



Open Space and Social Inclusion: Local Woodland Use in Central Scotland



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Forestry Commission

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Research findings have been summarised for each of the communities which were used as the basis for the case studies, focus groups and questionnaires. The summaries highlighted findings relevant to the local area and provided an opportunity to give feedback to the community.

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Summary

- The key finding is the central importance of childhood experience – the frequency of childhood visits to woodlands is the single most important predictor of how often people visit woodlands as adults. Those who visited woodlands often as children are more likely to go walking alone in woodlands as adults. This raises questions about use of open space by those who do not get the opportunity as children to experience woodlands.
- The findings showed that in order for people to visit woodlands regularly, woodlands need to be close to homes (within walking distance) and accessible. Easy access by car, bicycle or good public transport are the second best option. These findings reinforce the value of community and urban woodlands.
- In the areas of this research project, most people visit woodlands at least once a month and many visit more frequently. Regular visitors say that they feel at home and at peace in woodlands.
- For all ages of users, access to woodlands give the potential for health benefits, both physical and psychological. Walking is the most popular activity.
- People’s perceptions of woodlands influence whether and how they use them. People use woodlands in different ways at different stages in their lives: women have different attitudes and patterns of use from men; people who feel vulnerable or fear accidents are less likely to use woodlands and, if they do visit, they are less likely to go alone.
- Woodlands can make an important contribution to ‘quality of life capital’. Assessing the ‘social health’ of woodlands through woodland and landscape managers recording and evaluating the benefits and services they offer is a way of determining the current and potential contribution of woodlands to quality of life.
- The research showed that the qualities which define a place (physical attributes, people’s behaviours and activities, and people’s perceptions) must all be taken into account when analysing existing patterns of woodland use and when planning for future use.

Overview of the report

1. Aims, objectives and methodology

The research aims and objectives

The research project sought to answer four basic questions:

- How important is forest use to local people? What proportion of the population and which segments of the population use forests?
- Which forests and woodlands do people choose to use or abuse? Why do they choose these forests, are there some characteristics which determine which forests people choose to use or abuse? Do communities with different characteristics choose different types of forests?
- How do people use forests and what counts as use or abuse? What do they do?
- What are the design and management implications for forest managers?

The research approach and methodology

The project had three phases and a mainly user-led approach:

- Phase I was a scoping exercise which included a literature search and interviews with some forest managers, resulting in a choice of communities to use as case studies.
- Phase II involved three different methodologies for gathering data about people's perceptions and use of local woodlands: A – focus groups to sample different age and gender groups within each community; B – questionnaires to sample a wider range of views; and C – on-site observations which looked for direct and indirect evidence of use and abuse and which recorded the physical characteristics of woodlands near each community.
- Phase III involved a synthesis of the data and an analysis of the findings, including feedback discussions with woodland managers, to identify key outcomes which can form the basis of recommendations for the Forestry Commission and for forest and countryside managers in general.

Literature review

The review identified several key themes covered by the literature: perception of woodlands; children and the natural environment; green open space and fear of crime and vandalism; women in woodlands; other demographic variables related to woodland use; and improving the design of urban woodlands. Key points related to: woodlands as a place to 'escape'; the importance of adventure and mystery and the concomitant potential for fear; negative perceptions of teenagers' use of woodlands; groups in society who feel vulnerable in woods (e.g. children, women, ethnic minority groups, teenagers); and for forest managers, the importance of participatory planning methods and effective communication.

Interviews with managers

Interviews with six forest managers in the area assisted in identifying some of the key issues and case study communities.

Community research

Five communities representative of central Scotland were used as case studies: Alloa, Corstorphine in Edinburgh, Lennoxton, Whitburn and Wishaw.

2. Research findings

A. Focus Groups

Focus groups indicated that the choice of woodlands and forests for recreational purposes is mainly driven by proximity to where the users live. Woodland type, e.g. coniferous or broadleaves, appears to have much less influence on choice of where to go. Facilities, e.g. for cycling or children's play, are factors which determine use and, although many people prefer open woodland, some users, including teenagers, like woodlands as places in which to hide or to get away from others. Woodlands have evidently been the location for many vivid and positive experiences of engagement with the landscape, often associated with childhood memories. Despite this, many people consider the opportunities for woodland enjoyment are more constrained than they were a decade or more ago.

The two factors most mentioned as preventing fuller use of woodlands are safety and forest abuse. The dumping of rubbish and general littering of many woodlands does not always completely deter people, but encounters with others who may be vandalising things or behaving anti-socially will. Fears for safety, whether because of other people or from injury (particularly among elderly users) are deterrents to people using woodlands alone.

