

Countryside Recreation Network

Outdoor Recreation Futures: towards a new research agenda

Proceedings from the January 2014 Research Seminar

St Georges Centre, Leeds

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Speaker bios

Lynn Crowe is Professor of Environmental Management at Sheffield Hallam University. Her main interests are in countryside recreation, and the contribution the natural environment can make to the quality of people's lives. Trained as a planner and ecologist, she has previously worked at the Countryside Commission, local authority countryside services, and the Campaign to Protect Rural England, and has been a board member of both English Nature and Natural England



Dave Stone is the Deputy Chief Scientist at Natural England. He has been an advocate for the environment as a wider determinant of health since the late 1990's. He is the UK National Reference Centre for environment and health, and an executive board member of the Health and Environment Alliance.



Simon Butler is Policy Officer at the Sport and Recreation Alliance, which serves as the UK's umbrella body for the sport and recreation sector. His role focuses on extending physical activity opportunities to individuals of all ages and backgrounds.



Verity Comley is a researcher for the Sport and Recreation Alliance, and has a Master's Degree from the University of Durham.



Foreword

Jo Burgon, Chair Countryside Recreation Network

This research seminar took Countryside Recreation Network (CRN) back to its roots of the late 1960's when as the Countryside Recreation Research Advisory Group (CRRAG) the network of UK agencies spent much more time and effort pulling together relevant research by public agencies and producing an annual directory of research activity.

Times have changed significantly with the emphasis on evidence gathering to support policy programmes rather than perhaps a more purist view of research. The role of the network today focusses more on practical delivery whilst still seeing the need for sharing and making the most of research activity.

In the recent past CRN has commissioned collaborative research between members, most notably on the value of the outdoors for health and wellbeing in 2005. In our network meetings we continue to share information on research undertaken by members.

This seminar has given the outdoor recreation community an opportunity to explore what more can be done to make the most of the research being undertaken and what role the network might play in future.

This was the last event under the Countryside Recreation Network banner. The Outdoor Recreation Network came into being in March and it is under that title that we will take this work forward.

My thanks to Alison Darlow for planning and running the seminar and to Kathryn Callaghan for her administrative work to bring us all together.

For those who attended I hope these proceedings provide a useful record of the day and for those who were unable to join us a flavour of what we covered and perhaps an enticement to make contact and participate in future. We do intend to hold an annual seminar on this subject.

Introduction

Alison Darlow, Natural England

This seminar was an opportunity for the CRN to take a step back and think about its future role in relation to research.

There have been recent shifts in the research agenda that have implications for the sector as a whole. Across all public policy areas there is now an increased emphasis on ‘what works for whom and in what circumstances’ which underpins the evidence-based approach to policy and practice.

Other areas of development include a focus on economic impact, using behavioural insights to better understand people and their actions, as well as a shift to making more use of existing evidence through systematic reviews and rapid evidence assessments. In terms of the benefits from the natural environment, there has been increased focus on the concept of ecosystem services in particular the health and wellbeing benefits afforded by nature.

So back to the seminar. The aim of the day was threefold:

- To provide a **forum for academics, policy makers and practitioners** to debate and discuss a new research agenda for countryside recreation research
- Develop a **shared understanding of research and evidence needs and priorities** for the sector
- Identify **tangible ways of achieving better join up** between academics, policy makers and practitioners

On the day we had a range of delegates from across the outdoor recreation community, including academics, research consultancies and member agencies. We had a mixture of stimulating and high quality presentations, workshops and plenty of lively debate.

This short report summarises the presentations, workshop findings and discussions from the seminar. Many thanks once again to everybody that participated, and particular thanks should go to our keynote speakers and workshop facilitators.

