

Understanding the recreation preferences and constraints of low participation social groups

Rachel Parry, Sue Williams, John A. Watkins

Abstract – Current research has indicated that participation in informal outdoor recreation is relatively low among certain groups, such as young people, older people, women, ethnic minority groups and people with disabilities. There is pressure on policy makers and practitioners to address this apparent imbalance. This paper reviews the findings of an international literature review which highlighted that there has been a focus on ‘constraints’ rather than on ‘preferences’, particularly in relation to participation in outdoor recreation in the UK. It would appear from the literature that there is a presumption that the main reasons for low participation are related to structural barriers (such as lack of transport) rather than a lack of understanding of the recreation preferences of non-traditional participants. This has raised the question of whether it is achievable to change the prevalent attitude amongst the countryside sector from one of ‘we expect people to want what we provide’, to one of ‘we will provide for what people want’. Would such a paradigm shift be successful in achieving more equitable outdoor recreation participation?

Index Terms – constraints and preferences, participation, under-representation and exclusion.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Existing research has indicated that participation in informal outdoor recreation is relatively low among certain groups. In particular, young people, older people, women, ethnic minorities, lower socio-economic groups and people with disabilities have been found to visit the outdoors less often than other social groups. Addressing this inequality poses a significant challenge for the outdoor recreation sector, particularly in relation to

understanding the determinants of non-participation, and ascertaining the role of the public sector in developing policies and interventions to increase participation.

As with many other public agencies, the Countryside Council for Wales has been charged with delivering a government priority to achieve ‘widespread and equitable access to the countryside and coast’ [1]. Although there have been individual projects that have been successful in encouraging various low participation groups to visit the outdoors, this does not appear to have led to a sustained change and overall participation in outdoor recreation in Wales remains skewed towards white, middle class, educated and able-bodied males. In considering how to address this inequality and increase participation, a number of key questions have been raised:

1. What are the specific constraints associated with low participation social groups?

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2. Are the leisure-time activity preferences different for non-participants compared to those of current recreationalists?
3. What is the relative balance between constraints and preferences? Does one have a greater influence on participation in outdoor recreation than the other?
4. Is low participation from certain social groups a result of exclusion or an expression of under-representation?
5. What is the role of the public sector in either influencing preferences or removing constraints?

2 METHOD

To begin to address these issues, an extensive systematic review was undertaken of the existing evidence/knowledge base arising from research on different segments of the population and informal outdoor recreation in relation to participation, motivations, benefits, preferred experiences and activities, constraints and strategies for overcoming constraints [2]. The priority was to review the research that has been published in the last ten years (in or after 1997).

After a two-stage screening process, a final 119 titles met the inclusion criteria, and 68 were subject to full review and data extraction.

It was agreed that all the UK or Eire papers selected (42 papers covering 41 studies) would be subject to full review and data extraction, while only 27 of the non-UK ones were reviewed in such detail. These were chosen on the basis that they appeared both applicable to the UK and relevant to the groups least well covered in the UK research.

The aim of the review was to identify the current 'state of knowledge' and degree of consensus in the following four areas:

1. The constraints to participation experienced by each priority group in relation to the three main areas of constraint: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural [3].

2. The motivations, experience and activity preferences of each of these groups, considering both participants and non-participants.
3. The evidence relating to the differences between participants and non-participants, and the strategies that have been used by those who do participate to overcome the barriers.
4. The effect of belonging to multiple groups on motivations, experience and activity preferences.

3 FINDINGS

3.1 Constraints

The review found that the majority of the research into non-participation had concentrated on constraints. Of the 68 included studies, 57 considered the constraints to participation experienced by each of the priority groups in relation to three main areas: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural. The constraints identified in the studies fall into 13 generic headings, which could be classified under each of the 3 main types:

Intrapersonal Constraints:

- Fear for personal safety & security
- Lack of knowledge
- Lack of time
- Poor health or fitness
- Lack of confidence
- Lone person
- Finding the weather disagreeable

Interpersonal Constraints:

- Concern about anti-social behaviour
- Feeling unwelcome
- Being put off by a bad experience

Structural Constraints:

- Poor provision of facilities and management
- Lack of transport
- Costs too high

3.2 Strategies

A large number of the reviewed studies had considered strategies to overcome non-participation, but despite this coverage there was found to be little solid evidence of the effectiveness of different strategies. Follow-up evaluation was not a focus of many of the studies but a number of them did give a good analysis of current constraints and the measures to address them.

