

# **Small Woods Association**

## ***'I just call it the woods'***

**A research report commissioned by the Small Woods  
Association to explore attitudes and access to woods and  
woodland products**

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## **The Researchers**

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## ***Executive Summary***

The study combined qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the experiences, attitudes and understandings of a diverse range of participants in a series of wood-focussed arts projects. The majority of data, which explored people's experiences of the arts event they took part in, and of woods and woodland products in general, was collected from 237 questionnaires and 96 interviews.

### **Arts events**

- Workshops, joint activities or performances in woods, or related to woods, have a great potential to allow people access to skills and knowledge.
- Woodland events can draw generations together and offer activities that can be enjoyed and cherished by families and communities.
- How people are prepared for participation influences their expectations, and can affect their overall evaluation of activity or event.
- Projects that involved workshops and activities by participants allow people to discover and develop skills.
- Events that did not involve participants actively target a different audience. They were more likely to enhance people's knowledge and lead to reflection about their use of natural resources.
- Expectations, likes and dislikes are not connected to either gender or age, nor the frequency with which they usually visit woodlands

### **General woodland interaction, including access and facilities**

- Nearly a fifth of the sample (more than a quarter of the children) never visits small woods. Nearly a further 50 percent of the participants visit less frequently than once a month.
- The ability to access woods is related to transport. Living in walking or cycling distance is connected to more frequent visits.
- The main reasons for visiting woods are to enjoy nature and to engage in activities.
- For all people, independent of how often they visit, flora and fauna are the most important reason for accessing woods.
- People who access woods more often than once a month were more likely to place emphasis on activities. People who visit less frequently place greater emphasis on nature and atmosphere.

- What people dislike is also connected with the frequency of visits. People who access woods more than once a month are more likely to dislike features of human impact, like pollution. People who visit woods less frequently have more problems with natural features.
- A need for improved accessibility to woods was highlighted
- The exploration of what features may attract more people, or people from a wider social range, to woods showed potential conflicts between different stakeholders, e.g. between dog walkers or cyclists and other users.
- Woods provide a context in which people feel their behaviour is free from social constraints. This allows for imaginative and exploratory activities.
- Contrary to recent studies, even in an urban context, personal safety does not appear to be a concern associated with woodlands.
- Woods are perceived to be places of peace and tranquillity where people are able to relax and rejuvenate. People of all ages value the therapeutic quality of woods.
- Woods both generate and evoke memories, overwhelmingly of a happy nature.
- Appreciation of woods appears to have little correlation to the capacity to use scientific language. Children in particular prefer to use descriptive and inventive names that predominantly focus on the features of the thing they are naming.
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### **Woodland products**

- The questionnaires unearthed a lack of knowledge and a general confusion about woodland products. People often do not know what type of wood has been used or the origin of wood.

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## 'I just call it the woods'

Army helicopter overhead, muddy lake, holly, names on tree, flexible tree, lopped trees, silver birch tree, steps down to lake, boots on ground

A pond which is mucky, standing on squidgy mud, long curl ivy, a massive holly tree, furry moss, birds singing peacefully, thick lines on tree, hill that look like hill, broken trees, large oaks, fast helicopter, roots of ivy, furry tree.

Muddy lake, prickly holly, felty English fern, name carving on tree, lopped trees, flexible trees, hairy texture, buried roots, smoky (smells bad), moss covered steps, blackberry bush, nut tree, natural dam, people scuffing leaves, chemical, robin red breast,

Brown lakes, a brown river, trees look like black, muddy, sunlit, leaves are floating from trees. Cold.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Introduction***

The Small Woods Association launched its Local Woods Campaign in 2000 in attempt to develop the relationship between people and their local woods. The need to reconnect young people in particular with the countryside and increase their confidence in using and enjoying woods is a concern also expressed by the Forestry Commission (O'Brien, 2001). The Local Woods Campaign is founded on the belief that recent decades have witnessed a revolution in the way people interact with woods and with woodland products. Concern has been raised by various reports exposing a lack of knowledge and understanding about woods and woodland products, including one showing that people believe that coppicing and charcoal production kill trees and destroy forests (MidsWoods, spring 2001).

Following a successful collaboration with arts and education charity, Beavers Arts, culminating in the production of an outdoor show in 2000, the two organisations planned the *West Midlands Festival of the Woods*. This programme of work comprised four area-based projects (as described in detail below) using different artistic media to develop the connection between people and woods. The combined programme of work was marketed under the name *Touching Wood*. This research report complements this programme. Those taking part in the arts activities are drawn upon as research participants for this study, which explores not only their experience of the *Touching Wood* programme but their general experience of and attitudes to woods and woodland products.

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<sup>1</sup> Extracts from children's notes taken during their woodland activity.

## Overview

The report begins by introducing key recent research publications from a similar field of interest. In the light of this contextual information, the research aims for this study are stated.

Having thus set the scene, the research methods (both qualitative and quantitative) adopted for this study are presented, and the reasons for their choice explained. Before the findings of the study are given, the report gives a full explanation of each of the *Touching Wood* projects, providing a background against which the analysis can take place.

The findings of the study are presented in terms of the three key areas explored: experiences of and attitudes towards the *Touching Wood* events; general interaction with woods, including emotional engagement with them; and understandings of and attitudes towards woodland products.

The findings are drawn together in a conclusion that links them to related research studies. The report is then concluded with a set of recommendations. First, suggestions for improvements to future events are made. Following this, recommendations for alterations to woods that might affect access are explored. Similarly, recommendations for developing access to woodland products are proposed. Finally, further research needs are identified.

## Recent research

A body of research on the interaction between people and woods is continuing to establish itself. We draw upon the following sources to provide a context against which to interpret our understandings:

- *Woodland sensibilities: recreational uses of woods and forests in contemporary Britain*. This report produced by McNaghten et al (1998), explores trends in public use of woods in various UK locations with particular reference to sites belonging to the Forestry Commission. The report is founded on data collected in focus group discussions and a series of interviews with recreation specialists.
- *The place of forestry in modern Welsh culture and life*. Henwood and Pidgeon's 1998 study is based on four focus group discussions following a half-day panel with those who have diverse interests in Welsh forestry.
- *Social Forestry: Questions and Issues*. Edited by O'Brien (2001), this publication draws together papers, workshop discussions and plenary discussion from a one-day seminar on social forestry in December 2000.
- *Perceptions, Attitudes and Preferences in Forests and Woodlands*, Edited by Lee (2001), this report brings together findings from a focus group study (Hickman, 2001) and from the household questionnaire survey developed from the focus group study. The questionnaire uses closed questions and targets four postcode areas across

Britain. Forty-five percent of respondents never visited woods and a further forty-two percent did so less than once a month.

- *Public Opinion of Forestry* (Gillam, 1999; Heggie, 2001). This report is made by the Forestry Commission every two years, and uses a household survey (of 2000 people) to explore adult's understandings and attitudes.
- *Play in the Woods - Questionnaire Summary* (Tidey, 2001). This brief research summary presents results drawn from a pilot questionnaire survey of audience members at the *Play in the Woods* event mentioned above. The respondents were mainly regular woodland visitors, only 8 of 75 respondents having not visited woods recently.
- *A Way into woodland: making access work well for all concerned* (Small Woods Association Conference, 2001) A collation of presentation reports combined with notes from the plenary discussion from the Small Woods Association's latest conference, the theme of which was woodland access.
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## Key findings of recent research

The key findings that relate to this research are presented below.

The clear conclusion is that the members of the public who took part in our groups place considerable value upon a wide range of (primarily non-economic) aspects of forests, woods and trees. (Henwood and Pidgeon 1998, p.5).

Overwhelmingly, research studies report the significant non-commercial value of woods and forests. See for example Hickman (2001); Lee (2001); O'Brien (2001); Rigler (2001); Mcnaghten et al. (1998). Hislop (see O'Brien 2001) identifies four themes of social forestry that offer greater insight into the this non-commercial value. They are: development, recreation and access, quality of life, and participation and awareness. It appears, however, that it is only recently that we have come to recognise the value of woods in terms of their contribution to people's lives.

Often the value of woodlands and trees to local people has been overlooked even though they can provide many benefits that enrich people's lives such as improving well being, reducing stress and providing physical recreation opportunities. (O'Brien, 2001, p 1)

A wide range of reasons has been reported for visiting woods, including the pursuit of leisure activities, escaping from the stresses and strains of everyday life, exploring wildlife, and the relief of depression.

### **Positive factors of woodland interaction**

Hickman's (2001) focus group study shows that the main reason for visiting woodlands was to seek peace and quiet (there was only one exception which related to a forest that did not offer a peaceful retreat). This finding is echoed by Henwood and Pidgeon (1998), who show that woods are appreciated for the escape they offer from city life as well as for the peace and tranquility they provide. McNaghten et al. (1998) also report that the most common feelings associated with woods were of peace, tranquillity and relaxation. These findings are supported by Tidey (2001) almost one third of whose survey respondents gave 'peace and quiet' as a response to the question 'name one thing you like about woodlands'.

Further to the above, McNaghten et al. (1998), and Henwood and Pidgeon (1998) refer to the particular therapeutic value of woodlands. The former study highlighting the opportunity they bring for stress relief, the latter showing that people report woods as bringing happiness and relief from depression.

This could be associated with the following finding of McNaghten et al. (1998)

participants across the socio-economic spectrum evidently felt themselves to *relate* to trees and woods in an affective, even spiritual, level, in a way that was restorative. (Ibid, p.44).

Henwood and Pidgeon (1998) also make reference to the spiritual quality of woods, and McNaghten et al (1998) describe woods as being associated with freedom. The associated depth of woodland experience is something greater than a purely intellectual interaction. An interesting illustration of this can be found in language. McNaghten et al. (1998) found that, even for those most ecologically minded, biological terminology fails to capture the depth of their experience of their natural surroundings

However, woods are also viewed as intellectually stimulating and educational places, (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1998). Perhaps this is associated with the notion of woods as places that evoke "a sense of excitement, adventure and curiosity at what might be found" (ibid, p.9).

Clearly one level on which woods provide educational stimulus, is through the opportunities they provide for encountering wildlife McNaghten et al. (1998). This is supported by the finding that the beauty of trees, and interaction with the natural environment, dominate people's feelings about woods (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1998).

### **Negative factors of woodland interaction**

Research has shown various negative factors to be associated with woodland interaction. Significant weight has been given to the notion that woods are viewed, particularly by women, as harbouring threats to their personal safety.

O'Brien (2001) discovered that, on a negative front, woods are seen to intercept light and space, and that they may provide a habitat for deleterious wildlife. Tidey (2001) found

that from 75 respondents 21 could name nothing they disliked about woodlands. However, similarly to O'Brien he found that for 6 respondents density and darkness were dislikes. Other dislikes uncovered by Tidey's survey included things associated with human impact such as dog fouling.

