

## Well-being for all? Social distribution of benefits from woods

Well-being is a positive physical, mental and social state and is a growing area of interest to researchers and policy makers internationally. In a synthesis of thirty one research projects undertaken in the previous decade, this study explores the well-being benefits people gain through a wide range of activities in and engagement with woodlands, enabling the presentation of a state-of-the-art typology of well-being benefits for woodlands in Britain. The study also analyses how these benefits are socially distributed.



*"My husband and I will come up here on our own, lovely and peaceful, not being stressed about anything, it's peaceful and quiet"*

### Background

Understanding and improving people's well-being is a key focus for the UK government. The focus on well-being is set within the context of a questioning of the limits of a purely economic approach to sustainable development and has become a prominent issue globally and a concern for governments. A report commissioned by the previous French President Nicholas Sarkozy identified the limits of gross domestic product as an indicator of economic performance and social progress. The report argues that the time is ripe for management systems to shift emphasis from measuring economic production to measuring people's well-being. Building on this debate in the UK, the Office of National Statistics has developed a set of well-being indicators. These include individual subjective measures of well-being as well as factors that directly affect well-being such as health, and wider contextual domains such as governance, the economy and the natural environment. In relation to woodlands there are concerns about inequalities in access and about the lack of contact with woodlands, particularly for children and young people.

### Objectives

This research aimed to:

- Identify the range of well-being benefits people gain from trees and woodlands in Britain
- Explore how the benefits are distributed across socio-demographic groups
- Outline the range of activities being undertaken to realise these well-being benefits.

### Methods

- Data was synthesised from 31 research studies undertaken since 2001. We re-visited the methods, results, conclusions for each of the qualitative studies and undertook new statistical analysis of the quantitative survey data.
- These studies were undertaken or commissioned by the Forestry Commission or the Social and Economic Research Group at Forest Research.
- The sample from the 31 studies was a total of 5,017 people; including 3,729 from surveys and 1,290 from qualitative research.
- Eleven of the 31 studies were evaluations of interventions and programmes.

## Findings

Survey research showed that nature connectedness, mental well-being and sense of place were the three most important personal well-being benefits gained. The survey work also found that physical activities (walking, cycling), social activities (visiting with friends/family) and mental well-being activities (relaxing, sitting, thinking) were the three most popular types of activity undertaken in woodlands. The qualitative research added depth and detail to the quantitative survey research and helped identify a wider range of benefits gained by different groups.

We found that whilst many people gain well-being benefits from trees and woods in Britain there are differences in the social distribution of these benefits. Women and the 35+ age groups gained the broadest range of benefits. Other groups, for example Black and Minority Ethnic Groups (BME), gain a narrower range of well-being benefit types. This leads to the conclusion that, as is the case with access to woodlands, the well-being benefits associated with woodlands are unequally distributed across society in Britain. Eleven of the studies focused on interventions aimed at encouraging access for 'hard to reach' groups and were successful in reaching BME groups and those of lower socio-economic status.

The typology of well-being benefits developed from this research synthesis outlines six high level well-being categories: 1) health, 2) nature landscape connections, 3) education and learning, 4) social connections, 5) economy, and 6) symbolic, cultural and spiritual significance. Grouped under these six categories are 21 well-being types. The typology illustrates the broad range of well-being benefits people gain from woodlands, providing further evidence of the multi-purpose nature of woodlands in Britain.

## Recommendations

To ensure that the well-being benefits of woodlands are gained across the social spectrum in Britain, a number of management approaches can be considered:

- Enabling so-called 'hard to reach' groups to access and enjoy woodlands requires the development of specific, targeted and tailored interventions and programmes.
- Organised and supported events and activities will be essential for those less familiar with woodlands and those concerned about visiting alone and safety issues to participate.
- Outreach work in communities can be the first step in enabling particular groups to access woodlands.
- Partnership working can facilitate effective targeting of particular groups because it will harness the expertise and networks of a range of organisations.
- There is significant potential value in encouraging a variety of woodlands owners to allow public access.

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### Reports and Publications

O'Brien, L and Morris, J. 2013. Well-being for all? The social distribution of benefits gained from woodlands and forests in Britain. *Local Environment*, 19, 4: 356-383.  
Morris, J., O'Brien, L., Ambrose-Oji, B., Lawrence, A. and Carter, C. 2011. Access for all? Barriers to accessing woodlands and forests in Britain. *Local Environment*. 16: 375-396.