



# Minority Ethnic Communities and the Natural Environment

Access to Nature Early Findings

## About Early Findings

This paper is one of a series being produced early across the lifetime of Access to Nature. We want to learn about what is working well for the diverse range of Access to Nature projects, and where they face challenges. Even in the early phase of delivery, projects are able to highlight their key learning. This may only be a partial picture of their progress and impact overall but nonetheless provides helpful insights to inform their future work and helps guide that of others. **Here we focus on the experience to date of two projects that are working with ethnic communities in the natural environment.** More Findings Papers will emerge as Access to Nature progresses and we can further build on what we have here to create a full picture of the learning from projects.

## About Access to Nature

Access to Nature is a £28.75 million grant scheme to encourage more people to enjoy the outdoors, particularly those who have little or no contact with the natural environment. Funded by the Big Lottery Fund's Changing Spaces programme and by Natural England, Access to Nature is run by Natural England on behalf of a consortium of major environmental organisations. This is a different kind of programme that aims to benefit 1.7 million people through partnership projects across the country. Funded projects include very local schemes run by small community based groups, through to national initiatives from large organisations. Diversity in scale is mirrored by a diversity and richness of projects including for example equipment to allow people with disabilities to access the natural environment across the South West; supporting minority ethnic communities to visit the countryside; as well as many projects which are providing a range of volunteering and educational opportunities for local communities and young people.

## The Current Context

At the core of the Government's vision of the Big Society is the belief that people should be empowered to improve their communities and shape the services they receive. Access to Nature has a key role to play within this, through encouraging and facilitating community involvement and action at the neighbourhood level in response to local needs, particularly amongst those who have little or no previous contact with the natural environment. The programme also complements other Natural England priorities such as increasing the number of under-represented groups that access the natural environment through the Diversity Review and the Outdoors for All initiative<sup>1</sup>.

### Minority ethnic communities and access to the natural environment

Many minority ethnic communities in England are disengaged from the natural environment. They are not familiar with what goes on beyond the urban boundary and some have never been into the countryside.<sup>2</sup> They make up only 1% of the visitors to National Parks, for example. Even on their doorstep, access to green space is limited. Research has shown that in areas where more than 40 per cent of residents are black and minority ethnic there is 11 times less green space than in areas where residents are largely white.<sup>3</sup>

The factors that affect access to the natural environment by people from minority ethnic communities include economic circumstances, language barriers, poor access to information and lack of transport. Another important reason is the feeling among some people from these communities that they have no entitlement to be in the countryside and are not welcome to visit.<sup>4</sup>

A number of Access to Nature projects aim to increase participation in the natural environment by minority ethnic communities. These projects, by considering what service providers need to do to improve their message and offer to minority ethnic communities, create the foundations for using and accessing the natural environment.

*"I have felt like a child again ..."*

*"The knowledge I have gained will remain with me forever ..."*

*"I like the countryside ..."*<sup>5</sup>

Comments like this reflect the excitement of people who have visited the countryside or taken part in activities in the natural environment for the first time. In this case they have been made by people from minority ethnic communities who are participating in Access to Nature projects.

### Creating the foundations for using and accessing the natural environment

For minority ethnic communities with no experience of the natural environment in Britain, a fear or concern about the unknown is not unexpected. There are Access to Nature projects that deliver organised and accompanied activities and visits to help overcome fears and provide a 'safe' option for those wanting to explore the natural environment. They often provide the first step leading to further independent visits.

Organised visits work best when linked with building capacity, leadership and skills in minority ethnic communities. Leaders can then engage and enthuse others in their community to access the natural environment, and lead group visits themselves.



<sup>2</sup> Black Environment Network, 2005. Engaging Ethnic Communities in Natural and Built Heritage, Black Environment Network: Llanberis

<sup>3</sup> CABE, 2010. Community Green: Using local spaces to tackle inequality and improve health, CABE: London

<sup>4</sup> Judy Ling Wong, Ethnic Community Environmental Participation, Black Environment Network: Llanberis

<sup>5</sup> Feedback from Mosaic Access to Nature project interim evaluation, June 2011

## Fact File

**Project:** People and the Dales

**Run by:** Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust

**Project outline:** Working with groups – including minority ethnic communities – that have little or no positive experience of the countryside. The project enables individuals to take part in fun, active and thought provoking activities in the southern Yorkshire Dales. These positive and enjoyable activities aim to inspire, enthuse and encourage individuals to return independently with family and friends. Over 3500 day visitors have taken part in 250 events. Events include walks in nature reserves and stunning scenery, craft activities (dry stone walling / willow weaving / using felt), farm experiences (lambing) and fun activities (kite making and environmental games).

### What the project has learnt:

#### *About reaching the target groups:*

- Work through key contacts and those who have good links within the target communities.
- Use existing links to establish contacts and relationships
- Attend community events to market the project
- Develop strong partnerships with other providers
- Offer activities that are tailored to meet the needs and interests of individual groups
- Be flexible and design activities that can be adapted to meet the needs of any group
- Provide a diverse range of activities that emphasise enjoyment and new, interesting and stimulating experiences. They can be physical (e.g. walking), practical (e.g. lambing) or involve crafts
- Don't under estimate the time needed for reaching out, recruiting groups and planning activities

#### *About working with minority ethnic groups:*

- Give people as much information as possible in advance to prepare for their first visit to the countryside – photographs and personal testimonies are useful
- Make appropriate clothing and items such as walking boots and waterproofs available to groups when they arrive
- It is hard to reach people who are not members of groups. Some success has been achieved through working via school liaison workers and Children's Centres

