

# Accessing the Countryside: Barriers and Best Practice

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**The following paper identifies the barriers people face in accessing the countryside and the initiatives being undertaken to help address these barriers.**

In a national context, public rights in terms of countryside access have been enshrined in several major pieces of legislation, such as the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act. While making provision for access these made no account of equality of access or individual rights. More recent legislation, the key ones being the Human Rights, Race Relations and Disability Discrimination Acts have required statutory bodies and, by implication, those they support to make adequate provision to enable disadvantaged groups to have equal opportunities to access facilities, services and activities which in principle are for everyone. The Forestry Commission, for example, is undertaking research to provide information that will assist them in fulfilling its duties under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 addressing issues such as “How and to what extent do the attitudes and perceptions of specific ethnic minority groups influence their use of public and private woodlands in the district?” Perhaps as a result of these legislative changes and pressure from rights groups the Rural White Paper 2000 contained the following commitment:

*By 2005, we will carry out a full diversity review of how we can encourage more people with disabilities, more people from ethnic minorities, more people from the inner cities, and more young people to visit the countryside and participate in country activities. Initially we will do this by seeking their views on what they need to enjoy the countryside. Then we will draw up a plan of action.*

As a result of this, extensive research has been undertaken in the last five years on barriers to access in the UK countryside from many agencies / organisations such as:

- The Countryside Agency (and to a lesser extent Scottish Natural Heritage and the Countryside Council for Wales)
- The Countryside Recreation Network
- The Forestry Commission
- The National Trust
- The Black Environmental Network (BEN)
- The Heritage Lottery Fund
- The Countryside Agency’s Diversity Review is especially valuable.

The research from these agencies are in general agreement that the main groups that are under-represented in countryside recreation are:

- Elderly people
- Disabled people
- People from black and minority ethnic groups
- People with low incomes
- People from inner cities

- Women
- Young people

These groups account for a large number of the population; national data indicates that:

20% (1 in 5) adults are disabled in some way in England<sup>1</sup>

1.5% (less than 1 in 50) children are disabled in some way in England<sup>2</sup>

9.6% (1 in 11) people are from black and minority ethnic backgrounds in England<sup>3</sup>

20% (1 in 5 people) are aged 8-24 in England<sup>4</sup>

The population of England is 49.1million<sup>5</sup> and 80% of the population live in urban areas.

### **Why participation / access to the countryside is important**

These figures suggested therefore that there is a large proportion of the population that for some reason are not visiting the countryside. There is of course no reason why everyone should be encouraged to spend time in the countryside. Some people live happy, healthy and fulfilled lives without ever visiting rural areas.

However, some people would have a richer life if more barriers were removed and it is clearly stated in government policy to achieve this. There are also major public benefits arising from increasing use of the countryside in terms of better physical and mental health. While there have been some interesting studies of qualitative effects there has been little research to quantify this effect in terms of savings for the National Health Service. We do know that physical inactivity is a major health risk affecting about 60% of the UK population and costing us an estimated £8.2 billion annually. Each year 1.5 billion day visits are made to the UK countryside and seaside. The Walking the Way to Health initiative has already encouraged 900,000 people to walk more with important health dividends, but much more needs to be done.

Many organisations e.g. the Countryside Council for Wales and the Forestry Commission have made the point that the concept of sustainability includes ideas like community participation and a range of actions for an inclusive society. Sustainability requires us to integrate environmental, economic, social and cultural concerns. Countryside leisure includes active recreation such as orienteering and mountain biking, more gentle pursuits such as walking, learning activities and positive involvement through volunteering. Different activities will appeal to different target groups. Increasingly the benefits of involving disadvantaged groups in conservation work and the huge benefits of fieldwork for children are being recognised.

The national importance of walking also deserves a mention; the economic benefits of walking in England have been estimated to be between £1.473 billion and £2.763 billion

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<sup>1</sup> (Department for Work and Pensions 2004)

<sup>2</sup> (Department for Work and Pensions 2004)

<sup>3</sup> (Office for National Statistics, 2001 Census)

<sup>4</sup> (Office for National Statistics, 2001 Census)

<sup>5</sup> (Office for National Statistics, 2001 Census)

and supports between 185,556 and 245,560 full-time equivalent jobs (Christie and Matthews, 2003).

Access to the countryside is therefore important not just for relaxation and social activity but also for health and economic prosperity.

