

What enables or prevents diverse groups, including black and ethnic minorities, from using and enjoying British woodlands?

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The Social and Economic Research Group is part of Forest Research, the research agency of the Forestry Commission in Britain. The group is engaged with a wide range of research exploring how trees, woods and forests (TWF) impact on people's well-being and quality of life, how they can contribute to community development, and how knowledge from research feeds into policy, practice and the governance processes that contribute to and inform various forest management and decision-making processes.

This presentation will report on a range of research undertaken by the group and funded by the Forestry Commission, including an evaluation of woodland-based 'Active England' projects, the 'Equality and inclusion of social diversity review' and the 'Urban health inequalities review' and draw out some key issues and trends relating to diverse social groups and their engagement with TWFs in Britain (Ambrose-Oji, 2009; O'Brien and Morris, 2009; O'Brien et al. 2010). We will outline some of the current policies and legislation that are driving these trends. For example, there are now nine protected categories in the equality bill in Britain including: age, disability, gender, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion/belief and sexual orientation. Some of these categories have specific legislation associated with them. Another potential strand, social deprivation, is currently also being considered for inclusion.

A further key focus of our presentation is the social distribution of well-being and health benefits associated with use of TWF. This is particularly relevant to key social policy agendas within contemporary Britain, where there are increasing concerns about rising obesity levels, associated low levels of physical activity amongst the general population and critically, the social distribution of these health problems. A recent strategic review of health inequalities in England called the Marmot Review (2010) outlines that health inequalities are entrenched in particular parts of the country. The Review identifies a role for trees and green space in reducing health inequalities by acknowledging the importance of green infrastructure for urban healthy living and encouraging physical activity for recreation and active travel. Well designed and maintained green spaces are said to encourage social interaction, exercise, play and contact with nature.

Qualitative and quantitative data will be presented as we explore questions such as: What barriers do particular groups face in accessing and enjoying woodlands?; What activities and approaches might enable excluded or under-represented groups to use and benefit from woods?; What are the appropriate policy and management responses by public agencies and organisations such as the Forestry Commission? Our research highlights important issues concerning accessibility and illustrates a range of barriers that prevent particular groups from visiting woodlands. These include psychological barriers such as concerns about personal safety and lack of confidence. Socio-cultural barriers include social/cultural norms of use for different groups; there can also be apprehension about other types of users in woodlands and their activities which may cause conflict between different groups. There are a range of physical and structural barriers including a lack of transport to reach woodlands and concerns about sites that appear to be poorly managed and show evidence of anti-social behaviour such as rubbish dumping and car abandonment (Morris, et al., 2010). We conclude that outreach, and led and supported activities, and specifically designed and targeted projects can be useful approaches in engaging 'hard-to-reach' audiences. These types of interventions will often require organisations such as the Forestry Commission to adopt an adaptive approach to policy and management, requiring them to work in greater partnership with other organisations who have more experience and skill in working with specific groups. Investing in training, new skills and knowledge amongst existing staff will also be important. Focusing on issues of the quality of woods and their accessibility is important, rather than solely on proximity and size. Promoting the well-being benefits of

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woodlands to diverse groups is less about providing large scale spaces and more about providing places where people have easy and routine access where they feel at ease.

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