#### *Important messages:*

- It takes time to build confidence among key contacts. These individuals are critical to the success of the project as they 'get people on the bus'. They help people overcome the barriers to taking part
- Even after attending training, some group leaders may still not feel able to return and lead a group on their own. This may be due to factors such as confidence, lack of funds and lack of transport
- Group leader weekends offered to the key contacts and group leaders 'give something back' to this vital group of people

*"It was the first time I have experienced the countryside in the UK after living 20 years in England"* (Bangladeshi woman)

*"I thought I was in my country when I came here today. I found four plants in the field which I cook in my country."*<sup>6</sup>

## Organisational change for engaging minority ethnic communities in the natural environment

It is important to provide opportunities for people from minority ethnic communities to access the natural environment. Equally important is the need to start looking at how those organisations that work in the natural environment make provision for and represent the interests of those communities. Organisational change is needed to ensure long term, sustainable engagement as highlighted by Natural England's Diversity Review.<sup>7</sup>

This change is about building commitment at all levels within organisations to improve diversity. It requires relevant policies, strategies and action plans to be in place. Practical steps include improving the representation of minority ethnic communities among management structures, staff and volunteers; providing information about what is on offer at places where minority ethnic communities will see it; and using positive images in publicity material that they can identify with.



### Fact File

**Project:** Mosaic  
**Run by:** The Campaign for National Parks

**Project outline:** Building sustainable links between black and minority ethnic communities, all of the National Parks in England and the Youth Hostel Association across England. The project trains leaders from minority ethnic communities to become 'Community Champions' and promote National Parks and the YHA in their communities. It also encourages partners to make organisational changes to help them reach minority ethnic audiences.

180 Community Champions have been recruited from minority ethnic communities in over 20 cities in England. They have provided more than 1600 volunteer days to the project and have introduced the National Parks to at least 4,500 new people. Those recruited reflect a diverse range of people in terms of their interests, composition, and previous usage and knowledge about the National parks.

### What the project has learnt:

*About building the foundations for a team of Community Champions:*

- It is necessary to provide training in the practicalities of running a group visit (including map reading, health and safety, what to pack), as well as experiencing firsthand the activities on offer in the National Parks; it enables Community Champions to talk with confidence to those in their community about what to expect on a visit
- Group Leader Visits and other training provide scope for personal connections to be established with at least a few members of National Park staff; these are critical in encouraging the Champions to go ahead and organise their own visits
- Linkages that are made between Community Champions are valuable; they provide mutual support and additional inspiration

*About Community Champions reaching out into their communities and arranging visits:*

- Intensive and ongoing support from a Mosaic Project Officer is necessary to continue building the confidence of Community Champions to enable them to lead their own visits.
- Champions need good links into their own communities; where these do not exist there is an onus on them to forge new local connections and relationships
- The first step for some Champions is to bring family and friends to the National Park, before reaching out to others within their community
- The economic climate is creating challenges for Champions who need to fundraise in order to run their own visits to a National Park

**Fact File cont.**

**Project:** Mosaic

**What the project has learnt (cont.):** *About Community Champions building bridges between the target groups, National Parks and the YHA:*

- Once relationships are established, Community Champions act as a conduit between their communities and the National Parks.
- These relationships are vital for ensuring a lasting impact once the project funding ceases.

*About influencing organisational change:*

- Influencing National Park policies and practices is a long process
- Working with Community Champions is an important step for National Park Authorities; it has raised the profile of minority ethnic communities and their interests in Corporate Business Plans, recruitment policies and marketing communications, for example
- Community Champions provide a platform for change; they provide greater exposure and access for the National Parks within minority ethnic communities, and engagement with groups and individuals who have not previously visited
- Visible change within National Parks will only follow once Community Champions have been engaged, feel confident and have become active
- Time is needed before some Champions will move from visiting, to taking a more active role in decision making within National Park Authorities
- Both informal (e.g. sitting on advisory bodies, reviewing marketing communications) and formal (e.g. becoming volunteers, speaking to Members, highlighting issues such as halal provision) routes of influence are possible and have an impact on the working of National Park Authorities

*Important messages:*

- The Community Champions model is seen as very positive by National Park Authorities and effective in giving them access to contacts and communities they would not otherwise have
- Organisational change is a long process that needs dedicated time and resources.
- There is an appreciation of the barriers to minority ethnic community access and a willingness to tackle them
- This approach provides a structure to ensure long term change, empowering individuals to continue promoting the National Parks after the project ends

*"I am a volunteer, so I am integrated into the [National Park] structure"*  
(Community Champion, Lake District National Park Authority)

*"I am proud to be a Mosaic Community Champion. If somebody wanted to be one, I would hold their hand and take them there"*  
(Community Champion, Yorkshire Dales National Park)<sup>8</sup>



**Summary**

Overcoming barriers to access for disadvantaged groups, including minority ethnic communities, is complex and time-consuming. It requires commitment from environmental agencies and, in particular, requires that time is spent making links with communities. Building a group of skilled and empowered Community Champions is invaluable in gaining participation by the community; and in supporting agencies to learn about and appreciate the barriers communities face and how to overcome them.

**Alternative formats**

Our documents are available as PDF downloads from our website, suitable for text reader technology. We may be able to provide other formats [e.g. Braille, a minority language, or large print] for specific documents where there is a proven communication need.

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Tel: 0845 600 3078 (local rate)

Email: [enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk)

Address: Enquiries, Natural England, Block B, Government Buildings, Whittington Road, Worcester WR5 2LQ