### **Barriers**

If we know who the under-represented groups are in the countryside, the next step to encouraging / increasing access is to understand why they are not visiting. Research has shown that people face a variety of barriers that prevent / discourage countryside recreation, these include:

- Financial costs
- Lack of time
- Lack of appropriate activities
- Lack of awareness
- Physical difficulty of access
- Lack of confidence and negative perceptions of the environment
- Lack of (appropriate) interpretative information
- Concern over route-finding
- A neglected or poorly maintained environment
- Negative feelings associated with previous experience of the countryside
- Lack of (accessible) transport

It should also be noted that many of these barriers are not mutually exclusive; the contrary is more the normal, where one barrier reinforces another. This leads to barriers becoming larger obstacles to overcome, making it harder for the individual to become involved with / in the countryside.

A scoping study carried out for the Diversity Review (Countryside Agency) identified that these under-represented groups also have further, individual reasons for exclusion, such as the perception of the countryside being a 'white' environment, or where there was uncertainty about appropriate activities and access.

The table below taken from Social and Community Planning Research show reasons for not visiting the countryside. It is interesting that almost a fifth give "no reason" and that for an almost equal amount the countryside has "no interest". Those not visiting for health reasons have seen an increase of 5 percentage points in just two years, this suggests either more people are suffering from ill health or that site access is becoming more limited.

Perhaps of greatest significance is that no one in 1998 gave lack of information as a reason for not visiting.

**Table 1: Reasons for not visiting the countryside for those who did not visit at all during the year in Great Britain (% of reasons ranked for 1998)**

Reason	1996	1998
No particular reason – just have not gone	23	19
Health reasons or disability	13	18
Work reasons – always too busy or a lack of time	19	17
Not interested: the countryside has no appeal	19	17
Lack of suitable means of transport	7	9
Not enough money or can't afford it	6	7
Nervous or uneasy about visiting the countryside	0	1
Lack of information about where to go	1	0
Other reason	12	12

Sources: Social and Community Planning Research, 1997 and 1999

Many of the findings above are reinforced by other studies, for example Scott (1994) identified from non-users of the countryside the following reasons for not visiting:

Time	N	oDisabled	No Car	Location	N	oN	oP r e f e r	Other
	Desire				Confidence	Info.	Towns	
34%	20%	12%	10%	7%	6%	2%	1%	8%

The issue of confidence was found to be much more of an issue by Scott than the later study. Social class is another barrier, a report by NFO System Three for Scottish Natural Heritage examined attitudes towards access to the countryside, this found that respondents in the AB social classes, car owners, males and those aged between 35 and 54 participated most often in countryside activities, while those who did not own a car, those aged 55 or over and those in the DE social classes were less frequent participants. These are consistent with Scott's findings on social class and countryside use (see table below):

Type of user/class	A	B	C1	C2	D	E
Countryside user	67%	89%	61%	67%	44%	32%
Non-user	33%	11%	39%	33%	56%	68%

The NFO report also found that, for all respondents to their survey, the most frequently provided reasons for not participating in open air recreation included:

- Being too busy (33%),
- Weather (33%),
- Poor health (17%)
- Restrictions related to the Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak (13%)

For the 30% of respondents who had not participated in open air recreation in the last 12 months, poor health, a lack of interest or old age were more likely to be given as a reason for not participating.

Some parallel research has been undertaken looking at non-use of public parks; Magde (1997) identified ten main characteristics identified as constraints that inhibited use of public parks. These included:

- Fear
- Weather
- Lack of time
- Family
- Lack of transport
- Lack of interest
- Lack of awareness
- Housework
- Distance and inability to physically access the park

Eight main causes of fear were identified. The main anxiety was that of physical attack, the remaining fell into two categories - those in which gender was apparent and those in which women's fears were only slightly higher than men's. Fear of animals / dogs was much higher for African-Caribbean and Asian groups than the white group. Black people are often represented as the perpetrators rather than the victims of crime. Women often felt safer in the presence of others.

A word of caution should be taken before stereotyping the reasons for people not using the countryside. The Countryside Agency's "Diversity Review - Factors Affecting Participation" found that it is not possible to assume what under-represented groups' attitudes are in relation to the countryside. The report goes so far as to state "we cannot even assume what the term 'countryside' means to such individuals and groups".

