

## Investigating the impact of National Parks on Health and Wellbeing

### Findings from a survey of Mosaic Community Champions in Wales

Sarah Wilson, Campaign for National Parks, May 2014

*'I get on the train, put on my walking boots and put all my stress and worries in the overhead luggage racks and just relax.'*

The Campaign for National Parks has been introducing people from black and minority ethnic communities to National Parks through the Mosaic project since 2001<sup>1</sup>, working with volunteer Community Champions who promote National Parks to their own communities. During that time many Community Champions have remarked how great they feel after visiting a National Park, what a positive impact visiting National Parks can have on stress levels, family life, wellbeing, confidence. When Vanessa, one of those Champions, talked about leaving her stress and worries on the train (quoted above), I wondered whether she picked them up again when she returned home.

This year we looked into this question in more depth – do National Parks really have a positive impact on health and wellbeing? And does it last longer than just the time you are visiting?

There are fifteen National Parks in the United Kingdom, of which three are in Wales. National Parks are large areas, protected in law for their beautiful countryside, wildlife and cultural heritage. They boast some of our most spectacular landscapes and aim to 'provide opportunities for everyone to experience, enjoy and learn about their special qualities'.<sup>2</sup>

The 2011 report on measuring health inequalities by the Public Health Wales Observatory found a 23 year difference in healthy life expectancy between the least and most deprived wards in Cardiff, where the most deprived wards had the lowest healthy life expectancies<sup>3</sup>. These are also typically the areas with the least access to green space. Studies have found that people who live close to green space are healthier<sup>4</sup>, patients recover quicker if they have a view of green space<sup>5</sup>, connection to nature reduces stress and enhances wellbeing<sup>6</sup> and that the outdoors provides a setting for fun physical exercise<sup>7</sup>. The link between using green space and the outdoors and better health and wellbeing seems clear and public health bodies are beginning to think seriously about the importance of encouraging people to be active in the outdoors to improve health. But does accessing the high quality green space of National Parks make a difference to people living in urban areas? National Parks are more difficult to get to than local green space therefore visits are

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<sup>1</sup> The Mosaic project in Wales has been running since January 2012. It is funded by the Big Lottery's People and Places Fund with contributions from the three Welsh National Park Authorities.

<sup>2</sup> National Parks UK website <http://www.nationalparks.gov.uk/learningabout/whatisanationalpark>

<sup>3</sup> Public Health Wales Observatory, 2011, Measuring inequalities 2011, Trends in mortality and life expectancy in Wales, University College London, forthcoming, Natural Solutions for Health Inequalities.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Natural England Technical Information Note TIN055 – An estimate of the economic and health value and cost effectiveness of the expanded WHI scheme 2009

<sup>5</sup> Ulrich, R. 1984. View through a window may influence recovery from surgery, Science 224:420-421.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Hansen-Ketchum, P, P Marck, L Reutter and E Halpenny. 2011. Strengthening access to restorative places: Findings from a participatory study on engaging with nature in the promotion of health. Health and Place 17: 558-571 and Natural England's Monitoring Engagement with the Natural Environment data 2009-13, [2012-13 Survey results](#).

<sup>7</sup> For example, TCV's Green Gym <http://www.tcv.org.uk/greengym/health-benefits> or the Walking for Health programme <http://www.walkingforhealth.org.uk/get-walking/why-walk>

typically less frequent. Does the higher quality landscape found in a National Park inspire the urban visitor to take up other healthy behaviours at home? And if it does, why?

We conducted a short multiple-choice survey amongst 60 volunteer Community Champions with the Mosaic project in Wales and interviewed 9 Community Champions in depth.<sup>8</sup> We also reviewed feedback collected from visits to National Parks organised by Community Champions. Community Champions are volunteers with a growing passion for the outdoors, particularly National Parks. All of them are from urban black and minority ethnic communities, which are traditionally under-represented amongst visitors to National Parks. For many, they were the first to visit a National Park in their family or community and their first experience in a National Park took place within the last two years. As a group, they promote National Parks and therefore already enjoy them and believe they have something to offer their friends and families.

The results of this study show definite links between the special landscapes of National Parks and improvements in health and wellbeing, or behaviours that promote health. It should be stressed that the sample size is small and consists of people who have discovered and started advocating for National Parks and therefore contains natural bias. Despite this the findings indicate a phenomenon that deserves further investigation.

## Survey Results

**Using National Parks has positive impact on health and wellbeing.** They inspire people to take up more physical exercise and people feel that being involved with National Parks helps them deal with stress and makes them feel more positive and physically healthy.

Overall most respondents felt that the special landscapes in National Parks provide inspiration to use the outdoors more and take more exercise. Many also talked about how their experiences in National Parks have made them more aware of health issues. A clear link also arose from the interviews between being a volunteer Community Champion in National Parks – showing the National Park to others – and feelings attributed to wellbeing such as feeling good, positive and confident and functioning well.<sup>9</sup>

**63% of respondents said they have significantly increased the amount of exercise they take since being a Community Champion and visiting National Parks.** Exercise ranges from walking in town or in parks to taking swimming lessons to an increase of activities in National Parks or other open countryside. Only one or two respondents felt they had not increased the amount they exercise at all.