Though formal analysis was not appropriate, the review identified some general conclusions on strategies for service providers that are likely to be effective in overcoming constraints to participation identified from the studies, based on the following ten areas:

- Focused information and events
- Site enhancement and maintenance
- Awareness raising and staff training
- Outreach and skill development
- Empowerment of target group
- Coordination and infrastructure
- Base-line data
- Offset costs
- Role models and staffing to reflect target population
- Sustainable legacy

3.3 Preferences

The reviewed studies did cover motivations and preferences but there was rarely any clear distinction made between the specific groups or between participants and non-participants. However, some general conclusions could be drawn based on the majority of studies.

In relation to motivations, it was found that 'fresh air and exercise' was the primary motivator for older people and low social class groups. This contrasted in particular with young people, who ranked 'socializing with friends' in first place.

'Lack of interest' was assessed in the review as an expression of preference (although it could also be considered a

constraint). The review found that ethnic minority groups expressed the greatest lack of interest, followed by people from areas of multiple deprivation, and then young people. The review identified two aspects to lack of interest or motivation: those associated with cultural setting and those with social context. There may be no cultural habit of using the countryside, for example for some ethnic minority groups visiting the countryside for recreation is an alien concept. Alternatively, there may be no social context for a visit to the countryside; for example younger people may perceive the countryside as boring or not for them and they may have other recreation preferences.

In relation to 'activity preferences' the review found that the majority of studies either did not specify any particular activity, or concentrated only on walking. The conclusions on activity preferences were therefore not particularly strong, but some key points were highlighted. All groups place walking for leisure first, with this activity being particularly important to older people and ethnic minority groups. Sightseeing and appreciating landscape or good views comes second over all, with people with disabilities and people from areas of multiple deprivation showing a particular preference. The third most preferred activity over all is observing nature and particularly by ethnic minority groups. The more energetic activities are preferred by young people, as is picnicking.

3.4 Multiple group membership

The review considered the effect of belonging to multiple groups on motivations, experience, and activity preferences. However, it was found that only four of the selected papers considered the combined effects on constraints and each had sampling weaknesses. Therefore, there was not enough data upon which to draw any firm conclusions.

4 CONCLUSIONS

There are a number of key conclusions and associated questions that have arisen from this systematic review of international research into low participation by specific social groups.

Firstly, the review has highlighted that the research to date has focused predominantly on constraints, particularly 'structural barriers', rather than on 'motivations' or 'preferences'. Motivations or preferences have mainly been considered in relation to the desires of current participants, thereby reinforcing a continuation of the needs of these groups rather than non-participants. It appears that there is an assumption in the countryside recreation sector that the main reasons for low participation are related to structural barriers (such as poor provision of facilities or lack of transport) rather than a lack of understanding of the preferences of non-traditional participants. This in turn suggests that 'we expect people to want what we provide', rather than 'we will provide for what people want'. Whether or not the outdoor recreation sector is either able, or willing, to initiate such an organizational paradigm shift is currently subject to debate.

Responding to this issue will raise some significant challenges, both within the research community, and in the recreation policy and delivery sectors. In particular, a research program into the preferences of these target audiences will be required in order to complement the previous focus on barriers. A key component of this will be to understand the relative balance between the 'pull' of preferences and the 'push' of constraints. From a policy perspective, it is likely that decisions will have to be made as to how far 'recreation opportunities' can be modified to accommodate potentially significantly different preferences and activities. This will need to include consideration of the impact of any such changes on existing participants.

Secondly, the review has indicated that there is little understanding as to whether the current inequality in participation is a result of under-representation or exclusion. Similar to the assumption that underpins the emphasis on constraints, is the implication that the inequality is a result of exclusion: that these social groups would like to participate, but are subject to barriers which prevent this. An alternative view is that a proportion of non-participants do not actually wish to take part in outdoor recreation, and prefer alternative leisure time pursuits. This view would support the hypothesis that some non-participation is actually under-representation rather than exclusion. Determining the extent of 'exclusion', which would represent potential, albeit unexpressed, latent demand, will be a significant challenge for recreation research to quantify.

Finally, the review concluded that there is relatively little robust evaluation in relation to whether interventions by the outdoor recreation sector have been successful in overcoming constraints or influencing preferences, and whether they have therefore led to sustained participation from the targeted social groups. Although there have been many projects aimed at achieving these objectives, monitoring has concentrated on the effects on participation during the duration of the project, and not on whether project participants have sustained visits to the outdoors following the end of the intervention. This will require the development of longitudinal evaluation programmes that will need to be built in to pilot intervention projects.

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