In terms of fears generated by woods, the greatest emphasis was on women's personal safety. However, it is also the case that "memories of getting lost in woods were stressed as being times of intensely experienced fear" (Henwood and Pidgeon 1998, p. 27).

McNaghten et al. (1998) report a general trend among women to be deterred from woods for fear of the dangers within them. O'Brien's (2001) findings include the perception that woods are dark and dangerous and may contain hidden danger, and that they are linked with crime. Lee (2001), through closed questioning, picks up on feelings of worry, vulnerability, and security in relation to gender differences. He uncovers the following:

worried about being alone: 12.7% men agreed, 56.9% women agreed

feel vulnerable in forest: 16.6 men agreed, 46.2% of women agreed

feel secure in forest: 56.2% men agreed, 31.1% of women agreed

However, Henwood and Pidgeon (1998) report that their sample did not express such strong fears, with much more emphasis being placed on the pleasures of being in woods.

### **Access and facilities**

There is limited mention in the studies of those facilities that might be seen to improve or increase access to woods. However, Hickman's (2001) focus group study shows fairly comprehensive findings. She revealed the following suggestions for woodland improvements:

More free parking

Picnic areas

More tea

Water fountains

More litter bins

More children play areas

Nature trails

Special areas for dog exercising dogs

Walks and information about flora and fauna.

Information centre, information events.

Different ideas about paths – wood chipping, gravel or leave it.

Disabled access

Heggie (2001) supports these proposals with the finding that increased facilities, in particular toilets and sign-posted walks, would promote greater use of woods and forests. Lee (2001) and Heggie (2001) indicated that transport was a significant access issue for families without car and that it led to a significant reduction in the frequency of visits and the likelihood of visiting at all.

## ***Research aims***

The research illustrated above leads to various recommendations for future research, some of which have fuelled the Local Woods Campaign and directed this research project. The aims of this research are, therefore, put forward in terms of these recommendations.

O'Brien (2001) identifies a need for a better understanding of the core values of stakeholders. She reports that the seminar participants concluded that further research is required. Particular areas she identifies for response are the following questions:

What is quality of life?

Who uses woodlands and why?

What are the social/psychological benefits?

The Local Woods Campaign proposes research into various aspects of people's relationships with woods and woodland products. It identifies a need to talk to people and find out what keeps them away from woods. It calls for research into how people are using woods, the relevance of woods in people's lives, and the links between woods and woodland produce. (MidsWoods, spring 2001). This forms the basis of our research remit.

In contrast to the research reported above, this study uses the focus of a series of woodland – based art events from which to draw participants. This enables both questionnaire and focus group research, as well as the additional qualitative dimensions brought by participant observation, interviews and artwork. Significantly, this study also targets a high proportion of children, offering new insights into their perceptions, understandings and feelings.

## ***Methods***

Designing a method that is able to give potential stakeholders a voice and allows gaining a better understanding of the meaning people attach to small woods by looking at the language used by local people leads to two possible difficulties. First, the question of who the stakeholders and potential stakeholders are has to be addressed. If the answer is 'everyone' the method used has strive to include everyone. This contradicts the methodological demand that everyone has to have the chance to be included in the sample. What about the people who do not like to or are not able to fill out questionnaires? What about people who are less

likely to agree to be interviewed? There are many underlying reasons for these difficulties: disinterest, low literacy levels, language difficulties, learning difficulties, sensory or physical impairments etc.

For this piece of research a flexible approach was taken. First, sampling was opportunistic. There were four projects, all connected to small woods, however geared towards different groups of the population and with a variety of set-ups. For some participants it was compulsory to take part (school children and college students), others came on their own accord. Some projects were performances that could be 'consumed'; others were workshops inviting people to actively participate in one or more activities. Altogether there were 577 participants, of those 57 per cent were women and 43 per cent were men. Some of these people took part in more than one project. Ten per cent of the participants were people with disabilities. The four projects offered an opportunity to gather the views of a wide variety of people, belonging to different age groups, at various points of their life course and with different experiences. Some of these participants would probably describe themselves as stakeholders in small woods; for others this was their first visit to a wood.

Because it was clear from the outset that we were dealing with a wide variety of people we designed a research tool that allowed us comparison, but also allowed respondents to use their own words, and to express the importance they attach to certain answers. This was achieved by including many open-ended questions. In effect we combined qualitative and quantitative methods and received, as intended, quantitative and qualitative data. The distinction between method and data is important for the following analysis and evaluation (Bryman, 1992).

Table 1 - 3 provide information on numbers of returned questionnaires and the gender and age of respondents. The overall return rate is 41 per cent. The variety in numbers is due to a multitude of reasons. Some projects were intended only for a small group of people and therefore provided only a small proportion of the data. The effects of weather (also beyond the control of the researchers) led to low participation rates in some projects and consequently only a small number of questionnaires returned.

**Table 1: Number and proportion of respondents**

	Number of respondents	Per cent
Hereford school	106	44.7
Blists Hill	39	16.5
Apedale	31	13.1
Stoke College	25	10.5
Nuneaton	19	8.0
Day centre	9	3.8
Baggeridge	8	3.4
Total	237	100.0

**Table 2: Gender of respondents**

	Respondents	Per cent
Male	85	35.9
Female	143	60.3
Missing data	9	3.8
Total	237	100.0

**Table 3: Age of respondents**

	Frequency	Per cent
Up to ten	105	44.3
11-17	36	15.2
18-25	17	7.2
26-40	16	6.8
41-60	49	20.7
61 or over	6	2.5
Missing data	8	3.4
	237	100.0

Our endeavour to include a variety of potential stakeholders and to access the language used by them to describe their relationship to woods necessitated a flexible approach by the researchers. This included participant observation from being active in offering workshops, to participating, or to ‘just’ being the researcher. Other problems to overcome included literacy and language barriers. In order to use the questionnaire it was important to explain some questions to children and encourage them to take time and write down answers<sup>2</sup>. In other cases the barriers were physical ones. For example, some people with disabilities needed help in filling out the questionnaire.

Since questionnaires have their limits in the information they can elicit we also conducted 96 qualitative interviews and a number of focus group discussions. Again, the methods had to fit the context and the ability of the interviewees. Some were interviewed in a more formal focus group setting, others were interviewed informally during a workshop, a walk through the woods or after they had watched a performance. This data is particularly useful in gaining knowledge about the language used and the processes involved that may alter attitudes of potential stakeholders, and is able to describe changing behaviour over time. Participating in the activities also gained us access to work undertaken by participants. For example, children were asked to note down what they saw, heard and felt as part of one project. These notes turned out to be useful in understanding children’s way of thinking about woods and language used. Additionally, seven artists were interviewed. This allowed understanding the work they were doing with participants and offered a deeper insight into the background of some of the participants.

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<sup>2</sup> The returned questionnaires show clearly that this task was difficult for a number of children. We like to express our appreciation for their perseverance and the effort they invested in our research project.

One aim of the research was to explore people's knowledge about woodland products. The questionnaire contained a section that asked about the last woodland product bought, the type of wood of this object and the origin of the wood. A large proportion of the sample did not answer these three questions. One explanation for this is that this section was felt to be out of place. Answering questions about the activity or performance, and the general use of woodland and possible improvements seemed to be accepted and could be connected to people's reason for being at an event. Hence, they were generally willing to fill out questionnaires. In contrast, being asked about products bought was felt to be challenging and out of place.

For some people the question about the last wood product bought was difficult to answer. Twenty-seven per cent did not write an answer down. Children were less likely to answer this question ( $p < 0.05$ ). Children may be less likely to have bought a wood product or to be involved in consumption decisions made in their households. Additionally, some of the respondents attended a day centre and lived in residential settings. Again they are less likely to be involved in these decisions and do not have the same access to buying products.

Overall there are five types of data source: The quantifiable answers given in the questionnaires, the qualitative answers noted down in the questionnaires, the qualitative interviews including focus groups, the work of participants and the observations of the researchers. The following report will identify the sources of data.

## ***The four projects***

The Touching Wood programme of work took place in and around four woods in the West Midlands. Each project was distinct from the others; based in a different sort of wood, in a different location, employing different artistic media. However, there was a common underlying theme of widening participation in the arts and widening access and understanding of woods and woodland products. What follows is a brief introduction to each of the projects.

### **Hereford**

This project took the form of a series of short, single artist residencies. In order that the changing seasons of the wood might be explored, these were spread between September and January. Work from the three residencies will be drawn together to form a website. It is also hoped that innovative means of making the art public will be employed – e.g. by printing on beer mats, bus shelters or parking tickets. Before going on to describe the individual residencies, it is worth mentioning some general features of the wood and the local context.

The residency focused around a wood on the outskirts of the rural market town of Hereford, Newton Coppice. The site, traditionally a deciduous coppice, occupies approximately 20 acres including a stream and two small pools. The wood hosts a wide range of tree species

but has an unusually high proportion of mature oak. In places the wood is very dense and coppicing is due to start again. The wood supports a huge diversity of wildlife, including less common species such as fresh water crayfish and harvest mice. It is a site of interest to the local mammal group and the Herefordshire Wildlife Trust. The wood has a wide range of users including dog-walkers and children, who make dens, ride their mountain bikes and go fishing among other things.

The site is situated next to the main road where there is limited parking and from where it is possible to catch a bus to Hereford. Otherwise, the wood borders farmland and housing. The housing estate concerned is somewhat notorious locally, and falls within an area that is currently part of a rural regeneration programme.

### **Hereford phase one**

The artistic focus of this phase of the project was on observational drawing and printing. Given that for logistical reasons it was not possible to take participants to Newton Coppice, the artist brought the woods to the participants. He collected a selection of objects from the floor of the wood including leaves, twigs, fungi, moss and logs. Although the artist worked with other local people including a youth group, the majority of the participants came from a primary school located very close to the site and serving an underprivileged community. It was with this school group that the research was conducted. The children did three main activities. First they were asked to choose an object from the woods that they would like to draw. Having made an observational drawing they were then encouraged to print in ink directly from the object. The final task was, using a log print made by the artist, to work out the age of the tree when felled by counting the number of rings and then to mark on the print significant dates, such as the year you were born. In general the activity was well received by the children and teachers and people participated keenly.

It is worth noting that the school had organised trips to the Forest of Dean and to Dinedor, and when asked to talk about their experiences of woods the children overwhelmingly referred to these trips.

### **Hereford phase two**

On this occasion, in early December, the artist was able to devote three days to developing work with children in the primary school that had been involved in the first phase. The first day provided an opportunity for the children to visit Newton Coppice for a charcoal burn and woodland walk led by the artist and the woodman. On the walk, done in groups of four or five children with an adult, the children recorded what they could see, hear and smell and what it made them feel. 'I asked them to record feelings and sounds and what they could see, to use their eyes ears and noses and to note the things that stood out.' (Artist). The result was a set of beautiful collections of drawings and words.

