

124 The impact of Covid 19 on outdoor recreation in the UK: benefits and challenges

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Introduction

Covid 19 has had a significant impact in the UK and has resulted in substantial changes to participation in outdoor recreation. A sequence of lockdowns where people were limited to 'stay at home' regulations within their local area, followed by the re-opening of travel and activities in the late summer of 2020, have affected the places that people visit and the activities that they can do. In terms of outdoor recreation, Covid 19 restrictions have ranged from being limited to one short walk per day directly from home for the express purpose of exercise, to tourism visits to anywhere in the UK to undertake the full range of possible outdoor activities within larger groups. In between these two opposites has been a variable number of greater or lesser restrictions on outdoor recreation and travel.

In order to understand the effect of Covid 19 on participation in outdoor recreation and associated land management issues, a number of robust social surveys and case studies have been undertaken by government agencies and academics across the UK. Many of these have been collecting evidence on a regular basis since the start of the pandemic and they provide a valuable resource to understand the impact of this societal wide change.

Methodology

This research has analysed the range of surveys and associated evidence on the impact of Covid 19 on outdoor recreation in the UK from 2020 and the first half of 2021 in order to understand the effect that the pandemic has had on:

1. the places people visit, reviewing the fluctuations between local greenspace and tourist destinations as a result of changing lockdown regulations
2. the activities people undertake, including identifying any increases or decreases in specific activities such as walking and cycling
3. subjective health benefits, in particular relating to mental health and well-being, as well as physical activity levels

4. perceptions of crowding, social distancing, and personal risk from others in terms of exposure to Covid 19
5. any changes to motivations and barriers to participation in outdoor recreation as a result of the pandemic
6. quantitative data on proportional changes to visit numbers between lockdown and re-opening periods during 2020 and the first half of 2021
7. case study reports of land management issues, such as impacts of wildlife, parking issues, and environmental damage
8. perceptions of local communities on the impact of increased visitor numbers during the 'open' periods of the pandemic

Results and Discussion

Covid 19 is an on-going pandemic, and the effect on outdoor recreation will continue to evolve. This research includes the analysis of the latest available evidence from 2020 and the first half of 2021, and will share the most current data from on-going surveys in 2021. Comparative analysis of multiple surveys will triangulate the results in order to identify commonalities from across different sources of evidence. In particular, it will map the changes in participation in outdoor recreation over the period of the pandemic, and link these to legislative restrictions within the UK. This will provide a unique insight into the effect of government policies and legal requirements during a fast-moving and ever-changing national situation.

The evidence from collated case studies indicates that there have been significant issues for land managers, both of local urban greenspace and more remote protected areas. The selected case studies used in this research provide examples from 2020 and the first half of 2021 of 'no intervention' compared with management actions including limiting visitor numbers and educational site-based signage. The analysis also includes a case study of a national nature reserve in Wales which is also a popular site for outdoor recreation which has used

specialist expertise in behavioural insights to inform the development of interventions to manage the impacts and maximise the benefits of visits.

Of particular interest will be the discussion around both perceptions of crowding and risk of transmission, in contrast to an increased sense of the outdoors being a 'safe' place from Covid 19. This discussion will be situated within wider theoretical research on perceived crowding that has been predominantly led by recreation researchers in the US. It will consider whether perceptions of an appropriate level of site users has been affected by Covid 19, along with the identification of any differences between rural and urban residents. Conclusions will also be drawn in relation to the importance of outdoor recreation for subjective

well-being and mental health. The restorative effects of nature have a substantial evidence base, for example the research relating to Attention Restoration Theory, and this research will review the evidence to understand if these psychological aspects have been perceived as having greater importance as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic.

Finally, the research will review future trends, based on the analysis of the changes in participation over the last 18 months using the latest data from 2020 and 2021. It will posit some indications as to the likely behavioural changes relating to outdoor recreation that might continue in the future, and the potential benefits and challenges that will arise for both land managers, recreation participants and local communities.