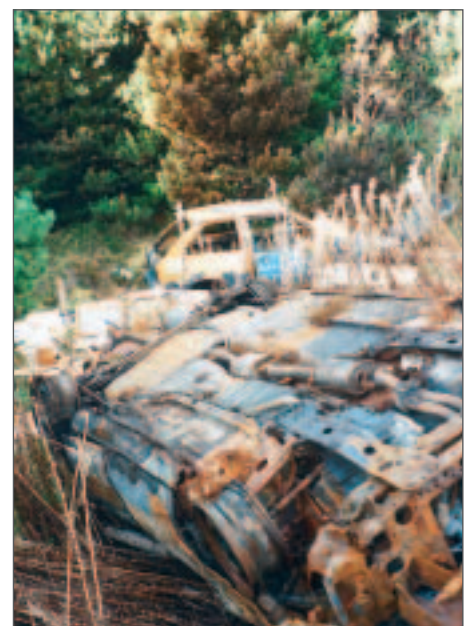


Figure 1

A den in the Polkemmet Moor plantation, Wishaw.

Figure 2

Burnt out cars in the Polkemmet Moor plantation, Wishaw.



B. Questionnaires

Questionnaires based on a Facet Design, were used to interview 339 people (46% male and 54% female) across the five communities. Most woodland visits occurred on a monthly basis (29% of respondents), with 17% not visiting woodlands at all. Lennoxton had the highest percentage of daily visitors (24%) and Wishaw had the highest percentage of those who never visit (27%). Men generally visit woodlands more frequently than women, and all groups visit most often in the summer.

There appear to be distinct categories of visitors:

- those who visit daily, often for walking the dog; these are the only group who generally visit woodlands alone;
- those who visit weekly, regular visitors who have the most positive views about feeling safe, at home and free from anxiety in woodlands;
- those who visit monthly, who share some of the perception characteristics of the weekly visitors, but to a lesser degree, and who are most interested in woodlands free from rubbish and in information boards and signage;
- those who visit once a year, who are least likely to visit woodlands alone, most positive about signs through the woodlands, and who share some characteristics with those who never visit woodlands at all in feeling less at home there.

Crucially, the frequency of people's woodland visits as children is related to the frequency of adult visits and to how comfortable adults feel walking in woodlands alone. Usage was also affected by age: those over 45 years old were less likely to visit for specialist outdoor activities, although the 55–64-year-old age group were an exception to this. Compared to men, women had stronger preferences for signs leading through the woods and for group and family activities, such as picnics, and were less likely to walk alone. Men were generally positive about walking alone and felt much less vulnerable in woodlands than women.

Analysis of the responses to the questionnaires covered two further aspects:

(i) Factor analysis of the attitudinal items revealed 11 dimensions accounting for 61% of variance in the data. Each of these dimensions contained variables related to one of the three categories of 'place': physical features, activities and perceptions. No dimension contained variables from more than one of these categories, which supports the original Facet Theory hypothesis that, in order to understand people's attitudes to woodlands, it is necessary to understand all three categories.

Woodland Features were associated with:

- physical appearance;
- signs and information;
- transport facilities, access and walking distance from home;
- naturalness and diversity.

Woodland Activities were associated with:

- walking and fresh air;
- family walks and picnics;
- wildlife and specialist outdoor activities.

Woodland Perceptions were associated with:

- fears;
- feeling at peace and at home;
- quietness/vandalism.

(ii) Predictors of Woodland Use – Regressions and categorisation statistics were used to separate respondents on the basis of frequency of visits and those who did not visit woodlands at all. The best demographic predictors of woodland visits were:

- childhood visits;
- owning a dog;
- having a special connection to woodlands.

Woodland features which were good predictors of woodland use were:

- walking distance from home;
- being accessible by car, bike or bus;
- signage and good information boards.

Woodland activities which were good predictors of woodland use were:

- walking on one's own;
- seeing wildlife;
- walking the dog.

Woodland perceptions which were good predictors of woodland use were:

- feeling vulnerable;
- fear of accidents;
- the social stigma attached to being alone in woodlands.

C. Site Surveys

Site surveys revealed that most of the sites visited by focus group participants were mixed woodland with varying amounts of conifers and of varying age. The only characteristics of woodland type which seemed to be related to levels of use or abuse were the size and dominance of conifers, and level of vehicular access. Large, densely-planted coniferous plantations, which had forest roads enabling vehicular access into secluded interiors, were those areas where most abuse, of all kinds, was evident.

The observations indicated that there is not a clear relationship between the quality of paths and the degree of use. Although welcoming and informative signage appears to be associated with comparatively high usage, a high level of use does not always correlate with freedom from abuse. However, evidence of high levels of management and maintenance, and/or high levels of conventional use, are generally associated with lower levels of abuse.

