

## Environment and Human Health

# Urban green space and wellbeing

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This research is part of the Scottish Government's GreenHealth project. It explores the contribution of urban green and open spaces to public health and wellbeing using in-depth qualitative methods with green space users. The findings show that green spaces have different meanings for different people. Hence, there is not a simple cause-effect relationship between green space engagement and wellbeing.

## Main Findings

- Meanings of green space, and hence any wellbeing benefits derived from engagement, vary between different people and social groups
- For most people the social aspect of meeting others is a key part of using their local green space and hence important to any wellbeing benefits derived from it
- For a small minority of people notions of escape and 'getting away from it all' are important to green space use and hence wellbeing
- For some people engagement with green space is as part of a group; this gives their activity meaning and purpose and provides them with a strong social identity in relation to the space
- The activities of different groups affects the experiences of others both positively and sometimes negatively
- Policy makers, planners and green space managers should ensure that communities have access to a range of different kinds of green space, to allow all to enjoy the wellbeing benefits of using these spaces.



## Background

The benefits of green space for health and wellbeing are widely known and increasingly documented. Much of this work focuses on the potential of natural environments to provide opportunities to enhance wellbeing in different ways:

- Physical wellbeing through physical activity and fresh air
- Mental wellbeing through stress reduction and attention restoration
- Social wellbeing through social integration, engagement and participation



Much research has focused on identifying and categorising the environmental characteristics of places, spaces and landscapes associated with particular health outcomes. Another approach has explored social and health inequalities associated with different levels of access and proximity by different social group. Less attention has been given to understanding the ways in which people use, value and benefit from green space in relation to health outcomes. The social dimensions implicit in any environmental engagement (and hence any wellbeing derived from it) are starting to be recognised but the issue requires further exploration. It is important to understand how engagement with green space is complicated through use by different social groups and the power dynamics which exist between them.

## Research Undertaken

This research explored everyday green space engagements in two wards in Dundee using qualitative methods, including face-to-face interviews, walking interviews, production and review of video recordings. The aim was to investigate both the ways in which people interacted with local green space, and the meanings through which green spaces are experienced, interpreted and understood.

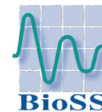
A qualitative approach was used to explore with participants the role that green, or open, space plays in how human health and wellbeing are produced. In order to understand the relationship between health and green space, there is a need to understand both how and why people engage with green space.

Two study areas were used in Dundee: Baxter Park, which is close to the inner city area of Stobswell, and Finlathen Park, which is close to Dundee's boundary with rural Angus. Within these two areas there have been: contextualising observation and interviews with key informants, visual and mobile interviews conducted with participants, and transcriptions and analyses of data.



Ten participants were recruited through local community groups, all of whom were regular users of either Baxter Park or Finlathen Park. Participants included both sexes, and age ranged from 19 to 60+ years. All were resident near the case study area. Participants' motivations for accessing green space varied, according to gender, age and other characteristics, for example interests, ability and lifestyle. Some used green space instrumentally (e.g. to walk a dog); for others it was a social occasion (e.g. visiting the park as part of a volunteer group or with friends and family), while for others it was explicitly a therapeutic experience. Often these reasons occurred together.

Findings were analysed with respect to categories relating to aspects of green space attitudes and behaviour. Particular attention was paid to health and wellbeing meanings of green space, and indirect behaviour relating to health and wellbeing, for example routines, social relations and leisure.



## Health and Well-being

The term wellbeing is an attempt to focus health away from the individual and the presence/absence of disease towards a more holistic and positive achievement. It comprises two main elements: feeling good and functioning well. Feeling good is related to subjective emotions such as happiness, enjoyment and contentment. Functioning well concerns relationships and social involvement. The concept thus offers a social model of health which locates individual experiences within a broader social context. Space and place are closely bound up with the social relations that produce (or not) health and wellbeing.

Subjective wellbeing varies between people and over time. Hence it is dynamic rather than fixed. Actions and activities that enhance wellbeing for one person or group may enhance wellbeing for others, or could come at the expense of someone else's wellbeing. The aim of this research was to examine how engagement with green space enhanced (or not) the individual and social wellbeing of different users.

