

Qing Lee - Forests and Disability

According to the European Disability Forum 65 million people within the EU have a disability. This is 10% of the EU population (EDF, undated). This group is diverse; it includes people with hearing, sight, speech and learning impairments as well as those with physical impairments. Finding effective ways to ensure equal access and enjoyment of the outdoors and forests for all of these groups of people is a requirement under much national legislation and arguably under EU disability legislation.

In Britain for example, where there are an estimated 10 million disabled people (DWP, 2006), the diversity and equality agenda in Britain is supported by the Equality Act 2010 and the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). In the DDA a disabled person is defined as someone who has a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day to day activities.

Land management organisations such as the Forestry Commission in countries such as Britain are working to meet their legal obligations to identify, consult, and include disabled people in the development of policies and services of importance to them. Answering the challenges of the equality and diversity agenda means learning more about disabled people's expectations, needs and the potential mechanisms for including different users of woods and forests, such as the wide range of disabled groups and the variety of recreational activities they undertake in woodlands.

DISABLED GROUPS AND ACCESS TO FORESTS AND THE COUNTRYSIDE

There is little literature on disabled group's engagement with, use of and views of the countryside or woodlands. Research such as the Diversity Review was set up in 2002 and finished in 2006. It aimed to investigate what could be done to support disabled people, black and minority ethnic people, people living in inner city areas and young people in outdoor recreation participation. Research was undertaken to explore perceptions and reasons for under-representation in countryside use by these groups through surveys and by qualitative methods. Results suggest that disabled people believed they enjoyed physical and psychological health benefits through contact with the natural environment and they enjoyed having new and varied sensory experiences. Problems with accessing the countryside included transport issues, costs of visiting and lack of knowledge of available facilities.

Research was commissioned by Forestry Commission to identify physical, social, cultural and attitudinal barriers (Burns et al., 2008). It was conducted in seven forests in England, Scotland and Wales and included people with physical impairment, learning disability, mental health issues and sensory impairment. The research found that disabled people valued woodlands and wished to have

access to them. Disabled people felt that woodlands and the wider countryside were beneficial for health and well-being, social inclusion and identity. These spaces were used to meet others and enjoy company but also sometimes to get away from other people. Those involved in the research suggested that the barriers they experienced in accessing woodlands were not so much related to their physical impairments but to external issues such as the provision of suitable information and appropriate facilities.

A study by Henderson (1995) in the United States of women with physical disability found that the impact of a given disability depended on the nature of the disability, whether the disabled person had taken on board the traditional role expected of a disabled person and the reaction of other non-disabled people. The research found that the disabled women tended to have less free time, a lack of opportunities and choices and often felt a certain amount of dependency on others as they needed assistance in particular aspects of their lives.

In Denmark many of the state forests have facilities to enable access for mobility impaired people. The Danish Forest and Nature Agency provides details online where people can see what disability facilities are available at that forest sites. In Sweden the 'Green Staircase' initiative is targeted at the long term unemployed and those with disabilities. Participants get involved in activities in the forest and are supported in assessing how they can get back into work. The project is based on the idea that working with nature is rehabilitating .

BARRIERS TO ACCESSIBILITY FOR DISABLED GROUPS

A recent synthesis of existing qualitative and quantitative research found that the key barriers to accessing woodlands for disabled groups included the following:

- Woods were not always seen as safe
- Lack of facilities such as appropriate information
- Mobility reasons making it difficult to get around on site
- No car to reach a specific site
- Site too far away
- Not enough information available to allow forward planning.

Lack of access to, access on, and information about sites are key barriers for disabled respondents who often need to plan visits in advance. Transport issues are also prominent as many disabled

people do not have access to a car and find public transport difficult. Stiles, gates, toilets and other forest-based facilities and features can also be unsuitable for wheelchair and scooter users. Cold can also act as a barrier with many disabled feeling the cold more than others. Some respondents voiced concerns about other forest users, for example, fear of cyclists whom they might not hear or see very well and who sometimes pass them quickly and too close for comfort. Some respondents talked about feeling awkward because they feel that they are perceived as not belonging in woodlands.

