

Growing Places

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

Spring 2011

Welcome to the SERG newsletter.

In this spring edition, we highlight recent research on the Forestry Commission's work with others to create and maintain quality environments.

Trees, woods and forests can have substantial impacts upon the social, cultural, aesthetic and economic quality of the environment. Consequently, as part of its overall mission, the Forestry Commission has long played leadership and facilitation roles enabling private, community and third-sector enterprises to create high-quality places and landscapes, and raise individuals' quality of life. Given recent and likely future changes in structure and funding, this role looks set to become much more prominent. These priorities are now a key element of both European policies (EU Forest Action Plan, theme 3) and national government policies that the Forestry Commission delivers, often in partnership with other organisations.

Quality of Life has become an important part of the evaluation of forestry programmes. Particularly strong efforts have been made to improve the quality of urban environments and the Forestry Commission has also led initiatives to improve the quality of rural landscapes, such as the Neroche Landscape Partnership Scheme. There are many aspects to quality environments, but the over-arching aim is to create inspiring places where people can live healthy lifestyles amongst strong and sustainable communities. The location, management and connectivity (environmentally and socially) of these places are particularly key to delivering quality.

Social science can capture good practice, identify cross-cutting lessons to be learnt, help measure efforts against 'quality' standards and indicators, and provide guidance for the design and implementation of future projects. This edition of *Growing Places* highlights work by Forest Research's Social and Economic Research Group (SERG) into some of the mechanisms through which this can be achieved: volunteering, landscape scale partnership, and monitoring and evaluation.

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Beyond the forest edge

Last year, the EC Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development invited SERG to lead Key Action 12 of the European Union Forest Action Plan: 'Explore the potential of urban and peri-urban forests'. This focuses on engaging local communities and non-traditional stakeholders in planning, creating, managing and using urban/peri-urban forests, and methodologies for evaluating their social and human impacts.

In January we gathered together experts and EU Member State representatives for a workshop and presented overview papers on the physical urban forest resource, its benefits and governance. Country case studies were also presented and facilitated discussion sessions led to lively and motivating exchanges.

For details visit:

www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/INFD-8ETBT7.

Volunteering in forests in Scotland and Wales

Environmental volunteering allows people to be involved in improving the quality of their local environments through the conservation and care of local natural spaces. Volunteers may also improve the quality of their own lives by getting involved in community action, meeting new people, undertaking meaningful activities and being physically and/or mentally active. The Social and Economic Research Group (SERG) has undertaken two new pieces of work; one with Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) and other partner organisations, and the second with Forestry Commission Wales (FCW). These projects explored what counts as volunteering in woodlands and determined its extent, particularly for public forests.

The work was undertaken through a series of workshops, meetings and interviews run by SERG, which identified the opportunities and challenges organisations face when delivering and managing volunteering activities. For example:

- Volunteering involves a diverse range of people and groups and a varied set of activities, leading to a broad range of tangible benefits for all.
- A key challenge is to match national strategic aspirations set out in Forestry Commission policies with local-level experience and capacity to work with volunteers.
- A more-effective support framework is needed that provides training, guidance and direction for forest managers who engage volunteers, and that also facilitates data collection on the extent and type of volunteering on the public forest estate.

Volunteering can take place in a variety of indoor and outdoor spaces. Woodland volunteering can be defined as the giving of time and energy in the outdoors or on activities directly related to trees, woodlands or the forest environment and which can bring measurable benefits to the volunteer, individuals, groups, communities, the environment and society at large. It is a choice undertaken freely and is not motivated primarily for financial gain.

The diagram opposite shows a conceptual framework for thinking about and gathering monitoring and evaluation data on volunteering. It also highlights the complexity of issues to consider.

This work follows on from previous research by SERG that explored the motivations for environmental volunteering and the wide range of benefits it can bring to people. Further details from these studies will be available soon.