We were delighted that Professor Nigel Curry (Countryside and Community Research Institute) was able to attend the seminar. As well as contributing to the discussions on the day he has also subsequently prepared a discussion paper on the priority research issues for outdoor recreation in the United Kingdom. The paper is available on the CRN website from here:

http://www.outdoorrecreation.org.uk/downloads/events/8/N%20Curry%20discussion%20paper_priority%20research%20issues%20for%20outdoor%20recreation%20in%20the%20UK.pdf

If you have any further thoughts or comments please do get in touch – I’d be delighted to hear from you.

Alison Darlow
Natural England

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Part 1 – Future priorities for outdoor recreation research

The key points from the keynote speakers are summarised here. The full presentations (including references) may be downloaded from: <http://www.outdoorrecreation.org.uk/events/37/outdoor-recreation-futures-towards-a-new-research-agenda/>

Outdoor recreation: changing pressures, new opportunities

Professor Lynn Crowe, Sheffield Hallam University

This was a personal overview focusing on trends in outdoor recreation, particularly relating to who participates in what and where and why. The presentation explored the factors which influence the provision of outdoor recreation opportunities in the natural environment, particularly public intervention in recreation provision, and how these might be changing. Finally Lynne considered if and how we evaluate our policies and initiatives effectively, and whether we can judge if we are successful in our objectives or not.

Current trends

We now have a good evidence base on participation in outdoor recreation. This indicates that huge numbers of people are still engaging with the natural environment – the Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE) survey suggests that 41% of the English adult population visited the natural environment during the past seven days (NE, FC & Defra, 2013). Trend data indicates that whilst figures are relatively ‘stable’ in England, Wales and Scotland – there may be indications that they are continuing to rise in Northern Ireland and the Republic.

MENE shows that in England 47% of visits are to the countryside, 43% are to outdoor spaces in towns and cities, whilst 10% are to coastal locations. In Scotland, since 2004, the proportion of visits to some types of destinations has increased, although there has been an increase in visits to local parks and open spaces (SNH, 2013) highlighting the importance of close to home green spaces.

In terms of activities, walking remains the most popular activity, with a half of all walks involving dogs. In Wales there have been increases in the proportions road cycling, wildlife watching, visiting playgrounds and informal games on visits (CCW, 2011).

Why we do what we do?

We justify public intervention in outdoor recreation provision on several grounds:

- Citizen rights – through tradition and custom, and statute.
- Management of multiple use in the private landscape – which often regards recreation as a ‘problem’ to be managed. This is better now, though concerns remain regarding landowner anxieties and environmental impacts.
- Outdoor recreation as a welfare good – focusing on health and wellbeing outcomes (or ‘ecosystem services’) as well as economic value.
- Contribution to the creation of sustainable communities – for example of the role of green infrastructure.

There is also private and voluntary sector provision, delivered through a multitude of agencies. There is evidence of increasing commodification of outdoor recreation opportunities. A key issue to consider is whether / how this increasing commodification matters?

Are we achieving what we want to achieve?

Key research questions that the sector needs to consider include:

- *How do we understand trends in demand and supply?* There is a need for qualitative research into attitudes to outdoor recreation, particularly the social and psychological barriers to taking part in recreation and physical activity across the lifespan. Other questions include understanding the relationship between supply and demand – for instance does increasing supply, through new rights or new organised facilities, stimulate demand?
- *What will be the impact of changes to society and culture?* These include the changing lives of families, children and young people, and ageing population, increasing cultural diversity, advances in technology and environment.
- *What will be the impact of changes in organisation and political direction?* For instance will more opportunities be provided by the private and NGO sector? Will there be increased outsourcing of public recreation management? Will this lead to increasing privatisation of facilities, land or new rights?
- *How do we know if we are succeeding?* What does success look like? We need to know what works (or not) and the outcomes of our interventions to be able to justify continued public intervention in the provision of outdoor recreation.

Evidence informed policy and practice: future research challenges in countryside recreation

Dave Stone, Natural England

The last decade or so has seen significant advances in the understanding of the benefits that outdoor recreation helps to deliver to society, economy and the environment, and not forgetting the folk who actually participate. But in these straitened times the benefits of the outdoors are in danger of being overlooked or considered as nice to have but not necessary. The presentation set out the future research challenges that must be met if countryside recreation is not to be overlooked in policy and practice, and what the community could practically do to meet them.

