

Quality of Life, Health and the Environment Agency

Background - Regular physical activity and contact with nature reduces the risk of serious illness, and improves quality of life and mental well being. Physical activity within a natural environment (“green exercise”) may bring additional benefits.

What we do -

we protect people from pollution and flooding, and improve health and quality of life by providing high quality environments and opportunities for outdoor recreation.

We commissioned two case studies from the Centre for Environment and Society at the University of Essex, one urban and one rural, to examine the physical and mental health benefits of environmental improvements carried out by the Environment Agency and partners. Both sites provide opportunities for outdoor recreation and relaxation in natural spaces that include water.

Summary

Our case studies show that small-scale environmental improvements bring significant health benefits to local communities. After the improvements:

- More people visited more often, stayed longer and were more likely to visit to exercise and for health
- Analysis showed that visitors’ self esteem increased the longer they had spent exercising in the natural environment.
- Local green spaces are an important health resource for surrounding communities.

A questionnaire and a participatory method were used to collect data. Participants were asked about smoking and physical activity habits, health and self-esteem, how they used the sites before and after the improvements, and what they thought was special about the sites.

The case studies are summarised below.

Next Steps

A third case study is being completed. An economic model of the value of environmental improvements is being developed. More research is needed to develop our results and to understand how we can use them.

Sutcliffe Park, Greenwich

Before restoration, Sutcliffe Park was a flat green area, lacking biodiversity, with the River Quaggy running in an underground culvert. Re-naturalisation of the river for flood management and re-landscaping work was completed in June 2004, and the park now has rich biodiversity and habitats.



© Halcrow

What we did -

we led the project as part of a wider flood defence scheme, working with partners from other organisations and the local community. The improvements have attracted new visitors, resulting in more health benefits for more people. 83% of visitors feel differently in the park now the River Quaggy runs through it, because of increased biodiversity, better opportunities for recreation, and the peacefulness and relaxation of being near water.

Why do people visit Sutcliffe Park?

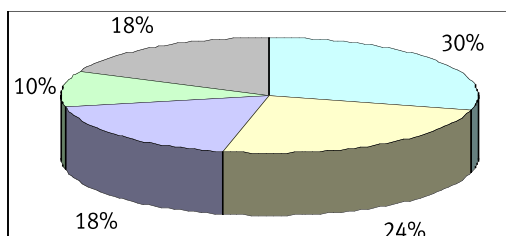
Before the improvements, most people came to walk dogs (42%). Afterwards, most come to exercise, increasing from 40% to 68%.

People are more than twice as likely to visit for 'health' reasons such as fresh air or walking (66% compared to 25% previously). The number of people visiting for 'wildlife' reasons has increased from 2% to 47%, and for 'scenery' from 9% to 26%.

Following improvements:

- The number of park visits increased by 73%
- People stay longer, on average 47 minutes per visit compared to 34 minutes
- Total time spent in the park per person per month increased by more than 3.5 hours
- 28% of people surveyed started visiting only recently, due to the improvements

What is special about Sutcliffe Park?



- Presence of water
- Wildlife
- Landscape/views
- Exercise/recreation opportunities
- Other

“ ... I like observing the various visiting birds... kingfisher and herons...”

“ It is a transformation... a green oasis in a busy urban area”

Montgomery Canal Towpath, Welshpool

Improvements were made to a stretch of the Montgomery Canal towpath, which passes through Welshpool, as part of a rural regeneration project.

Access, safety, and biodiversity were improved, and old tramlines restored. A circular trail using local artwork will be introduced.



© British Waterways

What we did

we worked in partnership with other organisations, including British Waterways who led the project. Much of our work to improve local environments is achieved in partnership with others.

Although improvements were only made to a short section of towpath, people are more likely to visit for exercise. The number of people visiting for health reasons increased from 53% to 58%, and for wildlife from 47% to 53%.

Following improvements:

- People stay longer, with the number of people visiting for less than 10 minutes on average decreasing by 13% and the number visiting for an hour or more increasing by 5%.
- Total time spent per person per month increased by more than 1.5 hours.
- The total number of visits has increased by 9%, as existing users visit more often.

What is Special about Montgomery Canal?

- 48% of people mentioned wildlife and flora. Peace and quiet (24%), and enjoyment of the walk (17%) were also important.
- People value the flatness of the walk, and being able to escape traffic noise.
- 60% of people feel more positively by the canal following the improvements, due to the cleaner and tidier paths, better recreation opportunities, increased safety and the value of the canal to the local area.

“Walking is safer and easier”

Recommendations

These case studies demonstrate the health benefits local green spaces and water environments can have for communities. The quality of natural environments is crucial in encouraging people to use and enjoy them, shown in both case studies by increased use following improvements.

- More research is needed to measure the health benefits of open space to users, and to explore their economic value
- Partnerships need to be developed across countryside, health and planning sectors to take advantage of the health benefits of the environment

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