Included outside: Engaging people living in low-income areas 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.

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.

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Further information

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Enjoying time in natural environments and nature connections

In low-income neighbourhoods, home spaces can be overcrowded and in specific neighbourhoods many people may not have access to private gardens, yards or balconies. Public parks and squares are often used socially to meet up and spend leisure time with friends and wider family groups, especially if privacy at home is inadequate.

Having access to public greenspace can be especially valued as a place for relaxation, for enjoying nature and noticing seasonal change [4,23]. The provision of play facilities in parks is a key enabler for children and their parents, grandparents or carers to spend time outside [16]. Qualitative research with low-income, multi-ethnic families with young children in Bradford highlighted the value of nearby greenspace as a social resource [10]. Greenspaces which can be walked through on the way to school, work or the shops provide ‘easy to be in’ nature spaces and routine opportunities for connecting with nature [23].

This is a highly diverse group of people

Clearly there are a wide range of individual circumstances impacting residents of low-income areas, but research in a range of fields has highlighted a variety of social disparities related to neighbourhood characteristics. In general people living in lower income areas have higher levels of limiting and ongoing poor health [16,22], and these are

experienced in different ways over the life course. Some people living in low-income areas have highly busy lives, multiple jobs and care responsibilities. However, for many who are not in work or education (often related to personal health or care responsibilities) there are issues of isolation and boredom [7].

While an area may have a low household income on average, some households within this area will have higher incomes. The mix of household incomes can change over time, and sometimes when change happens more rapidly (often referred to as a processes of gentrification) this can raise issues of social polarisation within local greenspace [18]. Within this evidence briefing, we have focused primarily on the needs of the majority of residents living in low-income neighbourhoods who are financially stretched.

Low-income areas are usually associated with urban environments. Against this stereotype, there are high rates and many pockets of rural and coastal deprivation where, despite the higher scenic value, there can be lower access to recreational greenspace, such as parks and play facilities [5,11,13].

Common reasons that limit the opportunities for people living in low-income areas to enjoy nature

Lack of available greenspace. Low-income areas are less likely to have nearby, high quality greenspace. There is robust data that draws attention to the relationship between low income and low levels of greenspace, and a ‘strong correlation’ between ‘greenspace deprivation and ethnicity’ [14]. Not all types of local greenspace are easily recognisable as being of recreational value, for example urban woodlands may not be perceived as a place to visit compared with a park [33].

Prohibitive cost of accessing and spending time in natural environments. The costs involved in travelling to more distant nature or coastal spaces affect access and use of nature spaces for those on low incomes [27]. In lower income neighbourhoods there are, in general, lower levels of car ownership, and public transport can be expensive, complex to manage, or simply not connected to locations like nature reserves [30].

Many people have concerns about the expenses involved in using natural environments and this can act as a barrier to engagement [11]. These concerns might relate to buying food and drinks or paying for entry or activities; membership costs of conservation or environmental organisations is out of reach for most people on low incomes. It can also be about purchases relating to having the ‘right’ clothes, kit and equipment, and knowing what is vital and what is optional.

Importantly, this can make visiting natural environments, especially unfamiliar ones, ‘high risk’ activities. If someone decides to ‘treat themselves’ and it turns out not to be a good experience for a range of possible reasons (getting lost, people are not welcoming, it’s

raining, there is nowhere to sit, the children are bored) this can reinforce ongoing negative associations of nature space and decrease the motivation to do it again [19].

Greenspace can be perceived as harmful for health and wellbeing. Despite a normative assumption that spending time outdoors in greenspace is beneficial for health, this is more complex in lower income neighbourhoods. There are fewer health benefits related to low-quality and poorly maintained greenspaces [4,24]. Greenspaces, especially those which are poorly maintained or have dense vegetation, are often associated with fear of crime, violence, threat, racism, anti-social behaviour, negative events, stories and memories [16,31,34,17,21,25]. Similarly, while greenspaces are usually associated with positive environmental benefits, some studies have shown how people in low-income areas that may suffer from high levels of air pollution are concerned about spending time outside near road traffic [2].

Knowledge and information about nature spaces. Nature spaces other than local parks can seem very remote for many people living in low-income neighbourhoods. Accessibility barriers include not knowing about nature environments that support opportunities for recreation and a lack of information about how to get to them, what they offer, and guidance about what to do (or not do) [1,26]. This can act as a particular barrier to visiting more distant nature spaces and rural areas [19,35].