## **Barriers for specific groups of people**

For different groups of non-users some specific barriers can be identified. The table below provides a summary of the types of barriers faced by under-represented groups in the countryside:

### **Black / ethnic minority**

- Cultural disposition
- A sense of alienation
- Absence of members of own community
- Inappropriate/unattractive activities
- Experiencing (or fear of experiencing) racism
- Language barriers
- Fears for personal safety
- Lack of single gender activity
- Lack of role models

### **Disabled**

- Poor quality of information
- Physical difficulty of access
- Poor public transport options
- Previous experience of isolation
- Lack of appropriate support
- Absence of other disabled users

### **Elderly people**

- Unattractive or unsuitable activities
- Anxiety over distance from assistance if needed
- Anxiety towards safety
- Need for accompanied activities

### **Women**

- Non-specific anxieties
- Fear of being alone in the natural environment

### **Young people**

- Lack of understanding of the countryside
- Drop in numbers of organised countryside activities (school or non-school based)
- Lack of appropriate / attractive activities
- Previous experience of uninspiring visits

### **Low incomes**

- More pressing issues relating to poverty
- Domination of 'middle class' visitors
- Travel problems related to poverty

## **Young people**

Hampshire County Council undertook a study of young people in Countryside Recreation. (South East Hampshire Young People's Countryside Recreation Demand Survey, December 2001). They found that the level of participation of young people is higher than that of adults and that there is a significant drop-off in the use of managed countryside sites in the transition between childhood and adulthood. 53% of respondents stated that they would like to visit the countryside more than they do at present. The study indicated that variations in the level of those wishing to access the countryside more often is not solely about supply but also about taste and preferences.

The constraints to participation that were identified that prevent increased use, were identified as:

- Lack of time
- A preference to take part in other activities
- Dislike of being out in the rain or getting footwear dirty

Interestingly the traditionally perceived barriers such as lack of access to transport, cost, household composition and worries about safety were not shown to be significant in affecting levels of demand. There were also difference in the choices made by males and those made by females in preferred activities.

For those young people not going to the countryside the reasons stated were stated as the "countryside is boring" and 29% stated that there is nothing to do when you get there. These were not views shared with other participants, who had a high level of involvement with the countryside.

Young people's understanding of the countryside was mixed; they were unclear where they were allowed to go, concerned about getting lost and just over a fifth knew the Country Code.

In order to increase young people's participation in the countryside, future initiatives and interventions should be aimed at improving the supply of quality countryside; that is easy to access and influencing tastes and preferences.

There were widespread parental concerns in research from Forest Enterprise (2005) about children's safety, with parents stating that they were unwilling to let their children have the sort of freedom that they had been given when young, to roam and explore woodlands and natural spaces.

## **Ethnic Minorities**

Amongst ethnic groups, fear of trespassing and lack of knowledge of opportunities for countryside recreation are frequently cited in a range of projects aimed at increasing participation in countryside recreation in the United Kingdom (Slee et al, 2001). But is this necessarily the case? Agyeman and Spooner, 1997; BEN, 2002 find that ethnic minority communities have no sense of belonging to or ownership of rural space, and/or feel unwelcome there. The UK Day Visits Survey (1998) does not give a lack of knowledge as a reason for not going amongst those who did not visit the countryside in the previous 12 months; 'work commitments' (lack of time), 'no particular reason' or 'simply not interested' were amongst the most frequently cited responses. Perhaps therefore it is this lack of desire rather than lack of knowledge that is at work.

This calls into question literature produced, for example leaflets printed in ethnic languages as a way of addressing knowledge gaps, additionally if people are not accessing the visitor centres, libraries or other distribution points in the first place, how do they get hold of the information?

A report by the Black Environmental Network "Access to the Countryside Trips" found that a lack of confidence was a barrier and there was a need for guidance and support, this

also applied to workers with community groups who felt they themselves needed to be introduced to the countryside to acquire the confidence to introduce it to others; a video about aspects of visiting the countryside would be very useful to help overcome some of these issues.

Additional research by BEN (Morris 2003) identified seven barriers to accessing the countryside by black ethnic minority (BEM) groups:

Inability to influence strategies for the delivery of rural services

Lack of (appropriate) interpretative information at sites, inadequate signage, and lack of publicity

Lack of appropriate activities to attract minority ethnic and black communities and to provide a positive experience

Lack of awareness of local initiatives and lack of perceived relevance - for a significant percentage of black and minority ethnic communities, communicating in English is problematic. Where agencies have translated leaflets the relative merits of the translation and actual distribution of the material is sometimes questionable

