

Nature Journalling Group, Guisborough Forest

- Participants identified several benefits from participating in the activity, including improvements to psychosocial wellbeing and connection to nature.
- Barriers to participation included issues relating to transport, self-motivation and awareness of the activity.

- This case study focuses on a nature journalling group at Guisborough Forest in North East England. The researcher joined the group whilst they walked around the forest and took part in a nature journalling activity on one occasion in November 2024.
- This case study is based on observations made during the activity in addition to conversations with seven participants during an in-person focus group following the activity.
- We spoke to five women and two men from the Teesside area. Participants were between the ages of 35 and 74. Six participants identified as White British, one identified as White and Black African. Four participants declared a health condition and at least two felt this condition impacted their day-to-day activities.



Nature journalling

Nature journalling is a method of connecting to nature, largely used to provide mental wellbeing benefits. It involves recording different aspects of a person's relationship to nature while immersed in it. During this 2.5-hour group activity, participants walked through the forest together, led by the activity organiser. Throughout the walk, the group took breaks to complete nature journalling activities which involved paying mindful attention to the multi-sensory features of the forest, such as the colours of fallen leaves, the fungi growing, and the sound of birds. Participants made drawings of these details and/or wrote down how they made them feel in journals provided by the activity leader. Afterwards, participants convened indoors for refreshments and seven of nine participants stayed for the focus group. The activity was free to attend.

Motivations

Participants recalled different motivations for taking part in the activity. For some, the activity was one they had not tried before, and they took part to try something new. One participant had taken part in similar journalling activities, but not in a forest environment; they wanted to utilise the session to journal whilst also being able to notice the forest features – something they had not previously had the chance to do. Similarly, another participant felt that the activity would afford an opportunity to push themselves out of their comfort zone by participating in creative activities that they would not usually do by themselves at home:

"I want to push myself to draw and paint and things. So, I find it easier to do it in the environment where there are other people doing it. Whereas if I'm at home, I just don't do it."

Another participant had tried wellbeing-oriented activities before and enjoyed them so was keen to continue to try similar, but distinct, activities again.

Most participants heard about the activity online including via social media (Facebook), while one participant was made aware through participation in a previous event.

Benefits of doing this activity in the forest environment

Participants identified several benefits from participating in the activity. For some, benefits were primarily psychological. They felt that taking part in the activity helped them to feel relaxed, calm and uplifted. Some participants attributed such feelings to the fact the activity allowed them to get outside and into nature:

"...it's so good for you to be outside in the fresh air and not just be inside in a building cooped up all the time. You need the fresh air. You need the daylight, and there are various things in nature that are good for you..."

The activity also facilitated feelings of nature connectedness. It prompted participants to notice the finer details of nature by providing a chance to write about and draw the forest features. It also enabled participants to learn about nature through discussions with others, which further prompted such feelings.

Being surrounded by likeminded people also helped participants to feel connected, and thus they derived social benefits from participation.

Changing or sustaining behaviours

Some participants also felt that the activity helped them to be physically active as it involved walking around the forest, including up steep hills. One participant with mobility issues found walking up the slopes "pretty hard" and another felt that walking up the incline was difficult after recently spending an extended period bedbound with a back injury.

Participants thoroughly enjoyed the activity and were keen to attend similar sessions in the future. They said that after taking part in the activity as a group, they would be more comfortable coming back to the forest to try the activity, or other activities with family, friends or by themselves. This was because their participation in the activity allowed them to become more familiar with the forest environment, making them feel safer there and because they were able to gain experience and confidence in completing the activity:

"So, I think the more of these things I come to, the more likely it is that I'll be able to start doing it myself in my own time."

Barriers to participation

Although there were clear benefits of participation in the activity, there were barriers that either made participation initially challenging, or would prevent further participation in the future. Participants firstly identified issues relating to transport. They felt that the parking charges in the council-owned car park were costly and would reduce their ability to come back by car, noting that they believe visits to nature should be free.

"It used to be £1 years ago...and now it's like £4.80 a day... they're kind of pricing out fresh air. I've got a big bugbear about it."

Additionally, one participant, despite successfully navigating his way to the forest on the day, felt that more needed to be done to raise awareness of the public transport options to the forest. While he stated that the journey was simple, before making his way to the forest on the day, he was unaware just how easy it was to get to by bus.

Some participants also felt that there needs to be greater awareness raising of the activity itself, so that people who might best benefit from it are aware that it exists and that they can take part in it. They felt there should also be more information on what the activity involves, so that those with limited physical ability are aware that some sections of the walk are more challenging.

One participant mentioned that they can find it hard to find the motivation to get outside and take part in such activities, particularly when the weather is unfavourable. Some also felt that litter in the woodlands, and people having their dogs off of leads potentially has a negative impact on their experience.

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More information about the monitoring and evaluation of the Active Forests programme, including additional case studies, is available at

<https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/research/active-forests-evaluation-overview/>

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