The following two days the artist worked with the children in their class groups. First, using words the artist asked them to do what he called *distilling* and to choose five words, not

necessarily a sentence, that gave a feel for their experience in the wood. The exercise was repeated but using images – generating simple representations in charcoal of what they had seen. First people worked as individuals or in pairs, then in fours to produce a large woodland scene, again in charcoal. It was on this occasion that the children completed the questionnaire.

### **Hereford phase three**

This phase took the form of a residency in a local day care centre. The centre caters for adults with a wide range of needs including those with physical disabilities and learning difficulties. Participants took part in woodland visits and artistic workshops. Due to access restrictions at Newton Coppice, the woodland visits took place at nearby Queenswood. The woodland visits provided an opportunity to collect natural material that was the used in the workshops. After making an observational drawing of their chosen objects, participants were encouraged to reproduce an element of this using black tissue paper on white paper. The artist was careful to provide a choice of working methods by which to achieve this result in order to give everybody the opportunity to work in a way that suited them. The artist then traced these images exactly to create woodcuts from which the participants then printed their images. The results were stunning and participants seemed to be pleasantly surprised at the results they achieved.

### **Baggeridge**

This residency took the form of a series of theatrical guided woodland walks and public workshops. Members of the public were given the opportunity to join in lantern workshops or to make clay models to be fired in unique animal-shaped kilns. All of this contributed to three spectacular woodland walks that included performance (in several languages), music and songs, kiln firing, and an ice fire.

The setting for all of this was Baggeridge Country Park, a site four miles from Wolverhampton and managed by South Staffordshire Council. Formerly a coalfield, the site underwent reclamation in the seventies, eventually being opened as a country park in 1983. During this process almost 20,000 trees were planted on the site, mainly oak, birch and hawthorn. The park is of biological importance and hosts a wide variety of species of plants, insects, birds and small mammals, including some that are rare to the area. A significant proportion of the park is wooded including some areas of ancient wood and hedgerows that survived the disruption caused by coal extraction. It is a well-resourced site with recently added play area, teashop and visitor centre. There is plentiful information available about the site, it's history and wildlife, and there are a number of marked trails for visitors. There is ample car parking, but limited opportunity for reaching the site by any other means. It is notable what a mixture of people make use of the Country Park - dog walkers families with young children, duck feeders, couples of all ages, groups of friends of all ages.

Culminating on Twelfth night, this project spanned a very cold period. Originally it was designed to accompany a large council organised Winter Wonderland event at the country Park that was eventually cancelled at short notice. Weather conditions and the timing of the event meant that community participation was not at the level anticipated. The first walk had to take on a much-reduced form, being restricted largely to a car park on account of the paths having become streams of water on ice. However, those that braved the cold, seemed to enjoy themselves enormously.

## **Nuneaton**

Two artists ran a weeklong residency, working with the community local to Haunch Wood, to make a banner display reflecting the wildlife of the wood. A series of open public workshops was held and a variety of participants contributed to the banners, including members of three youth groups and individuals of all ages over ten. The artists used cutting and stencilling techniques as a means of overcoming the fear of painting on cloth. While the framework and format of the banner was decided in advance by the lead artist, participants were encouraged to contribute ideas for content. The three banners depicted spring, summer and autumn in Haunch wood and were designed to surround a display board belonging to the local Wildlife Trust.

Haunch wood is set on the edge of what has become a notorious estate in recent years. It is located between several housing developments. Many social problems are evident and in the minds of local people, in particular high rates of crime and of drug misuse were continually referred to. The wood is relatively newly planted on the site of a former brick works. At a first glance it is not particularly attractive as it plays host to burnt-out cars, beer cans and other refuse. However, the wood sustains a rich variety of wildlife and is clearly much used and appreciated by local people. There are a wide variety of people who make use of the wood including young mums with pushchairs, people walking between the two estates, cyclists, dog walkers, and children.

A community education worker from the local Wildlife Trust was involved in the publicity of the event and in organising the community involvement. However, for a variety of reasons activating community involvement was a difficulty not fully resolved. It resulted in the postponement of the event from November to January and less, and more unpredictable participation. Notwithstanding the above, a significant number of people, predominately women, contributed enthusiastically to creating a detailed and beautifully executed banner.

## **Telford**

Just before Christmas a winter celebratory show, "Nuts", was performed in the lovely bicycle pavilion at Iron Bridge Gorge Museum on the Victorian Village site, Blists Hill.

This theatrical and musical performance was a lively, fourteen-person show covering woodland life in the changing seasons. From childhood games to deforestation, the show

moved between very jolly and funny moments to very sad and disturbing ones. Features of the entertaining evening included baked apples, live music and singing, recorded sound track, performance, masks, puppets and more... The biggest complaint the large and appreciative audience seemed to have was the problem of finding the venue – it was up a dark lane and signposting wasn't clear!

This performance was not linked to one wood in particular. Instead, material was gathered from a variety of sources. The artists devised the show after researching people's experiences and local history, and was based on woodland knowledge.

The show was toured in January, with a smaller cast, at a variety of venues including schools, colleges, and elderly care homes. There was huge diversity in the audiences that this show reached in terms of socio-economic background, age and previous experience of woods and theatrical events.

## ***Findings***

The research findings are presented in three parts, corresponding to the three key elements of the research. First, issues relating specifically to the Touching Wood activities are addressed. Following this, the report examines the participants' interactions with woods independent of these events. Finally, the findings related to woodland products are explored.

## **Activity / touching wood**

There is clear evidence to show the enthusiasm held by audience members and participants, and the pleasure and educational gain provided by the Touching Wood events.

Some of the boys said they go down to the woods but they just go on their bikes and they don't normally see anything. It was really interesting for them. (Teacher, Hereford)

I went twice yesterday. I come home and my mum and my brother come with me again. [Girl, aged 9, Hereford] Further questioning revealed that this was the first time she had ever been to these woods]

Wicked woods – no maths – out of school – out in woods discovering things. (Boy, aged 10)

Can I give my address? We would like to come again if there's anything like this. The theatre made the walk – we would come again if you're doing something like this. The kids wouldn't just go on a walk. (Woman, aged 36, Baggeridge)

I think you're doing a wonderful job. It's lovely all this. (Woman, retired, Nuneaton)

I want to go back to Afghanistan and plant trees. (Man, aged 18, Telford)

People came for different reasons. A large group of people were not able to decide whether to come or not. Assumably, depending on how they were introduced to the activity or event may have shaped their expectations (Table 4).

**Table 4: People's expectations before attending the event or activity**

	Frequency	Per cent
Fun	60	31.9
Don't know	50	26.6
Exciting	28	14.9
Activity	17	9.0
Smoky, muddy, wet	11	5.9
Boring	10	5.3
Nothing	9	4.8
Learn	3	1.6
Total	188	100.0
Missing data	49	

Nearly a third expected to have fun and an additional 15 per cent expected something exciting. About one third of the sample did not know what to expect or expected nothing. Children in particular were likely to express their expectations in emotional terms: excitement, fun or even boredom. Seventy-four per cent of those respondents aged less than 18 did so, compared with only 24 per cent of the adult respondents. Adults were more likely to come without any particular expectations at 56 per cent ( $p < 0.001$ ).

The activities and the performances were viewed as a success. A quarter of the respondents liked 'all of it' (Table 5). The combined proportion of the respondents who liked an aspect of the event shows that nearly half (48 per cent) liked what had been offered. It is important to note here that the questionnaires did not use closed questions. These were answers formulated by each of the respondents individually

**Table 5: What people liked in general**

	Frequency	Per cent
All of it	54	24.8
Entertainment	40	18.3
Wood activity	33	15.1
Art activity	32	14.7
Nature	24	11.0
Interaction	10	4.6
Humour	10	4.6
Atmosphere	7	3.2
Mud	7	3.2
Personal achievement	1	.5
Total	218	100.0
Missing	19	

What people liked is not associated with gender. What people liked is associated with their expectations ( $p < 0.05$ ). The largest proportion of people who liked everything was found in the group of people who had expressed no expectations, at 30 per cent. Of those who had noted down their expectations in terms of emotions, like 'fun', 'excitement' or 'boredom', 51 per cent liked the event best and 26 per cent natural features (including mud). Not surprisingly the expectations of people looking forward to an activity or a learning experience were met. Sixty-four per cent of that group noted down that they liked the activity or the event best.

Respondents also were asked what they liked least about the event (Table 6).

**Table 6: What people disliked in general**

	Frequency	Per cent
Nothing	70	38.5
Practical (e.g. seating, space, acoustics)	33	18.1
Nature	28	15.4
Event	21	11.5
Other	18	9.9
Weather	6	3.3
Personal shortcoming	4	2.2
Don't know	2	1.1
Total	182	100.0
Missing data	55	

The majority of respondents (39 per cent) did not dislike anything about the event. What was disliked were mainly practical factors such as uncomfortable seating, insufficient workspace for all participants, inadequate acoustics. Others disliked features connected with the natural settings of some of the events, like slippery paths. Although it only presents a very small proportion of the answers, the answers coded as 'personal shortcomings' are considered to be highly significant. These answers were expressed by young people with very low levels of self-esteem. They feared that they were not able to join in the activities, worried that they could not do it 'right' or that they might spoil the whole project. One of the positive effects of this art project was that it helped these young people to discover that they are able to join in and that they have skills they did not previously know they possessed.

When you think you can't do something, if you keep trying and ask for help it turns out good. (Questionnaire respondent, Nuneaton)

That you can mix colours and that you don't have to be perfect. (Questionnaire respondent, Nuneaton)

What people disliked was not connected to gender.

The events and workshops in this project aimed improve people's knowledge about woods and pass on woodland and/or art skills. Table 7 lists what people noted down what they had learned.

**Table 7: What people had learned by taking part in the event**

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Woodland skill	44	23.9
History/philosophy	42	22.8
Nature	40	21.7
Attitude change	20	10.9
Other	20	10.9
Art skill	10	5.4
Nothing	8	4.3
Total	184	100.0
Missing data	53	

There was a wide range of learning outcomes expressed. This is indicative of the diverse skills and knowledge they were given the opportunity to obtain. For some people practical skills, like woodland skills or art skills were important. Others learned about woods in history or found a new way to think about their environment and the impact of humans on nature. What people learned is not connected to gender or age.