3. Implications for forest design and management

In examining the ways communities interact with their local woodlands, there is evidence of a range of use and abuse, and attitudes to this. Woodland managers recognise the need to understand the context for woodland use and develop participatory planning tools in order to make appropriate management decisions. Ideally, management of woodlands and their use by the community would aim to move all behaviours in a positive direction along any use/abuse scale.

- Physical site qualities matter more to people who rarely visit woodlands – physical site qualities are less important than proximity in determining which woodlands people use, but freedom from rubbish is important to people. Signage, well-defined paths, information boards and

other physical signs of welcome and care are also valued, particularly by infrequent users. A virtuous cycle can be established by removing accumulated rubbish and damaged items and increasing the presence of local rangers or wardens. This is likely to encourage a wider range of people to start using the area and further deter abusers. Local councils, planning departments and the police must work in coordination with woodland managers if workable solutions to major problems of abuse, such as fly-tipping, are to be developed.

- One person's use is another's abuse and different kinds of behaviour will be acceptable to different groups of people. What currently is perceived as abuse may, from a different perspective, be seen as robust woodland use which serves a valid social purpose. Young people, in particular, may welcome somewhere to let off steam and engage in noisy or physically challenging activity that would be unacceptable in a more public place. There is potential for remoter woodlands to be places where such activities are allowed to take place and managed as such, perhaps in collaboration with youth or social workers and the police.
- Issues of social inclusion include teenagers who find woodlands attractive as places to 'hang out' and be themselves, away from the disapproving gaze of adults, but whose presence is perceived as threatening by other people. The evidence that unemployed people use woodlands to escape the social pressures of their situation shows that woods already make a contribution to the well-being of people who are economically and (often) socially disadvantaged. Retired people are potentially an important category of woodland users but they are often anxious about their safety in woodlands; group and family visits can help overcome some of this anxiety. It is unfortunate that the random sampling techniques used in this research did not result in any significant response from disabled people or those belonging to ethnic minorities; these should be the targets of future research. The role of dog walkers is relevant as they provide an important element of informal policing, and give owners an increased sense of security when alone in woodlands, but the potential negative impact of dogs on children, ethnic minorities and elderly people should not be overlooked.



Figure 3

Old miners meet on the reclaimed pit in Lady Wood, Whitburn.

- Targeting particular groups for outreach and involving other professionals may be most effective. For example, programmes to encourage positive experience of woodlands in childhood will need to involve teachers and youth and social workers. Working together with local health authorities and individual health practices would help maximise the health benefits of woodland use.
- Effective information dissemination is important as well as clear signage that lets people know what they can expect in the way of provision and accessibility. Attractive and well-designed

entrances and signage systems need to be accompanied by effective programmes for dissemination of information to the community at large. The impact and potential of new communication technology here should be considered.

- Management needs to be flexible and allow locals and groups more control, if the community is to truly participate in managing woodlands. Long-term funding for woodland management is essential for any social inclusion programme to be developed and grant-aiding authorities should consider whether a new grant structure and focus is required.

Figure 4

Broadwalk leading into woodlands in Gartmorn Country Park, Alloa.



4. Future research needs

Future research on open space and social inclusion should focus on:

- Effective ways for children to experience woodlands.
- Targetting specific groups (e.g. teenagers, disabled people, ethnic minorities) about woodland use and their desires for use.
- Models for effective involvement of other professionals, e.g. youth workers.
- Site-specific design and management solutions.
- Design of welcoming entrances to woodland areas.
- Information needs and dissemination methods appropriate to address social inclusion.
- Internal design of woodlands in relation to people's perceptions and use.
- Evaluating the health benefits of woodland use.

List of contributors

This research project has been carried out by the Landscape Design and Research Unit and the OPENspace Research Centre of Edinburgh College of Art and Heriot Watt University on behalf of the Forestry Commission. The work of the project was directed by Catharine Ward Thompson, Peter Aspinall provided expertise on research methodologies, data analysis and interpretation and much of the project management was undertaken by Simon Bell. JoAnna Wherrett undertook the initial interviews and focus group work, Catherine Findlay undertook the detailed quantitative analysis and Penny Travlou contributed to a major part of the literature review. Margaret Scott Myers developed and designed the questionnaire; Stephen Robertson and Katherine Southwell made significant contributions to site surveys, data collection and presentation, assisted by Carol Omar and Stella Wisdom. Max Hislop supervised the project for the Forestry Commission under the direction of Marcus Sangster. All drawings and photographs are by Katherine Southwell.

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