Gentrified nature space and feeling it's 'not designed for us'. Nature spaces, greenspace design and management, and the activities organised within them, tend to reflect middle class values and assumptions [31,35]. It is not often clearly acknowledged that low-income communities and people from working class backgrounds may have distinct cultures of nature engagement, and although financial accessibility is important, it is not the full story. It is important to develop a deep understanding of what preferences and values are under-represented in nature spaces and account for these in design principles. Some forms of activity which are more commonly accessed by people from middle/high income groups can crowd out the diversity of other activities and practices [10,24].

People with higher incomes can be the more obvious users of certain activities in natural environments and for people who are less well-represented this can generate a sense of feeling observed and judged [35]. People from lower income households can feel concerned about 'what's allowed' and the 'suitability' of activities for them, as well as the costs involved [12]. The increasing practice of the renting of public park space by local councils to event organisers for pay-to-enter music events and festivals can also create exclusionary experiences from a park visit [20].

Relevance of nature and various life pressures. In stressful and demanding lives, nature engagement can be a low priority. Some of these pressures relate to the sense of just not having enough 'time' for nature [8] but also to some of the time-related consequences and outcomes of being in nature spaces. Getting wet or muddy involves the costs and time of cleaning clothes and shoes, and can also be perceived as 'bad parenting' with dirtiness signifying neglect [9]. 'Messy nature' cleaning costs are experienced most acutely by rural low-income families [28].

Lessons from the evidence for supporting better access and meaningful inclusion

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Provide and resource multi-use nature space that can become part of 'essential' everyday activities. Multifunctional space is often key to supporting ways in which nature experiences can become part of such everyday activities such as taking children to school or doing the shopping. Natural environments that are well-loved and well-used often combine some or all of the following: something to do (for free or low-cost), facilities to eat and places to socialise with friends. Whether visiting a site can be combined with another task is also commonly a factor. This may be about location, but could also be about providing events that have a functional purpose (child entertainment, celebrating a seasonal or religious holiday, getting fit) alongside the often more nuanced pleasures of engaging with nature. It's useful if these multiple reasons for visiting can be clearly communicated to potential visitors [2,10,32].

Facilitated support to overcome hesitancies about accessing and using nature spaces. Hesitancy may be due to lack of confidence, concerns about safety and feelings of exclusion [9,29]. Often this means social forms of facilitation by trusted peers who also offer low-key role models for developing skills and self-assurance in accessing more unfamiliar natural environments [3]. Supporting people from under-represented groups to identify and deliver interventions and activities is the best approach, where feasible [6,29].

Work collaboratively and in partnership with local communities and under-represented groups. This is based on the principle that those who are taking part in an activity are best placed to help design it. The case studies demonstrate a range of methods for drawing on localised expertise. If feasible, finding mechanisms for supporting paid involvement of groups and individuals in strategy and decision-making can be both

practically important for individuals and ensure that their contribution is taken seriously. Whether or not payment is possible, it is important that contributions of time and energy meaningly inform action, otherwise this can be experienced as demoralising or even exploitative, increasing barriers to engagement rather than reducing them [3,6,15,24].

Affordability is vital for nature engagement. Developing understanding of the challenges of getting to a specific natural environment without a car and the cost of this, and then seeking ways to make travelling to the site easier and more affordable is a vital exercise to embed in organisational reviews (see the example of the 'DalesBus' partnership in the case studies in the Evidence Briefing on older people for one way to do this [5]). There may also be costs for visitors in terms of staying longer at a site, so ensuring that any food and drinks options cover a range of price points can also be helpful.

Case Studies

National Trust: Sunflowers at Rhosili

A field of sunflowers draws a wider-than-usual mix of visitors from nearby Swansea to enjoy a 'visual spectacle'. The flowers have significant value for pollinators, but in terms of human visitors they provide an immersive sensory experience and are extremely photogenic. This initiative is one component of a long term conservation approach in 'The Vile' on the Gower, alongside habitat creation such as hay meadows and hedgerow management.

For many visitors, walking in the sunflowers is the first step to this wider landscape, one that engages on a sensory level rather than one focused on environmental knowledge. The field provides an opportunity to take photographs of family and friends in nature and then share them online. The National Trust have reported a much higher diversity of visitors during 'sunflower season', with huge numbers using the social media hashtag as they share their pictures.

Takeaway point: Taking photos on phones and sharing them on social media can be thought of as a low cost leisure activity that is enjoyed by people across social groups. Highlighting 'nature settings' that reliably provide people with share-able moments can broaden their appeal, and in particular can positively reflect the seasonal qualities of the UK such as autumn colour or spring blossoms.

