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The outdoors as a contested leisure terrain

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Abstract

In this critical commentary we propose that ‘the outdoors’ is a contested leisure terrain that is both a space for freedom, relaxation and enjoyment, and, at the same time, a site of exclusion, hierarchy and discrimination. We review some of the well-established benefits of outdoor leisure in relation to physical and mental health, well-being and personal development. However, these benefits are not equally accessible to all, with many groups and individuals reporting feeling excluded from leisure in the outdoors. Drawing on the context of the UK, we argue that the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating these divisions, as outdoor leisure takes on added significance during times of lockdown. Nevertheless, we suggest that the pandemic may also offer an opportunity to rethink outdoor leisure and ‘the outdoors’ as a leisure space in more inclusive and accessible ways.

Key words:

Outdoors; leisure; exclusion; well-being; COVID-19

Introduction

The ‘outdoors’ is a prime space for leisure, relaxation and enjoyment. From a gentle walk in the park, to extreme wilderness environments, the outdoors provides opportunity for a wide range of leisure pursuits requiring varying levels of physical fitness and expertise, cost and specialist equipment. In many ways, the outdoors is the most democratic of leisure spaces, as almost everyone can go outside. However, what we mean by ‘the outdoors’ is complex. Particularly in terms of leisure, the outdoors is not equally open and accessible to all. Far from being a space for everyone to enjoy, we suggest that the outdoors is in fact a ‘contested terrain’ (Tagg, 2008; Dashper 2016) with contradictory meanings between freedom and openness, on the one hand, and strict norms of behaviour that limit access and acceptance, on the other. In this critical commentary we explore some of these tensions and their meanings for understanding leisure in the outdoors.

Places are both physical spaces and social constructs, formed through social interaction and imbued with historically, socially and culturally specific meanings. Place identities are not stable, but subject to constant renegotiation and reproduction (Heldt Cassel, 2021). This is certainly true of ‘the outdoors’. We write this commentary from the UK, which has implications for some of our discussion below. Ideas of the outdoors in a British, or more specifically English, context are imbued with the concept of the rural idyll, “representing idealized notions of beauty, simplicity and nostalgia for an imagined past” (Dashper, 2016: 350). In the English context, access to ‘the countryside’, an important subset of ‘the outdoors’, is heavily regulated and restricted through both legal restrictions

that limit public access to land (Shoard, 1999) and codified 'rules of conduct', such as the Countryside Code, which attempt to normalise and maintain particular forms of countryside citizenship (Parker & Ravenscroft, 2001; Parker, 2006). In such ways, access to and inclusion in the countryside is heavily regulated, making outdoor leisure inaccessible to many.

COVID-19 has rocked the world in 2020-21, permeating all aspects of our lives, including our leisure. The pandemic has highlighted the contradictory nature of the outdoors as a leisure space by reinforcing its importance in terms of physical and mental health and wellbeing while at the same time exposing the elitist and exclusionary aspects of access to these spaces. As we write, the UK is experiencing a third national lockdown, with deaths from the virus having surpassed 100,000. The population is restricted by law to just one trip outdoors per day for exercise, making access to the outdoors all the more valuable and contested. It is in this context that we write this commentary to expose many of the taken for granted assumptions about outdoor leisure and leisure in the outdoors. Our discussion in this commentary is linked to the contested nature of the outdoors in the context of Britain, and we suggest that 'the outdoors' is indeed a culturally specific concept and leisure space. Ho and Chang (2021) discuss the idealisation of 'the great outdoors' in the context of Canada, and Straker (2020) explores Māori relationships to landscape and the outdoors, indicating some of the multitude of ways in which different societies and cultures relate to and imagine 'the outdoors'. Notwithstanding local and cultural specificities, many of the wider issues about inclusion, exclusion, power and privilege we discuss here have broader resonance with other international contexts.

We begin by discussing ways of conceptualising the outdoors and some of the benefits of outdoor leisure before moving on to consider how exclusion and inequality sit alongside health, well-being and enjoyment in the contested terrain of the outdoors as a leisure space.

