

Exploring disabled people's perceptions and use of forest recreation goods, facilities and services in Scotland, England and Wales

The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and its subsequent amendments, coupled with the establishment of the Disability Rights Commission in 2000 and, more recently, the Disability Equality Duty (2006), have radically altered the social experience of disabled people in the UK. The right to equality of access has now become a defining characteristic of contemporary society. Research suggests that, as a group, disabled people are currently not attempting to access woodland areas managed by the Forestry Commission. There are a number of potential reasons for this. While there is a possibility that it is the result of either informed choice or lack of awareness, the cause is more likely to be other barriers to participation. This study seeks to determine the reasons for disabled people's low participation in this leisure activity.



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Background

Working from the social model of disability, the research sought to identify the physical, social, cultural and attitudinal barriers encountered by disabled people in their attempts to access the outdoors. The research was conducted in seven different forest and woodland locations in Scotland, England and Wales, including Forestry Commission (FC) woodland, National Trust sites, community forests and Local Authority urban woodlands. Various disability groups were involved as participants in the research, including people with physical impairment, learning disability, mental health issues and sensory impairment, as well as the families of disabled children. The views of disability groups, support assistants, FC staff and other stakeholders were included.

This work is part of a suite of three research projects exploring disabled access and woodland recreation.

Objectives

The study sought to determine the reasons for disabled people's low participation in woodland leisure activities. The research aimed to:

- explore disabled people's attitudes, perceptions and experiences of woodlands and how these affect use of woodland recreation goods, facilities and services

"Like me they want to get out and take part in an extreme sport in the countryside, and I'm sure there are a lot of younger, disabled people who would be interested in doing this"

"It's about the thrill, the adrenaline, the risk, the skill challenge, the improvement, it's about all of those things"

Rough Riderz¹ mountain bikers using adapted wheelchairs

- explore disabled people's physical, information and emotional needs and expectations in relation to woodland, and make recommendations on the ways in which woodland recreation goods, facilities and services can be made more accessible to disabled people
- explore processes of communication and engagement with disabled people and make recommendations about how these can be applied to the planning and provision of woodland recreation goods, facilities and services

¹ Rough Riderz is a club aiming to give wheelchair users the opportunity to enjoy the thrills of off-road downhill four-wheel mountain bike riding using adapted wheelchairs. See www.roughriderz.co.uk/club.php

Methods

- A range of methods was employed, including a literature search and telephone interviews with representatives of a variety of disability organisations, countryside organisations and focus groups with disabled people.
- Site visits to different woodlands were carried out with disabled people in the summer and autumn of 2007, as a means of capturing the diversity of experience with regard to location, group and country.

Findings

There are a number of barriers that militate against disabled people's ability to experience the countryside. These barriers include attitudes, lack of facilities and equipment, poor provision of information in suitable formats, transport issues and resources. It is clear that many disabled people feel that they are not 'expected' to be found in or to want to go into the countryside.

However, there has been a considerable amount of work done by those involved in the outdoor leisure industry to try to improve access for disabled people. Much of the effort has concentrated on physical access and meeting the needs of those with a physical impairment. The needs of those with a learning disability, a mental health problem or with sensory impairments have often gone unmet. The two most basic issues facing these groups are attitudes and information provision. Attitudes to disabled people include a belief that they are not capable or competent. Consequently, service providers are often 'over-protective' in their attitudes to the activities they promote for disabled people. The type of advice and information wanted by disabled people varies by impairment group.

Recommendations

In considering the implications for the Forestry Commission and others providing outdoor access, the authors recommend the need to:

- devise, develop and deliver appropriate professional training for FC and other countryside professionals by disabled trainers that takes into account recreation and woodland site-specific issues
- work with organisations of and for disabled people to establish what information each disability group requires along the access chain (i.e. from finding out about a site before leaving home to visiting and then returning), and the most appropriate form of communication to deliver this
- understand that disabled people want to enjoy the countryside in a variety of ways, and should be seen as a heterogeneous group with a diversity of interests
- establish outreach work/collaborative work between woodland staff and local disability organisations as one way of opening new possibilities in outdoor environments for disabled people

Partners

The research was carried out by Nicola Burns, Kevin Paterson and Nick Watson, Strathclyde Centre for Disability Research.

Funding / Support

Funded by Forestry Commission Scotland.

For further information contact: bianca.ambrose-oji@forestry.gsi.gov.uk or visit www.forestresearch.gov.uk/fr/INFD-7LTFBG for details of projects exploring disabled access and woodland recreation.

Reports and publications

Burns, N., Patterson, K. and Watson, N. (2008). *Exploring disabled people's perceptions and use of forest recreation goods, facilities and services in Scotland, England and Wales*. Strathclyde Centre for Disability Research, Glasgow University for the Forestry Commission, Glasgow, 83 pp.