



**ENGLISH
POLICY
GROUP**

BRITISH ECOLOGICAL SOCIETY

People, Policy & Planet

Accessing and maximising nature in England

19 April 2023

The BES English Policy Group (EPG) hosted the inaugural event in its *People, Policy & Planet* series on 19 April at the British Ecological Society in London. In this report, we summarise the content of the event, including the topics covered by the speakers and themes that emerged during the discussion.

The issue of public access to nature in England is currently making the headlines, including protests around the recent legal decision to restrict wild camping on Dartmoor, and the Labour Party announcing an upcoming 'Right to Roam' bill. On one hand, an increasing number of studies are revealing that spending time in nature has a wide range of benefits for human health and wellbeing. On the other, public access is often associated with increased risk to species of conservation interest.

The overarching question at this event was: How can we balance conservation and restoration of habitat with people's need to access nature in England?

Our six expert speakers gave informative, provocative and entertaining insights into this important question and the discussion that followed is summarised below.

Natural Wellbeing: A reciprocal relationship

Sarah Howes

Sarah Howes is a lecturer in mental health nursing at the University of Plymouth. She has studied the use of green prescribing for Dartmoor and Exmoor National Parks, and the impact of nature as a wellbeing strategy within nurse education.

Benefits of nature on human wellbeing

There is now a large body of scientific literature supporting the positive effects of nature on wellbeing, from depression and anxiety to dementia, both in wild spaces and urban settings. [Sarah's work](#) published earlier this year found evidence for the following impacts of nature on mental wellbeing:

- Increase in positive affect (positive emotions displayed, e.g. joy)
- Decrease in negative affect (negative emotions displayed, e.g. sadness)
- Enhanced sense of belonging
- Promotion of meaning-making (making sense of life events, relationships, and the self)
- Fostered an interest in caring for the natural world

However, research from surveys usually focuses on white, western groups, so does not paint the whole picture.

Social and health inequalities

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted some of the [benefits of contact with nature](#), but also awareness of the inequalities of access and the value of easily accessible urban [green](#) and [blue](#) spaces. Green spaces were found to [mitigate racial disparity of health](#). Poorer neighbourhoods generally have less access to quality green space, but the people who benefit most from contact with nature are in the poorest 25% of the population. National parks and forests are used only by the richest third of the country, but blue space is an exception to this trend – people from all walks of life use beaches and the sea.

Barriers to nature access

Social factors

- Wealth – the costs of trains, access to reserves, parking, camping/outdoor gear
- Ethnicity (people of colour not feeling welcome in nature and experience hostility)
- Gender, crime and threat (e.g. women/trans people feeling vulnerable in unpopulated spaces)
- Physical ability

Environmental factors

- Natural dangers and climate change
- Unhealthy environments e.g. lack of biodiversity, pollution, poor air/water quality, aesthetics

Research gaps

- Predominantly female samples have been used
- People of colour are underrepresented in studies
- Insufficient focus on social dynamics e.g. how groups interact in green spaces
- Insufficient focus on human impact on nature

Nature and healthcare

Investment in nature is an investment for the NHS. It is important to have access to green space as part of both staying and getting well. Hospital patients recover faster when they have access or a view of green space, but lots of green space around hospitals is gone.

The UK Government's [25-year Environment Plan](#) directs healthcare workers to become more actively involved in brokering access to nature-based wellbeing interventions, but there is a divide between what is written in research and policy about the benefits of nature for wellbeing and what happens in practice.

There is now wide support for the therapeutic potential of nature immersion and '[green social prescribing](#)' is on the rise – this involves healthcare workers prescribing nature-based interventions, such as walking and community gardening, to patients.

We ask what can nature give us, and few ask what we can do for nature. Healthcare is one of the world's most polluting industries (World Bank 2017), but there is a current drive to [develop more sustainable practices](#).

People of Colours' relationships with nature

Beth Collier

Beth is a Nature Allied Psychotherapist and ethnographer who specialises in working with relational trauma in our connections with people and nature. She is the founder and director of Wild in the City, a non-profit which works to support well-being through a relationship with nature in London and beyond.

[Wild in the City](#) supports People of Colour to explore their human relationships and their connection with the natural world. It helps them to feel more connected to nature, build a sense of community and a secure base and belonging in nature so that they can feel comfortable and safe exploring on their own.

