

Engagement with nature and Covid-19 restrictions Survey 2021: Key Results

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Background

This summary report provides results from the Nature and Covid survey undertaken by Forest Research in 2021, as a follow up to a similar survey in 2020 (O'Brien and Forster, 2020). The surveys undertaken in 2020 (n=2,115) and 2021 (n=398) are not directly comparable statistically as the 2020 survey asked about pre-Covid activity and during Covid activity. A small number of people (n=33) completed both surveys, and these were matched to explore change over both surveys. In the current survey people were asked about visits to nature/woods from the end of March until June/July 2021, and questions about motivations, barriers and benefit changes focused on the past 12 months i.e. from June/July 2020 to June/July 2021.

77% of respondents were female, 96% were White, 62% were from urban postcodes, just over 55% lived in households with more than two people. The majority of age groups were well represented with more than 10% in each age category. The sample is similar to that of the 2020 survey.

Wellbeing

Those who were physically active for 60 minutes or more in the past week had better wellbeing in terms of:

- Life satisfaction
- Feeling more worthwhile
- Being happier
- Being less anxious.

In the matched data there were small (non-significant) positive increases in life satisfaction, feeling worthwhile, and feeling less anxious for respondents, and a significant positive shift in happiness.

Visits to nature and woodlands

In general, those who were more physically active (150 mins or more) in the past week were more likely to visit green and natural spaces.

From the end of March 2021 until June/July respondents visited:

- Woodlands 86%
- Urban green space 76%
- Fields, farms, countryside 70%
- River, lake, canal 67%

Overall visits were up by 10% or more on the previous survey. Respondents in households with more people in them were significantly more likely to visits green and natural spaces.

Matched data across the 2020 and 2021 surveys showed significant increases in visits to beach/sea and grounds of a historic property or country park, which might be due to fewer restrictions on visits further afield.

More physically active people visited woods more frequently than less active people (for example, around half of the most physically active group visited woods twice a week or more versus 14% of the least active). Those in urban areas were significantly less likely to visit woods than rural respondents.

Just under 50% of respondents had visited a Forestry England site from end of March to June/July; about 20% were unsure if they had visited an FE site; these results were within 5% points of the 2020 survey. Those who were physically active were significantly more likely to have visited than the less active.

Lockdown restrictions leading to increase in engagement with nature

About 60% of respondents stated there was a significant increase or some increase in their engagement with nature due to local and national Covid-19 restrictions. Potentially indicating a renewed focus on nature when there were fewer other activities people could undertake.

Time engaging with nature (n=22)

A polarised picture emerges from the qualitative comments similar to the 2020 survey results with some people visiting nature more due to being furloughed and spending less time commuting and others visiting less due to being ill, concerns about overcrowding, and wanting to ensure they follow the various restrictions rules.

'The amount of time I have spent outdoors in nature has increased enormously over the last year, particularly during the winter months which would not have previously been the case'

'I had long Covid in 2020 with fatigue for months, so spent all my outdoor time in spring-summer sitting in my small back garden rather than going out for walks. This year I am much better so have been steadily increasing my time and distance on walks with less time for the garden'

'The woods have been a saviour and our garden a retreat'

Activities in nature

For more than 50% of respondents there was a significant/some increase in the first five activities listed below:

- Being in your garden 69%
- Viewing nature/wildlife 61%
- Exercising outdoors 54%
- Visiting a local wood/forest 52%

- Viewing trees 52%
- Visiting a nature area (not a woodland) 47%
- Tending window box/indoor plants 43%

Those who had increased their physical activity in the previous 12 months were significantly more likely to report increases across all activities.

About 80% reported walking on three or more days per week, with about three quarters reporting raised breathing levels due to undertaking the activity.

Less than 15% reported cycling in the previous week, 85% of those who did cycle stated in raised their breathing levels.

About a third reported doing other activities (e.g. gym, home fitness, running etc.) during the previous week, 90% of them reported increased breathing rate levels.

More than 80% stated they planned to sustain changes in all of the activities mentioned above.

Nature connection

Two thirds reported an increase in nature connection in the previous 12 months.

Respondents reported a significant increase in:

- Happiness in nature 41%
- Amount of time taken to appreciate nature 40%
- Feeling connected to nature 33%

The results were similar to the 2020 survey. Those who had increased their physical activity in the previous 12 months were more likely to report an increase in nature connection.

Motivations

Respondents reported a significant/some increase in these top three motivations for visiting nature over the past 12 months which scored highly:

- Mental health and wellbeing 73%
- To take children outside 69%
- To make the most of exercise opportunities given the Covid restrictions 69%

Those who had increased their physical activity in the previous 12 months were more likely to report an increase across all motivations.