Lack of confidence and negative perceptions of the environment - including fears of getting lost, not knowing where to go, lack of support, feelings of vulnerability, fears for personal security, and negative perceptions of regular users and groups. One of the biggest problems for the tentative black visitor to the countryside and other natural open spaces is that there are not many black people there. The real or perceived risk of encountering animals and the wild fauna associated with natural open spaces is another major factor which dissuades minority ethnic groups from visiting the countryside

Negative feelings associated with previous experience of the countryside

Financial costs incurred / lack of time and other commitments - free time of black and minority ethnic groups is often devoted to 'intra-community' activities, family life, and 'personal development' activities

## **Disability**

The Countryside Agency Report "By All Reasonable Means" identifies the most common barriers to visiting the outdoors for disabled visitors:

- Physical barriers, such as steps, steep gradients, stiles and gates
- Lack of accessible information
- Lack of accessible toilets
- Lack of confidence, low expectations, not feeling welcome, fear over safety or of getting lost
- Too far to walk
- Lack of convenient and accessible public transport
- Inaccessible café, shop or Visitor Centre
- Lack of seating and opportunities to rest or take shelter
- Cost of transport, parking fees and refreshments
- Lack of staff awareness of the needs of disabled visitors
- A limited range of activities
- Poorly maintained environment

The Countryside Agency report “Sense and Accessibility” (2000) looking at Country Mobility Schemes finds that information from sites doesn’t have enough detailed information to encourage or enable potential visitors with mobility impairments.

## **Elderly**

Many of the issues for disability apply to the elderly; in addition elderly visitors have anxieties for their own safety. Visits to the countryside are also often part of a larger / longer trip to which the countryside site is just one element.

## **Low income**

For those in low income barriers can exist around travel and associated costs to visit sites and also entry fees. Additionally there are costs incurred on sites like ice cream for the children or other treats / souvenirs, which over a day can substantially increase the cost of a visit.

Forest Enterprise report ‘A Sort of Magic Place’ identified that cost is particularly significant for families, those on low incomes, the unemployed and non-car owners, who felt that visiting green spaces or woodlands was a relatively inexpensive day out and was therefore an important outlet for them.

## **Women**

Some of the reasons for fewer women visiting the countryside include a drop in the numbers of organised countryside activities (school or non-school based) – perhaps this is due to increased legislation and fear of litigation should accidents happen. Other reasons include a lack of appropriate / attractive activities and a previous experience that was uninspiring.

Forest Enterprise report ‘A Sort of Magic Place’ showed that one of the key gender differences across all areas and ages was that they would not feel comfortable visiting woodlands alone due to insecurity on personal safety,

It is clear that there are numerous barriers preventing people accessing the countryside and in order to attract specific groups a targeted approach is needed to overcome the specific barriers of each group.

## **Site-specific barriers**

As well as visitors’ personal characteristics, sites themselves can in themselves create additional barriers a recent research by the Forestry Commission found that:

- Woodland and forest areas were valued for the escape they provide, and that emotional benefits may be more important than physical benefits
- Cost is significant, especially for families, those on low incomes, the unemployed and non-car owners who felt that visiting green spaces or woodlands was a relatively inexpensive day out

- One of the key gender differences across all areas and ages was the suggestion by the majority of women in the discussion groups that they would not feel comfortable visiting woodland alone

### **Reasons for site selection**

In addition to identifying barriers to accessing sites a look at why people chose to visit sites will also help identify the factors to encourage site use and perhaps help overcome some of the barriers.

Reason for visiting a site are varied and include; distance to travel, facilities at a site, opportunities at the site, size of the site and activities available at a site. For different types of users different factors will be more important.

One important factor in who visits sites is the proximity of a site to the visitor. Research consistently shows that the majority of visitors come from within 10 miles of a site.

The Countryside Agency Research Note “English Countryside Day Visits”, which is taken from “Leisure Day Visits” Report of the 1998 UK Day Visits Survey estimates the average distance travelled to the countryside is 17.3 miles however this is for all visits, including shopping and to seaside. Looking more closely at the data the distance people travel to the ‘countryside’ is far lower.

<b>Distance</b>	<b>Percentage of people</b>
Up to 1 mile	16%
Over 1, up to 2miles	11%
Over 2, up to 5miles	23%
Over 5, up to 10miles	17%
Over 10, up to 20miled	13%
Over 20, up to 40miles	10%
Over 40, up to 100miles	6%
Over 100 miles	4%

*(Data from Countryside Agency)*

50% of all journeys are less than 5 miles and 67% are less than 10 miles. More recent data from the Leisure Day Visits survey (2002/3) show a mean distance travelled for walking / rambling / hill walking in GB as 8.6 miles.