This makes sense as a form of psychotherapy - an ideal mother (Earth) can offer a sense of security and a non-judgemental relationship. So, there is an emphasis on establishing a secure relationship with their community and nature.

Lack of knowledge of UK natural history contributes to a sense of disconnection. Wild in the City uses natural history, teaching groups about different habitats, ecosystems and the symbiosis of life, as a way to create a relationship with nature. They also teach practical woodland living skills such as foraging and camping, and include reflective time around a fire to discuss barriers to nature access. Through ecotherapy, people have the opportunity to explore their relationship with nature while actually being in nature.

Their work is currently focused in Southeast London but they are also doing hiking trips further afield to try to make the countryside around London feel safe and comfortable to explore.

They train people to be "Nature Guides", taking their confidence and skills learnt further to guide others to explore their relationship with nature and thus increase the representation of Black and Asian leaders in nature to make others feel more comfortable.

Funding is needed to do more research on People of Colour's experience of nature and others' response to their presence in nature.

Why focus on People of Colour? Disparity in access and benefits

There are a few reasons for the disparity in access to nature, including emotional and psychological barriers about who nature is and is not for, and experiencing racism and hostility in the countryside. There are also generational messages passed down in some communities, for example there is a historical narrative that the great outdoors is a white privilege. Colonial thought created a narrative on black people being primitive in nature. This can become a self-limiting myth, with internalised messages that that being in nature is backwards, shameful or unsafe.

98.2% of People of Colour live in cities and this has created an urban identity. Cities feel like a safe place, but it has taken away any sense of "rural belonging"; though in heritage countries people are deeply connected with nature, intergenerational knowledge transmission has been lost through migration and resettlement. Human disruption of connection to nature has left behind trauma. This is why Wild in the City is working to re-establish oral histories of humans and nature, reclaiming a feeling of belonging in nature.

Nature conservation impacts of access

Dr Durwyn Liley

Durwyn is a founder and director of Footprint Ecology, a nature conservation consultancy based in Dorset. Durwyn has worked across the UK on projects on the impacts of people on the countryside, and he is particularly interested in bird disturbance and ways to combine visitor and ecological data.

A difficult balancing act

Access to the countryside and wild places is fundamental to our health, wellbeing and sense of place, but it has a flip side. With a growing population and increasing demand for access, there is more and more pressure on countryside sites to accommodate recreational use. In the UK it is typically our most important nature conservation sites that are also those with access, and this can lead to a range of issues.

Negative impacts of recreation

These negative impacts caused by human access exist in synergy:

- **Damage** to habitat and structures: vegetation wear from footfall, soil compaction and erosion, exposed roots and trees dying, direct damage e.g. from vandalism
- **Contamination:** dog fouling, leaching of shampoos and other chemicals from dogs swimming in ponds, plastic pollution, spread of non-native species by humans e.g. via seed dispersal
- **Increased risk of fire:** resulting in direct mortality and long-term habitat change
- **Disturbance:** behaviour response such as wildlife avoiding suitable habitat because of people's presence, physiological and energetic costs e.g. due to stress, direct mortality
- **Other management issues:** High levels of access make sites more difficult to manage for wildlife (e.g. grazing management), costs of managing access deflect from site management, high demand for facilities

Damage



Access can decrease space for wildlife and drive ecosystem degradation. Extent of degradation depends on local context (e.g., number of people, climate, weather conditions, soil and vegetation structure). For example, people stop to look at views at tops of hills where there are thin soils.

This is Epping Forest, a Special Area of Conservation which qualifies for woodland and heathland habitats. Footprint Ecology is increasingly called in by a range of organisations to work on sites where growing demands for recreation are creating tension and pressure on individual sites.



Images from [Liley et al. \(2022\)](#) from automated cameras at Burnham Beeches (a Special Area of Conservation). Even relatively low levels of use can have marked visual impacts - the 19.6 people per day image shows a path that has become wide, lost litter and is becoming compacted. While muddy paths are unsightly and difficult to walk on, there are real issues for tree health, vegetation and soils, for example, compaction can damage tree roots and reduce mycorrhizae.

Contamination

Walking humans can disperse seeds over very long distances, [up to at least 10km](#). The abundance and richness of non-natives is [higher in areas with tourism/recreation](#) compared to control sites and evidence suggests that horse riding is a particularly strong vector. Dog fouling is also a key source of contamination, and dogs in water result in increased turbidity and contamination from flea powder, tick treatments, etc.

