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Executive Summary

Connecting with nature in 2020: who did, who didn't, and why it matters.

A review of recent evidence from the UK and
insights from nature engagement practitioners in Cumbria.

Tania Lemmey

May 2021

With thanks to the participants, the University of Cumbria and the Back on Our Map project.

This study explored inequities in nature connection in the UK and inclusive nature engagement practice. Data, context and a fuller discussion may be found in the dissertation of the same title, available via the University of Cumbria research repository at <http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/6147/>.

Who is this summary for?

Practitioners, researchers and policy makers in the fields of education, nature restoration, public health, social justice and tourism. In particular, it is relevant to the ongoing implementation of the Back on Our Map (BOOM) species restoration project in south Cumbria, and the wider work of BOOM project partner organisations.

Purpose of the study

The study seeks to address inequities in nature connection, by informing nature engagement practice in the UK, which has implications for both mental health and ecological restoration.

The research is intended to be collaborative and transformative: sharing success stories within a collective of organisations, identifying avenues to develop practice and providing an opportunity for reflection on inclusive nature engagement practice within the interviews.

Background to the study

There is evidence that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, people in the UK valued nature more highly, including for their mental wellbeing (Lemmey, 2020; RSPB, 2020). Public interest in accessible, neighbourhood nature experiences grew and people were inspired to spend more time in nature in future (Lemmey, 2020; Ramblers, 2020). At the same time, inequality of access to nature-rich places increased (Natural England, 2020a). As such this study is topical and relevant to informing a more equitable future.

While a 'green' economic recovery from the pandemic focusing on climate change mitigation attracted significant new government funding, comparably small investment was promised to tackle the UK's depleted biodiversity. Yet, the British public are concerned about the loss of nature (Natural England, 2020a). A relevant initiative is the BOOM project, a biodiversity action project led by the University of Cumbria, which aims to involve the local community in the reintroduction of rare or locally extinct species (University of Cumbria, 2020).

Supporting evidence

The study was informed by recent research from the UK into nature connection, nature engagement and access to nature. Nature connection is understood as a person's feeling of affinity with nature, informed by Mayer and Frantz (2004). Natural England (2020b) has found lower nature connectedness among men and among people in the least affluent socio-economic groups and much lower nature connectedness between the ages of 13-18 years.

There are potential health and environmental benefits as well as social justice outcomes from this research, since a person's sense of connectedness with nature has been linked to both their happiness and wellbeing (Capaldi, Dopko and Zelenski, 2014; Pritchard *et al.*, 2020) and their tendency to take actions benefiting the environment (Mackay and Schmitt, 2019; Whitburn, Linklater and Abrahamse, 2020).

Research into nature engagement interventions has also yielded evidence of wellbeing benefits, including strong indications of the effectiveness of nature-based social prescribing for mental health (Bragg and Leck, 2017). Participating in simple nature engagement activities predicts pro-nature conservation behaviours (Richardson *et al.*, 2020).

During the pandemic, people in the most deprived areas, people with lower incomes and those with lower levels of education experienced increased inequity of access to nature (Natural England, 2020a). People from minority ethnic groups were more likely than white British people to lack neighbourhood greenspace (Ramblers, 2020) and access to a private garden (Natural England, 2020a). The literature review identified other demographic indicators of inequitable access to nature. Barriers to contact with nature included walking access, lack of time due to work, ill health, disability, older age, experiences of discrimination, lack of awareness of how to access nature and lack of representation. Plus, coronavirus safety concerns impacted use of outdoor places in 2020.

Data collection methods

A sample of 14 people with a role in facilitating nature engagement were interviewed using a semi-structured format and object elicitation (Willig, 2017). Interviews took place remotely during November and December 2020. The sample was established in consultation with BOOM project staff and included 13 of 15 organisations approached. A wide range of organisation types and remits were included, providing breadth of representation of nature engagement initiatives in south Cumbria and the Morecambe Bay area.

Data analysis

Interview recordings were reviewed holistically and then processed in detail by recording all relevant responses in note form, tabulating by question topic. These tables were then visually reviewed for identifiable themes, themes were refined and occurrences tallied.

