

GREEN SPACES MATTER - REALLY, REALLY MATTER

This latest article by our volunteer contributor, Lizzie Bannister, examines how the “growth agenda” for our region needs to take seriously the conservation of green spaces and ensure formal and informal access to it. The article has a central premise that mental health, in particular, benefits from green spaces.

The Growth Agenda

No-one living in the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough area can fail to notice how much the population has grown in the last decade or so, simply from the increased amount of housing and traffic. Official figures from Cambridgeshire County Council suggest a population increase from c. 810,000 in 2011 (when the last Census was taken) to 1.4 million by 2036.¹ Even that could be too modest given that Cambridge is an economic powerhouse² with easy access to London, and our universities and established hi-tech and biotech industries proving a huge draw for incoming businesses.

Our region’s villages and market towns are, inevitably, growing too as they provide cheaper housing than Cambridge, albeit with the added costs and inconvenience of out-commuting for many residents. All this local and regional growth means increased pressure on rural land and other green spaces from housing, infrastructure, industrial/commercial developments and so on. Yet successive national and local governments have, historically, been very poor at joined-up thinking on how to manage growth. Although protected to a certain extent by planning laws, too often the countryside and wildlife are viewed as barriers to prosperity and are poorly safeguarded despite the contribution they make to our health.

The Concept of “Natural Capital”

New thinking is starting to happen, however. Before researching this article, I wasn’t familiar with the concept of “natural capital”, but the Government is taking it very seriously³ and it’s popping up in all sorts of publications.⁴ It’s basically about assigning value to aspects of nature. In the case of our region, that includes wetlands, woodlands, grassland, high grade farmland, major rivers, and areas of

¹ <https://opendata.cambridgeshireinsight.org.uk/dataset/cambridgeshire-historic-population-1801-2011>

² <https://www.irwinmitchell.com/ukpowerhouse>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan>

⁴ https://www.anglianwater.co.uk/assets/media/Natural_Capital_Asset

high biodiversity. These aren't just "nice to haves" but the source of a vast range of services that can be categorised as *Provisioning services* (crops, livestock feed, timber, water, medicines); *Regulating services* (water quality, soil fertility, flood defence, carbon sequestration); and *Cultural services* (recreational benefits, health benefits).⁵ In some cases it is possible to quantify the value of these services e.g. agriculture, timber, water abstraction, carbon sequestration and recreation.⁶

Those Vital "Cultural Services"

I can't comment on the Provisioning and Regulating Services, but I do have some expertise - and an absolute passion - for the Cultural Services that our region's natural assets provide to us all. Unlike the relatively new concept of "natural capital", we have known for a long time that using or having a connection with green spaces, from small gardens and parks to the wider countryside, nature and wildlife is good for us in many different ways from recreation and relaxation to learning skills that help us interact with people and the world around us.⁷ The MIND website has an excellent section on the benefits of simply being out in nature, from improved physical health, mood, relaxation, confidence and self-esteem, to reduced feelings of stress or anger, and better access to social interaction opportunities.⁸

Public Health England's latest Health Profile for England report⁹ looks very optimistic on the surface: *As a society, people are living longer – life expectancy in England has reached 79.6 years for men and 83.2 for women and we're healthier at every age group than ever before.* However, the reality is that millions of people are living with physical and mental health problems, some of which could be helped by spending structured and unstructured time in green spaces.

The UK Mental Health Crisis

One in four of us will experience mental health problems at some time in our lives, and mental illness is the single largest cause of disability in the UK.¹⁰ The causes are immensely complex, encompassing bio-chemical process, physical health conditions, unemployment, poverty and debt,

⁵ <http://www.cpier.org.uk/final-report/>

⁶ <http://www.vivideconomics.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Natural-Capital-in-Cam-and-Ely-Ouse-catchment-report.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-profile-for-england-2018/chapter-6-wider-determinants-of-health#fnref:10> see footnotes 9 and 10 on this site

⁸ <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/nature-and-mental-health/#.WRaDWeNw5s> © Mind. This information is published in full at mind.org.uk

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/current-and-future-state-of-nations-health-revealed>

¹⁰ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/five-year-forward-view/next-steps-on-the-nhs-five-year-forward-view/mental-health/>

homelessness and poor housing, childhood and adult violence, trauma, discrimination, isolation, bereavement, and lifestyle factors including work, diet, drugs, alcohol and lack of sleep.