Research from the Forestry Commission supports the Countryside Agency findings:

Examples for two site surveys show that the majority of users are travelling short distances to the sites. Sherwood Visitor Survey 2000 (Forestry Commission) showed that 87% of respondents were locals (living within 15 miles of the site), 94% of respondents had visited the site before. Of those who had visited the woodland before, 40% visited between one and three times a week with 31% visiting most days, reinforcing the view that it is local users. The site “Blidworth Woods” is a complex covering 400 ha and has five car parks around the perimeter. The surrounding villages comprise of commuter belt and old pit villages. A second site is in the East Anglia Forest District. Rendlesham is the main recreation area and offers a range of facilities; waymarked walks and cycle trails, adventure play area, giant play sculpture, cycle hire, light refreshments, picnic areas and

an annual events programme. Here over half of the visitors (56 %) had travelled between 6 and 15 miles. A further 21% travelled shorter distances.

Similar data from Scottish Natural Heritage further supports these findings. In the report "Survey of Walking", Scottish Natural Heritage 2000 cites the factors which were rated as being most important in the choice of a walking route, these were:

- Being 'safe' and away from traffic
- The scenery, views and the countryside
- Knowing that people are allowed to walk there
- Being 'easy to get to / nearby'

In contrast, less important factors in the choice of route were 'good signposting and waymarking' and being able to 'explore a new area'. This research also cites that about two-fifths of those walks which did not start from home (41%) started within 10 miles of the respondent's home (or where they had stayed the night before) while 14% started over 40 miles away. Even with the larger distances in Scotland between sites and settlements this is still a significant number of people visiting sites 'on the doorstep'.

A report by Scott (1994) based on household surveys in the South Wales Valleys identified the time people travelled to countryside sites. Significantly 75% travelled less than 30 minutes to visit what they considered a local site.

#### Travel time to countryside site

	< 10 mins	10-29 mins	30-59 mins	1 to 2 hrs	> 2 hrs
L o c a l countryside	140%	35%	16%	6%	3%
W i d e r countryside	9%	23%	22%	22%	24%

Source: South Wales Household Survey, 1994

*NB: The definition of "local and wider countryside" proved problematic. The approach relied on a given respondent using their own experiential familiarity with the terms "local" countryside and "wider" countryside based on the visits that they had taken*

The distance of the trip to the countryside is perhaps even shorter than the figures first suggested when the mode of transport is also taken into account. The car accounted for 56% of local trips and 86% of wider countryside trips. This means that the majority of the 10-29 min journeys are by car, therefore the distance these countryside sites are to the visitor's home is likely to be no more than 15 miles (based on an average speed of 30mph – i.e. able to travel 15 miles in 30 mins)

#### Mode of transport

	Car	Motorcycle	Bicycle	Walk	P u b l i c transport	Other
L o c a l countryside	56%	1%	4%	38%	0%	1%
W i d e r countryside	86%	0%	1%	5%	2%	5%

## countryside

Source: South Wales Household Survey, 1994

Forestry Commission survey (Forestry Commission (2005) *Monitoring the quality of experience in forests, Thetford, Suffolk*) identifies the most important factors in deciding to visit a site. Respondents were asked to rank on scale 1 to 5 (with 5 being the highest) the factors important in selecting the site to visit. Safety of property and personal safety were at the top of the list along with clean toilets (see below)

Table B-8 – Importance of different aspects in decision to visit (mean score)  
Base: All respondents (316)

	Importance score
Feeling happy to leave your car in the car park	4.48
Clean toilets	4.34
Feeling safe in the forest	4.32
Being able to spend time with family and friends	4.23
Value for money of your whole trip or day out	4.15
Being able to enjoy scenery and views	4.14
Enough car parking	4.04
Being able to enjoy the wildlife	3.93
Clear signposting on footpaths	3.89
Choice of paths for walking	3.68
Being able to get fit and healthy	3.68
Solitude, peace and quiet	3.65
A cafe	3.53
Leaflets and information about the place you are visiting	3.50
<b>OVERALL AVERAGE</b>	<b>3.43</b>
Availability of staff at the site	3.27
Choice of trails for cycling	3.26
Children's play equipment	3.17
A shop	3.15
A 'go ape' high rope course	2.82
Choice of trails for other activities	2.58
Availability of cycle hire on site	2.44
A forest drive	2.10
Baby changing	2.08

The NFO System Three for Scottish Natural Heritage identified factors that people looked for in choosing a site; signposted routes (38%) and toilets (36%) were selected much more frequently than any other options. A further eight of the alternatives were each chosen by more than a fifth of

respondents - better public transport links, clear information about rights and responsibilities, more maps, more promotion of the countryside and how to enjoy it, more paths suitable for all types of users, more specific information about sensitive times of year for farming and conservation reasons, more car parks and more paths near towns.

