



LOCAL OPEN SPACE AND SOCIAL INCLUSION: CASE STUDIES OF USE AND ABUSE OF WOODLANDS IN CENTRAL SCOTLAND

COMMUNITY SUMMARY: ALLOA

This outlines some of the results of a research project into the use and abuse of forests and woodlands in the Central Belt of Scotland. It was carried out by the Landscape Design and Research Unit and OPENspace research centre at Edinburgh College of Art/Heriot-Watt University on behalf of the Forestry Commission.

Research Aims and Objectives

This research project sought to answer four basic questions:

1. How important are forests for people to use or abuse?
2. Which forests and woodlands do people choose to use or abuse?
3. Why do they choose these forests, are there some characteristics, which determine which forests people choose to use or abuse?
4. What are the design implications for forest managers?

These were based on seeking user-led response to the questions (hence use of 'woodlands' of 'forests' terminology):

- Initial discussion with forest managers and community groups to identify case studies
- 5 case study communities (Alloa, Corstorphine, Lennoxton, Whitburn and Wishaw)
- Focus groups – 3 to 4 per community
- Site-based observations
- Questionnaire to each of the communities

Research Methods

FINDINGS FROM LENNOXTOWN

The following focus-group discussions were held in Alloa:

1. Alloa Mother and Toddler Group mothers
2. New Approaches, Alloa
3. Alloa Academy, S2 Class
4. Lornshill Academy, Tullibody

A. Findings from Focus Groups

1. *Favourite activities*

Overall walking was by far the most popular activity; cycling was also very popular. In Alloa alone, people also mentioned food-gathering such as picking berries.

“You can just go away by yourself. You can just disappear and nobody can see you...you can't do that in the city, you can't just keep walking , walking, walking” (Person from New Approaches, Alloa)

2. Things people dislike about the countryside

The principal things people disliked about the countryside and woodlands were: rubbish, vandalism, dog fouling and dumped or burnt out cars.

3. Most frequently visited forests

It is clear from the focus group discussions that woodlands are more likely to be visited if they are close to the community, preferably within 3 miles (5 kilometres).

4. Safety issues

There are some places in Alloa which were considered fine and safe for walking, e.g. Gartmorn Dam, and others which were not, especially for women and children. Some parks had quite mixed use, e.g. Greenfield Park, used by young children in summer as well as by older teenage and adult groups.

"I was always in Greenfield when I was a wee lassie, climbing the trees" - Teenager, Alloa

5. Abuse of woodlands and forests

- Rubbish: Alloa has a problem in general with rubbish, including bottles, cans, broken glass, plastic and other litter. Many people said it was necessary to walk past rubbish while walking in the woods, e.g. between Alloa and Clackmannan Towers. Two areas, Sauchie and Hutton, were reported as having discarded needles on the ground.
- Fly tipping: There was mention of prams and bicycles being dumped.
- Vandalism: There have been a number of problems with new play equipment and statues being vandalized. Children were held responsible for some vandalism, and issues of high poverty and unemployment were cited as factors leading to vandalism. Trees and wooded areas have also been damaged, sometimes by fire or ring-barking of trees.
- Alcohol and drug abuse: These were cited by some groups as problems.

"At the woods at Sauchie, folk take drugs down there... 16- to 17-year-olds hiding in there. You can see that they're dealing and that, so you don't go in there, it wouldn't be safe" – S2 pupil. Alloa

6. People's ideal woodland

There are a variety of ways in which people engage with the landscape; they can involve very powerful, and often very positive, sensory and emotional experiences, as the quotes from the discussion groups demonstrate.

- For all: woodlands could be places where people can feel a sense of escape from the mundane world and its problems.
- For unemployed people: woodlands can offer a release and a relief that is clearly therapeutic.

"I find it's quiet, it gets you away from everyday life, basically. You just go away and be in a world of your own sometimes. You can go away if you're angry at anything, just go away and get yourself all calmed down." - Unemployed person, Alloa

- For children: woodlands can be special places for experiencing things that are out of the ordinary.

7. Improvements

- Maintenance: Most groups would like to see the forests and woodlands cleaned up, possibly by using a clean-up campaign. Footpath maintenance and improvement was also an important issue.
- Signage: Notice boards and information panels were thought to be a good idea.
- Facilities: Facilities for children were requested by many people. Several facilities for adults were also mentioned, like benches, which should be well positioned and well spaced out.
- Education: By educating the children about the environment, it is hoped to improve their behaviour in later life.
- Consultation: Local people expressed an interest in knowing about plans for their area.
- Woodland character: People indicated that they do not want to turn their woodlands and forests into commercialised theme parks; rather, they would like to keep them natural and informal.

B. Findings from Questionnaire Analysis

Demographics

The questionnaire was used in all 5 of the study communities. From the overall 339 interviews, 76 were conducted in Alloa with 37 male and 39 female respondents. Most of the interviewees were between 25 and 64 years old.