It is interesting to compare what people had expected before they took part in the event and what they feel they learned ( $p < 0.001$ ). Those who had expressed their expectations in emotions (like fun, excitement, boredom) showed a fairly equal spread across the categories 'skills' (43 per cent), 'learned about nature' (25 per cent) and 'wider knowledge, change of attitude' (32 per cent). Not surprisingly over half of those who had expected to learn by participating in an activity felt they had picked up some skills (55 per cent), or had learned something about nature (41 per cent). Interesting results emerge from the small group of people who had no expectations. Members of this group were most likely to improve their wider knowledge, learning, for example, about the history of woods in England. Also, they were more likely to develop or change an attitude or philosophical question (65 per cent), e.g. connected to human impact on nature. A further 19 per cent in the group without expectations before the event stated that they had learned something about nature.

The fact that the data were gathered from the variety of events means it is possible to compare the potential of events where people are involved actively with those events where people remain spectators. When people attending the event remained spectators they were most likely to improve their knowledge or mention that they had changed their attitude ( $p < 0.001$ ). Just over three-quarters of passive spectators fell in this group. Involving people in activities is an opportunity to teach skills (just over half), pass on knowledge about nature (a third) or offer more general knowledge, which may lead to a change of attitudes towards woods and human impact (17 per cent).

Another possible connection to be explored was the question of whether people who visit small woods more frequently learn different things from those who visit less frequently or never. The analysis of the questionnaire did not reveal any correlation. Events and performances, it seems, offer a different level of insight from non-organised woodland visits.

Asking people how they would improve the event in which they had been participating also gives valuable insight in what people expect and about the activities themselves. It should be noted that only half of the 237 respondents suggested improvements for the events (Table 8).

**Table 8: Suggestions for how to improve woodland events**

	Frequency	Per cent
Practical	72	61.0
Other	24	20.3
Event	11	9.3
Advertising	9	7.6
Art activity	2	1.7
Total	118	100

Practical improvements, like better seats, efficient sign positing to the events and having enough space to join in activities, formed the vast majority of suggestions made.

## General interaction with woods

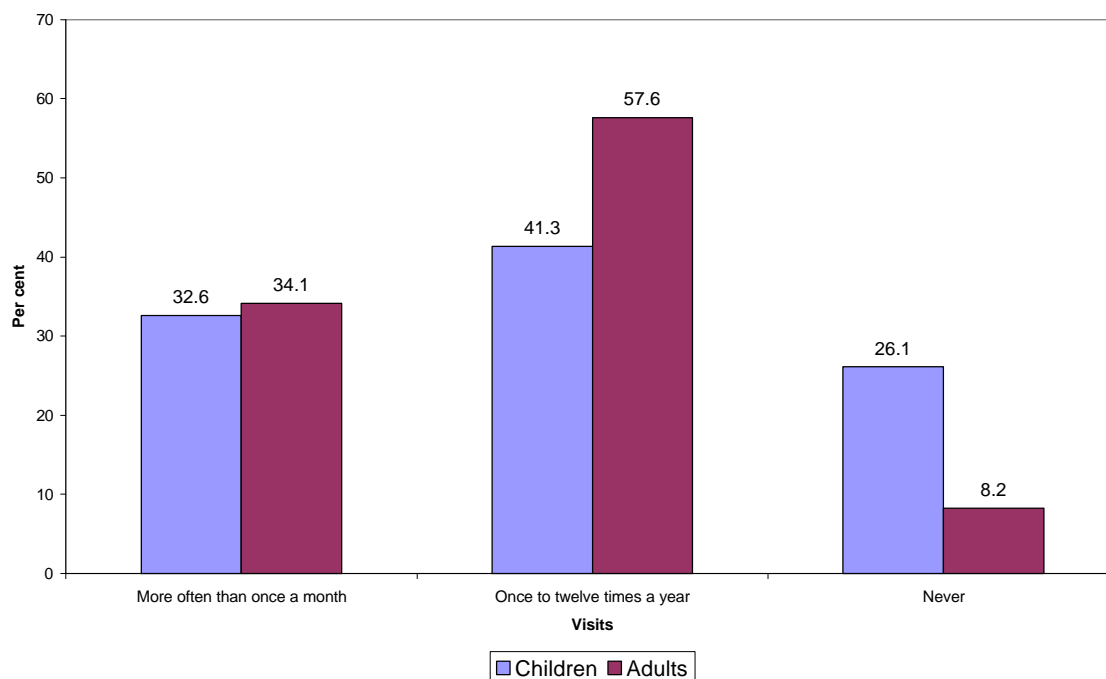
Just over one third of respondents visit woods more frequently than once a month (Table 9). The largest group accessed woods less than once a month at 32 per cent. Just under one fifth never visited woods.

**Table 9: How often do you visit woods?**

	Frequency	Per cent
More than once a week	26	11.3
Once a week	27	11.7
Several a month	27	11.7
Once a month	36	15.6
Less once a month	72	31.2
Never	43	18.6
Total	231	100.0
Missing data	6	

There were significant differences between children and adults (Figure 1. Approximately one third of the children and the adults went to woods more than once a month. The difference between adults and children was that significantly less adults (only 8 per cent compared to 26 per cent of children) never visited woods ( $p < 0.01$ ).

**Figure 1: Children and Adults visiting woods**



The questionnaire asked respondents to list their three most important reasons for visiting woods. This was an open-ended question. However, the answers given allowed coding and comparison.

I never really went to the woods because I didn't live near them. I only went to the woods when I was on holiday. (Girl, aged 10, Hereford)

I like it all really. I don't come very often. I can't get myself here. I come with the Day Centre not with anybody else. (Woman, aged 43, Hereford)

It's great value - for 60p [car park fee] you get all these things long walks the children's playground (Woman, aged 35, Baggeridge)

Actually, it's hard to get here. It's not very accessible. Where we used to live there were lots of paths to the country park. (Woman, 30s, Baggeridge)

**Table 10: The most important reason for visiting woods**

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Plants, trees	47	26.3
Explore, walk, play	37	20.7
Animals	18	10.1
Peace	16	8.9
Relax	14	7.8
Walk dog	10	5.6
Exercise	10	5.6
Fresh air	8	4.5
Fun	7	3.9
Drawing	4	2.2
Other	4	2.2
Family	3	1.7
Teach children	1	.6
Total	179	100.0
Missing data	9	

**Table 11: Second most important reason for visiting woods**

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Plants, trees	38	24.1
Explore, walk, play	29	18.4
Animals	22	13.9
Exercise	13	8.2
Peace	11	7.0
Other	10	6.3
Fun	7	4.4
Mud	5	3.2
Walk dog	5	3.2
Relax	5	3.2
Fresh air	4	2.5
Teach children	4	2.5
Family	3	1.9
Drawing	2	1.3
Total	158	100.0
Missing data	30	

**Table 12: Third most important reasons for visiting woods**

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Plants, trees	23	18.5
Animals	13	10.5
Explore, walk, play	26	21.0
Peace	8	6.5
Mud	7	5.6
Family	4	3.2
Drawing	2	1.6
Walk dog	7	5.6
Other	12	9.7
Exercise	9	7.3
Fresh air	5	4.0
Relax	8	6.5
Total	124	100.0
Missing data	64	

Tables 5 – 7 show that reasons for visiting woods are predominantly related to the enjoyment of the natural environment, trees and plants, walking, exploring and playing, and watching out for animals. The atmosphere of peacefulness was also important to young and older people alike.

Since the first, second and third reasons did not show any huge difference in ranking we collated the reasons to one variable (column 5 and 6, Table 13).

**Table 13: Reasons for visiting woods**

	Reason 1	Reason 2	Reason 3	Total	Per cent
Plants, trees	47	38	23	108	23
Explore, play	37	29	26	92	20
Animals	18	22	13	53	12
Peace	16	11	8	35	8
Exercise	10	13	9	32	7
Relax	14	5	8	27	6
Other	4	10	12	26	6
Walk dog	10	5	7	22	5
Fresh air	8	4	5	17	4
Fun	7	7	0	14	3
Mud	0	5	7	12	3
Family	3	3	4	10	2
Drawing	4	2	2	8	2
Teach children	1	4	0	5	1
Total	179	158	124	461	100

Reasons that do not easily fit in the proposed categories were coded as 'other'. They include 'gives me energy', 'freedom', 'nice to be out', 'forget my problems', 'praise God for his wonderful creation' and 'touching the ground'. One respondent worked in the woods.

I go with the grandchildren, they take their bikes down there too. That's what children should be learning about - nature and small animals. I'm the only one that takes them down there. It stops then damaging things, it stops vandalism. (Woman, retired, Nuneaton)

Similarly, the questionnaire asked what people liked and disliked about woods. Again this was an open question. What people liked was very similar to the reasons expressed for visiting woods. Plants and trees featured most prominently at 39 per cent, followed by peacefulness at 17 per cent, and observation of animals at 14 per cent. Again, there were 'likes' that did not easily fit into categories. These included, 'the sun shining on the trees', 'a sense of age',

'muddy track on mountain bike', 'you can do what you want in there' and one respondent noted down that the wood provided 'natural clearing for rituals'.

All the creepy-crawlies stop me from going the woods. But I like it because you get to see all the lovely trees and the acorns.

The things that people noted down as their dislikes about woods (table 14) made interesting reading.

**Table 14: Dislikes of woods**

	Frequency	Per cent
Mud	53	34.4
Other	27	17.5
Damage by people	25	16.2
Plants, trees	17	11.0
Dog fouling/dogs	12	7.8
Animals	10	6.5
Water	4	2.6
Walking	4	2.6
Accessibility	2	1.3
Total	154	100.0

The large number of answers that were coded as 'other' is the first indication that stakeholders and possible stakeholders have conflicting interests. Some wished to ban bicycles, mountain bikes and dogs, others disliked what one respondent put as the 'rumble of the nearby motorway and other negative aspects of the modern world'. Difficulties may arise from too many visitors, too many tourist trails, too much organisation or trees planted in straight lines. Another dislike related to the atmosphere that was perceived to be 'spooky' or a concern of getting lost.

When people disliked plants they were writing about nettles and plants with thorns, like brambles. The animals that people expressed a dislike for were insects. However, one child noted down 'frogs and toads' and another 'foxes and wolves'.

