

Fresh Air – People cannot get enough of it

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Abstract Applying the concept of ecosystem services, a core concept in the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and explored more fully in the recent UK National Ecosystem Assessment, asks that the relationship between people and the natural environment is re-framed. This necessitates examining the values that individuals and communities place on the natural environment, and the words and language used to describe the benefits.

The authors of this poster focus their attention on Wigan Flashes, a Local Nature Reserves in the post-industrial town of Wigan, and report on a survey of visitors in which their purpose for visiting the Flashes was identified. This survey is part of more extensive work in which a rapid ecosystem service assessment will also be conducted. That work, when complete, will be reported elsewhere.

Within the survey 250 interviewees responded to questions which explored the benefits of visiting the Flashes. More people visited the Flashes for physical (68%) health and well-being benefits than for psychological (38%) or social (6%) reasons.

A major theme emerging from the questionnaires was the association with “fresh air”: a term particularly prevalent in the early history of public health. The possibility of using this term as part of a social marketing strategy in order to encourage people to engage in more active life styles is explored.

Introduction:

The relationship between people and their natural environment is ever changing. For most of the last two millennia Aristotle's view persisted: Nature made nothing in vain and everything has a purpose. Plants, he is reported as saying, were created for the sake of animals and animals for the sake of men (*sic*), and domestic animals are here to labour, wild ones to be hunted (Thomas, 1984). In the 18th century William Tuke, a Quaker philanthropist who ran an asylum for people with severe mental ill health filled the courtyard with rabbits, gulls, hawks and poultry in the hope of encouraging benevolent feelings, greater responsibility and self-control. In the 19th century the British Charity Commission recommended that sheep, hares, monkeys, and other domestic animals should be added to those institutions in a bid to create less hostile, and more attractive places. Even Florence Nightingale recognised the value of animals and in her *Notes on Nursing* (1880) indicated that people confined to one room gained pleasure from the presence of a bird (Wells, 2011). In the 19th Century the foundation of the National Trust, and other social reforms, marked the recognition that open space was important to people. In the 21st Century the concept of Ecosystem Services asks us to re-frame our relationship with nature once more. It asks that we recognise the benefits that flow from the natural environment and that ascribe values to these benefits. Often these benefits are not visible and hence not valued. Yet, social marketing teaches us that through appropriate promotion society's views and values may change. What then are the values that people using a local nature reserve in Wigan ascribe to that area, and how might their perceptions be used to encourage others to use this and other similar open spaces.

Methods:

A questionnaire was piloted to 70 participants, selected by opportunistic sampling of people within Wigan Flashes Local Nature Reserve on July 15th 2010. After amending the questionnaire was completed by 250 people between 16/09/10 and 18/10/10 (inclusive). Within the questionnaire there were questions that explored the respondents reasons for visiting Wigan Flashes and the emotions that the site instilled in them. The questionnaire was designed allowed the participant to explain what they considered to be the benefits of the reserve to their health or well-being.

Results:

Of the 250 respondents 94.8% stated that they perceived that their visit to the site was beneficial to their health. The major benefit to health and well-being was seen as Physical (67.9%) (Table 1).

Of those visiting the site 94% undertook activities categorised as functional engagement (i.e. activities that were not site specific such as walking). There was no apparent relationship with age. With regards to active participation (e.g. watching wildlife) however, there was an age effect. With a dip around 25-45 years of age and then a continual rise with each increased age range (Table 2).

Within the sample 18.4% of respondents, when asked why they visited the site replied that it was for “fresh air”. Of these respondents 30.4% visited the site daily (at least 5 times a week) and 37.0% visited the site weekly.

Table 1: Perceived Health Benefits

Health Benefit	Percentage of respondents
Physical	67.9
Psychological	38.4
Social	6.3
Physical & Psychological	13.2
Social & Psychological	0.0
Physical, Social & Psychological	0.4

Table 2: Active Participation and Functional Engagement

Age (Years)	Level of Engagement (% responses)			
	Active Participation	Functional Engagement	Both	No Response
<16	0.0	91.7	8.3	0.0
16-25	28.0	92.6	18.5	0.0
26-35	19.2	88.5	11.5	3.8
36-45	19.4	96.8	16.1	0.0
46-55	36.7	96.7	33.3	0.0
56-65	42.0	92.8	34.8	0.0
>65	54.5	94.5	49.1	0.0

Discussion:

With 94.8% of respondents stating that they visited the site for health reasons it is clear that amongst the sites users this benefit is well recognised. All of the respondents who recognised a health benefit perceived that the benefit was physical (adding the three categories in Table 1 that contain the word Physical). Just over half (52%) of the respondents perceived a psychological benefit. Whilst only 6.7% saw a social benefit. These data suggest that the benefits were perceived as being individual to the person, rather than being something that is shared through social activity.

Over 90% of the respondents were using the site for activities that were not classed as functional activities, i.e. activities that could be conducted in other places e.g. walking. Hence one must look to see what the attractions of the site are. Dog walking was the most common reason for using the site (49.6%). Only 32.4% of the respondents came for the wildlife interest, this is despite the sites designations (LNR, SSSI) for wildlife. Slightly fewer respondents (28.4%) stated that they came for the scenery. These data suggest that the site is attractive to people for reasons other than its primary purpose, i.e. of protecting wildlife.

One phrase kept recurring throughout the interviews: fresh air. Almost 1 in 5 people went to the site for “fresh air”. Yet this term has not yet been fully capitalised upon in health marketing or publicity materials. Natural England (n.d.) do advise that a focus on the benefits of fresh air can widen the appeal of health messages. Here we see a reframing of people's relationship with their environment: an appeal to a feeling, a deep routed sense that “fresh air” is good, and that that alone is sufficient to encourage people to get out in to natural sites, such as Wigan Flashes, more often.

This study has added to the evidence base to support the use of the term “fresh air”. It is suggested by the authors that the term has potential for use in social marketing strategies for wildlife sites such as Wigan Flashes. This notion is being explored more fully in a more extensive survey of 500 people in which open ended questions are used to explore their relationships with the natural environment more fully.

References:

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