In both of our case study sites we found multiple uses and meanings of greenspace. These meanings can enhance engagement for others, or they can come into conflict. When tension occurs between different users this can affect the meaning that the park has for people, their engagement with it and any potential wellbeing benefits that might be derived from use. One such tension in Baxter Park occurred over the use of a children's play area. At lunchtimes some of the pupils from a local secondary school would use this area, which had an impact on mothers with young children.

The school pupils are physically commandeering space with their bodies, but also appropriating space through squeezing out more welcoming socialities and introducing less welcoming ones. The pupils' engagement also invites change relating to the ecologies of the park, such as encouraging the seagulls through their litter, which in turn further discourage particular uses and users. Another of our participants commented on the military fitness group, who appropriated space through sound and movement. While she did not enjoy seeing or hearing them, others might have different views of people using the park to exercise.

## Wellbeing and Place

Place is often defined in relation to location, setting and meaning, the result of continuing interactions concerning not just where an individual is but also what they are doing and why. Place forms a part of our cultural identity and as such place matters for health and health inequalities. Work on therapeutic landscapes has examined how certain places – such as sacred sites, spas or pilgrimages – become associated with health and wellbeing because they are perceived to have properties or associations that are believed to be conducive to producing experiences associated with health. This concept has been extended to include any places considered beneficial to enhancing health and wellbeing, noting that landscapes can be important in maintaining, not only restoring, health. The subjectivity of individual experiences of both (ill) health and perceptions of landscapes emphasise how the meaning and nature of place with respect to health is different for different people, groups and over time.



Thus, experiences of place derive from engagement with nature within particular social contexts rather than being pre-determined outcomes linked to proximity. People experience environments in quite different ways. Even those visiting nature alone ascribe particular socio-cultural meanings to their experience; and while places may be designed to elicit particular practices, all kinds of other practices may be going on within them which they were never designed to admit.

This research sought to draw attention to the social relations within which urban green space use and management take place, and how these shape the meaning and experiences of various green space users and the wellbeing benefits (or not) for different groups.



## Conclusions

Green spaces have different meanings for different people and social groups. People's understanding and interpretation of green space – who they understand it has been provided for and its purpose, their beliefs about how it should be managed – influence their engagement with such places and hence any wellbeing benefits that might be derived from using them. Activities that enhance wellbeing for one person or group may also help to enhance the wellbeing benefits for others. Equally, activities may come at the cost of another person or group's wellbeing.

Green spaces, like other kinds of spaces, become meaningful to users through social processes which may enhance (or not) any wellbeing benefits derived from engagement. However, in the policy debate about health and wellbeing, the focus has been on the material rather than the social qualities of different green spaces. Although it would be impossible to unravel the natural and the social since they are so closely intertwined, we can examine further how the material and social aspects of green spaces are combined.

The social contexts through which green spaces are encountered and understood are multiple and complex and contested between different individuals and groups. Balancing multiple demands between different users to ensure that the wellbeing benefits of some social groups are not achieved at the expense of other groups is an important but significant challenge for policy makers, planners and green space managers. What green spaces mean to dominant groups can result in the accepted uses of the spaces which might enhance wellbeing for some individuals or groups but marginalise or exclude others. Attention thus needs to be paid to how power and knowledge affect meaning, and how different groups are positioned in relation to these resources.

## Policy relevance

The work has potential implications for those involved in green space management and planning:

- Policy makers, planners and green space managers should ensure that communities have access to a range of different kinds of green space, to allow all to use it to enhance their wellbeing. This requires understanding, sensitivity and skilful communication of the tensions.
- The identification of mechanisms which support stronger elements of social use, such as coordination groups, e.g. volunteer organisations and 'Friends of', can potentially enhance wellbeing through providing a purpose and sense of achievement. However, attention needs to be paid to the effect of such mechanisms on green space values, ownership, use and engagement by others not necessarily part of such groups. This then helps foster public responsibility for maintaining local environments.
- A social value is attached to green networks, providing functions beyond those of biodiversity of wildlife
- Urban green spaces perform a role in raising public awareness of aspects of nature in their local environment, which helps connect people to the land and the seasons, as sought in the Scottish Land Use Strategy.

**For further information:** Dinnie, E., Brown, K. M., & Morris, S. (2013). Community, cooperation and conflict: Negotiating the social well-being benefits of urban green space experiences. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 112(0), 1–9.

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