

'Table Tennis' observations and interviews: Thetford Forest

As part of the Forestry Commission England and Sport England 'Active Forest' programme observations and short interviews were undertaken at Thetford Forest in the school Easter holidays. Over a four hour period 72 people, mainly young boys, played table tennis for an average of fifteen minutes. Short interviews were undertaken with fourteen adults (mostly talking to two adults together) to understand more about families' experiences in the forest and the benefits of being active.



Table tennis at High Lodge

Two table tennis tables are available at High Lodge, Thetford Forest. These are located near to the Café and Information point and are clearly visible to the majority of visitors to the site. Those adults who watched their children playing table tennis were interviewed, however for many children that played their parents were not visible – potentially they were minding other children or picnicking on the grass further away from the tables.

Motivations

Fifty three percent of those observed during a four hour period were young boys twelve years of age and under playing with each other sometimes in two's or three's. Twenty five percent were girls, again usually age twelve or under. Families were motivated to visit the site because it has many opportunities for children to undertake different activities *'there are not many sites like this where you can come that are child friendly, they [the children] are fine and will walk in the woods but they need something a bit more exciting as they get bored easily'*.

Intergenerational activity

A quarter of the sessions were families playing together, mum, dad and children, grandparents and grandchildren. As one grandmother who played with her granddaughter explained *'it's for different age groups, a five year old can happily play with the grandparents, it's a good thing'*. This grandmother had played table tennis with the Women's Institute thirty or forty years ago. One family who usually had a holiday each year at a Forestry Commission site or Center Parcs stopped for the father and son to play together in the morning, then they went

off to do other activities. They came back in the afternoon and the mother and second son played a friendly but competitive game of table tennis together.

Benefits

The benefits adults described were more to do with being in the forest in general rather than specifically associated with table tennis, as this was only one, fairly small, aspect of their visit which often involved multiple activities. It was clear that a few families regularly played table tennis when they visited. The average time on the table was just over fifteen minutes. A few younger children stayed on the tables longer but were not always playing table tennis, sometimes they were just playing by running round the table or hiding under it. Many seemed unfamiliar with playing table tennis which meant much time spent on bending and picking up the ball, and running to retrieve it. A couple of families had seen the tables before but said they had been busy so the children had not used them previously. There were three occasions when children came and waited as the tables were busy.

Benefits

'It refreshes everything and clears the mind and is calming'

'They [the children] love the table tennis, they love it up here in general but they do particularly like that'

'It's nice to get them off their gadgets at home and get them out in the sunshine'

'It's a relaxed day, the kids are much better outdoors than they are indoors, no arguing they just get on with it and let off steam'

'I prefer to be outside I don't like gyms I think they are a bit artificial, I like to get out in the fresh air'

'This is the great thing about this place you can spend the whole day and if they [the children] get a bit bored you can move on to the next thing'

Activity in the forest environment

Most of the interviewees visited the site from 1-4 times a year travelling for 40-60 minutes to reach the site. Table tennis was one of a number of activities people were doing on site, other activities included 'Go Ape', using the children's play area, cycling, or walking on the trails. Most of the interviewees were staying for the day. About half the interviewees said they usually used the café; others brought a picnic or had lunch elsewhere. Most of the interviewees were physically active and those with children stated the children were reasonably active as well.

Table tennis was a social activity for people of all ages from 5 to over 65 years. Young boys were the keenest to play and were more likely to play together without adults. There was much fun, laughter, shouting and joshing each other by those who played. Adults were observed playing with their children, apart from one young couple in their early twenties who played together.

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