*'It has given me motivation to carry on walking in parks in my community and to go for longer walks in the National Park too'* Dawn, Wrexham

*'Oh yes – I've been doing loads more fitness stuff and I don't think it is coincidental. I did lots of swimming around the lakes and getting into the National Parks as much as possible.'* Homan, Bangor

**All respondents said they feel positive after visiting a National Park** and of these three quarters said the positive feeling lasts more than a week. Feeling positive is a key part of wellbeing.<sup>10</sup> Community Champions report being particularly affected by the beauty of landscapes in National Parks and the 'fresh air' (Stella, Cardiff). All the interviewees talked about positive

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<sup>8</sup> Highlights from these interviews are available as separate case studies on [www.cnp.org.uk/mosaic/resource-centre](http://www.cnp.org.uk/mosaic/resource-centre)

<sup>9</sup> See Waite S et al, *Starting from Here: Baseline report for the external evaluation of the Mosaic Project, Literature Review*. Campaign for National Parks with Plymouth University, 2014 for review of different definitions of wellbeing.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

feelings as a result of visiting National Parks such as ‘the feelings I have are so beautiful’ (Tarig, Cardiff) and ‘I can’t explain that fundamental feeling – it’s like letting the landscape do its thing’ (Homan, Bangor). Fateha talks about how visiting National Parks makes people who were born outside the UK ‘feel close to their home countries as many had grown up in villages. They enjoyed it so much’. While Zobia sees being connected to the outdoors a key part of being connected with the country you live in.

**All the respondents bar two said they feel healthier as a result of being involved with National Parks.** Most of the interviewees talked about how using National Parks has made them healthy. Some feel motivated by the landscape to do more exercise, as noted above. For others it is more of a general sense of health. ‘The beauty of nature is very important. All of us need to be outdoors sometimes ... for our lives to be healthy’ (Aliya, Swansea).

Stella also talked about the positive impact that taking her family to the Pembrokeshire Coast has had, particularly on her daughter. ‘My daughter is autistic... She feels liberated when we go out and I can see that it changes her mood. She really enjoys the great outdoors and these nice green spaces’.

**Nearly half the respondents saw little or no change in their stress levels as a result of visiting National Parks,** while only 6 people reported noticing a big reduction in stress levels. Most of the interviewees did not volunteer information about stress either, though a couple mentioned feeling relaxed and relieved of stress when visiting National Parks. Quite a number of Community Champions have spoken about how becoming a Community Champion and visiting National Parks has helped them deal with stress in more personal conversations outside this piece of work<sup>11</sup>. However this was not significantly corroborated in this study – It is possible that other things are more important or more noticeable than stress relief. It may be the case that a visit to a National Park may relieve stress on the day or may be a contributing factor to managing stress, but is not enough on its own to have a lasting impact.

**90% of Community Champions said they had noticed other people in their families or communities benefitting from better health and wellbeing from getting into National Parks.** All of the interviewees talked about the importance of introducing others to the National Park and the impact that has on other members of their community. As noted above, for some it is the connection with the country of their birth, for others health and fitness, and for others it is about having good time as a group without paying a lot of money for it. Feedback forms filled out during visits organised by Community Champions back this up with over 90% of participants – people visiting a National Park for the first time - rating visits at 5 or 6 using a scale of one to six, where one shows no enjoyment, and six shows high levels of enjoyment.

It is possible that Community Champions, through the act of *showing* National Parks’ inspirational landscapes to others, gain additional positive benefits that lead towards wellbeing. For most of the interviewees, their best experience in a National Park involved introducing others to it, seeing the joy that others get out of the visit. There have been several studies which show a positive link between health and volunteering<sup>12</sup>. It would be interesting to discover the extent to which the positive health impacts noted in our survey are due to this type of volunteering in National Parks or just *being* outdoors in National Parks.

**There is something about *the special qualities* of National Parks which contributes to creating the positive impacts on health and wellbeing** experienced and reported by the Community Champions. The special landscapes are clearly inspirational. All the interviewees talked specifically about the inspirational effect of Snowdonia’s mountains, Pembrokeshire’s coastline or the waterfalls and hills of the Brecon Beacons.

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<sup>11</sup> For example in a conversation with a Community Champion in January, she talked at length about how her job is very stressful and the way she manages it by visiting National Parks’.

<sup>12</sup> For example Casiday, 2008, *Volunteering and Health; What impact does it really have*, University of Lampeter and *Volunteering England* and King M, 2014. *Volunteering Impacts*, The Conservation Volunteers.

Regarding inspiration to use local green space, three quarters of the survey respondents said they visit green space more since their first visit to a National Park. This was not quite borne out in the interviews where only three of the interviewees said they actually use the local green space more as a result of inspiration from visits to National Parks. Of the others, three stated they already used local green space before becoming a Community Champion, one said she doesn't use it since she 'just likes being in National Parks' (Aliya, Swansea) the other two reported no change.

## Conclusions

The evidence is clear from this small investigation that visiting National Parks is beneficial to health and wellbeing and that this impact lasts longer than just the visit itself. The particularly spectacular landscapes that are found in National Parks appear to heighten this sense of wellbeing and inspires people to some extent to increase use of local green space. Showing these special places to others in the community or family is an important part of positive wellbeing impacts Community Champions in particular gain from National Parks.

National Parks create an important venue and opportunity for urban families to unwind and relax and can provide inspiration to take up outdoor activities which can lead to better health and wellbeing. Investment in both protecting these spaces of 'gold-standard landscape and introducing people who have never visited them could be a critical part of developing a healthy and cohesive country.

## Recommendation for further study

It would be useful to gain a better understanding through a broader study sample of the particular benefits that the special qualities of National Parks can bring to health and wellbeing – and to better understand the difference between volunteering in National Park, or getting others involved in it, and simply *being* in it.

Mosaic funders



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