

THE HEALTH, SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS OF OPEN-AIR RECREATION

By providing and promoting opportunities for people to enjoy the outdoors, particularly close to where they live where they can do so regularly, a wide range of health, social, economic and environmental benefits can result. This note summarises the benefits of open-air recreation.

What are the health benefits?

Improvements to people's health can be achieved by them becoming more physically active on a regular basis. A review of recent research and promotional campaigns (Carney 2001) has confirmed that physical inactivity carries a far higher risk of contributing to coronary heart disease and some forms of cancer than do smoking, drinking or poor diet and that substantial improvements in public health, particularly in relation to coronary heart disease, are possible through encouraging more people to become more active on a regular basis. Targets set by the Government encourage people to aim for 30 minutes of moderate exercise every day.

As walking and cycling are relatively inexpensive activities, require no special skills and can be built into people's regular, daily routine, they provide one of the best ways for people to become more physically active. Having safe, attractive opportunities to walk or cycle from the doorstep and into the countryside, though, is very important if this is to be achieved.

The Health Education Board for Scotland has been promoting walking through its "Walk about a bit" campaign and this will be supported by the innovative "Paths to Health" project, launched by the Paths for All Partnership in October 2001. These are a good start at addressing the issue but much more effort is needed to provide better paths and to encourage use.

What are the social benefits?

A number of social benefits can arise from people taking part in open-air recreation, including:

- escaping from the pressures of modern living - gaining relaxation, refreshment and challenge, and thus helping reduce anxiety and stress levels;
- better opportunities for social interaction - meeting people or going out in small groups, and thus helping to enhance communities;
- a more socially inclusive society - walking and cycling are inexpensive activities and better access opportunities close to towns and cities means that people without a car can visit and enjoy the countryside more.

Walking is a low cost activity accessible to people of all ages and requires no special skills or equipment. Providing local path networks close to where people live also gives a wider range of people, particularly those without access to a car or to affordable public transport, the opportunity to enjoy the outdoors and share in some of the benefits that can result. Such local provision can also be part of wider

environmental improvements that help to restore community spirit through increased social interaction and a better living environment.

What are the economic benefits?

Open-air recreation is important to the Scottish economy. People spend money on equipment for their activities, on getting to the countryside and on things like food, refreshment and accommodation. Tourists generally spend more money, particularly on accommodation, eating out and gifts. This all helps to support the rural economy and a growing number of businesses depend on this income, particularly in rural Scotland.

The UK Day Visit Survey estimated that 137 million day visits were made to the countryside and coast in Scotland in 1998 and that, on average, each person spent about £6.50 on such visits (National Centre for Social Research 1998). Thus, the total expenditure on these visits amounted to £900 million.

A more detailed survey of people's participation in walking (NOF System Three Scotland 2000) estimated that people living in Scotland made a total of about 300 million walks (of any length) for pleasure in the countryside and at the coast and spent £900 million in doing so. The average expenditure per party was £6.21, of which £3.07 was on food and drink, £1.55 was on fuel and £0.41 was on bus, train or taxi fares. The equivalent figure in a similar survey in 1995 was slightly higher at £6.96.

Visitors to Scotland generate a substantial economic benefit for Scotland, with walking being the second most popular main holiday activity after City Breaks and generates an estimated £438 million (Transport for Leisure & Smith 2001). Some 39% of all overseas visitors – 800,000 people – go walking or climbing as part of their visit and spend a total of £370 million.

This expenditure helps to support many jobs. An early study (Scottish Agricultural College 1992) estimated that open-air recreation supported over 20,000 FTE jobs, and participation in open-air recreation by people living in or visiting Scotland has increased since 1992.

This employment can be particularly important in rural areas. A study of the use of a local path network at Dunkeld and Birnam (EKOS 1998) estimated that the income generated by the use of the network supported up to 15 FTE jobs. The majority of local businesses were seeing a more even spread of custom throughout the year because of the existence of the network and a third also stated that the existence of the network had led them to increase their hours of opening.

Many businesses have also made the link between improved health and reduced stress levels on productivity and therefore have initiated schemes to encourage staff to walk/cycle to work, using practical advice given in the HEBS' "Walk in to Work Out" pack (Mutrie, Blamey & Whitelaw 1999). A healthy workforce is a productive workforce, with fewer days lost to illness plus greater mental sharpness at work giving more output and better performance.

What are the environmental benefits?

The environmental benefits of open-air recreation are harder to measure but can include:

- an increased sense of pride in and stewardship of the local environment;
- a greater awareness and understanding of the needs of the countryside and of land management.

As more and better maintained routes are developed for cycling and walking closer to communities it is hoped that more people will be encouraged to make less use of their cars for short distance trips. This will help to reduce congestion and air pollution thus providing a safer local environment and providing people with a healthy more relaxing way of making their journey to and from work, to the shops or for social purposes.

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