



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

COMMUNITY SUMMARY: WHITBURN

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' cf. '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 WHITBURN

The following focus-group discussions were held in Whitburn:

1. Polkemmet Playground
2. Whitburn Probus Club
3. Over-50s Exercise Class
4. Whitburn Academy, S2 Class

A. Findings from Focus Groups

1. Favourite activities

Overall walking was by far the most popular activity. Cycling was also very popular as Whitburn has very good cycle tracks, including the National Cycle Trail in West Lothian.

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

Whitburn is unusual in that one place, Polkemmet Country Park, is used by all the groups from Whitburn as a major recreational area. Despite some evidence of people fearing personal attack, Polkemmet is considered to be safe for children and teenagers. Younger children have open space to play in and a set aside, enclosed, play area which parents are happy for them to use, as long as a parent/carer is nearby. On the other hand, the older residents of Whitburn expressed some fear of walking alone in the woodlands, and have been advised by the local police not to do so. Of those that do walk in the woodlands, many either take a dog with them or go in company. Men who walk alone are more worried about scaring women than being scared themselves.

"I think the majority of people are frightened to walk alone."

"Men walking alone now are frightened in case people think they are following them. When you see a man who's on his own you think 'Oh no', you are just waiting to rush."
Woman from the over-50s exercise class, Whitburn

In general, people are being given advice not to go into woodlands alone. In one area the Neighbourhood Watch scheme has given out leaflets which advise people not to go out alone.

5. Abuse of woodlands and forests

- Rubbish: Whitburn is considered to be a fairly dirty place by the local people. The woodlands are prone to littering, which annoys some of the residents. The local parks also have a problem as young people regularly leave their beer cans and drug users their used needles.

"Where I live... we have a forest right next to us and we were forever going through it but when you walk through there it's just beer bottles and stuff now. Ten years ago it was quite a nice place to go for a walk but now... it's quite nasty to walk through, cars burnt out." – Teenager's views

- Vandalism: Vandalism is believed to be rife in Whitburn. It is felt that some people will destroy something as soon as it is built. It has been known for benches to be guarded while the concrete around them sets, to prevent their immediate destruction. This problem is perceived to be getting worse; no amount of repairing walls covered in graffiti or mending facilities helps. Old cars are also a big problem, while they can be picked up by scrap merchants, some are simply set on fire and dumped on back roads or in forest entrances.
- Alcohol and drug abuse: The woods in Whitburn are seen as places for youth gangs to hang out. King George's Park has set places for bonfires, but is apparently also used for other activities which may be illicit, such as underage smoking and drinking.
- Fly tipping: People have been dumping such items as refrigerators and mattresses, despite the fact that the council will uplift rubbish for free.

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.
- 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, 69 were conducted in Whitburn with 33 male and 36 female respondents. The largest group of interviewees were between 25 and 44 years old.

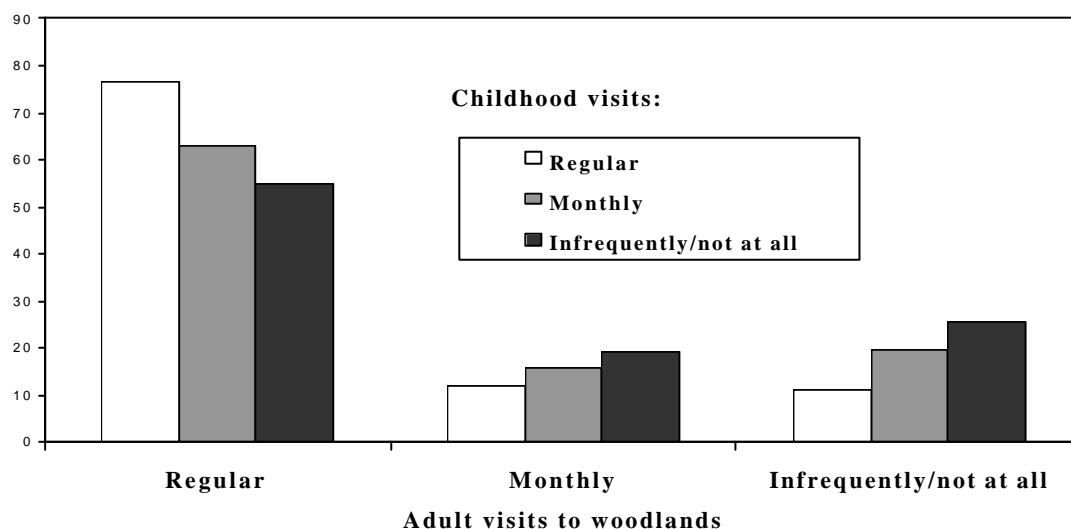


Chart A: Frequency of visits to woodlands: The graph shows clearly that the people who regularly visit woodlands are the ones who used to go to woods frequently as children.

Chart B: Frequency of woodland visits by community

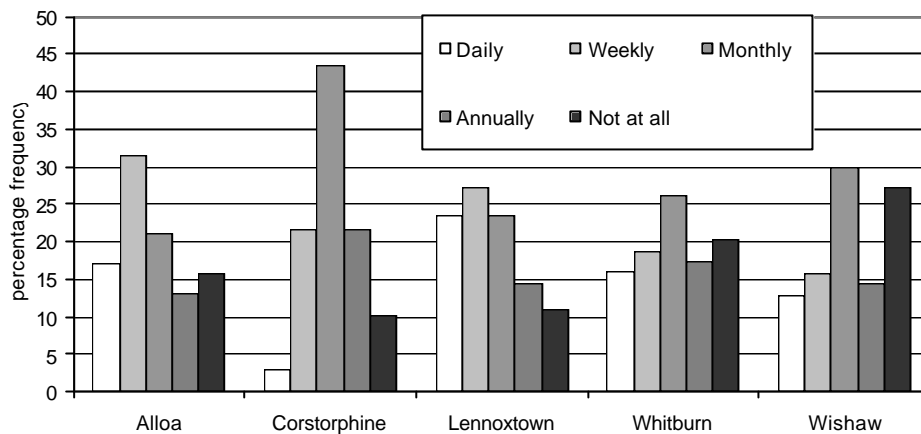


Chart B: Frequency of woodland visits by community: The graph shows that in Whitburn there is a high percentage (20.6%) of people who have never visited woodlands at all.

C. Findings from Site-based Observations around Whitburn

1. Polkemmet Moor Plantation: Used mainly by motorbikers, walkers and horse riders. Evidence of substantial abuse of the woodland (e.g. car dumping and burning, fly tipping, vandalism).
2. Lady Wood: Well-used by retired people walking and socialising at meeting places marked by benches. There is only a small amount of litter.
3. Glenburn Wood: Used by dog walkers meeting friends. Evidence of children playing, building tree houses in big old trees. There is not much litter or rubbish in the area.

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
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.