Disturbance

Disturbance means the impacts on species resulting from the presence of vehicles, people and their pets in the countryside, and is a lot more than just scaring off birds in a park.

Wildlife will avoid their habitats altogether due to human presence, which can result in direct mortality from nest abandonment. Durwyn's own work [modelling beach-nesting ringed plovers](#) found that if nest loss by accidental trampling could be prevented (through fencing) the plover population would increase by 8%, and a complete absence of human disturbance would result in a population increase of 85%.

There are a range of studies that have compared the amount of corticosterone (a stress hormone) in faeces for birds in different areas subjected to different levels of disturbance, for example for [Black Grouse](#) and [Little Bustard](#). There are also studies showing elevated heart rates – for example a heart rate monitor on a [wandering albatross](#) showed an elevated heart rate for 2-3 hours after someone

had passed the nest. Birds may therefore appear ‘undisturbed’, but the effects may be evident in poor breeding success –one study suggests high desertion rates for [kittiwakes](#) was associated with disturbance increasing the energetic costs for the birds. Many disturbance studies focus solely on birds taking flight and the energetic costs of being flushed, but physiological impacts are much harder to understand.

Management of nature access

Visitor surveys by Footprint Ecology at a range of countryside sites across the UK (including National Parks, key wildlife sites, heathland, woodland and coastal sites) have found that dog walkers are the largest single activity group and usually account for 60-80% of a random sample of people interviewed. Typically these people have chosen the site because it is close to home – not for the wildlife. A typical dog walk involves a circuit of around 2.5km during which dogs are off the leads.

Durwyn suggests that the most important nature sites should not be the de facto locations for people to visit for convenient daily dog walks or other activities that are not necessarily appropriate. He’d advocate that there is a need for a greater separation of access and nature conservation - this is how other countries manage access.

For nature recovery there should be more and better countryside access with people having inspiring places to visit on their doorsteps, but the key nature sites are better protected, looked after and have more space for wildlife. There are opportunities to create new areas specifically for human access, relieving the pressure on some of the nature sites important for wildlife.

Case study: The Wash and North Norfolk Coast

The Wash and North Norfolk Coast are of exceptional importance for nature conservation, encompassing a suite of coastal habitats, and hosting a range of rare and notable species. The area is also a popular destination for recreation, including dog walking, water sports and wildlife watching. How to balance the provision of access to the coast and nature conservation has long been recognised as a challenge, especially as the area is managed by a range of organisations and includes a range of national and international designations.

Considering the above, a [recent project](#) commissioned by The Wash & North Norfolk Marine Partnership (WNNMP), Norfolk Coast Partnership (NCP) and PROWAD LINK looked at how to balance nature conservation and access. The project followed the [Limits of Acceptable Change](#) process, which provides a framework for managing recreation impacts. It is a well-established approach in the US but has rarely been applied in the UK. The project identified the main issues of concern, including disturbance to beach-nesting birds, non-breeding waterbirds and seals, alongside damage to coastal habitats due to trampling. Working with stakeholders, six zone types were then identified that reflected how different parts of the coast might be managed and experienced by visitors – encompassing a spectrum from wilder areas, with little or no access, to more urban areas with hard sea defences and infrastructure. Aspirational zone maps were then created for the area and how they could be informed using monitoring data. Notably, the process is iterative and provides a means for different bodies to work together in partnership, explore different scenarios and provide for access in a way that doesn’t overly compromise the conservation interest of the area.

Connection to nature

Dr Amy-Jane Beer

Amy-Jane is a biologist, naturalist, writer and campaigner for nature. She is a columnist for British Wildlife, Country Diarist for The Guardian, and a member of the core organising team of Right to Roam, campaigning for a right of responsible access to England's countryside.

Amy began by playing the recording of a nightingale and talking about the power of connection to nature – the power of hearts and minds. How can policy make space for barefoot curiosity and a sense of empowerment? For daydreaming, and creativity, escape, freedom, and love.

Our nature is dying by a thousand cuts and needs a thousand stitches to heal it. All of society is needed to help: we need to keep going, and politicians need to be pushed. We shouldn't feel like we have to get "permission" to access nature – it has to feel like home to have a true connection.