Lockdown restrictions increasing motivations

Around two thirds of respondents stated a significant or some increase in motivations to visit nature brought about by the local and national Covid-19 restrictions.

Changes in benefits from engaging with nature

In the past 12 months people stated a significant change (when engaging with nature) for the better in terms of:

- A feeling of escape and freedom 69%
- Mental wellbeing 66%
- Feeling close to nature 65%
- Gaining a sense of solace from engaging with nature 65%

Although not directly comparable, similar results were found in the 2020 survey. Like motivations, those who had increased their physical activity in the previous 12 months were more likely to report a change for the better across all benefits.

The thirty-nine qualitative comments outlined benefits but also anxieties about social distancing, understanding the various restriction rules and concerns about getting Covid.

'Nature has been a lifeline for me, but the restrictions were very difficult. It's hard recovering and trying to get back to normal'

'As a woman all these benefits are contingent on feeling safe in the nature space'

'I have recently been diagnosed with complex post-traumatic stress disorder and being in nature, on my own with the greenery and wildlife, birdsong and forest smells is my only solace from my muddled mind. It's the best therapy by far and has certainly saved my life'

Appreciation of trees and woodlands

More than 50% reported a significant or some increase in appreciation of trees and woodlands in the previous 12 months, with very similar results to the 2020 survey. Trees in woods were most appreciated, followed by trees along footpaths/waterways, followed by trees in the local park, trees in the street and trees in people's garden.

Many qualitative comments showed an increased appreciation for trees in different contexts (n=169), people talked about noticing nature more, feeling more connected to nature and nature helping them to reflect on their lives. Words such as calm, happy, peaceful, slowing down, relaxing, and beauty were used to describe how people felt. A small number of people talked about planting trees, while others were concerned about trees being felled in gardens or due to development.

'I have strictly followed the rules during each lockdown and not driven the 3 miles to woodland so street trees were the only trees I saw at times. I really, really appreciated them'

'I've forced myself to take daily walks as much mental health was suffering - it's been a revelation for me. I'm more mindful, have got a new birdsong app and tree identifier so I can learn more about what I'm seeing/hearing'

I've been valuing my own company much more and can do this most effectively when I'm in a natural space. Being around people and within

enclosed spaces has become a more anxious experience over the last 12 months and green spaces of any kind offer an escape from that'

'Saddened to find out about projects to destroy local woodland to be used for building on. Signed a petition. Feeling much more angry about forest destruction and feeling quite helpless about it all'

Barriers

The three main barriers to spending time outdoors in nature were:

- Concerns about overcrowding and distancing 44%
- The various national Covid restrictions 38%
- Worries about breaking Covid restrictions 34%

Less than 10% reported green spaces being too far away or difficulties getting to accessible green spaces as barriers. Those doing much less physical activity in the past 12 months were more likely to report facing a range of barriers to accessing nature.

Forty-eight qualitative comments outlined some of the barriers people faced and these included people finding the various restriction rules confusing, sites being busier than usual, the weather, and lack of toilet facilities for older people or those with specific conditions. Not being able to access nature could have a significant impact as outlined by the following quote.

'We live in the Forest of Dean district but still a drive away from the FOD England sites and were worried if visiting meant breaking lockdown. But our mental health plummeted as we do not have nearer green spaces nor even pavements to walk on as very rural and with a baby born in lockdown this made us housebound'

Conclusion

There were similarities between the surveys in 2020 and 2021, although they are not directly comparable.

Those who were more physically active in the past week were more likely to visit woods and nature and were less anxious and happier. Those who had increased their physical activity in the previous 12 months were more motivated to visit and gained more benefits.

For many the various restrictions led to them spending more time in nature and being more motivated to engage with nature due to fewer other activities being available. Barriers highlighted confusion about the various Covid-19 restrictions and the concerns that people had to not break the rules, and protect themselves and their families.

It is clear that for many people visits to nature and woodlands played an important role in supporting their wellbeing through the various Covid-19 restrictions and strengthened their connection to nature. For many these changes have lasted through the various Covid-19 restrictions over the last 18 months.

References

Note: The methodological approach and the survey questions can be found in the O'Brien and Forster (2020) link below.

O'Brien, L and Forster, J. 2020. [Engagement with nature and covid-19 restrictions. Quantitative analysis 2020](#). Forest Research, Farnham.

Armstrong, A., Brockett, B., Eustice, T., Lorentzon, A., O'Brien, L., Williams, S. 2021. [Why Society Needs Nature: Lessons from Research during Covid-19](#).

O'Brien, L. Forster, J. 2021. [Physical activity supporting connection to nature and helping to maintain wellbeing during the Covid-19 restrictions in England](#).

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