

# Feeling Good in the Woods

The increasing interest in health, well-being and woodlands is described by Liz O'Brien from the Social Research Unit at Forest Research.

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Young people investigating and showing interest in the natural environment – which research has shown could provide an alternative way of supporting children with attention deficit disorder

Mounting evidence suggests that woodlands, trees and natural and green spaces can play a significant role to play in improving people's health and well-being.<sup>1,2</sup> This evidence relates not only to people's physical use of woodlands but significantly to the emotional and psychological benefits that people gain from exploring and viewing trees and woodlands. To explore this subject area in more detail, Forest Research (the research agency of the Forestry Commission) organised three seminars in 2002 that brought together forestry, environmental and health professionals.<sup>3</sup> Workshop discussions focused on four main themes. These themes and some of the key points raised included:

- **Policy:** The need to create a lead agency that champions health and nature, bringing together current environment and health policies. Integrated partnerships were considered important to link the areas of mental, physical and social health.
- **Practice:** The value of increasing people's sense of safety and ownership of green spaces. Run regional demonstration projects to enhance health and well-being and involve schools in using locally accessible woodlands.
- **Promotion:** The importance of getting across an effective, positive and fun message.
- **Research:** The need to carry out effective monitoring and evaluation of any projects using both qualitative and quantitative indicators to assess health and well-being benefits.

Along with the seminars, conferences focusing on health and natural space were also held by English Nature in partnership with the UK Public Health Association and by the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV). These all emphasise the rising importance of health and green space issues in the current agendas of a range of organisations.

### **Contributions of woodlands and natural spaces**

Physical activity, well-being and social participation are areas of particular importance in the current debate. In terms of physical health, woodlands and green spaces provide areas people can use for a variety of activities involving exercise. From the widespread availability of walking and cycling routes in woodlands to more specialist facilities such as sculpture trails, treetop walks and mountain biking routes there is a range of opportunities for all ages and abilities. Using these facilities on a regular basis as part of an exercise regime can help to build and maintain healthy bones, muscles and joints, reduce blood pressure, help to prevent obesity and reduce incidences of some types of cancer.<sup>4</sup>

Nature acts as a restorative environment according to US academic Stephen Kaplan.<sup>5</sup> This is based on the concept that we use ‘directed attention’ when we want to focus on a specific task and we recover from this through ‘involuntary attention’ which requires no effort. A number of studies have shown that natural environments can play an important role in restoring directed attention from fatigue.

This has potential benefits for everyone’s well-being but according to Faber Taylor *et al*<sup>6</sup> it can have a particular impact on children with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). This disorder can affect children in a range of ways from poor academic performance through to displaying anti-social and aggressive behaviour. Medication to treat this disorder can have serious side-effects. It has been suggested that alternative approaches to dealing with ADD could include the use of natural environments as a potential source of support for children with this condition. Faber Taylor *et al*, in their study of ADD, suggested that the benefits children gained when using green space, such as increased attention, occurred not only during the time the children spent playing in green settings but also lasted afterwards in a way that did not occur when they played indoors.

Woodlands and trees can stimulate the senses. So are green environments especially effective as places that restore people from mental fatigue? This seems to be the case as this and other studies suggest that contact with nature may help to reduce anger and aggression and commuter stress.<sup>7</sup>

My own research which focused on the values and meanings people associate with trees and woodlands highlights their importance as places to escape to from the general stresses of everyday life.<sup>8</sup> As one young man in Liverpool said when interviewed “you don’t have to hurry” in a woodland.

We also need to be aware of the importance of place to people’s sense of well-being and quality of life. This concept was outlined by Henwood<sup>9</sup> in her 2001 report assessing the role

of the countryside agencies in promoting benefits to health. People's subjective experiences give places their significance, enhance their relationship with nature and promote feelings of well-being. We can come to identify very strongly with specific places as an integral part of our everyday lives and as they become imbued with personal, cultural and social meaning. Once a place becomes part of a person's identity then changes or loss of that place can have a significant impact, which can often explain the conflicts that arise from environmental change.

Woodlands also act as a social setting and a space for community action and participation – leading to greater social inclusion and cohesion. If someone has hands-on involvement or a sense of ownership of a particular area their enjoyment may increase further. Sullivan and Kuo<sup>7</sup> found signs of stronger communities and neighbourhood ties in large inner city public housing estates in Chicago where there were trees as opposed to concrete. People with strong neighbour ties are generally more physically and mentally healthy, so urban forestry for example may have a significant role to play in communities' lives. Involvement in woodland activities can also improve people's sense of worth and self-esteem as well as enabling them to learn new skills and meet new people.

