

Nature engagement & wellbeing pre, during and post Covid-19: Supporting the UK (green) recovery

Progress report January 2021

The overarching aim of this ESRC funded project is to assess changes in nature engagement and wellbeing in the UK as a result of Covid-19. This is done through four empirical projects assessing how people engage with nature pre-, during and post Covid-19. The 18-month project started in June 2020. The first six months of the project have focused on data collection for the four different projects as well as the organisation of a network and stakeholder event. This brief 6-monthly report summarises the progress made in each of the four studies and presents some preliminary findings.

1a. Longitudinal Survey A – completed during and after Lockdown 1.0 distributed through convenience sampling.

Method: The first survey was completed in May 2020 by 170 participants (83% female, 21-75 years). It was distributed among personal contacts on social media, which means the sample is not representative of the UK population. The survey included questions about the use and evaluation of favourite nearby and distant natural places (excluding private gardens) during the first UK national lockdown (March-May). A second survey was sent to the same sample after the second national lockdown (November 2020); this survey was completed by 40 participants. A follow-up survey will be distributed to the same participants post national lockdowns in 2021.

Preliminary findings: Preliminary analyses of the first survey, focusing on the first lockdown suggest that respondents indicate that both near and far favourite natural places were visited significantly less during the first lockdown than before. However, this was much more likely for distant favourite places; 90% had not been able to visit during the lockdown. Respondents rated distant favourite natural spaces higher on a range of potential restorative qualities (qualities that could support wellbeing; Gatersleben, B., et al. (2020).

1b. Longitudinal survey B – representative for UK.

Method: This survey was completed by 850 participants, via “Prolific” which enabled us to recruit a representative sample of UK respondents. The survey includes similar questions as the one described above but did not exclude private gardens as potential favourite nearby natural places. This survey was completed in September 2020, reflecting on the first national lockdown and on current nature engagement and wellbeing experiences.

Preliminary findings: Preliminary analyses confirmed that people visited favourite nearby natural spaces more frequently during the lockdown (about 1/3rd stayed inside or near the house, 1/3rd travelled less than ½ mile). Walking, engaging with nature (gardening, watching wildlife) and relaxing were the most common reported activities. Participants suggested that they would continue doing so after the first lockdown. A small but significant minority did not visit any natural spaces during lockdown; all of these people cited fear of spreading Covid-19 as a reason. About 1/5th of the respondents said they would have liked to engage more with nature. Respondents who could not engage with nature outdoors tried to do so in different ways, for example with plants indoors, watching birds through the window or by watching nature documentaries on-line (Gatersleben, B., et al., 2020).

2. Text analysis of comments on Chris Packham and Springwatch 2020 Facebook pages during lockdown, looking at digital nature engagement.

Method: This qualitative study uses a thematic analysis of comments publicly available on Facebook to investigate the association between nature engagement on social media and wellbeing during the first Covid-19 lockdown. Data consisted of comments on videos from the BBC’s Springwatch 2020 TV series (68 videos with 13,701 comments in total) and from a UK TV presenter and naturalist’s (Chris Packham) livestream videos (55 videos with a total of 129,564 comments) posted on Facebook from March to July 2020.

Preliminary findings: Analysis of the comments resulted in 3 major themes being generated: (1) engaging with nature via social media is emotionally complicated, (2) cognitive and deeper reflections generated from social media nature engagement and (3) coping with stress during Covid-19. These findings may be useful in supporting wellbeing throughout the current pandemic and in future scenarios of a similar nature (Xu, T., et al., 2020).

3. Ethnographic study of up to 30 families of different socio-economic backgrounds, providing an in-depth analysis into experiences of nature throughout the pandemic.

Method: This qualitative study aims to explore the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown and travel restrictions on people’s engagement with nature. Up to 30 household representatives will be interviewed

using an ethnographic photo elicitation methodology (Golding, S., et al., 2020).

Preliminary findings: At this point in data collection, very early observations suggest that before lockdown participants engaged with nature as a setting for varied 'purposeful' activities (e.g. travel, exercise, conservation, wildlife 'spotting', and landscape immersion. It is noted that other people were often present during these experiences. During and after lockdown, it is noted that early observations suggest that 'after' lockdown does not feel significantly different from during lockdown, that fear is pervasive within experiences of nature (e.g. fear for themselves, directed at participants from others they encounter in nature, and for nature itself). It is also noted that nature provides a space for comfort, solace and escape, but that its 'purpose' has changed from experiences prior to lockdown. It should be noted that these early observations are based on approximately one third of targeted respondents and should be interpreted in this context. Full findings will be disclosed on completion of the target number of household interviews.

4. Secondary data analyses of the People and Nature Survey collected by Natural England relating to nature engagement in England.

Method: The fourth part of the project consists of secondary data analyses of The People and Nature Survey for England (PAN) an online continuous panel (since April 2020) of several thousand English households and The Monitoring Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE) panel survey (2009-2019). The surveys ask a range of questions on nature engagement including natural places visited in the last 14 days/last 7 days, visit activities and evaluations of the places visited. Natural spaces in these surveys are defined as green and blue spaces in UK visited for leisure (in towns, countryside, coast, sea). It does not include gardens.

Preliminary findings: Preliminary findings of PAN data analyses conducted by NE (Natural England, 2020) suggest that visits to natural places during the first lockdown (1st quarter data - 6,249 responses: April - June 2020) varied significantly between socio-demographic groups, with lower SES groups visiting nature much less often. Not visiting nature was also associated with lower reported wellbeing. When comparing reasons for visiting nature during this period (PAN data) with reported reasons for visiting nature in 2018/2019 (MENE data) people appear to

visit natural places more often during the lockdown for fresh air and exercise.

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