

Canicross Event: Dalby Forest

As part of the Forestry Commission England and Sport England 'Active Forest' programme data was gathered at a Canicross event in Dalby Forest. Eleven people participated in short interviews, 8 females and 3 males. Two of the males were volunteering at the event and the rest were runners. Runners ranged in age from the 16-24 age category, to the 55-64. Both volunteers were in the 65-75+ age categories and were retired. The runners were all working. Six travelled a distance of 6-20 miles to reach the site and 5 travelled over 30 miles.



Canicross at Dalby Forest

The Canicross event was the third to be run at Dalby Forest. Thirty nine people participated in the event; sixty eight had registered, so quite a few paid to participate but did not attend on the day. An incident on one of the roads on route to the site might have been one of the reasons for this. Blue Cross, an animal charity, set up a stall at the event. The majority of participants ran the 5K or 8K route available with one dog, and a smaller number ran with two dogs.

Motivations

Motivations for getting involved included people wanting to exercise with their dogs, meet like-minded people, and have fun. One young woman described herself as over competitive after doing a lot of athletics when young. The majority were already active however; two people were new to running. A male runner in his late fifties, who came to Dalby, sometimes with his grandchildren, felt it was important to be a role model and encourage the younger generation to be active. Another woman who outlined that she had not run for months registered for the event in order to '*give me a kick start and get back into it*'.

Benefits of Canicross at Dalby

Participants stated that they found the event fun and enjoyable, and were happy to be undertaking an activity with their dogs which provided an opportunity for bonding. The social connections were important and the chance to meet new people, as one woman put it: '*It's a small world really, when you are out running with dogs, you get to know people*'. One young woman doing Canicross for the

first time was at the event with her mother who had done the previous Canicross event at Dalby. Another woman stated that her daughter wanted to have a go, although the family only have one dog, so they will have to take turns.

Benefits of Canicross at Dalby

Interviewer: 'How do you feel at the end of the race'

'Absolutely elated, I'm really happy I did it' (Female runner 1)

'Oh it's just good fun, I enjoy it. It's doing something different. It's nice doing things with her [the dog] and not leaving her at home. You meet loads of other people and dogs' (Female runner 2)

'It's hard but this is a really good course, the paths are not too hard so the dogs do better and my knees! (Female runner 6)

Visiting Dalby

The majority of runners had been to Dalby previously. There have been three Canicross events at Dalby and two of the participants had got involved in all three, while four people had been to one of the previous events. Only two of the runners had not been to Dalby before. One woman visited many forest sites.

We are Forestry Commission (FC) addicts, whenever we go away I feel like I do a tour of FC woodlands. I love the paths, they are always a good grade, you don't have to be a great map reader, and I have the app on my phone so we can plan where we are going to walk before we get there' (Female runner with two dogs)

Another visitor had been to the site but did not realise how big it is:

'If we ever come [to Dalby] we go to the visitor centre and go for walks down there with my grandchildren, but now we have just discovered this is an enormous forest and there is so much more to discover, so we will come a lot more with the dogs' (Female runner)

Running with dogs

Participants outlined that running with their dogs allowed them to work together as a team and spend time with them. Three were member of Canicross clubs, with one young woman stating that she had set up her own club. Participant's felt it was harder than running on their own, but they could also go faster as the dogs pulled them. One woman outlined: *'I was running and taking the dogs for a walk and then I realised the dogs like running as well, so I put the two together'*. Training the dogs to follow appropriate commands was also seen as important.

The Canicross event was popular, with the majority of runners having participated in at least one previous event at Dalby. Owners outlined that their dogs enjoyed the event, and the owners enjoyed bonding with their dogs. The event was viewed as an opportunity for socialising for both dogs and owners.

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Website: <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/research/active-forest-programme-evaluation/>