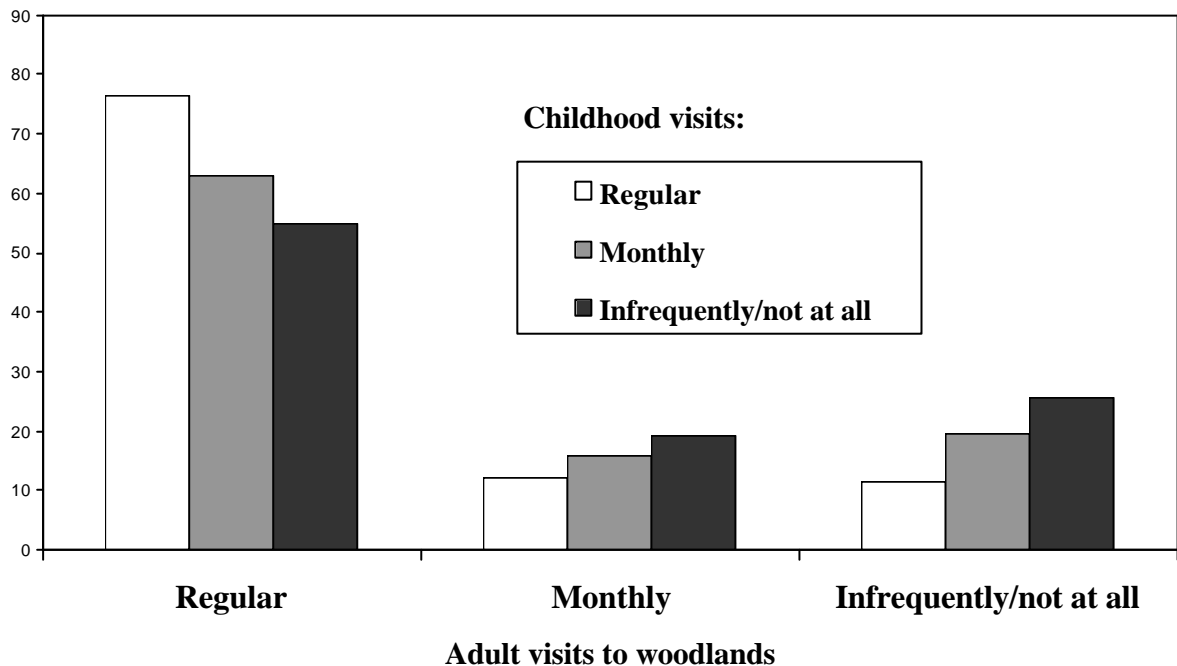


Chart A: Frequency of visits to woodlands: The graph shows clearly that the people who Regularly visit woodlands are the ones who used to go to woods frequently as children.

Chart B: Frequency of woodland visits by community

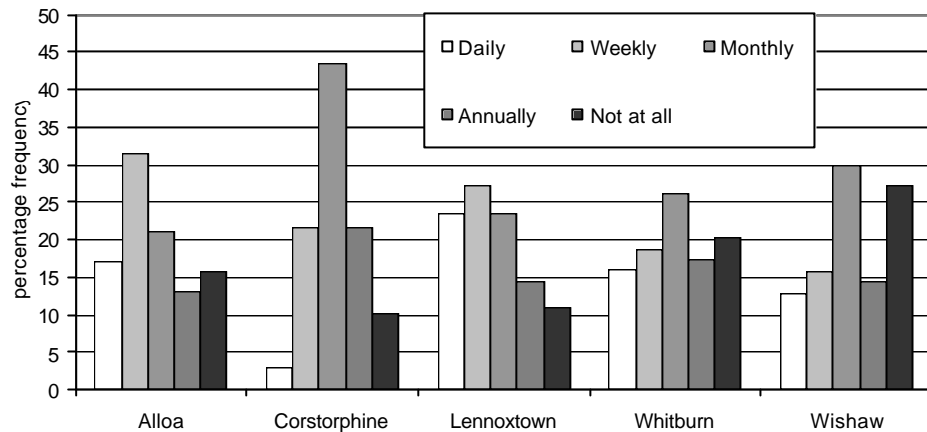


Chart B: Frequency of woodland visits by community: The graph shows that Alloa has the highest level of weekly visits (32%) of all 5 sites.

C. Findings from Site-based Observations around Alloa

1. Gartmorn Country Park: Cowpark Wood: Used by walkers and horse-riders. Litter and graffiti in evidence in the area behind the primary school.
2. Tower Woods: Users include children; evidence of dens. Extensive fly-tipping – builders’ and gardeners’ waste as well as domestic rubbish.
3. Inglewood: Walkers and dog walkers. Some litter, rubbish dumping, vandalism to trees.
4. Ochil Hills Woodland Park: Broad range of users: mothers and toddlers, children, older people, hill-walkers, joggers and dog-walkers. Small amount of litter and builders’ rubbish.

Interim Summary of Overall Project Results

1. Childhood experiences
 - Childhood experience of woods best predicts adult visits
 - Adults enjoy giving children the opportunities to experience woodland play
2. Perceptions about woodlands
 - Regular users, especially those who visit weekly, have very positive views about feeling safe, at home and free from anxiety in woodlands
 - People who don’t visit feel more vulnerable or fearful about visiting woodlands
 - Any negative perceptions must be overcome, or at least balanced, before people can enjoy positive woodland benefits.
3. What determines choice of woodlands?
 - Mainly proximity to where users live
 - Walking is the most popular activity by far, then cycling
 - Country or forest park facilities
 - Teenagers like places to hide out, be away from adult scrutiny.
4. What determines or predicts woodland use?
 - Frequency of childhood visits
 - Signs and information, woodland variety and tidiness
 - Walking on one's own
 - Easy access
 - Woodland activities, wildlife
5. What constrains use of woodlands?
 - Feeling vulnerable
 - Fear of physical accidents (e.g. falling, elderly people)
 - Fear of intimidation or being attacked (women and children)
6. What do people most dislike about woodland abuse?
 - Litter, evidence of fires, broken glass
 - Fly-tipping and car dumping
 - Vandalism and remains apparently left by groups of youth