The challenge to the outdoor recreation sector

A positive view of outdoor recreation is that over the past couple of decades the outdoor recreation community has done a good job of selling the message that outdoor recreation benefits places, people and the economy. However it may be argued that these benefits have been 'sold' on the basis of limited or weak evidence.

There is an increased focus on the need for good quality evidence. External pressures and our increased professionalism have raised the bar for evidence to inform policy and practice.

Understanding and overcoming the barriers to outdoor recreation, properly evaluating the effects of recreation management on people's behaviour, and identifying and quantifying the causal mechanisms of health and well-being benefits are just a few of the research challenges facing the countryside recreation community.

Research questions for the sector

We need to think about the social, economic and environmental effects of outdoor recreation.

Social evidence needs include:

- the social benefits of access to the outdoors, for example social interaction & cohesion, skills, employment, education
- where people recreate, who recreates, what motivates, what are the barriers.
- black and minority ethnic & disadvantaged groups: barriers, motivations, behaviours
- physical and mental health effects: including proximity effects, dose, setting

Environmental evidence needs include:

- the effects of recreation patterns on the biological environment: noise, disturbance, eutrophication, ground compaction
- the condition of recreational infrastructure
- the importance of biodiversity in urban areas
- the utility of recreational spaces re urban drainage, microclimate modification,
- spatial design to maximise benefits
- the impacts on social environment: noise, aerial pollution, exclusion.

Economic evidence needs include:

- who is spending what, where, and why?
- micro-economic impact of different interventions at different scales
- revealed preferences rather than declared preferences.
- cost-effectiveness of proven benefits for example physical health

Improved research practice

There are lots of assumptions about the virtues of recreational outdoor recreation – they must be challenged through the development of a more robust evidence base drawing on sound research methods.

There needs to be a shift away from small scale poor quality studies towards studies that are based on sound research design (taking into consideration issues such as sample size, elapsed time, use of controls and / or comparators, counterfactuals, using tried and tested methods and tools, and evaluation) that provide robust evidence of causality, attribution and impact.

Ideas for how to take this forward in the sector include:

- **Every site to do one experiment per year**
- **Share your data**
- **Work with others (partners, academics, communities)**
- **Take advantage of natural experiments**
- **Make full use of volunteers & students**

Communicating the economic impact of outdoor recreation

Simon Butler and Verity Comley, Sport and Recreation Alliance

The Sport and Recreation Alliance (SRA) represents a wide range of organisations which deliver outdoor recreation opportunities. By stimulating tourism, creating jobs, generating sales and boosting health and wellbeing these activities have a direct and indirect economic impact.

Why this project?

The Alliance presented a current work which aims to showcase the extent of that impact as part of its long-term aim to make the case for outdoor recreation. The presentation was based on work in progress and provided an opportunity to seek thoughts, feedback and input from others in the sector.

How was the project approached?

The project did not generate new evidence but focused on bringing together existing data which was brought to life with case studies. It was been undertaken in a partnership which included Liverpool John Moores University, the Outdoor Industry Association, Natural England and others.

What did it find?

A key issue is that there is no accepted definition of outdoor recreation – and so the definition that was used reflects the membership of the SRA. Outdoor recreation was defined as ‘any physical activity which has the enjoyment of the natural environment at its heart’.

- Participation – outdoor recreation matters to the population (in England 55% are frequent visitors to the natural environment and 42m adults went on 2.85bn visits).
- Tourism – the great outdoors is a key driver of tourism (48.5m overnight trips involved outdoor recreation in 2012, accounting for a spend of £9.93bn).
- Employment – outdoor recreation creates jobs (estimated that 26,000 people are directly employed by the outdoor industry).
- Health & wellbeing – the outdoors is a natural health service (growing body of evidence on impact of outdoors for wellbeing and health e.g. UK National Ecosystem Assessment).

