



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

COMMUNITY SUMMARY: WISHAW

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?

Research Methods

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

FINDINGS FROM WISHAW

The following focus-group discussions were held in Wishaw, North Lanarkshire:

1. Mother and Toddler Group
2. Branchalwood Residents Association
3. Wishawhill Lunch Club (employees of the local council)
4. Coltness High School, S2 and S6 Class

A. Findings from Focus Groups

1. Favourite activities

Overall walking was by far the most popular activity in Wishaw. Cycling was also very popular.

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

The Wishaw groups felt that it was not safe to go into woodlands alone. They would only go if there were at least two adults in the group; some people reported being frightened and concerned in the past, and of having been scared by men walking their dogs. Mothers thought that the walks were fairly isolated from help, should any problems arise. Every group except the school pupil group voiced clearly this fear of being alone. Neither women nor children would walk alone in the dark, although adult men were happy to walk their dogs at night or go for walks on their own at dusk.

"It's much more to do with the information they get now. I don't think we are any worse really... It's like children being abducted: thirty, forty years ago, you would never have heard of all that, but now...people don't let their children go down the road themselves...a lot of it is imagined; not imagined, but we are aware of these things, therefore parents are more cautious."

(Older person – Wishaw)

5. Abuse of woodlands and forests

- Rubbish: There is litter on the ground in the area. Beer bottles and broken glass appear to be the main problem.
- Vandalism: Burnt out cars are becoming a problem; while in the past, these were moved by the council, now they are left on the road, as it is no longer necessary to keep the road clear.
- Alcohol and drug abuse: Some comment was also made about young men who use the woodlands for drinking. Although discarded needles have been seen at nearby Baron's Haugh RSPB reserve, there is no evidence in the Coltness woods of drug abuse.
- Fly tipping: Other areas close to some of the new housing estates have problems with dumping and fly tipping. People appear to use this area as a 'private dump', despite the fact that the local council will uplift any items of rubbish for free; supermarket trolleys, three-piece suites, fridges and garage doors have all been seen. This is considered to be mostly a problem caused by people who actually live next door to the woodland.

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.

"I tell you one thing that stuck in my mind... I allowed them (son and friends) to take a drink out of the burn, and none of them had ever taken a drink out of the burn. I couldn't get them away from it: 'Can I get another drink?... Can I get another drink?' I could not believe that, it never occurred to me that that was the case." (Adult – Wishaw)

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.

"I use (the woods) three days every week when I have got the grandchildren. The size of the gate...to get a push-chair through, it's extremely difficult, it usually takes a man's strength rather than a woman's. Once you do get in with a push-chair, the steps (are) fine down the way but a mother with a young child will have great difficulty getting the pushchair back up again". Adult - Wishaw

- **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:** Comments received included that people 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, 70 were conducted in Wishaw with 37 male and 33 female respondents. The largest group of interviewees were between 25 and 44 years old.

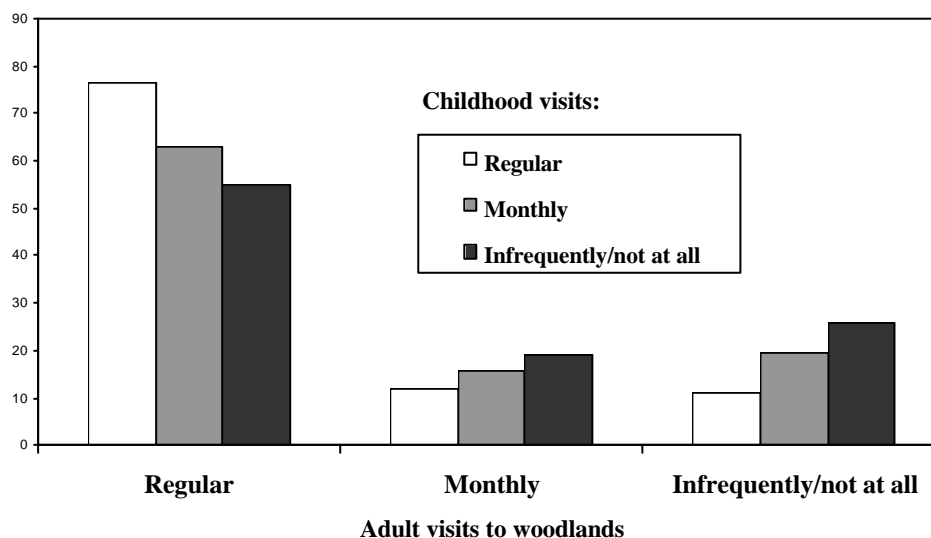


Chart A: Frequency of visits to woodlands: The graph shows clearly that the people who Regularly visit woodlands are the ones who used to go to woods frequently as children.

Chart B: Frequency of woodland visits by community

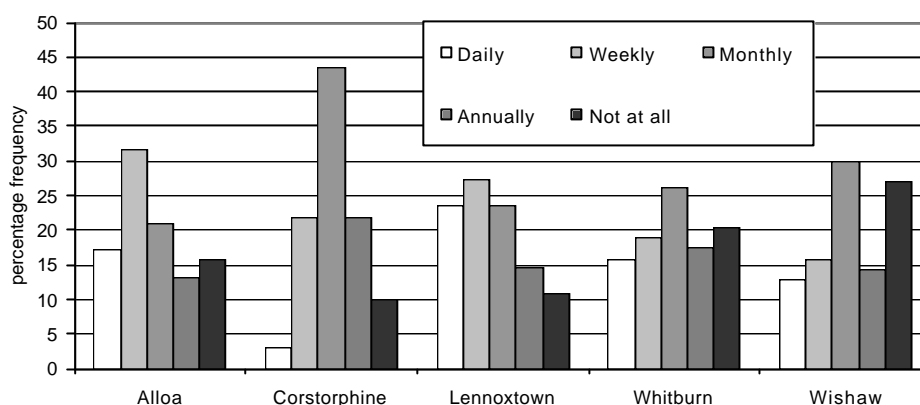


Chart B: Frequency of woodland visits by community: The graph shows that Wishaw has the highest levels (27.1%) of interviewees who never visited woods at all.

C. Findings from Site-based Observations around Wishaw

1. Cambusnethon Woods: Walkers and bikers are the main users. Fly tipping was bad but now reduced since barriers erected. Dens built by youths – drinking, air gun practice etc.
2. Dalzell Park: A variety of users: youngsters, families, horse riders and walkers, although mainly concentrated in open areas of the park rather than wooded sections. Evidence of garden rubbish and litter from nearby housing.
3. Baron's Haugh: Lots of use by bird watchers and a range of people of all ages. Some vandalism to a bench and small amount of graffiti but otherwise little abuse.
4. North Branchal Wood, Coltness: Main users are walkers, dog walkers and children. Abuse includes fly-tipping, garden rubbish, spray paint on furniture, fires, air gun use.

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