The costs of treating mental health problems run into billions of pounds, let alone the incalculable economic and personal costs to society, individuals and their families. Medication and talking therapies remain the key tools in the clinician's mental health treatment toolbox, but waiting lists for appointments can run into weeks or even months, and little can be done to simultaneously address some of the causes of mental health problems that I have listed above. Thankfully, there are steps that individuals can take to help improve their mood and reduce stress levels.

“Green Care” or “Ecotherapy”

“Green care”, the structured use of nature to help with mental and physical health issues, is gradually becoming more widely used throughout the healthcare system. Government-funded healthcare schemes are being supplemented by those established by commercial and charitable organisations which the NHS can use to reduce demands on its own services. MIND use the term ecotherapy as a catch-all for these services, which include exercise, animal care, horticulture, and conservation.¹¹ In all cases, the programmes are led by trained professionals, are activity-led in a green environment, focus on the natural world, and involve social interactions. They can also be combined with other treatments such as medication, talking therapies, and creative activities.

Springhall Farm, Bottisham and Darwin Nurseries, Cambridge

One type of green care/ecotherapy service is social farms which put farming practices to therapeutic use. I visited our local accredited one, a goat farm called Springhall Farm that sits on 17 acres near Bottisham, to assess what it offered. Springhall Farm's farmers are healthcare workers. They found the setting up process and paperwork challenging, but were well supported by their accreditation body Care Farming UK.¹² The farm set up is very accommodating. Clients and visitors are simply asked to dip their boots upon entering and exiting the farm, and obvious health and safety measures such as hand washing are in place. The entire environment is welcoming, with comfortable amenities including a rustically decorated barn. The experiences of the service users at Springhall Farm definitely match the outcomes that Care Farming UK seek. For example, they enjoyed being in a good working relationship with the farmers and doing meaningful tasks such as caring for and feeding the goats, growing plants and building bird boxes. There is even a goat-meat tasting menu.

¹¹ <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/nature-and-mental-health/about-ecotherapy-programmes/#.W-Rc0meNw5s> © Mind. This information is published in full at mind.org.uk

¹² <https://www.carefarminguk.org/>

The service users gained increased purposefulness and confidence, enhanced their skills including teamwork, increased understanding of rural lifestyles and food production, and improved both mental and physical health. The benefits can be seen when green care/ecotherapy is used as a preventative and treatment measure.

Another local example of the benefits of green care/ecotherapy is Darwin Nurseries in Cambridge, a horticulture project and farm shop where adults with learning disabilities and mental health challenges gain the skills, independence and confidence to take an active role in the community.¹³ The Nursery is listed as one of the therapies on the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough NHS Trust Psychological Wellbeing Service.¹⁴ As with Springhall Farm, both physical and mental health issues are addressed and improved along with social and practical skills, increased self-esteem and employability.

Of course, we need to ensure that there are agreed quality standards against which green care/ecotherapy providers can deliver appropriate therapies. But it's clear that it has the potential to play a huge part in the widely-accepted "whole person" approach to healthcare.

The Global & National Challenge To Protect Nature - and Humanity

At the end of this month (November 2018), 196 member states of the United Nations will send representatives to the Convention on Biological Diversity in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt to discuss the collapse of global ecosystems. As I write this, the executive director of the Convention, Cristiana Paşca Palmer, has warned that the world has to agree a new deal for nature in the next two years or humanity could be facing its own extinction.¹⁵ Ms. Palmer says that people throughout the world must pressure their governments to set ambitious targets by 2020 to protect the insects, birds, plants and mammals that are vital for global food production, clean water and carbon sequestration - those *Provisioning services* and *Regulating services* I mentioned earlier as part of the Concept of "Natural Capital".