The final report will be published in June 2014 on the SRA website: www.sportandrecreation.org.uk/

Discussion – what are our future research priorities?

The following points were made in the subsequent discussion on future research priorities for the outdoor recreation sector:

- The sector needs to agree what we want to achieve and what is our definition of success? This is required to help define what research is required and what outcomes we want to achieve.
- We need to understand what motivates people to participate/not participate and what we need to supply to encourage participation. There are limits to what long term trend data can tell us, suggesting the need for qualitative methods (in particular ethnographic studies) to better understand barriers and how these may be overcome.
- The importance of measuring the right things is difficult, in particular being clear about benefits, outputs and outcomes. One way forward would be the more widespread use of standardised outcome measures.
- There are a lot of small datasets and grey literature available that need to be pulled together in an accessible format.
- The importance of communicating and presenting research findings in a digestible format for decision makers. For example the use of infographics and case stories and can be a compelling way of presenting evidence.

Part 2 – How do we make it happen?

Workshop 1 – Join-up: how can we engage with the research community?

Facilitator: Mike McClure – Sport Northern Ireland

There are likely to be significant benefits for the outdoor recreation sector in engaging more proactively with the research community. This workshop considered how we might seek to develop closer working links with academia and research institutes.

The following themes emerged in the discussion:

- *Opening up CRN to the wider research community* – we need to explore how we can open up the CRN to academic and other research institutions, for example through an academic membership category and/or reduced conference fees for PhD students.
- *Partnering arrangements with academia* – there may be potential to move towards research partnering relations with universities, rather than a commissioning/contractor relationship. This could include aspects of understanding research needs and priorities, mentoring and expert advice to guide research design and projects. There may be new funding opportunities available for joint working with universities.
- *Funding opportunities* – we need to explore new funding opportunities that are available via academic routes for example Erasmus Plus, other EU funding pots.
- *Working with health sector* – the health sector is currently missing from CRN. We need to consider how we can engage with the health sector to explore the links between the outdoors, physical exercise and improved health and wellbeing. The CRN links with Outdoors for All Strategic Research group should be explored.

Workshop 2 – Impact: how can we make the most of existing research and data?

Facilitator: Sue Williams – Natural Resource Wales

Workshop 2 considered how we can make the most of existing research evidence and datasets to inform our policy, delivery and practice. This could be through, for example, better sharing of research findings, reanalysing existing datasets or joint commissioning of research.

The following themes emerged in the discussion:

- *Accessing data* – finding and accessing data emerged as a key challenge. Key issues emerged around who wants to access data, for what purpose as well as issues around control and quality. We need to distinguish between raw data, and data embedded within papers and reports.
- *Standardised survey questions/measures* – the need for greater use of tried and tested standardised survey questions and outcome measures (for example on health and wellbeing) would help to address issues around comparability and inconsistency of methods. This would help us to build a more robust and consistent evidence base.
- *Greater use of rapid evidence assessments/systematic reviews* – we need to move towards making more use of existing evidence by commissioning rapid evidence assessments or systematic reviews, which would draw together the evidence base to address a specific question.

- *Geocoded data* – we need to make greater use of geocoded data to enable us to address basic access issues.

Workshop 3 – Capability: do we have the right skills and capacity?

Facilitator: Paddy Harrop – Forestry Commission England

This workshop focused upon the research capability of the outdoor recreation sector. Having the right skills and capacity is critical to how effectively the sector commissions and uses research to support evidence based policy and practice.