Right to Roam recognises the need to protect our landscapes, but we (and those of us who know more about the natural world) need to be wary of being a "gatekeeper" of nature - we are not special to have ecological education. There is lots to be learned on nature tours if you have the time and money and you feel comfortable attending. But to have to go on a tour you are a "visitor" to nature, but Amy believes we ARE nature (not just visitors). Education and engagement has a place, we need the unguided exploration to feel connected and have a spontaneous relationship with nature where you don't need permission to access it.

If we feel like visitors in nature, we will not take responsibility for protecting it and restoring it. Right to Roam came up with the idea of Wild Service – the responsibility of people to look after the nature they access. We have the most nature-disconnected society in Europe and are one of the most nature-depleted nations. Nature is suffering and the current measures are not enough - we are fixing small problems but our solutions are not scaling up. For contact with nature to become connection, it needs to happen regularly. Politicians need to feel the public biting at their heels.

Our Strategic Ambition Since 1895 – Conservation and Public Access

Rob Rhodes

Rob has worked for the National Trust for over 25 years, managing estates in Shropshire, Hampshire and Dorset. Now based in the central team, he is currently the Head of Countryside Management and Rangers. He has a passion for sharing the countryside with others and is therefore championing public access and nature connections across the organisation.

Managing access is an increasingly important issue to the National Trust. How do we decide what level of access is reasonable? Some of the questions that need to be answered are:

- What makes a place special?
- What are the risks in allowing access to the place? What is the carrying capacity for people?
- What does the landscape allow? – the ecology/geology of the site
- Is there evidence to inform the decision?
- The main principle is that access to nature is a good thing but
- There are other factors to take into account, including other activities such as farmers and residential tenants and their security, etc.

At the National Trust's protected sites, access is restricted for parts of the year. For example, the Farne Islands has National Trust staff on site 24/7 when the seal/bird populations are vulnerable during breeding seasons. However, this is resource heavy and not possible everywhere.

Infrastructure

It's about engaging with the visitors so that you can still provide an experience but in a controlled way so that the impacts on wildlife are reduced. This requires infrastructure, e.g. paths, fences, visitor viewing platforms and hides, signs, zoning.

The National Trust Mutton Cove site in Cornwall has ~500,000 visitors a year but is also a very important site for grey seals. The National Trust provides a visitor experience with nature in a semi-controlled way, e.g. asking visitors to walk quietly, dogs on leads, providing infrastructure such as establishing a trail to keep people on one track.

Mutton Cove has become a popular place for a selfie. The key is to engage with the visitors so that they can get their selfie, but also protect the seals. It helped putting in a trail with a railing to protect the area – this concentrates disturbance and helps cliff verge vegetation restore.

Signage can be very effective – e.g. "if your dog is barking please move away", "all dogs must be on a lead", etc.), but can be ignored. There is nothing more effective than a sign that says "ADDERS!" But we need more research into people's behaviour in natural spaces, for example responses to interventions such as signage.

Blue spaces

National Trust are working in partnership with activity providers to put together a code of conduct for responsible usage of waterscapes so that people respect the environment they are in. Activity leaders can act as conservation stewards and raise awareness. It is important to work in partnerships with others.

Dogs

Dogs are one of the main reasons people get outside and close to nature – 31% of National Trust members own one. But we need to advocate responsible dog ownership, engaging owners. The Dogs Welcome Project is promoting responsible dog ownership while enjoying National Trust sites. It includes clear and consistent messaging about where dogs should be on leads and includes 'sacrificial areas' where dogs can be off lead.

Nature connection and citizen science

Dr Michael Pocock

Michael is an ecologist at the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, interested in the diversity of citizen and community science, its use for ecological science, and in supporting people's connection to nature. At UKCEH he is lead for public engagement with research, working to promote public engagement with its research to ensure a real world impact.

Volunteer-collected biodiversity data is very valuable and is a crucial part of environmental monitoring, complimenting data from professionals and sensors. In the State of Nature report, over 9000 species distributions were recorded by citizen scientists. As well as benefiting science, it benefits people in terms of nature connectedness and wellbeing, and society by encouraging action for nature.

Nature contact vs nature connection

According to the [People and Nature survey](#) by Natural England, 84% people agreed that being nature makes them happy and during the Pandemic, 41% agreed that nature was more important than ever for their wellbeing.