In the UK, our precious Green Belt is under pressure of development as never before, not just in our county, but nationally.¹⁶ And the *2018 State of Nature* report by the RSPB makes horrifying

¹³ <http://www.cpft.nhs.uk/Darwinnursery/about-us.htm>

¹⁴ <http://www.cpft.nhs.uk/services/pws/the-therapies.htm>

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/nov/03/stop-biodiversity-loss-or-we-could-face-our-own-extinction-warns-un>

¹⁶ <http://www.cpre.org.uk/resources/housing-and-planning/green-belts/item/4931-state-of-the-green-belt-2018>

reading.¹⁷ As Sir David Attenborough says in the Introduction: *“The stark truth is that far more species are declining than increasing in the UK, including many of our most treasured species. Alarming, a large number of them are threatened with extinction”*. Based on quantitative assessments of the population or distribution trends of 3,148 species, the report shows that, of these, 60% of species have declined over the last 50 years and 31% have declined strongly. Of more than 6,000 species that have been assessed using modern Red List criteria (the highest conservation priority), more than one in ten are thought to be under threat of extinction in the UK. The message is clear: *We should act to save nature both for its intrinsic value and for the benefits it brings to us that are essential to our well-being and prosperity.*

Countryside and Cities

If we care for our countryside, it will continue to care for us in diverse and lasting ways. And cities must do their bit for green spaces, too. Peterborough is ahead of the curve (and certainly miles ahead of Cambridge): planning to be operating as a truly circular city by 2050¹⁸ as a member of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation’s Circular Cities Network.¹⁹ There’s no space to examine this concept here, but do take a look at the sources in the footnotes.

What We Can Do

Within the national “growth agenda”, the pressing needs for adequate housing, infrastructure and industrial/commercial developments, there must also be clear understanding by us all that green spaces matter to everyone and everything. We know from the campaign against single-use plastics that people power works. We can all help to get the message across whenever we can - to national and local government, planning and health authorities, business owners, family and friends - that the green spaces around us are not just a vast potential untapped building plot but actually essential to human life, health and welfare.

We need to take an interest in local planning applications and oppose those that will damage the landscape and environment. We need to join and actively participate in organisations, like the CPRE, that are dedicated to averting the worst damage to our natural environment and, by extension, to wildlife. We need to educate our children so that they are not alienated from the natural world but understand the precious role it performs for us all.

¹⁷ http://ww2.rspb.org.uk/Images/stateofnature_tcm9-345839.pdf

¹⁸ <http://www.futurepeterborough.com/circular-city/>

¹⁹ https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/assets/downloads/publications/Cities-in-the-CE_An-Initial-Exploration.pdf

We need to be greener than we are now in our everyday lives so that our cumulative efforts help to protect our natural resources for future generations. We need to volunteer in areas that help habitat creation and restoration, and become “citizen scientists” helping to monitor wildlife in our local area. We need to plant more trees, shrubs and flowers and do whatever we can to improve our local environment. If we are experiencing mental health issues, we need to ask our GP about accessing green care/ecotherapy services. Not only will they help to improve your state of health, but increased demand will encourage further land use for health and social care services rather than for yet more building.

Above all, we need to get out as much as we possibly can into our green spaces, whether they are small urban gardens or national parks and enjoy those wonderful, free, life-enhancing *Cultural services*. I can guarantee that whether you are running, walking, sitting, cycling, climbing, on horseback, or just standing and breathing deeply, you will feel more alive, happier, and less stressed than when you closed your front door behind you.

About the author: Lizzie Bannister spent her teenage years on a 4.5 acres smallholding in the middle of the arable Fen landscape. This gave her an abiding love for the countryside, its wildlife, and its intrinsic value to all who live and work in it, and to all who visit it. This love translated into conservation studies to Master’s degree level and, after a career in the NHS, to interning in a landscape partnership programme on a summer placement. Lizzie is one of the most active volunteers in the CPRE Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Branch, offering a broad range of skills from database development, and Twitter, to photography and writing.