

A matter of Trust: nature sport and environmental charities



Now in its 116th year, the National Trust – along with its 60,000 volunteers – is responsible for hundreds of country houses and world-famous heritage sites across the UK. In part driven by what its Chairman, former Times editor Simon Jenkins, describes as “the reassurance of the old” during a period of austerity, its membership has risen to more than four million – up 500,000 since 2007.

The Trust recently launched Getting Outdoors and Closer to Nature, a campaign reflecting its stated ambition to make “everybody feel like a member” by the end of the decade. Research by the University of Exeter’s Centre for Sport, Leisure and Tourism is supporting this project by investigating how the Trust can better serve one of the groups most conspicuously under-represented in its existing membership – young adults.



Overview

Simon Jenkins became Chairman of the National Trust in 2008, since when he has overseen a successful programme of reducing what he has described as the organisation’s “ponderousness and bureaucracy”. Jenkins has hailed the Trust as “the perfect post-digital organisation”, remarking: “We’re not trying to bring our members into the 21st century. We hope we’re in it – and we hope they’ll join us for that reason.” The Getting Outdoors and Closer to Nature campaign is an important part of that philosophy.

The Trust is keen to address two key issues. First of all, it is aware that, although its stewardship of stately homes and other historic buildings is well known, its ownership and management of a large proportion of the UK’s coastal and countryside regions is underappreciated. Secondly, only a small percentage of its burgeoning membership is made up of people aged from 18 to 30.

These concerns conveniently coincide in the sphere of nature sports. Many young adults enjoy activities such as surfing, mountain-biking and

trail-running. The Trust recognises it will be in a position to market itself and its land more effectively if it can develop a detailed idea of how the natural environment is experienced through sport and, perhaps just as importantly, how the target demographic perceives the Trust itself.

Working alongside the Trust, the University of Exeter is aiming to provide precisely that information. Drawing on empirical and qualitative research, it is exploring the role of nature sports in fostering young adults’ sense of wellbeing and belonging in relation to the natural environment – the ultimate goal being to determine if and how these experiences translate into an emotional connection with the work of charities such as the Trust.

The study, which began in October 2011, will feature a range of interviews with and surveys of 18-to-30-year-olds who participate in nature sports. Trust employees will also be asked to contribute, while further methods of data collection are expected to include focus groups and analysis of printed material.

KEY FACTS

- The National Trust now has more than four million members. This figure represents a rise of 500,000 in the space of the past four years alone.
- Even so, appreciation of its ownership and management of coastal and countryside areas – as opposed to its role in maintaining stately homes and other historic buildings – is underappreciated.
- In addition, only a small proportion of its membership is drawn from the 18-to-30-year-old demographic.
- Research by the University of Exeter is seeking to address these issues by exploring the role of nature sports in fostering young adults’ sense of wellbeing and belonging in relation to the natural environment.
- The ultimate goal is to determine if and how these experiences translate into an emotional connection with the work of environmental charities such as the Trust – so guiding future strategies for both conservation and attracting more visitors.

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A matter of Trust: nature sport and environmental charities (cont.)



Comments and implications

"The National Trust is well aware that its ownership of land is often overlooked," says PhD researcher and ESRC CASE studentship award holder Josey Field.

"The Getting Outdoors and Closer to Nature project is driven by a concern for the conservation of that land, but at the same time it's evidence of the Trust's determination to enhance the visitor experience. To this end, the Trust is keen to make its presence in outdoor spaces more obvious and to recognise and cater for people's needs in order to attract more visitors – and that's where this research will prove so valuable."

Strongly related to the National Trust's goal of appealing to more 18-to-30-year-olds is the need for a better understanding of the reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural environment. Such knowledge

could help shape how coastal and countryside areas are used and conserved in the future, as well as potentially guiding policy on health.

"Previous research has suggested time spent in a natural environment is mentally restorative and that exercise in such a setting could have greater wellbeing benefits than activity undertaken elsewhere," says Field. "However, although this offers a starting point, it doesn't allow us to explore how specific groups use the natural environment and attach meaning to it.

A study that focused mainly on surfers and windsurfers alluded to a sensory connection that might be developed through taking part in nature sports, but would that kind of connection extend beyond the environment to established environmental charities such as the National Trust? That's something that this research will endeavour to examine in detail."

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Josey Field
ESRC Researcher

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Simon Jenkins
Chairman, National Trust



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