

## Ethnographic peer research on access to nature in the countryside

By Maxwell A. Ayamba



Group picture of participants taken during the research at the Longshaw Estates Visitor Centre, Peak District National Park. | Maxwell A. Ayamba

This 'Access to Nature Participant Research Project' was undertaken with 35 participants from Asian Community groups based in Sheffield and Rotherham on a guided health walk at the Moorland Discovery Centre, Peak District National Park on 6 September 2020 when the lockdown was partially lifted. Prior to the walk, the topic was discussed with the group leader and all participants for their consent and willingness to participate.

*'My own connection with nature has always been very strong for as long as I can remember, although looking back on my childhood, nature was never at the forefront of family life. My parents, who were both born and raised in Pakistan and migrated to the UK taught us to respect other non-human beings and to be kind to all creatures. However, the relationship we had with the wild as a family didn't usually extend past a BBC documentary on the TV. Despite this, I was blessed to have been raised in a very green, leafy suburban village on the outskirts of London and spent plenty of time playing outdoors. The area's population was predominantly white and middle class, and I was often (noticeably to me) the only Asian child attending overseas field trips or the after-school guide club Brownies. After completing my Masters' degree in Environmental Management from Sheffield Hallam University and having been exposed to the Peak District National Park, it was only then I discovered that one of my close ancestors also shared my interests and was an avid sand dune ecologist, and another ancestor a professor in forestry. To me, this highlights a feeling that I sense across much of the Asian community - that a strong relationship with nature is resurging, after having skipped the previous generations or two'.*

Noor Khan - British Pakistani Female, aged 29



*Participants on a guided walk in the Moors at the Peak District National Park. | Maxwell A. Ayamba*

This quote, from a participant's 'lived experience' about the British natural environment can be termed a form of 'cultural severance' from the natural environment and appears to resonate predominantly with subsequent generations of British born Asians (see Ayamba, & Rotherham 2014)<sup>20</sup>. Participants involved in this ethnographic study in the Peak Park did make very positive comments when asked about first impressions of the rural countryside environment, attributing values to the area such as 'beautiful', 'calming', 'relaxing' and open space. However, despite these positive comments, most participants admitted they did not have a strong sense of connection with the rural countryside space. As one participant posited, 'trips out to the countryside were more about getting away from the noise in the city than about experiencing nature'. When asked, all participants agreed time spent in nature was only spent with family and/or friends, but none would choose to spend time in nature on their own. They viewed walks in the countryside as an opportunity to strengthen connections with families, rather than with the surrounding wildlife or landscape. Each participant was aware of at least some benefit that walks in countryside spaces were having on their physical and mental health (one labelling it - 'therapeutic'), with each having a great appreciation of the fresh air and the vast landscape which provides that freedom to roam.

However, when discussing the issue of access to the countryside, most participants were unfamiliar of walking routes or how to get to places within the Peak District and would not choose public transport to get there, even if this is available. Some had concerns about safety, fearful getting lost, attacked, fall or not having a bathroom nearby. Participants felt more confident coming out in the countryside with people that look like them because they can walk and talk and share similar experiences and for safety reasons but also felt walking alone can be boring. Participants narrated how majority of Pakistani families in Sheffield were from the rural countryside but lost this cultural connection to the countryside due to migration.

There are no promotional materials and publicity about the English countryside aimed at Pakistani families to create increased exposure to the rural countryside space nor is outdoor information, education and gear targeted at their community. There is also virtually no funding for community groups to enable people from migrant communities to learn about the cultural and ecological history of the English countryside. The participants stated they tend to view attempts by environmental organisations or Local Councils to get them visit the countryside as tokenistic, describing this a box ticking exercise with no real sustained commitment. All were however of the view that it could be beneficial if community groups were to be engaged in debates about how they can be connected to the countryside environment and what activities could be used to attract them.



*Some of the participants can be seen here posing for pictures with cows in the Peak District National Park. | Maxwell A. Ayamba*

In conclusion, from the writer's own perspective on this ethnographic research, highlight barriers with regards to groups classed as minoritized accessing the countryside space and which have in the past been very superficial because the environmental movement in the UK has a chequered history of failing to examine the barriers to ethnic minorities accessing the countryside. After all, the vast majority of BME people reside in urban areas with less than one per cent perhaps in rural areas. Racialised narratives of the UK countryside are all based on the English idyll and Countryfile TV documentaries project a white rural English countryside narrative which has become normalised and accepted and thus seeing Black faces in the countryside is not something that has been written into stories of the British Countryside landscape. Migration history tells us that migrants have tended to live in cities for number of reasons: jobs, education, security, sense of community. The notion of the contested rural space which is the biggest barrier and an important debate to be had, has not received much attention from Government. This is because there is an existing contradiction between Government strategy and the way local host rural communities seek to protect their identities with the power given to them by increased localism policy. This gap in policy

situated in rural racism narrative is a serious political problem which has led to this notion of racialized otherness and the production of rural whiteness. Past and present Government policies have failed to acknowledge how the rural space is more personalised than urban space because in the rural space the personal identities of people and places are brought into

intimate juxtaposition and that complicates belonging in ways that have implications for racialized, ethnicized differences. These historical issues are often overlooked in Government policy frameworks with the ongoing narrative being lack of access in the countryside space facing minorities down to socio-economic and perhaps cultural factors. Another barrier has been how the countryside space has become commodified and how this has led to the erasure of BME people from the countryside space. Issues of racial injustice and lack of BME people's involvement in the environmental discourse have resulted in the alienation of minoritized groups in the countryside space. The UK's environmental movement is dominated by older, large, conservative, preservation-oriented bodies who set the overall environmental agenda with the wealthy and aristocracy playing key roles with some environmental movements headed by Lords and most environmental debates such as access discussed in the House of Lords. The environmental movement and countryside space portray an upper middle-class based political system bias with no platform for minoritized groups to be involved in the discourse around countryside access.



*Participants walking with the rocks in the background or the Moor landscape | Maxwell A. Ayamba*

## About the Author

Maxwell A. Ayamba is a PhD research student in Black Studies, Department of American & Canadian Studies, University of Nottingham, M4C/AHRC.

Maxwell is an environmental journalist who has previously worked as an Associate Lecturer/Research Associate at Sheffield Hallam University. He founded and still coordinates the Sheffield Environmental Movement and was the founder of 100 Black Men Walk for Health Group, which inspired the play 'Black Men Walking'.