## Summary

There are a group of accepted 'non-users' who do not participate in countryside recreation. While the reasons for their non-participation can be broadly grouped and identified these should not be taken as definitive answers. It should also be acknowledged that for some people the countryside is just not their 'thing', however for others many want to visit but face barriers preventing them.

Reasons for not visiting are (broadly):

- Lack of interest
- Lack of time
- Lack of ability (transport, physical, confidence)

Each reason has its own possible solutions, from increased awareness that may stimulate greater interest through to improving transport links and footpaths for physical access. One of the common reasons for not visiting the countryside stems from a lack of

confidence. The following section will look at some initiatives to increase participation in countryside sites and address issues such as confidence.

## Best Practice

**The second part of this paper will look at some examples of initiatives and projects to encourage under-represented groups to visit the countryside.**

There is a large body of good practice to assist countryside managers to remove barriers and examples are increasing rapidly. The BT Countryside for All project produced by the Fieldfare Trust has provided the standard guidance for many years on provision for disabled visitors to the countryside. It covers access standards, guidelines on networking, information, transport, interpretation, and events management and technical sheets. While some in the disabled community feel the standards are too ambitious and rigid there is still much of value in this work.

Examples of poor practice where staff seem to be unaware of the appropriate standards are all too common. The Countryside Agency is intending to produce an updated framework in the very near future for good practice in working with disabled people to improve and increase their access to the outdoors.

The Countryside Agency's Integrated Access Demonstration Projects and more recently the Area Based Action Research (ABAR) developed from the Diversity Review are also important. The aim of the ABAR is to test tools and methods to increase the diversity of countryside visitors, and encompasses four individual projects geographically dispersed around England. These will run for three years from Summer 2004 until 2007. The projects are described below:

**Beyond the Boundary (Yorkshire).** Testing whether the barriers of confidence and lack of information by BEM communities can be overcome through supporting urban and rural communities to twin with one another. Initiative to use cricket to encourage BEM to the countryside.

**By All Means (Kent).** Testing whether a measurable increase in the level of access to Kent's countryside routes and sites can be achieved through working closely with disabled people and their representative organisations through all phases of planning, development and management.

**Finding Common Ground (Plymouth).** Testing whether engaging with women and their families in inner city Plymouth, and linking them with women in rural communities, increases their confidence and unlocks their ability to access the Devon countryside.

**Stepping Out (Coventry).** Testing whether engaging with carers of people with mental health problems in Coventry in accessing activities through a graduated, 'stepping stones' approach, leads to an improvement in their quality of life, raised awareness levels in service providers, and increased capacity within community organisations.

These examples are just the tip of the iceberg of initiatives to encourage participation of non-users and there is always scope for fresh imagination. Calorie maps of selected walks

and cycle rides have been developed in Wales, weekly 'Forest Friend's events for young children and their carers and the numerous links and partnerships with hospitals and primary care trusts are just some of the imaginative approaches being taken. As Liz O'Brien of the Forestry Commission stated in 2004:

*"Getting the systems and infrastructure in place is important in terms of appropriate facilities and targeted activity programmes. But, a social and cultural approach which helps to give people the skills, confidence and a positive attitude to maintaining a healthy active lifestyle is also needed. We need to tell a story that raises awareness and promotes the opportunities of using woodlands and green space as fun places to improve health and well-being on a long-term basis."*

We certainly need the "fun" but many areas / sites haven't yet dealt with the basics. The key word for all under represented groups is confidence; confidence that you can use a site physically, that you will not suffer discrimination, that you will be safe and that information and activities will be appropriate.

### **What examples of best practice are there?**

Whether actions are being undertaken to encourage confidence is questionable. In identifying appropriate initiatives to encourage participation the Countryside Agency (Diversity Review) identified that the majority of organisations (irrespective of whether they were a local authority or the voluntary sector) who manage outdoor recreation sites lacked the confidence in approaching people from under-represented groups. The result of which is a lack of engagement with people who could use their facilities and the potential opportunities that inclusion would bring to both the user and provider is lost. Insufficient effort is made to find out why people are not visiting their sites through surveys with non-visitors.