I saw a sparrow hawk. It comes to my bird table. It gets my birds, but it's nature! (Female, retired, Nuneaton)

For further analysis the reasons for liking woods were grouped as connected to natural things, activities or the atmosphere. What people disliked about woods was coded into natural things, human impact and other. In both cases natural things play an important role. As much as many plants and trees are liked, other plants are not. Mud is also a natural thing. There were some children who liked mud. It was seen as a reason to go to woods and again noted down

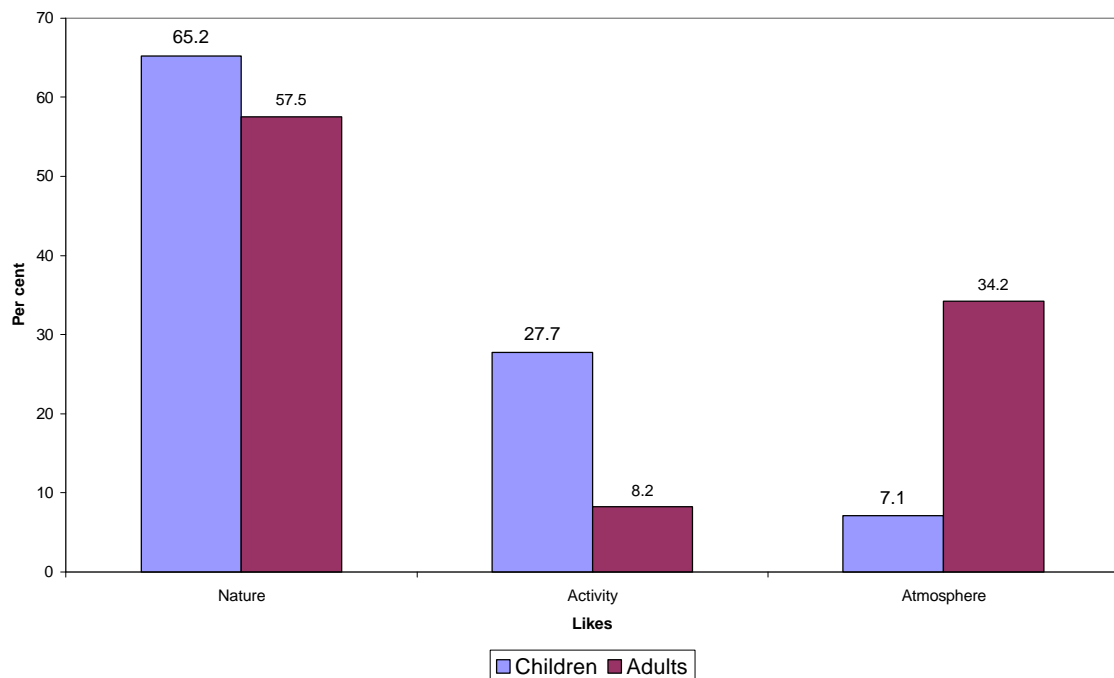
as a feature they liked. However other children and some adults view mud as a characteristic of woods they dislike.

I got muddy. Ha! Ha! (Boy, aged 10, Hereford)

I think the wood is pretty you can discover things. I don't like the mud I like the leaves. (Girl, aged 9, Hereford)

A conflict of interest may be related to age differences (Figure 2). Children are more likely than adults to like woods on account of the possible activities. Adults are more likely to like woods because of the peaceful, relaxing atmosphere ( $p < 0.001$ )

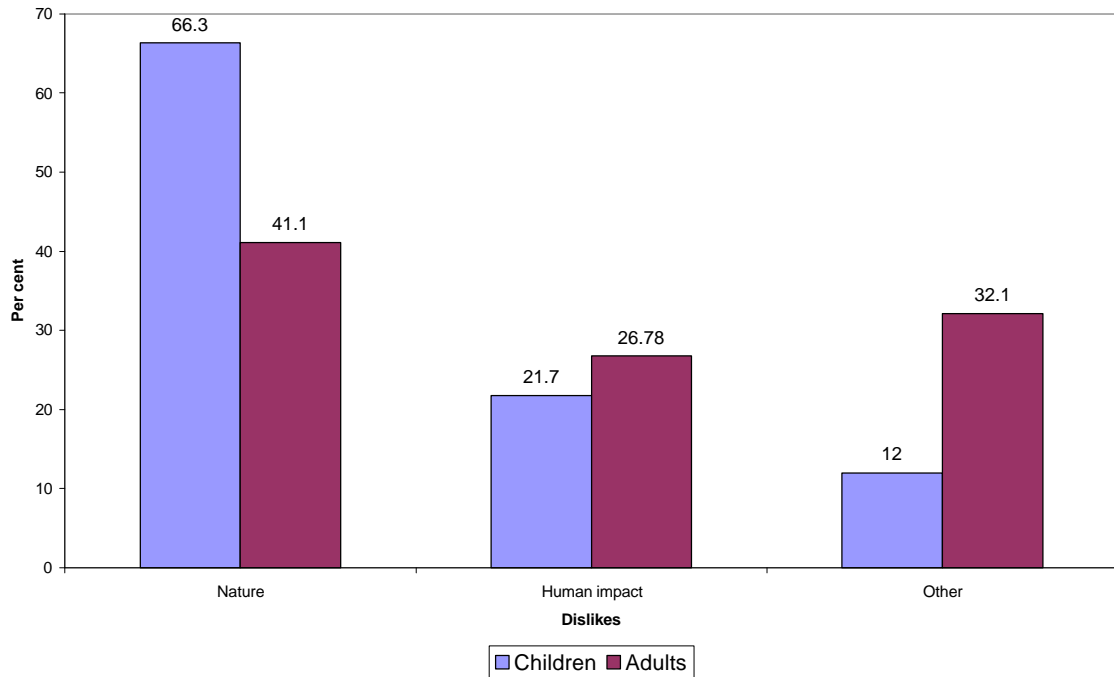
**Figure 2: Children's and adult's likes of woods**



Similarly children and adults differed in what they dislike about woods (

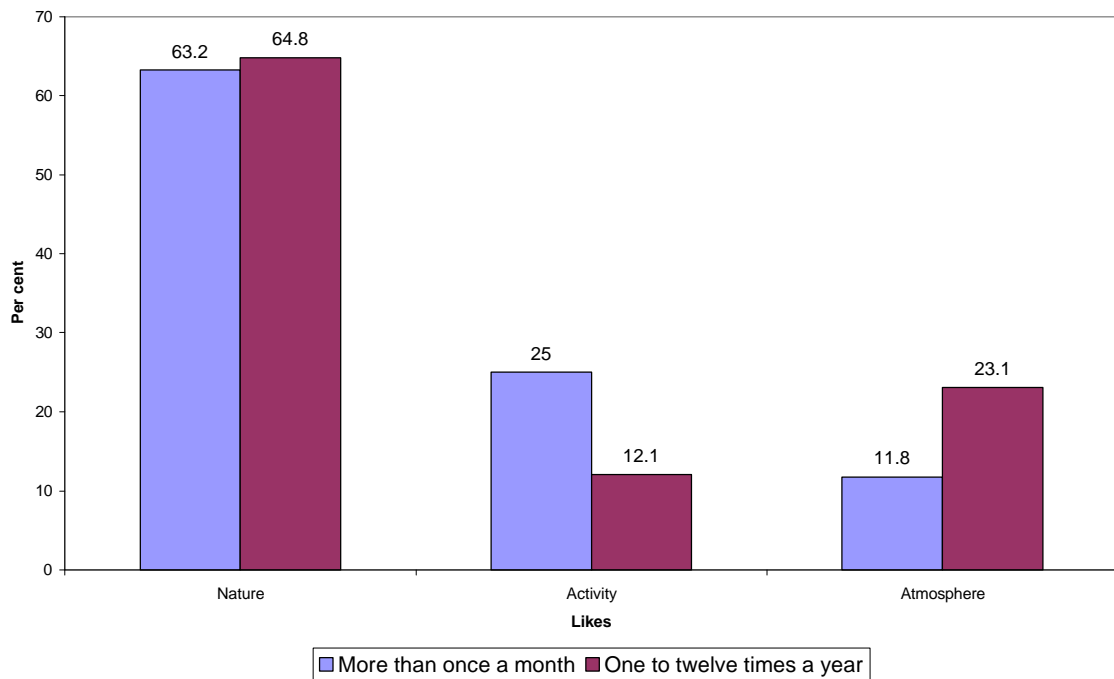
Figure 3). Children were more likely to mention natural things, particularly mud, than adults. This may have been due to the activity a large group of children participated in when filling out the questionnaire. Yet, adults were more likely to articulate dislikes less easily to code as 'nature' or as 'human impact' ( $p < 0.01$ ).

**Figure 3: Children's and adult's dislikes**

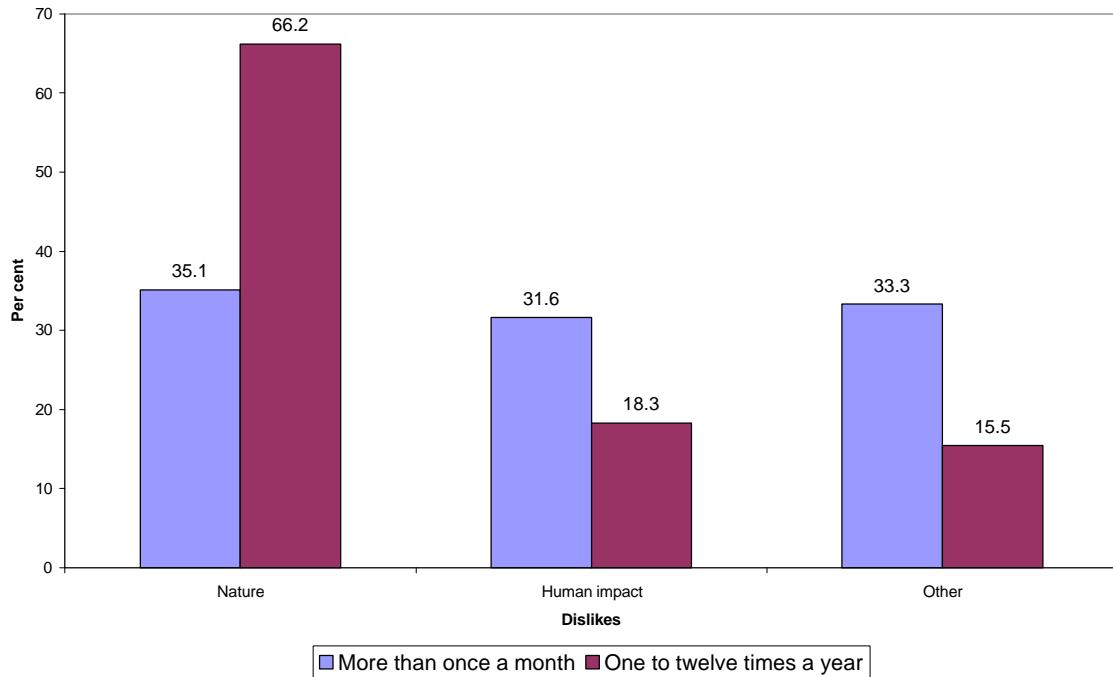


What people like or dislike about woods is connected to the frequency they make use of these natural facilities (Figure 4 and Figure 5).

**Figure 4: The frequency of visits and likes of woods**



**Figure 5: The frequency of visits and what people dislike**



People visiting more regularly were more likely to list activities possible in woods than people accessing woods less frequently ( $p < 0.05$ ). This may be explained by familiarity with the woodland atmosphere.