Conceptualising the outdoors in leisure research

The 'outdoors' continues to be identified as a place in which a plethora of opportunities present themselves for those willing to look. As a form of leisure, being in the outdoors offers everything from a quiet walk in a local green space near to home, to scaling adventurous peaks in remote and harsh environments. Research is identifying that being outdoors impacts health and wellbeing (Clough et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2020), fitness (Mackintosh et al., 2018), and the development of transferable skills such as resilience (Allan et al., 2012; Shellman & Hill, 2017). This has not gone unnoticed by policy makers. In the UK, the government has recognised the importance of getting people outdoors by introducing a large initiative through its 25 year environmental plan (Her Majesty's Government, 2019). This aims to get more people involved in the outdoors at an early age in an effort to help build greater environmental awareness, encourage physical activity in sport and leisure, and help curb some of the effects of a growing challenge around mental health, which has been magnified during recent periods of lockdown and self-isolation (Ammar et al., 2021). To offer a brief understanding of some of the benefits of outdoor leisure, we focus on three areas: outdoor recreation, health and well-being, and personal development.

Outdoor Recreation

Outdoor Recreation is a broad term that draws together many ways in which people engage with the outdoors for leisure and is recognised as an important element in government policies for delivering benefits for health, education and the economy (Mackintosh et al., 2018). A report by the Outdoor Industry Association (OIA, 2015: 14) identified that in the UK there are 8.96 million people, or 27.6% of the total active population (defined as those who have taken part in any sport in the past 12 months), participating in outdoor activities. They also identify some of the key motivations for participation, including spending time with family, having fun with friends, enjoying scenery/being close to nature, as an alternative to traditional sport, and also just for fresh air and to enjoy the

weather. One area in particular which is worth noting is ‘traditional outdoor recreation’ (Mackintosh et al., 2018: 317) which includes activities such as hill walking, canoeing and rock-climbing. During the COVID-19 pandemic there has been a surge in adventure seekers looking for more localised outdoor leisure activity, in what is being termed the ‘Micro Adventure’ (Mackenzie & Goodnow, 2020). With restrictions in place, people are looking to be creative in how they maximise the outdoor space they have access to in order to enjoy being outdoors and have a sense of connection with the natural environment (see also Breunig, 2020).

Health and Wellbeing

While participants in outdoor leisure activities recognise that participating makes them ‘feel good’ (Henderson & Bialeschki, 2005), research within this area is developing a deeper understanding of what this means and the impact it has on individual physical and mental health and well-being (Lawton et al., 2017; Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018; White et al., 2019). White et al. (2019) identified that being in nature has a positive effect, with their research indicating that people who spend at least 120 minutes a week in an outdoor context report higher levels of health and wellbeing. Evidence suggests that the outdoors is linked to participants achieving multiple outcomes and offers an avenue to find and maintain a lifetime of physical activity (Eigenschenk et al., 2019). Clough et al. (2016) identified that adventurous physical activities in the outdoors provide benefits such as increased positive psychological outcomes, opportunities to overcome challenges, and ability to fulfil basic psychological needs whilst increasing physical activity levels. They do, however, point out that while we know that there are positive outcomes, further work is needed to fully understand them.

Personal development through the outdoors

In addition to the health and wellbeing benefits, participating in leisure activities outdoors has an impact on an individual’s personal development. Research in child development has shown that time playing in the outdoors has long-term benefits for children’s development and behaviour, particularly when they are exposed to various weather conditions and environments (Ulset et al., 2017). In adults, participating in walking groups in natural environments has been shown to ‘undo’ or dampen the effects of some stressful life events (Marselle et al., 2019). Pomfret and Varley (2019) have identified that sharing adventurous leisure experiences together within a family group “could provide healthy, bonding, positively developmental and memorable collective experiences” (p.506).

