People's experiences of woodlands in north-west and south-east England

People's values and ways of viewing and interpreting the world provide a framework for assessing and describing their use and enjoyment of woodlands, and for how they debate and understand wider environmental issues. This research project, undertaken in 2003/04 for the Forestry Commission, sought to explore the ways in which people valued woodlands in their locality and more generally as part of the British landscape. Focus groups were undertaken with a range of people in both urban and rural areas to explore and gain an understanding of the social and cultural values of woodlands. Analysis of the data highlighted a number of key themes, including the feelings of well-being people gained from woodlands, and conflict and confusion over what was viewed as anti-social behaviour. Implications for policy development are outlined, focusing on the need for effective public participation, of addressing people's safety concerns and the importance and meaning of place.

Background

Three study areas were chosen in north-west England. Liverpool is a large metropolitan area that, in the past, has experienced significant economic decline. Stockbridge Village is a large housing estate in Knowsley that has suffered from high levels of deprivation. Both of these locations are within the Mersey Forest, one of 12 Community Forests in England. The third north-west site was Ambleside, situated in the Lake District National Park in Cumbria.

In south-east England, the study areas were Southampton and Heathfield. Southampton is the closest city to the New Forest, which was designated a National Park in 2005; Heathfield is a small market town in East Sussex.

Objectives

This research aimed to:

❍ explore and describe the values held for woodlands and trees through a series of in-depth discussion groups

❍ evaluate whether there were any differences between the north-west and south-east groups, and between urban and rural perspectives, and if so explore why

❍ explore the implications for the Forestry Commission of different people's values for woodlands and provide guidance for future management

> *"My memories of woods as a child, they seemed huge and really exciting and full of adventure. Whereas as a parent I'm more anxious because I'm the one with the responsibility, worrying about whether the children are going to be safe"*
>
> Female participant, 20–35 years of age, Liverpool

Methods

❍ A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit 16 focus groups. Eight were held in urban and rural areas in the north-west and eight in urban and rural areas in the south-east.

❍ A total of 123 members of the public were involved in the focus group discussions. All discussions were tape recorded for detailed analysis.

❍ Interviews were undertaken with staff from four organisations: the Forestry Commission, Mersey Forest, a Community Development Organisation and Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council.

Findings

Five key themes emerged from analysis of the data.

○ **Woodlands, green space and well-being** – physical, emotional and psychological pleasures were identified in this theme, including freedom, escape, relaxation and being away from pressure.

○ **Management of woods for conservation, economic and public benefit** – this theme focused on issues of wild and managed wood. There was some awareness of commercial management of woods such as felling and replanting, but this was generally not seen as a particular issue as it was distant from respondents' day-to-day lives. Public benefit was viewed as important.

○ **Community, place and personal identity** – respondents talked about their early memories of using woods. Public involvement was also considered important in providing people with a sense of ownership of their local woods.

○ **Conflicting and confused space** – this theme focused on concerns about the loss of woods to business or development, and about people's safety when in woodlands.

○ **Education and social learning** – there was a desire in the urban groups to pass on knowledge to the younger generation so they would respect and take responsibility for the environment. The rural respondents talked about learning more about their environment and focused on life-long learning through contact with nature.

Recommendations

Drawing together the five themes that emerged from the research, possible implications for future forestry policy development include the following.

○ The majority of respondents had never had any involvement in decision-making related to woodland management. Good quality and fair public participation can engender public trust and confidence, as well as providing fora in which different people can articulate their values. Some of the Stockbridge Village group were actively engaged in improving their local wood, highlighting what could be achieved by community groups with support from organisations.

○ Understanding citizens' knowledge of particular areas can provide relevant information for organisations, which can be incorporated into their management of an area.

○ Places are not only physical locations, they are also associated with a variety of experiences and memories. Greater understanding is needed of the importance of place in forest management and the many-layered meanings people associate with particular places.

○ Women tended to feel more insecure in woodlands than men. Woods that appear neglected or abused generate greater feelings of discomfort. Consequently, encouraging a cycle of use of woods through events and activities and clearing away rubbish are important.

Reports and publications

O'Brien, E. (2003). Human values and their importance to the development of forestry policy in Britain: a literature review. *Forestry*, **76**, 3–17.

O'Brien, L. (2004). *'A sort of magical place': people's experiences of woodlands in northwest and southeast England.* Forest Research, Farnham.
Available from http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/fr/INFD-5Z5CDR, 64 pp.

O'Brien, E. (2005). Publics and woodlands in England: well-being, local identity, social learning, conflict and management. *Forestry*, **78**, 321–336.