Disabled respondents particularly emphasised the need for much more detailed information about access and facilities, preferably supported with photographs, so that they could choose appropriate woodlands and plan their visit.

‘What is a waste of time is just going out in the countryside with your scooter and hoping to do a ramble. 90% of the time you won’t be able to. You’ve got to know where to go, and that information, a database of accessible places is hugely needed’.

There are concerns that organisations trying to respond to people with disabilities have to great a focus on physical impairments rather than other types of disability, too strong a focus on people’s condition and not enough on finding out what they want and enabling that to happen. It is suggested that a culture of fear is being created through constant references to health and safety issues.

FOREST MANAGERS UNDERSTANDING

Research has been undertaken in Scotland to understand forest managers’ knowledge and skills related to disability accessibility (Bell et al., 2007). The research found that there was awareness within the forestry sector of the need to promote disabled access however knowledge of the DDA was not high and managers felt the need for advice on a range of issues such as the most useful ways to approach and involve disabled people and organisations that focus on disability. Managers suggested that key obstacles to their carrying out more activity to promote accessibility for disabled groups included finance and the staff resources needed to make changes as well as the potential physical limitations at particular forest sites that might limit what facilities can be provided.

Generally, recreation managers were not aware of how important information is to disabled users and how they use this to assess whether they can access a site and what to expect when they reach a forest site. When thinking about and discussing disability forest recreation managers often think about wheelchair users rather than people with other types of disability such as hearing, mental illness or visual impairment.

However, some forest sites are making wider provision such as the Mamhead Sensory Trail at Haldon Forest Park in Devon that provides Braille and tactile maps for those with visual impairment. Some forests also provide all terrain mobility buggies known as 'trampers', these are specifically designed for off road use on beaches and in forests and the countryside. Managers also felt that they needed more training and guidance for how to make spaces more inclusive for the disabled.

DESIGNING APPROPRIATE SPACES FOR DISABLED PEOPLE

A sensory rich trail design framework was produced for the Victoria Government in Australia, after a twelvemonth project of research and consultation was undertaken to find out the needs of users and managers (Nillumbik, undated). An important aspect of design is to involve managers, designers, potential users and other stakeholders in the process so that a greater understanding and awareness is reached of needs and potential opportunities. The framework highlights the need to carry out sensory mapping of a site to assess what it has to offer in terms of touch, sound, sight and smell and then seating, planting and access design can be planned in relation to this.

In Britain the Sensory Trust focuses on making places

more accessible for everyone regardless of age, disability or background and this includes a focus on design of spaces for different groups of people. In the Trust's 'Making Connections' (Price and Stoneham, 2001) publication they divide disabled groups into the following as a check list for design requirements and design suitability:

- Semi-ambulant (mobility impaired) people
- Wheelchair users
- People with sensory impairment
- People with learning difficulties
- Elderly

They suggest that when designing accessible places consideration needs to be given to on site accessibility, interpretation, and offsite access. Community involvement is also important in designing suitable spaces that meet local need.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Research highlights that it is important to understand that disabled groups are not homogenous and there can be significant differences between groups. Obstacles that prevent access need to be

addressed; one obstacle can be overcome however two or more obstacles can become too much for disabled people to surmount. Daniels et al. (2005) note the importance that disabled travellers place on the actions and attitude of others. For example, the willingness of staff to push and pull wheelchair users along a forest trail is said by one respondent to have “made the difference between just ‘looking’ and actually ‘seeing’ what was around us.” Better understanding is required of disabled groups needs when accessing woodlands, it is also important to know more about understanding of disability issues, and how to design spaces suitable for a range of people. Outreach work between forest staff and local disability organisations is one important way of providing new opportunities for disabled people. Providing appropriate training for forestry professionals is important that takes into account specific forest and recreation issues.