

Growing Places

The Newsletter of the **Social and Economic Research Group**

Spring 2009

Welcome to the third SERG newsletter.

This issue brings together articles which highlight the wide variety of ways in which different sections of British society enjoy and benefit from trees, woods and forests, including positive impacts on health and well-being, novel ways of engaging with creative arts and gaining enjoyment from woodland wildlife.

All change at Forest Research

It is a time of change for SERG (the Social and Economic Research Group) within the Agency. Forest Research (FR) has been busy working on a new structure that will meet emerging research challenges. At the start of April 2009, FR is launching three new research centres:

- **The Centre for Forestry and Climate Change**
- **The Centre for Forest Resources and Management**
- **The Centre for Human and Ecological Sciences** (SERG's new home).

Equality and diversity

Great Britain is home to a vibrant, diverse and changing society including communities with different ways of life, living in different rural and urban environments. The Forestry Commission has been extending its work on diversity through the implementation of equality assessments.

Research work and findings

SERG undertook research to review evidence describing the impacts relating to trees, woods and forests and the diversity groups.

Barriers to access The common barriers affecting woodland use were: transport to sites, site condition, site design, and the right kinds of advertising, signs and interpretation. Having appropriate information was important to people living with disabilities, particularly information which allowed them to make up their own minds about whether and where to visit woodlands. Some ethnic groups and age groups found woodland activity carried social stigma; for example teenagers feared accusations of anti-social behaviour.

Positive impacts Impacts described by the evidence were mainly positive. The most important to all groups was the chance to build social relationships: woodlands provide a place to meet, walk with the family or other people. The elderly, disabled, mothers and children and young people appreciated the chance for new experiences and to take part in exciting forms of independent play. All groups recognised the health impacts of walking through woods, and some disabled people, young people and those in more deprived areas noted the particular value of woods and forests in relieving everyday levels of stress to improve mental well-being.

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Beyond the forest edge

Countrywide consultation

In the past few months Anna Lawrence (Head of SERG) has travelled through Scotland, Wales and England, consulting with Forestry Commission (FC) staff, from forest managers to policy advisors.

These visits conclude our year-long planning process which sets research priorities and activities for the next 2 years. The consultation ensures that our research plan reflects the needs of the FC, and also covers issues important to private woodland managers.

Our plan includes work which systematically assesses the evidence for the health and well-being effects of woodlands and trees, novel approaches linking woodlands and trees for community development, devolved woodland governance, and strengthening the links between research, policy and practical roles within the FC.

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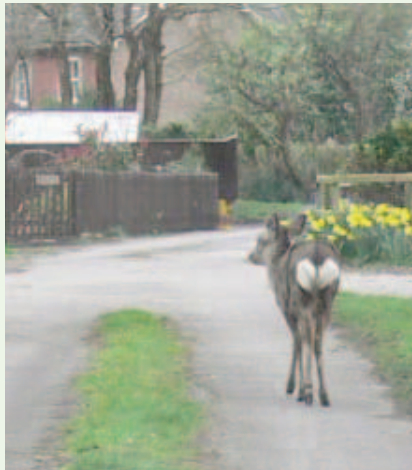
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Human dimensions of species management: peri-urban deer

The continued expansion of urban areas into the countryside has seen more interactions between people and wild deer. This is particularly true in the peri-urban zone around the edges of towns and cities. These places are characterised by a mixed mosaic of land-uses including residential, heavy and light industry and infrastructure such as water treatment works, electricity substations and roads, along with more traditionally rural land-uses including



Sika deer: a welcome visitor or too close to home?

forestry. The 'Management of roe deer in peri-urban Scotland' research project is funded by the Scottish Government and has been examining these interactions and what drives them. The multi-disciplinary team mixes SERG's expertise with that of Ecology and Technical Services colleagues. The project is being carried out within the boundaries of the Central Scotland Forest, with two case-study sites around Linlithgow, West Lothian and the former Ravenscraig steelworks in North Lanarkshire.

Deer–people interactions

People and deer interact in many ways – both positive and negative. Peri-urban expansion has increased the actual and potential impacts caused by wild deer. These include road-traffic accidents, garden damage and the transmission of diseases, including Lyme disease. Concerns have also been heightened over the welfare of deer as they have become increasingly exposed to injury from road-traffic and to acts of cruelty and anti-social behaviour. The existing institutions and practices for deer management were largely developed for rural areas, and are not necessarily appropriate to peri-urban areas and communities. People often enjoy seeing deer around their homes and sharing their environment with them. Consequently communities accept what they perceive to be only limited negative impacts.

