

Places in Cumbria for wildlife and people

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Introduction

It is important to understand how the nearby environment contributes to people's well-being and quality of life. This project focused on local open spaces and wildlife in Cumbria. It explored how a range of stakeholder representatives, from health professionals to local businesses and landowners, perceived the value of the natural environment and the need for more local provision of nature reserves.

What was done

English Nature commissioned the OPENspace Research Centre at Edinburgh College of Art and Heriot Watt University to carry out research in Cumbria. An initial forum was held with key stakeholders to identify the main issues relating to people's connections with nature, and particularly with nature reserves and green space in their local area. The forum also helped to refine strategies for approaching the different sectors in the main study.

A postal questionnaire was used to survey people living in Cumbria about their perceptions and use of green spaces and nature reserves. The sample was designed to ensure that the respondents, 205 in all, reflected the diversity of Cumbria's population and geography. Separate postal, e-mail and telephone questionnaires were used to obtain responses from particular targeted groups: healthcare professionals; representatives of local authorities and key partner organisations with land holdings in Cumbria; Local Strategic Partnership members and environment organisations in Cumbria; representatives of the business sector in Cumbria; and people working in schools and youth organisations.

The resulting data was analysed using qualitative and statistical methods as appropriate to reveal people's behaviours, values and expectations in relation to existing nature reserves, in the context of other local natural areas and open space in Cumbria.

Results and conclusions

1. Green spaces and nature reserves in Cumbria are highly valued for their contribution to health and well-being, enjoyment and relaxation, as well as opportunities to interact with wildlife.
2. Cumbria's natural heritage attracts 15 million visitors per year, contributing to the local economy, as well as attracting companies and professionals to relocate in the area.
3. Many people perceive that Cumbria is well served with nature reserves through the National Parks and National Nature Reserves; however the majority of Local Nature Reserves are located away from urban areas where most people live.
4. Local Nature Reserves are recognised as beneficial for people's health and wellbeing, quality of life, and local communities in general, as well as for wildlife.
5. What people value most about nature reserves are the opportunities to see wildlife, and also to experience peace and quiet.
6. For many of the respondents in this study, the issue is not the need for more nature reserves but, rather, the need to be better informed about the ones that already exist and to be able to have good access to them.
7. People consider that existing sites are poorly publicised and often not welcoming.
8. Better public transport and better physical access for disabled people, families with children, and people from economically disadvantaged areas would also make a difference to use of local green space and nature reserves.
9. A travel time of less than 10 minutes is a significant threshold for access to outdoor recreation sites in Cumbria, whatever the mode of travel but particularly for pedestrians. Almost all people who visit local green spaces more than once a week take less than 10 minutes to get there.
10. Although Cumbria as a whole approaches English Nature's recommended density of one hectare of Local Nature Reserve land per 1000 people, most local authority areas in Cumbria fail to reach this level. Barrow-in-Furness at present has no Local Nature Reserves.
11. People in Cumbria are already visiting a large number of local outdoor sites which could be enhanced and developed for wildlife as well as people.
12. Community engagement and local community identity are considered important aspects of nature reserves.

Recommendations for action

1. Greater publicity should be given to existing local sites, using a variety of media and pre-existing community resources, such as local papers and newsletters, GPs surgeries, libraries, etc.
2. The identity of Local Nature Reserves should be enhanced to create a welcoming and positive character (rather than emphasising what is prohibited), and improve accessibility for disabled people
3. Public transport to existing nature reserves should be improved, especially from disadvantaged areas.
4. In many cases, the richness and value of open space sites already used by local people should be developed, as an alternative to designating new sites. 'Local' sites which can be accessed by foot in less than 10 minutes from people's homes should be prioritised near urban areas.
5. New Local Nature Reserves can take advantage of old brown field sites and derelict land in and around urban areas. The Barrow-in-Furness area in particular should be targeted for promoting access to existing nature sites and developing new ones.
6. The evidence provided in this report on the benefits for health and wellbeing, quality of life, education, business and the community in general can be used to support investment in management and maintenance of sites and to target budget holders in local authorities, business and tourism organisations
7. The interest shown by health professionals in developing more health-linked activities and providing more information for local people on existing natural areas and green spaces should be followed up.
8. Outreach and education work with local schools, youth organisations and communities should be developed to encourage more positive behaviours in green spaces, and combat the issues of litter, vandalism and dog mess which deter many people from using green spaces.
9. There are opportunities to develop a fresh dialogue between different interest groups – land owners, statutory bodies and representatives of user groups - to overcome longstanding stereotypes and negative perceptions
10. Community involvement in Local Nature Reserves should be developed and promoted, working in partnership with businesses, schools and land owners to engage people in the management of local sites and stress the value of outdoor conservation work to health and well-being and local communities.

English Nature's viewpoint

This research was commissioned to assess how NNRs fit into the overall greenspace and "nature" resource in Cumbria. We wanted to understand better how people value and use the local open spaces that exist within a rural county for experiencing nature and getting out into the countryside. We also wanted to look at the current and potential role of Local Nature Reserves in Cumbria. LNRs are not evenly distributed across the county, so we wanted to find out whether there are any sites that people know about which could be put forward as new LNRs. We work closely with local authorities to promote the designation and management of LNRs, and are keen to explore how better use could be made of an extended and enhanced network

The research has provided valuable evidence on how people perceive and use the open spaces they know about. There are some useful messages for us concerning the promotion of NNRs and what we should consider offering at these sites. The results also show that sites such as NNRs and LNRs and other greenspaces are valued by local people, however this is constrained by poor information on the location of these open spaces, what wildlife and other features they support, and what they can do there. It also highlights the importance of developing the richness and value of open space sites already used by local people as an alternative to developing new ones.

The research shows that people differ in what they want from greenspaces. What people value most are opportunities to see wildlife and also to experience peace and quiet.

Particular areas in Cumbria are identified which should be targeted for promoting access to existing nature sites and developing new ones. The report will provide important evidence to assist Natural England in developing its greenspace strategy in Cumbria.

Selected references

Cumbria Biodiversity Action Plan. 2001. Available from: <http://www.wildlifeincumbria.org.uk/>

FRIENDS OF THE LAKE DISTRICT. 2005. *Open Spaces, Green Places* project by Friends of the Lake District, Cumbria County Council and Voluntary Action Cumbria. Available from: <http://www.fld.org.uk/info/openspaces.htm>

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