While it's been found that [120 minutes in nature](#) a week is associated with good health and wellbeing, the quality of that time is crucial – nature connection does not just mean nature contact - what you do in it matters. A study by [Richardson et al.](#) on >2000 adults found that happiness and sense of a worthwhile life were more strongly related to nature connectedness rather than just spending time in nature. It is not just about having green spaces around you, but actually connecting with them through mindfulness and engagement.

Similarly, a study by [Wicks et al.](#) during the Pandemic found nature connection was strongly related to greater wellbeing and less anxiety and depression than amount of local greenspace.

[Richardson et al.](#) identified five pathways to nature connection: senses; emotion; compassion; meaning; beauty. How do these pathways link to citizen science?

Benefits of citizen science

There was a boost in both interest in nature and volunteer biological recording during the pandemic. [Pocock et al.](#) studied the impact of nature-based citizen science on wellbeing and nature connectedness. In a randomised controlled trial people were assigned one of these activities to do for 10 minutes a day for a week:

- One of two different citizen science activities
- Spending ten minutes in nature and writing three good things (a 'nature noticing' activity)
- Citizen science recording plus writing three good things
- Waiting list (control)

80% of the participants who signed up were women, and the majority already felt they had a close connection to nature. Some people opted out of the study due to anxiety about the citizen science.

Both citizen science and nature noticing activities improved people's pro-nature feelings, mood and wellbeing, and the combination of citizen science and the nature noticing activity made people feel most connected to nature. Citizen science gave people permission to go and spend time in nature.

Self-reported experiences showed strong benefits across the five pathways (senses; emotion; compassion; meaning; beauty) and boosted understanding of the natural world. This suggests opportunities to improve the design of citizen science to enhance pathways to nature connectedness. A potential challenge is that introduction of technology can impede sensory connection with nature.

Q&A

Questions from the audience answered by the six speakers.

Is there a correlation between benefits from access to nature and the biodiversity value of a natural space? i.e. do I get same benefits from a local park as from "wilder" places?

- The complexity of a habitat does bring something different – the difference between a garden of green grass vs. a garden full of biodiversity and the intrigue of the life stories occurring within it
- Diversity of birdsong is important - [studies](#) have shown that people feel happier when they hear a mix of birdsongs
- But it is subjective and depends on what your experience is – if you have no access to anywhere nice, even a tiny patio in the fresh air means a lot

- It can be a matter of scale - a patch of grass with a dandelion is easy to dismiss, but zooming in on the flower and noticing the insects visiting it can provide a different experience
- Urban spaces can still have very high levels of biodiversity. But the level of deprivation of the area is important to consider - people from deprived areas might not go to the more biodiverse spaces near where they live because they are considered unsafe

How do we balance access to nature with nature conservation in the context of delivering conservation policy?

- There is lots that can be done to achieve sites that deliver benefits for biodiversity while still retaining levels of access
- There needs to be a balance between access and exclusion. Access e.g. dog walking routes requires relatively expansive land areas. High quality biodiverse areas should exclude people, while other areas should welcome people
- Some species don't do well where the people are, but it's a relatively small list. You can definitely have a heavily-accessed place with high biodiversity
- There is a dilution effect of permitting wider access where people are more spread out across the country
- Diffuse access is good, but there is a point where certain species/habitats need a high level of protection so as not to disappear
- Creating natural spaces for invertebrates provides a great opportunity to improve biodiversity in an urban context

What infrastructure will foster a connection to nature?

- It's all about personal relationships with nature that then translates into a culture of connection to nature
- There is a risk that visiting nature becomes a tick box exercise, so we need to develop inclusion and connection
- It's important to improve biodiversity in the places people go already and "make nature hit people in the face as they leave their door." We could make urban green spaces more pollinator focused - bring the insects and the birds will come!

To what extent are sacrificial areas acceptable?

- Maybe sacrificial areas are inevitable and a price we have to pay?
- The National Trust makes those decisions all the time and it probably is inevitable - sacrificial areas can be useful in order to protect the wider site
- At some sites, the only areas where wildlife still inhabits are those with fences keeping people out. In some ways diffuse access is good so that high numbers of people don't concentrate in one or two places, but you do need to have mechanisms, such as zoning, to control access to some areas
- There are a lot of places where nature is sacrificed for other things (e.g. agriculture) - in these areas, field margins that are there for ensuring access are also good for biodiversity, so there are ways to improve sacrificial areas for nature

How can we encourage nature connection, rather than just access?