Key findings

BOOM partner organisations provide a wide range of nature engagement opportunities, most of which are likely to develop nature connectedness via the pathways identified by Lumber, Richardson and Sheffield (2017).

Social context and place characteristics are also influential in nature connection, such as growing and sharing food and visiting culturally significant places.

Some of the nature engagement provision, such as conservation volunteering, has direct ecological benefits but any provision which develops nature connectedness may have ecological benefits via pro-nature conservation behaviours (Richardson *et al.*, 2020).

BOOM partner organisations recognise the mental wellbeing benefits associated with nature engagement; practitioners have experience in facilitating informal therapeutic provision and interest in developing green social prescribing opportunities in the region.

Urban residents; people with disabilities; young people; people from ethnic minority groups; residents of areas of high deprivation and people in the lowest income households are under-represented groups in terms of nature connection, nature engagement or access to nature. Many other under-represented demographic groups are identified through the literature and the local knowledge of practitioners. Intersectionality of the under-represented groups requires consideration.

Partnership working to enable bespoke provision for underserved groups is important in inclusive nature engagement. Other themes in inclusive provision included: skills development, urban outreach, free of charge activities, creative arts, physical access and inclusive community events.

Barriers to engagement with nature due to societal, personal, financial and infrastructure factors were identified by interviewees. Recent literature suggests organisational barriers could also be pertinent (Glover, 2019; Lingayah *et al.*, 2020).

Organisations which explicitly tackle the inequities of multiple deprivations in their nature engagement work tended to be those which serve a particular local community; acknowledgement of intersectional disadvantage was otherwise limited.

Conservation volunteering and group nature engagement programmes have been severely limited during the coronavirus pandemic. Inclusivity initiatives in the nature engagement sector have suffered via reduced partnership working; reduced availability of funding; and reduced in-person facilitation of group experiences.

When restrictions eased, nature-rich places were popular with visitors, including many new visitors. A need for more effective communication with new visitors around responsible engagement with nature was clear. Development of virtual engagement offerings during 2020 has enabled organisations to communicate nature connection opportunities to new users and larger audiences.

Recommendations

As coronavirus restrictions are lifted in 2021:

Organisations and the BOOM project should prioritise reinstatement of group nature engagement programmes, which have been greatly limited by the pandemic and include much inclusive provision. The BOOM project should harness enthusiasm for nature and address the urgent biodiversity crisis through greater inclusion in practical nature restoration activities.

Organisations operating in popular landscapes for visitors should plan to welcome more new visitors who may have limited prior engagement with nature and facilitate connection with nature.

Inclusive approaches to nature engagement:

Organisations should continue to develop partnerships which seek the perspectives of the underserved persons and address their specific preferences and access needs for engaging with nature, with consideration to intersectionality and awareness of the possibility of systemic barriers to engagement.

Organisations with a role in facilitating nature engagement in the region could further collaborate towards addressing inequities in nature engagement, for example in sharing best practice and identifying gaps in provision.

Organisations could develop their role in addressing mental health inequities, seeking further partnerships for green social prescribing in the region.

Organisations could establish greater dialogue with under-represented groups through digital communications, building on innovations during the pandemic, while mindful of digital exclusion.

Organisations should build capacity for nature engagement provision for young people aged 13-18 appropriate to their developmental priorities and motivations (Hohnen, Gilmour and Murphy, 2020) as they experience the lowest level of nature connection by age.

Specific recommendations for the BOOM project:

The BOOM project can pursue ecological impact by addressing inequities in nature connection and promoting nature conservation experiences for wellbeing at the same time as having direct ecological benefits through species restoration.

The BOOM project and partners should continue to develop place-responsive nature engagement opportunities which encourage repeat visits from underserved groups to facilitate belonging, a sense of place and compassion for nature in a specific area. These could involve creative arts, engagement with cultural heritage and further opportunities to participate in nature restoration in locally significant, accessible places.

The BOOM project should take opportunities to embed inclusivity in the project legacy; including looking for ways to support the employment of people from disadvantaged backgrounds in nature restoration roles. There is willingness among partner organisations to sustain BOOM activities.

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