The answers of frequent visitors are almost equally spread between the three groups nature, human impact and other. People less likely to come to woods on a regular base disliked natural features and were less likely to formulate other dislikes than those fitting the description 'nature' or 'human impact' ( $p < 0.01$ ).

## **Emotional engagement with woods and its reflection in language used**

The analysis of the questionnaires has shown interesting trends in the various ways of engaging with woods and reasons for doing so. However, the format of the questionnaires, although including open questions, does not allow for full description of people's emotional engagement with woods. The less formal nature of interviews and participant observation proved to be successful in uncovering details of participants' emotional attachment to woods.

### **Woods as a place of freedom, adventure and discovery**

Kids go there 'coz it's a big space where you can keep out of trouble and adults go there to walk dogs. We go there all the time. (Girl, aged 12, Nuneaton)

Particularly for children, woods seem to be perceived as places of adventure, spaces that afford them a relative freedom. It seems that woods are perceived to be a place somewhat beyond the rule and order of the adult world, where you can try things out and be mischievous.

Sometimes we get wheat and corn and chuck it at the farmer's windows (Boy, aged 10, Hereford)

Woods provide a setting for imaginative and adventurous games, a place to build dens and create an alternative world. The building of dens came up frequently in conversation with children, something reiterated by the Countryside Ranger at Hereford. Participants talked about the games and activities they invented for themselves or their friends and families.

Me and my dad we take our bikes sometimes and sometimes we go looking for mole holes. Sometimes my dad gives me challenges. Sometimes my mum goes with a pram and my dad leaves me and my sister and we have to follow the track. (Boy, aged 10, Hereford)

My dog likes the woods. We hide in the long grass then my dog comes and finds us. (Boy, aged 9, Hereford)

Excitement is to be found in the exploration for which woods create an ideal opportunity. Even getting to the woods can be an adventure:

We have to jump over the mud and nettles to get to the farm then we can get in the wood. (Boy, aged 10, Hereford)

we used to come as kids on our bikes and through the fence, just follow the railway track. (Man, retired, Baggeridge)

It's fun really. I went with my dog on my own and we got lost. We followed the path and we found our way out....The first time I went there before I even got in I was round the car park and I didn't know the woods was there and I was up in the field and I saw a pathway and a gate and I went through it and there was all these conker trees lined up and that's when I started taking my dog. (Boy, aged 10, Hereford)

Even things that one might imagine would be perceived as frightening or unnerving, were reported very excitedly, particularly by children.

I go there at night – there's lots of bats (Girl, aged 9, Hereford)

Sometimes, even a frightening experience in its memory became just one more adventure. Getting lost was reported both by the Children at Hereford and the Day Centre participants as being exciting and a source of amusement. During the woodland walk with the Day Centre participants, quite a lot of pleasure was generated through friendly teasing over who was leading the way and therefore who was responsible when we didn't know our way back. Perhaps, in this instance, this was a light-heartedness that was allowed by the relatively open feeling of the particular wood and the confidence that was generated by clear way marking.

However, it is interesting to note that, even in the urban contexts, very little if anything was mentioned about the fear of woods. The questionnaires did not raise this as an issue directly, using only an open question about dislikes of woods to give space for raising such concerns. In Nuneaton one of the researchers raised the question of safety in the woods with a group of young teenage girls. We had had a long conversation about the estate which borders the wood and its rising social problems. They told me of the concerns their parents had about the number of injecting drug users, and shared horror stories of violence and abuse directed at other young people. This led naturally to asking the girls about their fears of going into the woods. When it became clear that they had no concerns, the researcher asked about their parents. The girls then agreed that their parents were saved from worry on account of their going to the woods with a large group of friends.

### **Therapeutic quality of woods**

I think the wood is very pretty because it's peaceful and pretty, I like the streams, trees and leaves. I hate the mud! (Girl, aged 10, Hereford)

Overwhelmingly, the feelings associated with woods were those of peace and tranquillity or of feeling relaxed and 'letting go'. Participants of all ages also talked evocatively about the emotional healing they gain from being in the woods.

The freedom offered by woods for mischievous behaviour or for doing things one might not normally allow oneself to be seen to do, suggests woods are precious spaces in which to free oneself from social constraints:

Scaring people – I hide and then when they come by I jump out.  
(Boy, aged 9, Hereford)

We saw a kissing tree – I snogged it I did (Boy, aged 10, Hereford)

At Nuneaton, there was one particular tree that one group of participants attached enormous emotion to. It was a place for sharing experiences with friends, for escaping from the rest of the world and for finding comfort and safety.

My tree. It's really big and we've all got a seat in it and when we get stressed out or one of us is upset we'll all go down to it. The tree makes us feel better. I know it sounds silly but it's gorgeous. It's really big, it's beautiful, it's comfortable and it makes us feel safe. (Girl, aged 12, Nuneaton)

One twelve year old girl in particular was so enthusiastic about this tree that she drew the illustration that follows in the researcher's note book, describing it in detail and relating particular branches to individual friends who have their seat there. The fact that none of these young people were able to name the species of tree seemed irrelevant to the emotional benefit they gained from it. This is a point explored below in relation to language and woods.

Figure (omitted from electronic version)

### **Figure 6: My favourite tree (Girls, aged 12, Nuneaton)**

When my grandma died we used to go down there [to the same tree] and sing, and we go down and talk about people you fancy and everything. (Girl, aged 13, Nuneaton)

The same urban wood that hosted this tree provided a significant source of relief for a much older woman also experiencing the loss of someone close.

I love it. I would be lost without it. I go three times a day. I live just opposite and every night I put food out for the foxes then I go upstairs and watch them. It's beautiful and peaceful. I lost my husband twelve years ago and walking round there was the only thing that gave me peace of mind. (Female, retired, Nuneaton)

The benefits woods bring in terms of helping people to maintain or recover their mental health, however difficult to quantify, are clearly of great significance.

### **Memory and woods**

Woods, the research shows, both trigger a rich source of memories (overwhelmingly happy ones) and provide a special environment in which people can have experiences that will become lasting memories.

It was great yesterday morning– the kids were talking about it on and off for the rest of the day (Teacher, Hereford)

The natural surroundings of woods have the power to trigger memories. Sometimes this is connected to changing seasons. Colours, smells, temperature and light all invite people to remember similar situations. This was particularly evident from the recordings made with the group from the Hereford Day Centre.

Oh well, yeah, I think everybody knows how to cook a hedgehog now. Just roll 'em in the mud and bake 'em in the oven and when you take the mud off you've got the meat. The hedgehog is like pig. The first time I had it I didn't know what the bloody hell I was eating like. On the farm I was by the gypsies hop picking. This is the nation of hop picking Hereford and apple picking. (Male, retired, Hereford)

I used to ride in woods like this. Horse riding and everything. I went to North Wales. (Woman, 43, Hereford)

The second comment was made during a walk in the woods, an activity that seems to encourage people to draw upon their past experiences. The walk-based event at Baggeridge also triggered fond memories, an example of which follows:

We used to come all the time, before it was a country park even. We used to come on our horses maybe twenty years ago. You could go anywhere then. Now there's just one path for horses. (Man, retired, Baggeridge)

Although a conscious effort was made by the researchers to uncover woodland myths and stories in conversation with participants, little information was yielded. Interestingly, however, when myths and stories were referred to it was through the recounting of personal memory. The following examples illustrate this clearly.

Daniel did have a favourite – the kissing tree. If you put your leg against it and kiss it and whoever you thought about when you kiss the tree will feel it. That's up on a hill. (Boy, 10, Hereford)

You kiss the tree and say you love someone, you kiss the tree and make sure no one's looking and they said it feels like they're kissing you. There's lots of names carved in the tree, even on the highest branch. (Girl, 9, Hereford)

This seems indicative of the powerful personal emotions and memories that are embedded in woodland experience.

## **Naming**

The issue of language and naming has proved to be particularly interesting in relation to people's experiences of woods. As indicated above, the depth and quality of what is experienced in woods does not seem to be linked to the capacity to name things by their correct or scientific name. As illustrated below, this is the case both in connection to woods themselves and to the natural life to be found within them.

I've been up one by Newton Farm – I can't remember what it's called (Boy, aged 10, Hereford)

Many children do not know or do not use the proper name of the small woods they access. It was commonly said, 'I just call it the woods' when discussing a particular wood. Other children liked to be inventive and give woods their own name.

We've got a nickname for it – conker wood, 'coz there's loads of conkers, more conkers than anything reckon. Me and my mates use that name. My mum did tell me the proper name but I can't remember. (Boy, aged 10, Hereford)

Another child called the wood 'second lake', this being the most interesting feature of the wood for him. This personal naming of woods seems to be connected to the sense of freedom and adventure woods offer for young people, as discussed above. It is interesting to note that,

even for the researcher, it was not clear from the outset what this wood was called – Belmont Coppice or Newton Coppice.

Inventiveness in names, it appears, applies equally to features within woods. For example, one boy (12 years old) from Baggeridge described the 'big dip' as his favourite feature.

The appreciation of nature (neither its perceived value nor the pleasures gained from it) is not dependent on a technical vocabulary. It appears that it is the features of the things observed that are important and that dictate the names attached to them.

I climbed to the top of quite a tall tree. Quite a brown one. It had bright green leaves. (Boy, aged 9, Hereford)

It's just a big tree an ordinary one. I don't know. It has flowers. (Girl, 12, Nuneaton)

When we done an activity in the woods we found little creatures. There was a spider in all. We found its nest. It's not every time you see a nest. (Girl, aged 9, Hereford)

Those children at Hereford who used the following expressions: "I like the colours in autumn" and "It's different all the time", were no less able than anybody else to appreciate the changing seasons as manifest in the natural woodland environment.

Although apparently lacking the technical vocabulary to describe their experiences in the wood the nine and ten year-old boys and girls from the Hereford school were very well able to express their experience of being in the woods. Restricted to just five words in which to distil their thoughts, what they produced was evocative and poetic as well as very descriptive of the sounds, sights, smells and feelings they chose to share. The following selection illustrates the richness and variety of their experience.

Slippery leaves, calm still water  
Water, shadowy, curvy, rippley  
Fluttering mossy greeny slimy  
Hard rotten wood log  
Tree creamy green dark brown  
Holly spiky shiny prickly  
Tree trunk hard branches thin and fine  
Tree lumpy, ruffly, smooth gentle  
Leaves, crumpley, scuffly, squelchy, cardboard  
Happy, joyful, cold, mucky, cheerful, sparkling, shiny  
Leaves- yellow orange gold brown  
Oak holly spiky leaves floating down  
Bendy tree, spiky bramble, woodland arch, curvy stream  
Bird singing peacefully, beautifully, sweetly  
Veiny, wiggly, muddy, wet, slippy

As mentioned above, it is the nature and features of what they experienced that seem to be of prime importance in their choice of words, hence the predominance of adjectives. It appears not to matter whether these children were able to name, for example, five different trees, they have a clear ability to appreciate the richness and diversity of woods without technical vocabulary. Single items found in the woods triggered associations and invited imaginative interpretation. For example logs were described as, 'frog-shaped log', 'star-shaped log' and 'crocodile logs'. Other children used names that described the most interesting features. For example, 'fungus tree', 'fur claw on big tree', 'tree – rough bits hairy', 'bent-branch tree', or 'thin tall rough and a little bit soft'.