The following themes emerged in the discussion:

- *The importance of different skills at all stages of the research process* – there was a focus on research commissioning skills, rather than research skills per se. These skills included: making the case for research (understanding its underlying rationale, value and appropriate use); getting the research brief right; and sound research commissioning practices (for example being clear on scope/scale of research and ensuring research briefs are proportionate).
- *Research standards* – the sector should do more to work with existing standards and protocols (for example ONS, government standards for social research, economics and statistics). Greater linkages with the academic community would help us to both be more at the cutting edge and help raise standards via peer review and publication in academic journals.
- *Outdoor recreation journal* – there appears to be a gap in outdoor recreation peer reviewed journals in the UK market (unlike the US and Canada).
- *Sharing expertise* – there is potential to share a range of materials and expertise that would help to drive up standards. This could include for example materials that could help with research briefs and the commissioning process, or training for users and commissioners of research. We also need to draw on the expertise in the wider research community, particularly those with cross sectoral interests for example health and environmental economics.

Future role for the Countryside Recreation Network?

Based on the wide ranging discussion at the seminar we have identified the following as priorities for CRN in developing its future role in relation to research:

Establish a CRN Research Group – this would involve representatives from across the sector to discuss, prioritise and drive forward the research role of the CRN including recommendations from the seminar). It should include both producers and users of research.

Engage with the wider research community – the CRN needs to find ways of drawing in a wider range of research interest from across the sector, including areas such as health, tourism and sport. Possible options include an academic membership category, reduced conference fees for academia and PhD students and an outdoor recreation academic peer reviewed journal.

Gap analysis/research prioritisation – a key role for the CRN could be to undertake and promote within the sector a gap analysis or research prioritisation exercise. This would need to be forward looking, drawing upon the latest thinking, and underpinned by a clear rationale for what the CRN

wants to achieve. The analysis could be used as a basis to communicate evidence needs to NGOs and academia.

Knowledge sharing – there appears to be a role for the CRN to play in encouraging knowledge sharing on a range of areas of interest to members. This could be in the form of a repository of finalised/current research projects including grey literature (via a wiki) using a framework developed by the CRN.

Quality and standards – the quality of evidence is a key challenge within the sector. There may be a role for CRN to play in advocating the use of standardised methodologies, measures and tools (e.g. HEAT, fitness metrics), guidelines on research quality as well as, sharing good practice on research commissioning.

Annex 1 - Feedback from delegates

The final session asked delegates to provide feedback on three aspects of the day:

Things you are taking away with you:

- Better understanding on some current tools
- Really useful and productive to meet colleagues face to face – better than e-interaction!
- Contacts and ideas
- Greater awareness of type of research that exists
- Contacts and renewed interest in OR research
- New contacts and ideas
- Contacts and awareness of the work of the network members
- Gained knowledge of the research / data in the sector and contacts
- To try to involve more contacts from RSPB with CRN
- The need for standard questions / tools in order to get comparable data
- Ability to compare ideas
- Very useful catch up on knowledge sources and challenges
- Networking contacts to share knowledge
- Broadened contact base! Very useful
- A better understanding of what research organisations need
- Please circulate emails to facilitate networking
- Contacts and renewed awareness of what research is happening, and on what...
- The need for NGOs to be more strategic and collaborative about our requirements
- Great potential for people to work together
- Good to hear that what we are hoping to do in NI marries up with UK trends
- New contacts and networks
- Research practice challenges and lessons plus network opportunities

Things to leave with CRN:

- Join up (somehow) with Outdoors for All group
- Priorities for action
- Expand the journal
- Wider scope – engage with other disciplines
- Pursue developing a simple record / search facility for research studies – as described in the workshops
- Create a portal for research papers
- Provide signposting to a range of research on trees, woods, forests – grey literature and academic literature
- Open up the CRN to the health sector and universities – to strengthen relevance and draw upon expertise
- Set up a small research group
- Database on current research
- Academia can provide very useful information for organisations on the ground
- Awareness of need for a repository/hub for painless access to research and data
- A realisation that academic research can be useful on the ground

- Wikipedia style data / research website
- Facilitating researcher / NGO partnership for research
- There needs to be an infrastructure for academics and NGOs to work together (like CRAGG used to be)
- Suite of standard methods and tools
- Needs to be pragmatic about doing research to direct strategic business decision and not obtain information for reference if required
- Expand membership re planning policy as well
- Make network accessible to NGOs and the academic institutes
- Expand the membership re health