For more information on the FCS study contact Liz O'Brien (liz.obrien@forestry.gsi.gov.uk) or for details of the FCW study, contact Bianca Ambrose Oji (bianca.ambrose-oji@forestry.gsi.gov.uk).

Communities, place-making and regeneration

Government policy is increasingly focused on the fact that trees, woodlands and other green spaces provide a vast array of benefits to society and can help improve people's quality of life. SERG is exploring different aspects of this agenda and has recently completed and published two research outputs.

Inventory report

The first is an inventory of evidence and practical programmes relating to the role of trees, woodlands and urban/peri-urban regeneration, place-making and place-shaping. The research identifies evidence relating to six topic areas:

- accessibility and usage;
- culture and landscape;
- health and well-being;
- local economy and benefit valuation;
- safety, crime and anti-social behaviour;
- social interaction, sense of community and pride.



The inventory report identifies key evidence themes, including the importance of woodland location to maximising benefits, the value of trees and woods to cultural identity, and the role that woodlands can play in building stronger, more-inclusive communities. It also highlights evidence gaps and provides details of urban regeneration, place-shaping and place-making programmes in Great Britain in which trees have played the fundamental role.

Review report

The second output is a review of concepts related to this growing focus, such as social capital, community empowerment, capacity, resilience and cohesion, and place-shaping and place-making. Despite their increased use, it is not always clear what these terms or concepts mean, what they look like in practice or how to measure their achievement. This review is a first step in addressing this issue. It explores the usage and definitions of the terms within UK Government and forestry-specific contexts, outlines examples of their operationalisation within UK public forestry, and reviews current indicators used for their measurement. The work also highlights gaps in indicators, future research requirements, and discusses the changing governmental context and how this might impact upon future forest policy. Research is ongoing and will further build on this review to investigate indicators in more depth before making recommendations on the most suitable indicators for use within a forestry context in Great Britain.

Both inventory and review reports are available to download from www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/INFD-8AMEHW.



Trees, woods and forests and their contribution to Quality of Life in England

In collaboration with Forest Research's Land Regeneration and Urban Greening Research Group, SERG has recently completed a three-year project to develop a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework to measure performance against Quality of Life targets. Forestry Commission England's Corporate Plan (2008–2011) outlined a range of Quality of Life success measures, or targets, which included aims to increase:

- the provision of accessible woodland;
- visits to and engagement with local woodland;
- quality of experience;
- personal and social benefits that people derive through woodland visits.

This project looked at the performance against these goals.

Initially, we identified indicator sites as the foundation for a wider, long-term M&E programme looking at the impact of woodland-based interventions on communities and places. The sites selected were Bentley Community Woodland in Doncaster, Birches Valley Forest Centre in Staffordshire and Ingrebourne Hill Community Woodland in South Hornchurch.

Baseline data was gathered for each site, through on-site and off-site data capture. This included carrying out specific surveys and using existing information and recording systems, along with the definition and demographic characterisation of local catchment areas. These methods were repeated over subsequent years to record changes in Quality of Life. In this way, the project has built up dynamic 'visitor', 'visit', 'quality of experience' and 'benefits' profiles for each of the indicator sites. In addition, comparisons between the changing 'visitor' and 'catchment area' profiles have shown how the social and spatial distributions of access and benefits for each site are developing.

Key results and developments

We are currently collating and analysing the results of the project's final year. Early analysis reveals, however, that all three sites have performed well across a number of key indicators, either maintaining or increasing the proportion of local communities that derive Quality of Life benefits through various forms of use and engagement.

In addition, the project has led to some significant methodological advances. The development of methods to profile local catchment populations and to capture data about the formal (i.e. organised) use of sites will be of particular interest to those managing and seeking to evaluate woodlands, forests and other kinds of green space.

Full reports, including results across three years and detailed descriptions of the methods used, will soon be available at: www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/INFD-7TGBUC.