- Focus on education, awareness and the culture of engagement. It needs to focus on a personal relationship and then evolve into a community and cultural connection

- Providing people with the tools to engage with nature e.g. education and awareness of what people are looking at and experiencing in nature
- Good to give people tools to see the biodiversity in small patches (e.g. it's not just grass, there are dandelions etc.)

Discussion

Summary of the key points made in the breakout discussions.

Does public access to nature as it stands in England impede or help the road to nature recovery?

Current, limited access is impeding nature recovery:

- Current access levels limit understanding of nature and therefore how much people care about it. For nature recovery we need lobbying - and if people don't experience it, they will not lobby for it
- People need access to engage and have better interactions, better learning and a sense of ownership. Access = greater connection = nature recovery
- Increasing equity in access to nature will mean more people will be inspired to protect it
- Only 8% of land is currently available for access, so millions of people are forced to use the same sites and this land is becoming very eroded. National Trust sites received a 500% increase in visitor numbers during lockdown, which was far above site carrying capacity and infrastructure completely broke down. Visitor numbers haven't stayed as high but are still higher than pre-pandemic levels
- Expanding access should therefore have dilution effect - lessening the pressure on certain sites
- Currently, the most accessible sites are often the most valued sites. e.g., heathland, moorlands, etc.
- We need to remember that nature loss is not being primarily driven by public access
- There is a trade-off between potential harm to local sites of high biodiversity value and benefits of access in terms of increased environmental awareness

More limited access helps nature recovery

- We need to acknowledge that there are negative impacts and we need some areas to have less access (using zonation)
- The proposed 'dilution effect' created by expanding access to nature may not work, as people will still go to where they can get to easily and where they particularly like to go, i.e. particularly beautiful spots. We need ways of helping people get deeper into the countryside to diffuse more people across the country
- Urban nature is equally important. Do we actually want more people to be able to access countryside from urban areas, or can we improve urban nature instead?
- There are arguments that certain species thrive from human interactions - for example, dogs can be good for trees because they scare off the deer that eat the young trees – but this is not the case as the deer still eat young trees at dawn/dusk when dogs aren't around

What further research is needed?

Disturbance

- There is still a lack of evidence on the impacts of access on wildlife and it is very context and species dependent. We also need landscape-scale research
- We need more localised species distribution information
- If you increase visitors, does the impact on nature increase at the same rate?
- Impact of dogs on soils and tree health. They are difficult to ban from sites because of their social context – they are part of the family
- Impact of foraging and what we can forage – the supposed impact of foraging is used as an excuse by landowners to prevent foraging

Infrastructure and policy

- There are evidence gaps in terms of what infrastructure works – e.g. what's the effect of widening paths? What are the impacts of zoning?
- We need more research into behavioural sciences and people's responses to interventions e.g. signage. What other nudges make people change their behaviour?
- Access brings people with dogs - how do we manage that expectation? Scottish code has rules for how dogs can access land. Are there issues with enforcing these codes of conduct?
- What is access like on field margins? Does the type of farming affect the access, or does historical access affect how farmers' fields are?
- Maps of what access we have, and what has been lost e.g. paths that have been abandoned - roughly half of public footpaths have been lost over 100 years
- How could Scotland's Right to Roam translate over to English policy and our own landscape contexts?

Wellbeing and nature connectedness

- What kinds of nature have the best effects on wellbeing?
- We need more information on the drivers that make people care for nature

How can access to nature be improved and extended in England?

Expanding the right to roam

- Follow the Scottish approach?
- Reverse the current model e.g. Right to Roam is everywhere, and private access has to be established
- There is so much more land that we could access without putting pressure on biodiversity - e.g. land managed for agriculture. More than 60% of England is farmland. Road verges can be more biodiverse than the edges of agricultural fields

Infrastructure

- We need to design infrastructure so sites can cope with the number of visitors coming. For example, during the pandemic the Norfolk dunes introduced an advance booking system for the car park to restrict numbers ahead of time
- Other countries have a culture of dog parks but they don't exist much here. There are now more dog parks in Norfolk now where you can book your half hour spot and tire out your dog before putting it on a lead and walking through nature
- You can direct people around fields e.g. where cows are birthing – could you do this for spaces you've set aside for promoting biodiversity?