The outdoors as a microcosm

The outdoors thus has numerous benefits in terms of leisure participation. What is it that draws us to the outdoors and why does it have such enduring appeal? Perhaps one explanation for this is the opportunity to engage with outdoor environments, whether rural or urban. Being outdoors can produce a host of condensed and often heightened experiences, accessing all our senses at once. Outdoor leisure can provide adventure, challenge, fun and relaxation. It offers opportunity to spend time with other people, with the natural environment, with animals, and also on our own, as we choose. For many, outdoor leisure is a welcome antidote to our increasingly urban, indoor, and screen-based lives. However, the outdoors also reflects and (re)produces inequalities, based around socio-economic status, physical ability, race and ethnicity, age, and gender. In such ways, the outdoors can be understood as a microcosm of wider society, encompassing freedom, joy and adventure for some and exclusion, isolation, and even fear for others.

The outdoors as a site of exclusion and hierarchy in leisure

Leisure time spent in the outdoors has numerous well-documented benefits, as outlined above, yet those benefits are not equally accessible to all. In 2015, a report by The Outdoor Industries Association for Sport England acknowledged that the stereotype of traditional outdoor leisure participation as “predominantly occurring in rural settings, accessed by white, middle class, car-

owning individuals/families doing traditional 'outdoors' activities" largely held true (OIA, 2015: 16). They identified a range of barriers to participation in outdoor leisure faced by three 'under-represented groups':

- Deprived communities (OIA does not specify who this group refers to, but images to accompany the report suggest this is understood in relation to socio-economic deprivation): distance; lack of local opportunities; perception and stigma; cost; and confidence;
- Black and minority ethnic communities: awareness; language; culture; confidence; safety; and perception/stigma;
- People with physical disabilities and the elderly: safety; physical access; distances; shelter and rest points; access to information; confidence; and route finding. (OIA, 2015: 28).

These and other barriers suggest that 'the outdoors' is not seen as a welcome and accessible space for all. Given the strong evidence for mental and physical benefits from outdoor leisure participation outlined above, lack of accessibility -whether real or perceived – is likely to compound existing inequalities between 'under-represented groups' and the white, middle class, able-bodied norm of the outdoor leisure participant.

The onset of COVID-19 brought these issues to the fore. In the early months of the pandemic, the contested nature of outdoor leisure space was brought to national attention in the UK, as the experiences of those living in cramped urban accommodation with no outside space were juxtaposed with those fortunate enough to enjoy private gardens and easy access to open outdoor spaces (Moore, 2020). Battles over who should be allowed to enjoy what outdoor space, and what leisure behaviour is deemed acceptable in those spaces, have brought to light the deep inequalities that shape leisure in the outdoors.

The first period of lockdown in the UK began on 23rd March, 2020 with restrictions easing from the end of May onwards (although we acknowledge that there were differences between the restrictions and responses of the devolved governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in comparison to the UK government, for purposes of simplicity here we refer to 'the UK' as a whole). Citizens were issued with a 'stay at home' message in order to try and reduce the spread of the virus and 'protect the NHS' (National Health Service). Trips outside the home were restricted to limited reasons, including food shopping, medical need, travelling for work, if strictly necessary, and once-daily exercise. This once-daily exercise took on huge significance for many people, and the first period of lockdown coincided with unusually good weather, encouraging people to embrace this once-a-day opportunity to get outside. For many this led to increased time spent on outdoor leisure in comparison to before the pandemic. NatureScot (2020) reported that 80% of respondents to their study took outdoor visits at least once a week during the summer of 2020, compared to 64% one year earlier, with short walks being the most popular outdoor leisure activity.

While this increased leisure time in the outdoors was valued and enjoyed by many, the lockdown exposed and exacerbated inequalities. Although once-daily outdoor leisure was permitted, children's playgrounds in public parks were closed, removing an important source of outdoor leisure for many families, which was particularly problematic for those without gardens and with limited space at home. While issues to do with health and education have affected many children during lockdown, restrictions on play have been described as "one of the most toxic effects" of the pandemic, as children have been effectively "imprisoned in the home" for long periods of time (Hughes, 2020: 3). In urban areas, parks became over-crowded as many local residents relied on them as spaces to escape the confines of their homes and partake in daily exercise, leading to some local councils closing parks and further restricting access. Densely populated areas, such as parts of London, suffered from increased pressure on limited green spaces, with closures and restrictions disproportionately affecting deprived areas and consequently poorer residents and Black, Asian and Minoritized Ethnic (BAME) communities (Duncan et al., 2020). As restrictions began to ease, many