Research in peri-urban communities

About half of the 150+ participants reported seeing deer in their local environment, and the qualitative research uncovered more information about how people and wild deer are connected. Early analysis suggests that deer are valued most for the link they provide between urban lives and the natural world, as well as for their aesthetic qualities and general attractiveness.

The most important concern for local communities is the vulnerability of deer to deliberate acts of cruelty. The participants felt that economic and ecological values of deer were more relevant to other Scottish communities. Fencing was always the preferred management option, with culling generally considered a 'last resort'. Some opposition to culling was registered, although the use of selective, professional, humane and legal methods was widely considered a legitimate management response.

An important output of the project will be a 'Responsibility Framework' which will provide guidance in identifying stakeholder groups for deer management planning, as well as making links to preferred management methods.

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Peri-urban expansion creates challenges to ensure safety of deer and drivers (photo: The Deer Commission for Scotland).

Reconnecting with environmental systems through imaginative engagement

There is much talk in both policy and practitioner circles about the need for building more sustainable communities. Public participation is a central part of this approach, but researchers and others have often commented on the difficulties of evaluating the effectiveness of participatory approaches. Using more creative approaches can help with this, and at the same time make participation more fun.

Focusing on river landscapes

SERGI was involved in a recently completed Economic and Social Research Council-funded project, 'Engaging with rivers in a period of uncertainty', which took an exploratory and imaginative approach to engaging people in complex environmental management issues, such as those we face with rivers. Flood risk, sustainable drainage and water quality have become major issues, and it is increasingly clear that these cannot be solved by hard engineering solutions alone. Equally, river landscapes can be a focus for identity and enjoyment – for pride in place and for renaissance of industrially damaged landscapes, such as our ex-mining case-study site, the River Dearne in Southern Yorkshire.



Small rivers can be rediscovered for community and individual enjoyment (photo: Paul Selman).

Our research was motivated by two key needs for sustainable communities: to reconnect with environmental systems from which we have become physically and mentally disconnected through passive reliance on technical fixes; and to engage with complex environmental systems in ways which enable us to help frame and contribute to sustainable use and management solutions. This goes beyond conventional participatory toolkits and requires active engagement and social learning to acquire new knowledge, confidence and skills. Through taking account of the interests, values, experiences, beliefs and feelings underpinning the different perspectives of others, we can improve our understanding of existing problems and develop more positive practices.

Creative writing workshops

This project used creative writing as a tool for engagement, recruiting initially 11 and then having 7 core participants aged between 35 and 76 (3 retirees and 4 in employment, of which 2 were in the environmental field). A series of 6 writing workshops took place where different river themes, catchment management issues and forms of writing were explored. SERGI devised an approach called 'embedded evaluation'.

In addition to common assessment criteria such as numbers and profiles of participants, and issues raised by them, we also examined what was actually happening or changing during the participation (at and between workshops) and afterwards as a result of the process. We used a combination of participant observation, evaluation forms, questionnaires, interviews and project diaries to monitor the impacts of the project in terms of participants' learning, feelings and behaviour.

Research results

Interesting results emerged, including:

- Imaginative writing was experienced as a versatile and powerful tool to encourage engagement with complex issues and different perspectives.
- Imaginative writing provided a level playing field for experts and lay people to communicate and learn from each other.
- The project facilitated learning about people, rivers and local history (mostly during events but also between events through raised interest).
- The workshops provided an opportunity for the older participants (aged 60+) to contribute much of their historical knowledge.
- Participation in the project triggered some changes for participants in their 30s, 40s and 50s with regard to some of their work practices, recreational activities and professional development.
- Workshop discussions and homework tasks provided an incentive to search for information about the local river and different perspectives on engaging and thinking about rivers at different scales.
- Participation in the project increased the time spent thinking about the state, use, meaning and management of rivers more generally.



Dissemination and celebration workshop for reporting project results to stakeholders and presenting writers' work.

The project produced an Anthology which is available along with other material from the project website:

www.shef.ac.uk/landscape/staff/profiles/paulselman/research.html

The project was led by Prof. Paul Selman of Sheffield University; and the creative writing workshops were led by Clare Morgan of Oxford University.

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