For next time:

- Yes do again! More sharing of new research / synthesis (e.g. like the EnvEcon conference)
- Examples of members' research and studies
- Involvement of health practitioners
- Relationship between OR and tourism
- Bring together policy makers and researchers to share the experience
- A review and classification of countryside recreation research over the last 15 years
- Work at principles of good practice for research
- Focus on importance of social interaction in countryside recreation through group activities, volunteering etc.
- Shared research; themed groups e.g. recreation and health
- Potential and actual conflicts in the countryside
- Opportunity to develop list of planned research
- Influencing and informing policy at a local and national level
- Information sharing about current research and needs
- Really like to see a focus on health and wellbeing – shame Dave Stone didn't focus on this
- Real and/or perceived conflicts
- Focus on best practice re sample size, methodology etc.
- Nature, conservation and access

Annex 2 - List of delegates

Surname	First Name	Job Title	Company
Harrop	Paddy	Recreation and Public Affairs Manager	Forestry Commission
Pryor	Sean	Research Officer	Lee Valley Regional Park Authority
Sharman	Julie	National Head of Enterprise	Canal & River Trust
Clarke	Heather	Head of Planning	Canal & River Trust
Roulston	Sharon	Head of Operations	Waterways Ireland
McCarroll	Caroline	Head of Strategy & Policy	Waterways Ireland
McClure	Mike	Outdoor Recreation Development Officer	Sport NI
Burgon	Jo	Chairman	Countryside Recreation Network
Atkinson	Jo	District Head of Recreation and Public Affairs	Forestry Commission
Williams	Sue	Head of Social and Economic Evidence	Natural Resources Wales
Donnelly	Paul	Policy, Planning & Research Manager	Sport NI
O'Brien	Liz	Social Researcher	Forest Research
Nicoll	Bruce	Policy Analyst - social and sustainable forestry	Forestry Commission
Sharman	Julie	National Head of Enterprise	Canal & River Trust
Clarke	Heather	Head of Planning	Canal & River Trust
Brown	Jo	Consultancy Manager	National Trust
Ambrose	Bianca	Social scientist	Forestry Commission/Forest Research
Ogilvie	James	Head of Social & Planning Policy	FC Scotland
Roberts	Joe	Recreation Adviser	Natural Resources Wales
Marshall	Malcolm	Countryside Funding Officer	Derbyshire County Council



Rowe	Jessica	Assistant Economist	Natural England
Dodd	Kenneth	Chairman	Visitor Safety in the Countryside Group
Darlow	Alison	Principal Advisor	Natural England
Langridge	Jim	Consultant	Jim Langridge Countryside Consulting
Taylor	Ken	Director	Asken Ltd
Curry	Nigel	Professor of Countryside Planning	Countryside and Community Research institute
Richardson	John	Honorary Chairman	Motoring Organisations' Land Access & Recreation Association
Burfield	Phil	Conservation Policy	RSPB
Denman	Jackie	Consultant	The Tourism Company
Hyde	Paul	Volunteer	In-Place
Jenkins	Joanne Jenkins	Senior Lecturer	Sheffield Hallam University
Liley	Durwyn	Director	Footprint Ecology
Kemp	Catherine	Outreach Officer	Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority
Natgrass	Petronella	Countryside Access Development Officer	Hampshire County Council
Allen- Collinson	Jacquelyn	Director, Health Advancement Research Team/Reader	University of Lincoln
Gilchrist	Paul	Senior Research Fellow	University of Brighton
Hawkesworth	Chris.	Planning and Facilities Officer	Canoe England
Atkinson	Richard	Access and Environment Manager	Canoe England
Rotherham	Ian	Professor	Sheffield Hallam University
Knight	Mary	Post Grad Researcher	Bath Spa University
Cook	Mandy	PhD Student	Dundee University
Back	Phil	PhD student	University of Sheffield