rural areas reported problems with litter and waste as increased numbers of people sought to escape urban locations and enjoy outdoor leisure (BBC, 2020). So-called 'bad behaviour' in outdoor spaces, urban and rural, was framed as 'appalling', 'inexcusable', 'disgusting' and 'unacceptable'. People who do not normally occupy these outdoor leisure spaces so visibly and in such high numbers – predominantly, working class and BAME communities – were blamed and thus positioned as 'space invaders' in the white, middle-class space of the outdoors, lacking the knowledge and class to behave 'properly' (Puwar, 2004). In such ways, these communities are 'othered', even villainised, in the contested spaces of outdoor leisure, adding to divides and even justifying the exclusion of some groups from many urban and rural outdoor spaces.

In the UK's 'lockdown 3' these issues are even more fraught, as bad winter weather and limited hours of daylight make access to the precious resource of outdoor space for daily exercise even more contentious. The pandemic has not caused these struggles over access and acceptance in relation to outdoor leisure but it has certainly brought them to public attention, exposing and exacerbating divisions between those whose bodies, behaviours and leisure practices are positioned as legitimate in the outdoors (mainly white, middle class groups) and those seen as imposters in these spaces (everyone else).

Conclusions: The outdoors as a contested leisure terrain

The outdoors can thus be understood as a contested terrain. It is seemingly democratic and accessible to all, offering opportunity for fun, relaxation and challenge. Yet at the same time it is a space of exclusion and hierarchy where inequalities are both exposed and heightened. For us, as authors of this commentary, the outdoors is predominantly the former. As white, middle-class, western, able-bodied, middle-aged individuals, we mostly feel comfortable in 'the outdoors', whether that is an urban park or the wilder moors that edge the urban region in which we both live. Our identities are tied to outdoor leisure: for Katherine this is through her passion for horses and riding; for Jason through his enjoyment of a range of outdoors sports, which include cycling and skiing, and his previous professional experience as an outdoor leader. 'The outdoors' has always been important for both of us and our leisure lives, and this has been all the more apparent during the last year of restrictions and lockdowns where being able to be outside and enjoy our respective leisure pursuits has been invaluable to our mental well-being. However, as critical social scientists we also try to be reflexive about our privilege and the ways it enables us to navigate these outdoor leisure environments relatively seamlessly. The pandemic has exposed the ways in which our relationships with the outdoors are in stark contrast to those of many who lack access and are excluded from outdoor leisure.

Although we acknowledge the ways in which 'the outdoors' can be a site of exclusion, it does not have to be. Aquino et al. (2020: 16) argue that urban spaces can be inclusive places for informal leisure that may contribute to "multicultural urban belonging". Smits and Knoppers (2020) show how (urban) outdoor space can enable social inclusion for youth in disadvantaged communities. These and other studies suggest that barriers to outdoor leisure may be more easily broken down in urban than rural spaces, indicating that 'the countryside' is seen as a more exclusive space than its urban outdoor equivalents. However, rural or 'natural' outdoor leisure spaces also have potential to become more accessible and egalitarian. Roult et al. (2019) argue that partnerships between local people, disabled people and their families, and local government would help enable people with disabilities to engage in rural leisure in ways currently often unavailable to them.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been catastrophic on global, national and local levels, and has exposed the stark inequalities of contemporary life – not least in terms of access to and enjoyment of outdoor leisure. However, it could also be an opportunity for reassessment and renegotiation of the

outdoors to become a leisure space that is more open, accessible and welcoming to everyone. This will require concerted efforts to overcome barriers relating to factors such as cost, distance, safety, awareness and confidence, and to introduce so-called 'under-represented groups' to a range of opportunities and activities that are available in the outdoors. These efforts will need to be accompanied by actions to challenge dominant perceptions of the outdoors, and the countryside in particular, as elitist and exclusive spaces with highly regulated norms of acceptable behaviour that limit inclusivity. Initiatives to encourage more people to engage in outdoor leisure can help ensure that the well-documented benefits of outdoor leisure - in terms of both physical and mental health, as well as learning, fun and socialising - are open to all.

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