people.

One of the DalesBus volunteers explains the value of the service for older people: "We pick up a large number of older, single people who have been widowed or live on their own and for whom a trip to a national park is a lifeline to keep them sane."

And while its functional purpose is invaluable, it also fosters a network of enthusiasts through The Friends of DalesBus, a voluntary organisation associated with the Dales and Bowland Community Interest Company. Whilst membership of the Friends isn't specific to older users, it demonstrates how meeting access requirements can also have social and community benefits. Though primarily a campaign group for accessible and affordable transport, the Friends also run an annual programme of fundraising events. Activities include music events, winter socials, summer walks and afternoon teas as well as short walking holidays in the Yorkshire Dales or further afield.

Takeaway point: Transport is an essential component of access to nature for many older people. The DalesBus provides a means of exploration and connection for locals and day-visitors alike. Beyond providing transport between local towns and valued rural nature spaces, this case study also shows that creating something that is genuinely loved and valued can add social value through associated collaboration and activity that may be particularly important for older people.

Website: [Dales Bus](#)

Further readings and resources

Doorstep nature connections in care home settings

Debbie Carroll of Step Change Design has working in this area for many years and has produced evidence-based guidance, which can be found on her website. This includes 'The Designer Handbook for Creating Actively Used Care Setting Gardens', a 'Care Culture Map: why do we not go into the garden', and a library of resources, many free to access.

Website: [Step Change Design](#)

Cycling Without Age

Cycling Without Age is a movement to support older and less mobile people to get out and about in nature to 'feel the wind in their hair'. Volunteers pedal three-wheeled tri-bikes taking two passengers at a time, often care home residents, out to local parks or greenspaces.

Website: [Cycling without Age](#)

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