The Gate Is Open
But Who Still Holds the Keys?

Race, Belonging and Participation in the Outdoors

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My position: pracademic, grassroots and advocacy

I work at the intersection of practice, research and challenge.

- Practice, research, lived experience and long-term advocacy
- Mosaic Outdoors: walking, volunteering, heritage and relationships
- PhD: race, rurality and the hidden histories of rural Britain
- Speaker, facilitator, trainer...

Access is not inclusion

Opening the gate is only the beginning.

- Access can be legal, physical or informational, and still not feel welcoming
- A gate, a map or a one-off event does not create sustained participation
- Inclusion: do people feel safe, recognised and able to return?
- Participation: can people shape, lead and belong, not just attend?

What communities tell us

People are not hard to reach, systems are often hard to trust.

- Practical barriers: transport, cost, time, kit, confidence, information
- Cultural and emotional barriers: fear of racism, not knowing the codes, feeling watched
- Faith, family, food, language, gender and safety all shape participation
- Many people are not “hard to reach”; institutions are hard to trust

Mosaic Outdoors: what works on the ground

Trust is infrastructure.

- Start with relationships, not routes
- Co-create: pace, place, food, timings, language, faith and family needs
- Repeated visits, familiar leaders, low-pressure entry points
- Progression: walking, volunteering, skills, leadership, storytelling
- In practice: National Trust Walking Together; PLPs, Hidden Histories, Volunteering

Belonging and connectedness

Belonging is built through return.

- Belonging is not created by invitation alone
- Connectedness grows through repetition, relationship, memory and recognition
- The landscape needs room for people’s stories, cultures and futures
- The test is return: do people come back, bring others, take ownership?

Race, rurality and whose countryside?

Whose stories make a place feel like home?

- Rural Britain is often narrated as white, settled and cut off from empire and migration
- That narrative shapes who is imagined as belonging
- Hadrian’s Wall: North African soldiers, the “Aurelian Moors”, were stationed at Burgh by Sands c. AD 253–258
- Hidden histories show racially diverse people are not new to rural landscapes
- Interpretation is not neutral: it can include, erase, unsettle or repair

It’s in the roots: the countryside’s own history

Exclusion is not an accident. It is part of the story.

- 1844: Wordsworth opposed a railway bringing “uneducated persons in large bodies” to the Lakes
- 1930s: far-right camps took urban youth outdoors, fusing love of countryside with love of country
- 2019: the Landscapes Review heard the countryside is seen by some as a “white environment”
- 2020: the National Trust linked 93 of its places to colonialism and historic slavery
- My Toronto panel: “Exclusionary Stories from Colonial Lands”

Challenging the norm of outdoor recreation

Diversity asks who is missing.
Equity asks what must change.

- Authority and what counts as “normal”, not only numbers – Whos missing …
- It shapes leadership, risk, clothing, behaviour, knowledge and interpretation
- Name race and racism, not just “underrepresented” or “hard to reach” groups
- Diversity asks communities to adapt; equity asks organisations to change

From gatekeeping to partnership

Partnership means sharing the keys.

- Invest in long-term relationships, not one-off outreach
- Resource grassroots groups as partners, not pipelines
- Share power: design, budgets, governance, interpretation, evaluation
- Measure belonging, return, leadership and influence, not only attendance

The closing challenge

The challenge is not simply how we get more people into the outdoors, but whether outdoor organisations are prepared to change who shapes, leads, interprets and belongs within it.

Access opens the gate. Belonging asks who holds the keys.

Thank You

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