Equally, there were children who were more literal in their interpretation:

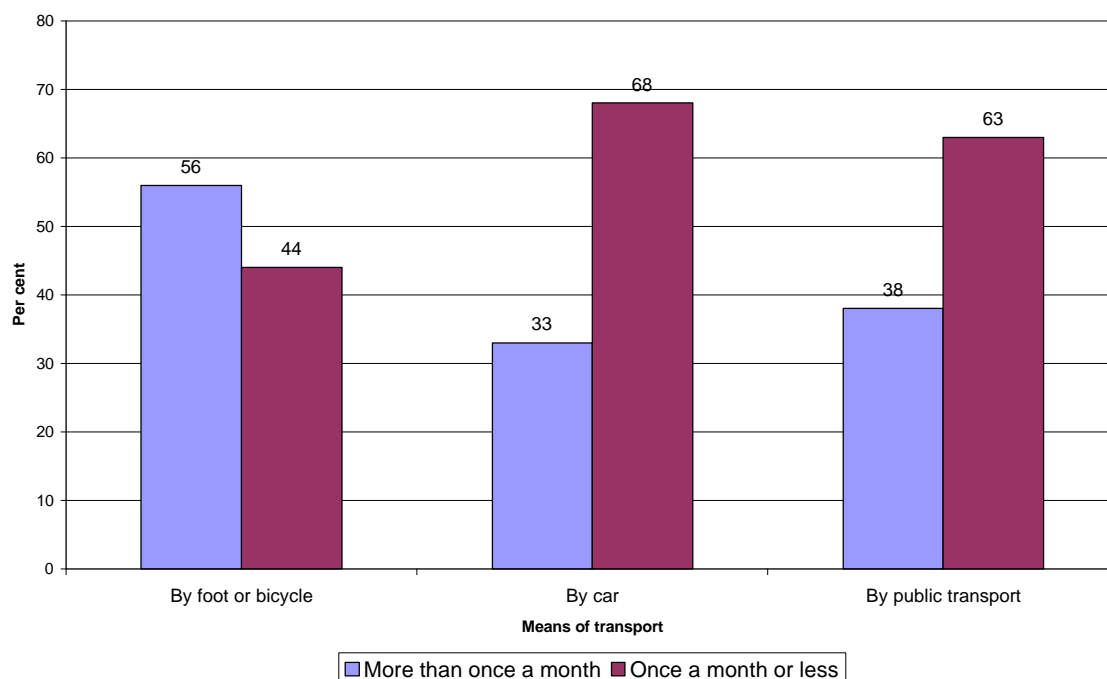
My feet are hurting  
I slipped on the mud  
The sun was pretty strong  
The smoke was stinking loads  
I saw some rabbit poo  
River looks like chocolate  
Mud in water with logs and branches and leaves

Literal or poetic, it is clear that these children had a clear understanding of what they could see, hear, smell and feel in the woods, and that they have an ability to express such experiences powerfully without the use of any technical or scientific vocabulary.

## **Access and facilities**

The frequency with which people access woods is related to the distance between their home and the woods and to the transport available to them. Figure 7 shows that individuals who are able to walk to woods or access woods by a bicycle ride are more likely to be frequent visitors than people who are dependent on public transport or use a car ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Figure 7: Means of transport and frequency of visits**



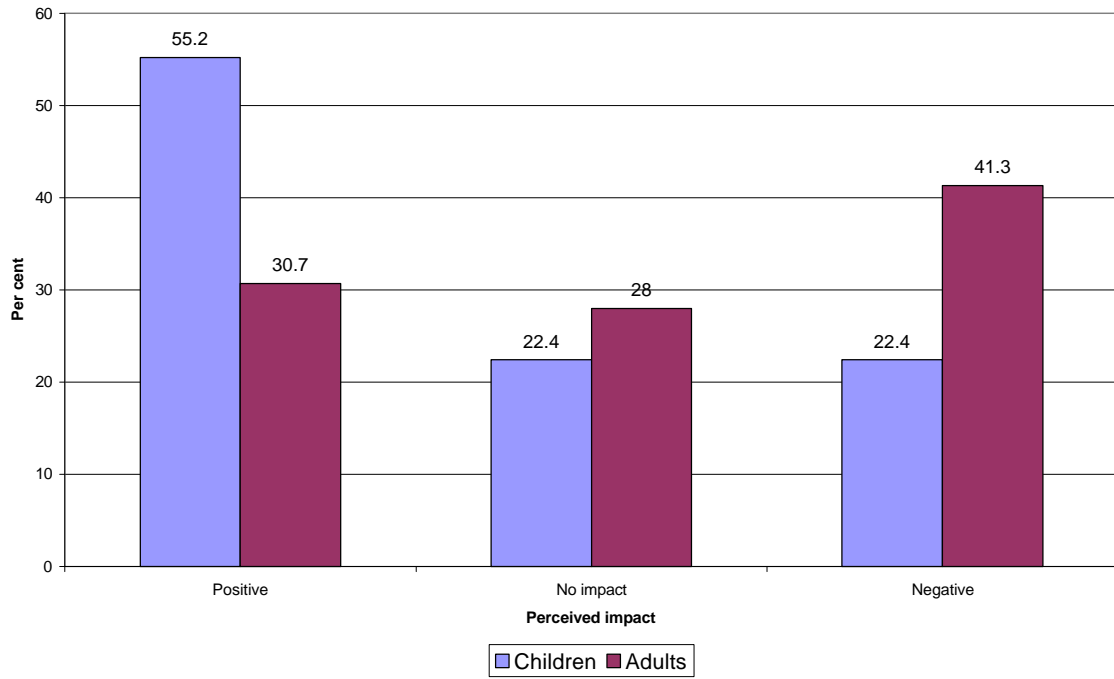
Overall, all of the listed features were more likely to be seen as having a positive impact than a negative one. The least controversial feature that would attract more people to woods is accessible paths. This is important to a range of people: to people using a wheelchair, to people pushing wheelchairs or push chairs and to people who dislike mud. Similarly, most people find information about the site and clear way marking positive, inviting features. All of these concern the physical access to woods. Two other features connected to the physical access to woods, public transport and car parking achieved quite different ratings. Public transport was the only suggested feature where the majority of respondents felt it would have no impact at 44 per cent. Half of the respondents felt that improved car parking would have a positive effect, but nearly a quarter felt it had no impact.

Another group of features that may attract more people to woods concerned possible activities. Organised events, picnic areas, courses and playgrounds were rated as having a positive impact on the attractiveness of woods. Just under half of the respondents felt that they would be more likely to visit woods if there were be a mountain bike track.

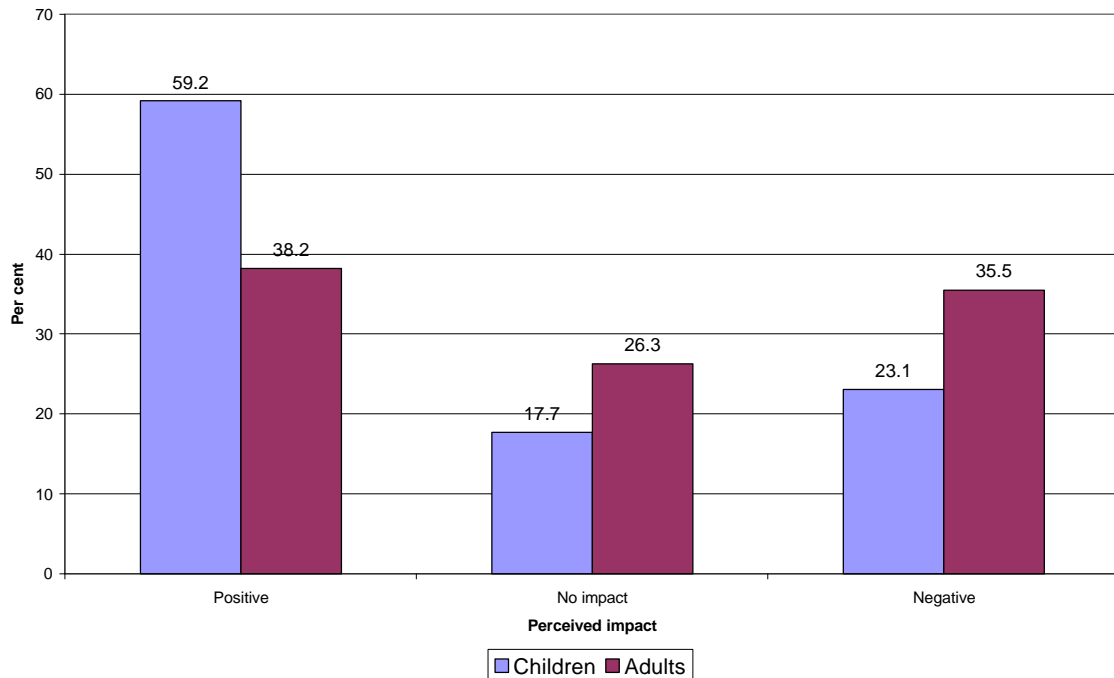
Interestingly the two features most clearly connected to younger people, mountain bike track and playground were rated by larger numbers of respondents as having a negative impact. A mountain bike track would discourage 30 per cent of respondents and a playground 27 per cent of the respondents to visit woods.

This is a clear indication for potential conflicts between stakeholders along age lines. Children were more likely to view mountain bike tracks as an attractive feature ( $p < 0.01$ ) and to see playgrounds as inviting to visit woods ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Figure 8: Perceived impact of a mountain bike track by children and adults**



**Figure 9: perceived impact of a playground by children and adults**



Clearly, people see wide-ranging potential in woods. Improved paths and information would allow a certain group of the population to access local woods. Installing mountain bike tracks and playgrounds has the potential to attract young people. Yet other people may feel discouraged to access woods if it would target young people. These potential conflicts are important to consider when planning the management of woods. It has to be considered if it is possible to target the wider population or if features attracting one group necessarily turn away another. There was a small group of respondents who preferred no enhancing features. They did not want, for example, paths or signposts because this would lessen the chance of an adventure and making unexpected discoveries.