To find out more contact Jake Morris (jake.morris@forestry.gsi.gov.uk).

Working together at the landscape level

From 2006 to 2011 the Forestry Commission (FC) led the ambitious Neroche Landscape Partnership Scheme (NLPS), which aimed to maximise wildlife conservation, access, recreation, and learning and skills development activities in the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. NLPS was supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and involved eleven partner organisations. In 2010, SERG carried out an evaluation of the scheme's impacts, governance structure and processes to gain insights for future partnership schemes.



Conservation volunteers and biodiversity monitoring groups for butterflies were set up under the Neroche Landscape Partnership Scheme.

The NLPS distinguished itself from other schemes by the early involvement of local stakeholders who had a strong decision-making role. The local stakeholders' group chose 23 projects that were then delivered by the FC project team and partner organisations, representatives of whom formed the Landscape Partnership Board, the scheme's governing body. The work programme was found to greatly benefit from having this combination of local and expert knowledge.

The scheme's holistic approach, wide range of activities, and integral diversity of skills, knowledge and perspectives enabled considerable learning amongst the project team and those members of the public who got involved. New skills, experiences, and increasing confidence to participate in and enjoy the local landscape, were all reported as benefits by the local stakeholders and public.

The research highlighted the need for an experienced and pragmatic project leader and supportive team to facilitate and maintain effective working relationships and drive forward delivery in a sensitive way. Having a very large partnership board can often hamper collaborative working and professional discussion. However, by establishing smaller working groups, the NLPS was able to maintain stakeholder input, which was particularly helpful for alleviating any concerns about controversial management activities, such as tree felling. The scheme demonstrated that professional support and training are essential to build the knowledge, skills and confidence to enable community members to play an active role in planning and delivery. Public bodies and third-sector organisations have a key role in facilitating this.

'...the fact that the Forestry Commission as a government organisation, has had the courage to lead a scheme like this is fantastic [...] this is what the role of a public sector should be, it's providing leadership, it's being a catalyst but it is involving lots of others and it's going across a much broader remit.'

(NLPS Board Member)

For more information contact Liz O'Brien (liz.obrien@forestry.gsi.gov.uk).

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Recent SERG publications

Edwards, D., Jensen, F.S., Marzano, M., Mason, B., Pizzirani, S. and Schelhaas, M-J. (2011). A theoretical framework to assess the impacts of forest management on the recreational value of European forests. *Ecological Indicators*, **11** (1), 81–89.

O'Brien, L., Burls, A., Bentsen, P., Hilmo, I., Holter, K., Haberling, D., Pirnat, J., Sarv, M., Vilbaste, K. and McLoughlin, J. (2011). Outdoor education, life long learning and skills development in woodlands and green spaces: the potential links to health and well-being. In K. Nilsson., M. Sangster., C. Gallis., T. Hartig., S. de Vries., K. Seeland. *Forests, trees and human health*. 343–372. Springer.

O'Brien, L., Townsend, M. and Ebdon, M. 2010 'Doing something positive': Volunteers' experiences of the well-being benefits derived from practical conservation activities in nature. *Voluntas*, **21**, (4) 525–545.

Morris, J. B., Tassone, V., De Groot, R., Camilleri, M. and Moncada. S. (2011). A framework for participatory impact assessment: involving stakeholders in European policy making, a case study of land use change in Malta. *Ecology and Society*, **16** (1), 12.

Park, J.J., O'Brien, L., Roe, J., Ward Thompson, C. and Mitchell, R. (2010). The natural outdoors and health: assessing the value and potential contribution of secondary public datasets in the UK to current and future knowledge. *Health & Place*, **17**, 269–279.

Young, J. and Marzano, M. (2010) Embodied interdisciplinarity: What is the role of polymaths in environmental research? *Environmental Conservation*. **37** (4), 373–375.

Where to find out about us:

What we do

www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/peopleandtrees

Who we are

www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/INFD-5XNATV

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