Zoning

- Access can be a good thing but it needs to be well managed. Appropriate planning is required so that access does not disrupt the movement of wildlife
- Zoning means have areas that have restricted access e.g. where vulnerable species are recovering
- Through better design you can make zones, nodes and corridors
- There are established frameworks for setting zones and management targets within these zones. These frameworks have been widely applied outside the UK - for example [Limits of Acceptable Change](#) but have been less commonly applied in the UK. One recent example from the UK relates to the North Norfolk Coast and the Wash
- However, zoning needs to be developed in an inclusive way. A top-down approach excluding people from areas would give negative response

Updating the Countryside Code

- If access is expanded, we need careful messaging about treating nature with respect
- We need something clear like the Scottish Access Code, which includes: Take responsibility for your own actions, don't be antisocial, care for nature
- Natural England updated the Countryside Code during covid but wasn't well publicised. Perhaps it doesn't need updating, it just needs to be publicised to people?
- Education is vital - people in the cities are not taught the Countryside Code
- We could turn the countryside code into the 'nature code' - stopping people from being alienated, who don't personally associate with the 'countryside' - it applies to urban areas too!
- Does the fact there is a code put people off/create a barrier?
- Though we need a code now, we need a culture change to make it so a code is not needed in the near future
- It could be more effective to have a memorable three-word motto like Boris had on his podium during the pandemic – e.g. respect, protect, leave no trace
- A greater connection with nature will develop a greater sense of responsibility. We need to attach emotion, not just provide a code
- It is important to design spaces to change behaviours. Positive language brings about more benefits in terms of behavioural change
- There is a danger of access to people and this causes landowners to worry about e.g. of being sued for someone falling over a hay bale. It comes back to the public education and being responsible

Education and increasing equity

- We need to make people feel welcome in the countryside through education so that they wish to take care of it, rather than that they are not welcome and so have no motivation to do so
- Education policies and access policies need to work together, as giving access without education can create unexpected and unwanted outcomes
- The role of young people and school: we need to create the skills and knowledge that will allow young people to create a connection with nature
- Education is really important and we need to move beyond schools/occasional visits to farms

- People don't always know where they can go - not everyone has OS maps and Google Maps don't help - this is another layer of access 'gatekeeping'
- We need to mind our language: telling people that going into nature is important for their mental health can be counterproductive in that people might interpret that as "the experts telling me what to do"
- We need a shared language in order to bring different people together to talk about this issue without creating conflicts and tensions
- Technology can help. Virtual reality is used in therapy to get people with severe anxiety to experience situations such as shopping centres and other crowded space in safety. We can apply this to nature experiences
- How do we address this in schools? Could BES provide the education/fieldwork?

Policy levers

- It will need to be a bottom-up, rather than a top down approach. Resolving conflicts and building relationships between different stakeholders is going to be very important
- ELMs payments could incentivise human and nature access - farmers receiving public money should grant access as the minimum. In general farmers tend to be quite positive about that
- As well as agricultural policy, it could be incorporated into the new land use framework, net zero, biodiversity, woodlands and green finance targets
- We need something equivalent to the Scottish Land Use Strategy in England
- Public health is a big lever – demonstrating the benefits for human wellbeing
- Nature losses are occurring on land we don't have access to. We could make biodiversity recovery policy align with access to nature policy

Healthcare and green prescribing

- There is lots of evaluation happening at Defra into green social prescribing
- It should become the norm, but we should also be funding things that stop people going to the GP in the first place by giving them more access to nature

What is needed to bring people together to agree on a policy?

- Discussion spaces similar to this in which there is agreement over various points, and being more inclusive of reaching out to people who aren't here today
- Areas of Outstanding National Beauty are not landowners themselves and cannot change access. The land is often privately owned, so we need to try and influence these landowners
- Spirituality has a role. We have a lot to learn from indigenous communities, where that link between spirituality and nature is a lot stronger
- Not 'telling' people what to do– inclusion is vital, e.g. including farmers' voices,
- Funding and investment, including in education
- A personalised approach that includes local relationships and understandings
- We need to work to connect people on this issue, building bridges between different groups/sectors
- Engage citizens and communities via deliberative panels e.g. parish councils, people's assemblies
- To engage with policymakers of the need for access to nature we can use a narrative focussed on the idea that access to nature will bring more environmental awareness
- More research into solutions