## Woodland products

Wood products are all around us, and the questionnaire answers seem to show that people find it easy to identify things made from wood. Asking about the last wood product bought resulted in a long, wide ranging list of things. This list included furniture, doors and fences, toys, as well as smaller items like a picture frame or a spoon. Others had noted down paper or pencils. Some respondents had bought charcoal and a few had bought a piece of wood for carving.

Questions about the type of wood and the origin of the wood proved to be more difficult to answer. Of the 173 respondents who wrote down the wooden product they had bought only

106 (61 per cent) knew the type of wood from which it was made. An even smaller proportion knew the origin of the wood. Only 80 (46 per cent) of the 173 respondents were aware of where the wood had come from.

Male respondents were more likely to know the type of wood than female respondents ( $p < 0.05$ ). Seventy-two per cent of the male respondents were able to identify the type of wood in contrast to 55 per cent of female respondents. Boys and men were also more likely to name the origin of the wood ( $p < 0.05$ ). Fifty-eight per cent of the male respondents were able to identify the origin in contrast to 40 per cent of the female respondents.

The age of the respondents had an impact on their knowledge of which wood products had been bought. Age continued to affect the detailed knowledge of the products. Children were less likely than adults to know the type of wood products were made from ( $p < 0.01$ ) and less likely to know the origin of the wood ( $p < 0.01$ ). Fifty-three of the hundred children answering this question knew the type of the wood compared with 72 per cent of the 52 adults. The origin of the wood was known by 37 of the hundred children but by 58 percent of the 72 adults.

The questionnaires revealed that the sample contained people who never visit woods, some who visit only a few times a year and some come very frequently. This had no influence on knowledge about wood products. One of the participants showed extensive knowledge of how woods and their products could be used.

Years ago we used to get, you know, the elderberry we used to make fishing floats – you never went to the bloody shops to get them. (Man, retired, Hereford)

It appears that much of this knowledge of the older generation has not been passed on to younger people. Additionally, the questionnaires do not communicate a strong knowledge about typical products from local woods. This may be connected the social background of the majority of the respondents. It is very unlikely that these people had a need for sheep hurdles, firewood, and beanpoles. Also it seems to be unlikely that many of the households would choose a local woods product over a cheaper import or plastic version.

## ***Conclusion***

### **Activities**

Workshops, joint activities or performances in woods, or related to woods, have a great potential to allow people access to skills and knowledge. The four projects took quite distinct approaches, and reasons for participation varied. In general people who took part had a good time and enjoyed the offered activities or the observed performance.

The analysis of the questionnaires showed that the way in which people are prepared for participation influences their expectations, and can affect their overall evaluation of activity or event. An introduction that emphasises the possible fun and excitement prepares people for activities and exploring nature. People who do not know what to expect may be open for new experiences and open their minds to new knowledge and new ways of thinking about woods.

Projects that involved workshops and activities by participants appear to be very useful in allowing people to discover and develop skills. Discovering skills in itself is beneficial for people, raising their self-esteem. Additionally, discovering woodland skills facilitates a connection with nature and local woods. This may enhance people's desire to visit woods. Events that did not involve participants actively target a different audience. They were more likely to enhance people's knowledge and lead to reflection about their use of natural resources.

As regards the events, men, women, boys and girls all seem to have similar expectations, likes and dislikes. It shows that the information given before the events take place and that the preparation of participants play a crucial role. It reveals the potential of woodland events to draw generations together and offer activities that can be enjoyed and cherished by families and communities. It is important to note that what people had learned and liked about the events was not connected to how frequently they visit woods, or if they visit at all. This implies that the skills and knowledge gained from participation in such events is something other than the benefits gained through frequent visits to woods. Events may be equally interesting for frequent woodland visitors as for people who had never set foot in a wood.

Organising events in woods can be a tricky business. Weather cannot be controlled. Muddy paths, rain and cold – all weather features – were what many participants and spectators disliked.

The four projects involved two types of participants or audiences. Some had chosen to attend an event others had to attend as pupils of a school or a college. People who chose to attend an event were more likely to enjoy everything and they found less faults both with the event and the setting.

### **General woodland interaction, including access and facilities**

The questionnaires showed that nearly a fifth of the sample never visits small woods. Nearly a further 50 percent of the participants visit less frequently than once a month, and just over a third visits woods more often than once a month. The findings of Lee (2001), whose survey of the general population showed 45 per cent never visit woods, contrasts sharply with the findings reported by Tidey (2001) where the vast majority survey had visited a wood recently. The reason for this difference is that Tidey's survey population was attending a woodland event. Our research demonstrates that the West Midland's Festival of the Woods has been successful in reaching audiences who do not normally access woods. Though there is still room for improvement.

The ability to access woods is certainly a transport issue. Hickman (2001), Heggie (2001) and Lee (2001) report that not having a car is a barrier to woodland access. However, having access to a car alone does not necessarily lead to more frequent visits of woods. A strong motivator to go to small woods is found to be proximity. Living in walking or cycling distance is connected to more frequent visits. This confirms Lee's (2001) findings. There is a difference between adults and children. Just over a quarter of the children in the sample had never visited a wood before. This may be due to accessibility issues like transport or the restrictions children in British society are subjected to.

The main reasons for visiting woods are to enjoy nature and to engage in activities. Adults and children noted down as reasons plants and animals, the peaceful or relaxing atmosphere, and the opportunity to walk, to exercise or to explore. Henwood and Pidgeon (1998), Hickman (2001), Lee (2001), Mcnaghten et al. (1998), all confirm that. Children were more likely to emphasise the activities possible in small woods than to adults.

Visiting woods more frequently leads to a change of emphasis regarding the reasons for visiting woods. For all people, independent of how often they visit, flora and fauna are the most important reason for accessing woods. People who access woods more often than once a month were more likely to emphasise activities in woods as a reason. When they were asked what they like about woods in general they also noted down the activities. People who visit less frequently were more likely to note down nature (flora and fauna) as their reason and emphasise the atmosphere they appreciate.

Natural features are also prominent in what people dislike about woods. Mud was disliked, as were nettles, brambles and insects. What people dislike is also connected with the frequency of visits. People who access woods more than once a month are more likely to dislike features of human impact, like pollution. People who visit woods less frequently have more problems with natural features.

Respondents' ideas of how to improve local woods highlight a need for improved accessibility. This is particularly important in relation to potential stakeholders with disabilities. The least

controversial feature 'accessible paths', would if installed, also address one of the commonly expressed dislikes 'mud'.

The exploration of what features may attract more people, or people from a wider social range to woods showed potential conflicts between different stakeholders. Children were more likely to appreciate the installation of activity enhancing features like a playground or a mountain bike track. Adults disliked this idea. Most likely they feared that it would interrupt peace and tranquillity, one of the important reasons for visiting woods. These findings illustrate the need to manage access in order that conflicts of use do not result in dispute (Morley, 2001). This was also a topic of heated discussion at the conference workshops where the conflicting interest of dog walkers and mountain bikers with other wood users were expressed.

Woods provide a context in which people feel their behaviour is free from social constraints. This allows for imaginative and exploratory activities. Even things that might commonly be perceived as frightening, such as getting lost (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1998), were recounted as tales of excitement and adventure. Even in urban context and where this information was explicitly asked for very little information was given about feeling of fear. These findings contrast with research reported by Mcnaghten et al (1998), O'Brien (2001) and Lee (2001). Our findings reflect the ambivalence shown by Henwood and Pidgeon's 1998 report on the issue of safety.

Woods are perceived to be places of peace and tranquillity where people are able to relax and rejuvenate. This echoes finding of Mcnaghten et al (1998). Woods are felt to be places that offer comfort in times of distress or loss. This is supported by Rigler (2001) who talks of the combined physical and mental health benefits of woodland activities. Woods both generate and evoke memories overwhelmingly of a happy nature.

Appreciation of woods appears to have little correlation to the capacity to use scientific language. This corresponds with the findings of Mcnaghten et al (1998). Children in particular prefer to use descriptive and inventive names that predominantly focus on the features of the thing they are naming. This allows children to express strong emotional links and is illustrative of the stimulus for imagination provided by woods.

### **Woodland products**

The questionnaires unearthed a lack of knowledge about woodland products. People often do not know what type of wood has been used or the origin of wood. The former is a knowledge gap that can be addressed by education and information. The latter is an issue for producers and traders. People cannot know the origin of wood of products they buy if this information has not been made available. Gillam (1999) reports that people are willing to buy woodland products made from Sustainably Managed Forest and from British timber.

## **Recommendations for change**

### **Events**

While in general the events were very much appreciated there were certain factors highlighted that could improve future events.

Careful organisation and preparation enhance positive aspects of events in woods.

- The event should be advertised correctly, for example indicating whether it is an in-door or out-door event.
- Signposts should help to find the venue of the event easily.
- People appreciate it when care is taken to ensure personal comfort, for example comfortable seating, appropriate space and adequate acoustics.

Ideally events should be the highlight of ongoing work in the community to ensure that participation and benefits are maximised.

When planning events it should be recognised that different events provide different learning opportunities. For example, skills are best passed on through active participation, while knowledge may be gained through audience participation.

Future events should also consider which existing or possible stakeholders are targeted.

Active participation appears to be more suitable for more difficult to reach target groups.

### **Access and facilities**

Any plans for alteration or development have to take into account the potential conflict between different users of the woods and between humans and nature.

- Tranquillity vs playgrounds/mountain bike track
- Mountain bikers vs walkers
- Dog walkers vs all of the users
- Adventures vs people wishing easy access
- Car users vs walkers
- Children vs adults
- People vs nature

With careful planning most of these potential conflicts can be avoided. Woods can be developed in order to meet particular interests. However, it should not be forgotten that woodland access is primarily a matter of convenience. People are likely to visit woods that are most easily accessible to them.

## **Woodland products**

Knowledge about woodland products is a complex area and one about which people are very confused. Any attempts to address this issue have to be sensitive.

- Awareness needs to be raised about available woodland products.
- Clear labelling indicating the origin of products may increase people's interest

## **Recommendations for future research**

In order to understand people's changing attitudes towards woods a longitudinal study looking at everyday use of woods could be employed to examine change over time and the impact of wood management.

An understanding of the benefits of events would be enhanced by a large-scale study that allowed for comparison events operating in different contexts and serving a diverse range of participants or audiences.

It would be well worth exploring further the therapeutic potentials of woods and the impact of visiting woods on physical and mental health. This should include an examination of possible differences of experience and benefits for children and adults.

The research has exposed some interesting differences between children and adults in their use and experiences of woods. Research focussing on generational interaction facilitated by visits to the woods may find a new dimension to the benefits of woods and their management.

Research geared towards exploring knowledge about wooden products has to be designed carefully. It needs to be linked to information about the availability of woodland products, price information and understanding of advantages and disadvantages of purchasing wood products.

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