This is clearly worrying, if the engagement of the people who are to be encouraged is not happening on what basis are decisions being made? Is it on evidence undertaken elsewhere, perceived barriers or what?

There are examples of collaboration, for example the Countryside Council for Wales is working in partnership with MEWN Cymru to raise awareness of the links between the environment and good health among ethnic minority women. The following section will look at more examples to provide and increase recreational opportunities for some disadvantaged groups.

### **Disability**

Northamptonshire County Council, as do most local authorities, have disabled parking areas situated near to accessible toilets and Visitor Centres, and each has a manual wheelchair available for free loan at their sites. In addition, Brixworth Country Park, their award winning national demonstration centre (Mackintosh Centre) of "Countryside For All", has electric "buggies" available for hire. In addition all Visitor Centres have a Language Line Service for those visitors needing help in other languages.

The **Chilterns Integrated Access Programme** is organising a number of projects to encourage people who do not normally visit the countryside to enjoy it more; these include:

### **Walks For All**

One of the biggest barriers to visiting the countryside for people with limited mobility is a lack of information about where they can go and what they can do. Everyone's ability is different and so what is needed is objective information about the conditions and facilities that can be found at a particular countryside site – so that people can make up their own minds whether they want to visit, if the conditions are suitable for them and what trails they can use. A number of countryside sites in the Chilterns area are accessible to people with limited mobility. For each of these sites a leaflet is being produced which provides objective information about the condition of trails (surfacing, gradients, widths) and other facilities. These leaflets will be made available in a pack and distributed through local disability networks.

### **Miles Without Stiles**

As people become more elderly they find obstacles on rights of way increasingly difficult to negotiate – stiles, steep hills and muddy paths for example – yet they still wish to explore the countryside. The Chilterns, in common with many other parts of the country, will have an increasingly ageing population in years to come. The same obstacles also limit those with pushchairs, electric scooters or those with poor health.

There are rights of way in the Chilterns which have few obstacles and which can provide opportunities to explore the countryside – but knowing where to find them is the problem. Working with local volunteers the Chilterns Access Programme hopes to identify suitable walking routes and promote these through a book. Where necessary it will work with local Highways Authorities to make improvements to the paths (e.g. replacing stiles with gates).

As referred to above the Fieldfare Trust has produced guidelines to good disabled access ([http://www.wealden.gov.uk/Planning\\_and\\_Building\\_Control/Building\\_Control/Design\\_Notes/14%20Access%20to%20the%20countryside.pdf](http://www.wealden.gov.uk/Planning_and_Building_Control/Building_Control/Design_Notes/14%20Access%20to%20the%20countryside.pdf)).

Promotion of easy access routes has also been undertaken, for example the “Places to Visit with Easier Access guide” to the Brecon Beacons National Park (BBNP) lists over 40 places with just that – easier access. It's not just designed for disabled people, but also for people who are less mobile, visually impaired, elderly, parents with young children or pushchairs and even for those that just like to take things a little easier.

Two examples of “Access for All” awards to improve Disability Access

### **Cnoc nan Craobh Accessible Path**

A wheelchair accessible path to allow people with disabilities to access Cnoc nan Craobh, which is a small hill recently planted with trees, from the hill there are tremendous views down the valley to the sea. The creation of this path has benefited disabled visitors, enabling independence in an area that is lacking in facilities for disabled people to enjoy the beautiful countryside freely.

Total Award: £9000

### **Castle Douglas, Dumfries & Galloway**

Comrie Footpaths - Perthshire

Improved access to the local footpath network and the long-term aim of creating accessible paths along the river at Comrie in Perthshire. The award enabled them to undertake the required training in order for them to effectively manage and deliver not only this project but also further accessible routes in the area. They recorded the project as it progressed in the hope that it will encourage local people to become more actively involved in providing accessible areas.