### **Urban and rural issues**

There is still a widespread view that rural areas are healthier places to live in than cities, emphasising the urban hell/rural idyll dichotomy. This is increasingly being challenged as over simplistic – both rural and urban areas experience complex social differences.<sup>10</sup> Poor diets, high food prices, low incomes and accidents – both agricultural and traffic-related – have all been identified as issues of significance for the health of rural populations. Poverty in both rural and urban areas increases the risk for people of being exposed to adverse health conditions, and may also reduce the coping resources people need to deal with these conditions, such as easy access to a health centre and a healthy diet.

People on low incomes tend to live in more degraded and polluted environments and generally have less access to nature. Responses to woodlands and green spaces may differ in intensity. For example seeing greenery and wildlife in the inner city may have a significant impact as it is relatively unexpected; they may also symbolise nature surviving in the city.

Green spaces may be some people's only contact with nature in urban areas. Those working in this field need to be aware of the importance to people's well-being of relatively small areas of green space or even single trees.

### **Health and green space initiatives**

Current initiatives are many and varied and include the Countryside Agencies 'Walking for Health' scheme and BTCV's Green Gym – in which volunteers get an aerobic workout by carrying out practical conservation tasks. Although schemes like these directly improve people's physical health, their most significant contribution may be in enabling people to have contact with nature and wildlife. They also provide an opportunity to build confidence and self-esteem.

Woodland activities and events are run on much of the Forestry Commission's (FC) estate and these offer opportunities for friends and families to socialise. One of the main benefits of the various walking schemes that are currently up and running is the prospect they afford people in making friends and joining new social networks. This often encourages them to carry on with their activity long after the particular scheme has finished.

In Wales the FC and the University of Wales Aberystwyth have produced 'calorie maps' of selected walks and cycle trails. These maps estimate the number of calories used based on a person's body weight and the terrain they are crossing.

A fifteen-month pilot health project in Chopwell Wood near Gateshead, managed by the FC, started in May 2004 to explore the range of health and well-being benefits that can be delivered on the FC estate. This is a partnership project involving the FC, the Friends of Chopwell Wood, Gateshead Primary Care Trust and Derwentside Primary Care Trust. The two main elements of the project include: a general practitioner woodland based activity referral scheme; and a programme of school visits in support of County Durham and Derwentside Healthy Schools Standard.

In a pilot project in the West Midlands in 2003/04 the Forestry Commission linked its Woodland Improvement Grant to health outcomes. Woodland owners were able to apply for grants if they encouraged health-related recreation linked to, for example, a 'Walking for Health' group.

At Wyre Forest near Bewdley the FC education manager, in partnership with other organisations, has set up the 'Wyre Forest Stride and Stroll' walks. A proactive approach is also being taken to encourage children to walk in woods through weekly 'Forest Friends' events for pre-school children and their parents or carers. At the Wyre Forest visitors centre a heart monitor is available so that visitors can check their blood pressure, pulse rate, height, weight and body mass index.

### **New opportunities and challenges**

Links and partnerships between Primary Care Trusts, the Health Development Agency, environmental groups and the FC bring new opportunities for understanding the objectives and targets of these different organisations. They also highlight how new projects linking health, well-being and woodlands can help these organisations to meet their targets in innovative ways. Links could be made, and in some cases are being made, with a number of government initiatives – for example through the 'Healthy Living Standard' or 'Healthy Living' Centres. The recent Sure Start scheme focusing on parents and children, and Physical Activity Pilots are also relevant.<sup>11</sup> A 'Memorandum of Understanding' was recently developed in the US in which four diverse government agencies and departments have come together to promote public health and recreation. Is this something that should be considered in Britain?

Removing barriers to people's use of green spaces is also crucial; this might be related to making green spaces accessible to where people live, reducing people's worries about their safety in woodlands or providing information about suitable places to visit.

Are there key groups such as the young, the elderly and minorities who could benefit from targeted schemes? Surveys of those who visit the countryside highlight the fact that these groups are generally unrepresented, suggesting that removing barriers to access and providing activities that attract these groups would be of particular benefit. In focusing on specific groups we could make links with social inclusion and community development issues working towards improving individual and community health.

Where woodlands and green space use may score highly over indoor exercise is through the contact they provide with nature and opportunities for socialising and carrying out activities with friends and family. Crucially they are free to use.

The FC is well placed for promoting health and well-being in the outdoors as it is the largest single controller of land in Britain and is able to deliver practical projects that increasingly involve a wide range of partners and publics. 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.

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**Cover** A direct-sown annual meadow on an urban roundabout in mid-August 2003. It was developed by Nigel Dunnett of the University of Sheffield in association with Telford and Wrekin Borough Council.  
Credit: Nigel Dunnett

Photograph on page 1: Forest Life Picture Library