Webpage: Sunflowers at Rhosili

London National Park City

London National Park City (LNPC) is a community-grassroots movement that aims to make London "greener, healthier and wilder". Rather than conceptualise nature as something 'out there', LNPC is all about exploring, celebrating and learning about nature

as intrinsic to the character of London itself. From wildlife experiences to local activities and campaigns, LNPC acts as a catalyst and a communicator with the goal of giving an inspirational insight into the special qualities of urban nature.

By providing accessible and attractive information and events the organisation potentially introduces the delights of everything green and growing and moving to people living in dense urban contexts who might not think of their local area as 'nature'. And while parks and greenspaces feature prominently, it's also about gardens, citizen science, rivers, arts projects, birdwatching and paddle boarding.

One distinctive aspect of LNPC is its volunteer ranger programme. The call out is for 'passionate people' with a wide range of experiences and talents, who might be motivated to do different sorts of actions, whether creating hedgehog highways or cleaning up the Thames or campaigning for local transport options. While the volunteer rangers include ecologists, what is striking about the profiles of the 100+ rangers as given on the website is the range of their everyday jobs and home locations, with a slant towards younger people from across the city. This is an activist movement that manages to promote and support nature and wildlife connections in an extremely broad and accessible way, and through this attract a highly diverse group of people to feel part of the community.

Takeaway point: Rather than only 'consult' at the beginning of the process, LNPC ensure that a wide range of people are continuously involved in the development of the 'National Park City' idea and have accessible ways of exploring and communicating the meaning or opportunities of 'nature' within diverse communities and a large cityscape. The website is an exemplary mix of using creative but accessible digital formats to communicate enthusiasm and invitations to join in.

Website: London National City Park

Museum of English Rural Life, Reading

The Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) brings together historical and contemporary exhibitions, collections and creative activities through which to explore the lives, experiences and craft skills of rural people past and present. MERL works with a range of social historians and contemporary artists to provide community projects which explore the social and ethnic diversity of rural lives and rural craft skills and make the global and colonial connections of the countryside visible.

One recent example of this approach to showing how social class is embedded in rural histories and nature cultures has been MERL's involvement in the 1918 Allotment project. In this project the artist, JC Niala, has recreated a physical allotment plot in Oxford using heritage seeds. The 1918 Allotment project explores the connections between growing plants and vegetables and rural communities and world events. The Allotment 1918 project shows how in the 1918 flu pandemic allotments were called on to produce food for the nation. The project not only highlights the craft skills of working class allotment growers but also shows how keeping allotments was a practice and skill that migrated to

urban working-class areas, with allotments becoming established greenspaces in urban environments (and ultimately cultivated also by affluent residents, and not just for subsistence living). MERL's exhibitions and creative activities work as reminders of the diversity of rural histories and the ways in which rural lives and the countryside were (and are) connected to urban spaces.

Takeaway point: Through its exhibitions and arts-based local and national activities MERL highlights and recognises working class and other communities whose connections, skills and relationships with rural nature spaces have been marginalised or lost. In doing so it provides inclusive routes for those who are under-represented in rural nature spaces to (re)connect with and relate to the countryside.

Webpage: Changing Perspectives in the Countryside

Further readings and resources

Outside Voices

Outside Voices is an e-book published by the YHA that asks 'who is the outdoors for'? And how comfortable do people feel there? It is a collection of interviews, poetry and graphic storytelling representing the perspectives and experiences of many people who don't think of themselves as 'outdoorsy'.

Website: Outside Voices

City Girl in Nature

Kwesia grew up in Deptford, South London. She regularly publishes expertly curated video interviews and explorations on themes of belonging, culture, wonder and nature connection alongside people living in inner city locations, who she describes as 'often neglected, excluded and marginalized' with regard to natural environments.

Website: City Girl in Nature

Clapton Park Estate 'The Poppy Estate'

John Little was the grounds manager for this social housing area in London (tenant-managed organisation), and over the course of fifteen years found multiple inventive ways to redirect money from grass-mowing to habitat creation, re-skilling his maintenance team to work with local residents as collaborators and growers.

Webpage: Clapton Park Estate: The Poppy Estate

Joanne Coates – storyteller

Joanne has been 'artist in residence' in a range of locations in the north of England, committed to exploring working class rural connections and communities primarily through the medium of photography.

Website: Joanne Coates

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