Total Award: £9,993

## **Young People**

A study by the Lake District National Park (2001) "Assessing Needs And Preferences In Relation To Countryside Recreation" examined how people's experiences when young had a significant impact upon their use of the countryside in adulthood. This found that the types of trips changes with stages of life and that the opportunities for children to engage in countryside recreation are reducing. As a result the following actions were recommended:

- Create new opportunities for young people to become involved in active countryside pursuits
- Provide equipment (loan or hire) and advice to young people through schools
- Develop and promote easy, short walks from settlements, clearly waymarked, which less confident people can follow them without using a map
- Develop countryside recreation areas on the fringes of the National Park

A paper from Sheffield Hallam "*If you go down to the woods today*" investigated how children feel about woods. The results found:

- Children generally share a perception of woods as fun places to visit and play.
- Children hardly ever visit woodlands on their own
- As with other users, children's perception of woodlands is greatly affected by the use or abuse of woods. Litter and vandalism made children think that the particular area is uncared for and potentially dangerous.
- Children viewed woods with a variety of activities as better than those with just trees, however most children could still be kept happy in a woodland area with minimum facilities.

Many children's first experiences of countryside are through schools. English Nature have introduced free entrance to sites for school groups, which has increased the use of their sites. This first / early experience is an important one as research (Hampshire County Council 2001) has shown that poor early experiences are a factor in future non-use.

## **Ethnic Minorities**

The Black Environmental Network have identified the following as best practice to encourage participation of minority groups:

- Participation can be encouraged through inclusive access and interpretation - for a community to be motivated to participate, they need to feel that environmental concerns are relevant to them
- Provide relevant interpretation that should include key information in several languages, or using pictures and posters on the walls to illustrate black and minority ethnic presence or participation. It is recommended that this is followed up with direct contact with target groups to build an ongoing relationship
- A sense of ownership and belonging to the countryside, and the nation itself, is often constructed through an appeal to their heritage. Developing multi-cultural interpretation contributes towards the recognition of the role of other cultures and helps foster a understanding of communities, and can highlight how ethnic cultures and communities have contributed to British heritage
- Signs and maps give people control without reducing the natural qualities of the area too much, maps can show the area of open space in relation to the surrounding area although they are not useful if they are unclear and in English only.

Offering visitors an informed choice also includes taking care to ensure that information reaches its target audience and in an appropriate format:

- Include the maintenance of 'safe' routes
- Open spaces with increased sightlines
- Giving thought to appropriate lighting
- Improving the appearance of natural open spaces
- People need people and the presence of rangers and a good mix of users helps build confidence and interest

Other activities that help foster a sense of ownership for a site include conservation groups, 'Friends' groups and voluntary wardening, along with children's activities, nightlife walks, and action for disadvantaged groups such as tree planting, single gender group activities, culturally appropriate events, and tree dressing days. These all foster a spirit of participation and inclusiveness.

**Bestwood Country Park, Nottinghamshire** is an example of access-based initiatives in the community forests. Key barriers to access for ethnic and disadvantaged groups were identified as:

Information  
 Transportation  
 Physical infrastructure for disabled users  
 Cost factors

The focus was on making access sustainable and non-coercive. The park works with many disadvantaged people including HIV patients, school children, disabled people and ethnic communities.

As a result of the project Sikhs and other ethnic minorities are increasingly accessing the park. However the managers of the site make it clear that outcomes that are based on indicators do not reflect the true benefits to the park users such as social inclusion, improved quality of life, greater community regeneration and lifelong learning.

### **Elderly, Women and Low Income**

For these other disadvantaged groups no reports could be identified of specific initiatives to encourage their participation. Some research such as 'A Kind of Magic Place' refer to women and the need to increase sense of security for their participation.

Also the minimal cost of woodland use is an important factor for the disadvantaged groups and as such any charging for facilities should be carefully considered to ensure that these groups are not discouraged from use.

### **Additional Factors Contributing to Success**

#### **Community involvement**

Dr. Bill Slee states that successful projects tend to be community-driven, championed by members of the community in which they are located. Community driven projects tend to have higher levels of participation, have greater commitment and longevity, and tend to remain focused on community rather than external interests.

#### **Security**

One issue around improving security is identified in "A Sort of Magical Place", Forestry Commission (2005). In a project where voluntary rangers were recruited in the New Forest to carry out conservation work and lead guided walks, one of the key unforeseen benefits of having these rangers, who will be identifiable because they are wearing Forestry Commission clothing, was that they some women feel more secure and therefore able to use these areas alone.

When women discussed safety concerns they described how seeing other people, particularly rangers or wardens, made them feel more at ease

### **Summary**

Although a definitive list of activities to encourage participation cannot be written there are some commonalities.

- Working with communities to encourage participation
- Increase confidence and security
- Get them young – positive early experiences affect future use
- Information needs to be appropriate to targeted group



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