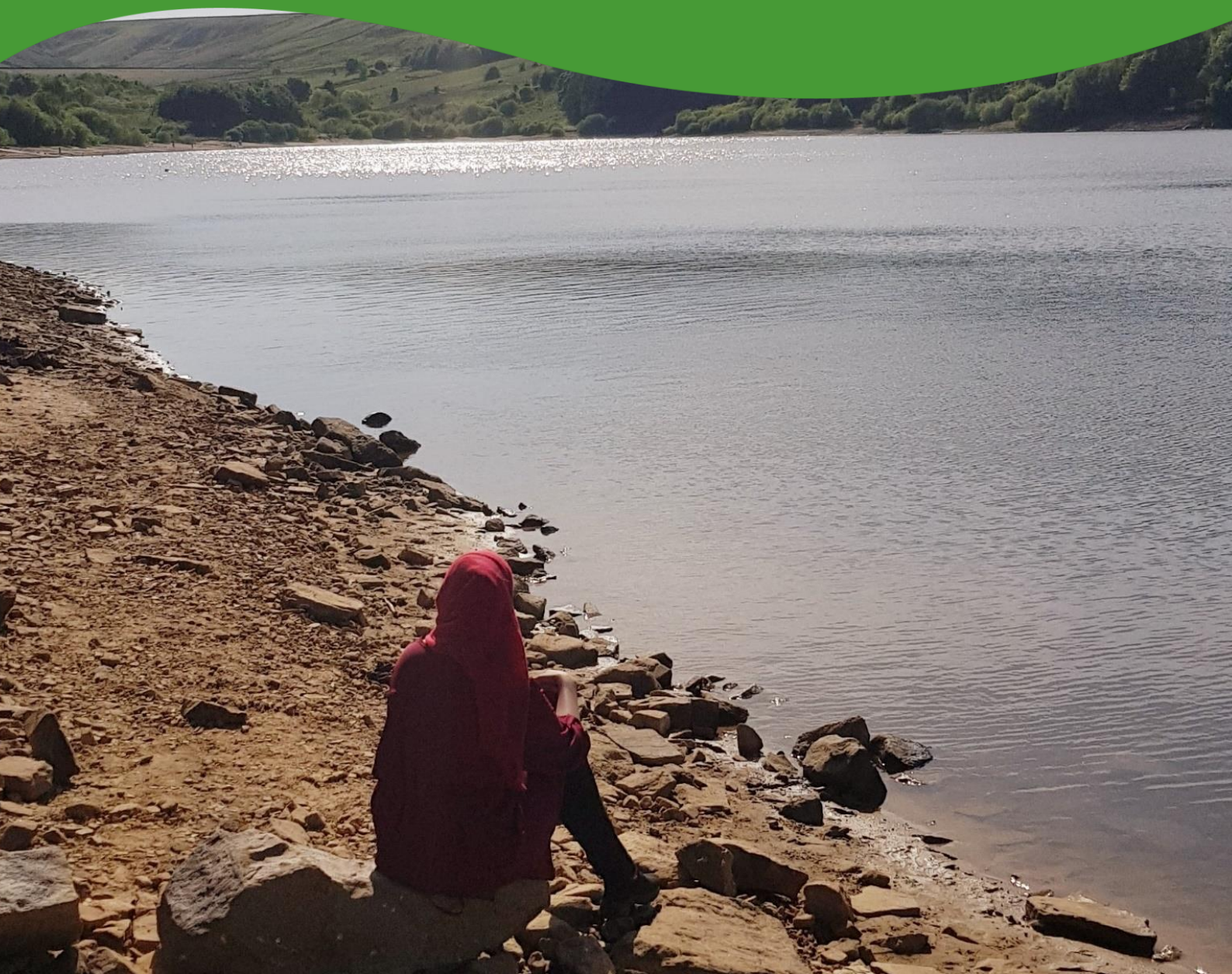
The countryside charity

August 2021

Access to nature in the English countryside

A participant led research project exploring inequalities in access to the countryside for people of colour



Access to nature in the English countryside

A participant-led research project exploring inequalities in access to the countryside for people of colour

At CPRE, the countryside charity we believe firmly in a countryside that enriches all our lives. It is this passion and belief that guides so much of our work at CPRE. Sadly, it is clear that the countryside for some, feels like a luxury they can't access, with research showing huge differences in engagement with nature and the countryside dependent on people's backgrounds and identities.

Inequalities in access to the countryside, from the statistics available, are connected to income, age and disability but are particularly severe when it comes to race. Children from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (identification used in original research) backgrounds are half as likely to visit the countryside than White children.[1]

CPRE wants to understand these issues further, to explore the complex situation around these inequalities and see how our organisation can support greater and more equal access to the countryside. That is why in 2020, we commissioned research looking at access to nature for people of colour that explored related issues of income, class, gender and disabilities.

Facilitated by the New Economics Foundation (NEF), this research took a qualitative approach and instead of employing a team of professional researchers working for NEF, the research team worked with people who have a lived experience of the topic. The group of individuals, all nine people of colour themselves with an interest in the issues surrounding access to the countryside, carried out up to 2 hours dialogue-based interviews with their peers and networks to further explore what access to nature and the countryside meant and why inequalities might exist. Up to 100 hours of dialogue was captured. Some of the group also engage with the topic through their own work with grassroots or local organisations and through their own initiatives, such as podcasts, exploring the topic.

This research project builds upon work already being done in this space by numerous individuals, including the participant researchers themselves, and, often under-resourced, organisations. The research project gleans further insight into the complex situation around intersecting inequalities (e.g race, generation, gender, geography, class, disabilities, health) in access to the countryside but is by no means an extensive summary of the situation around race and access to the countryside. This project serves as a catalyst for further meaningful work in this space and the stories shared are designed to add to the existing narrative. Further details on previous studies and work in this area are summarised in the 'Previous studies' section.

At CPRE, we continue to explore with other organisations, individuals and grassroots groups how we can create a more welcoming countryside that truly enriches all our lives.

These stories and reflections from the researchers provide some insight into the complex situation around race and access to the countryside. We hope they prompt inquiry, questions and collaborations in the readers and listeners.

We are so grateful to the researchers for their time, insight and expertise and look forward to continuing to work together.

[1] Natural England (2019), 'Children and Young People report Analysis of data collected between March 2018 and February 2019', *Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment,* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/828838/Monitor_of_Engagement_with_the_Natural_Environment__MENE__Childrens_Report_2018-2019_rev.pdf

Previous studies

We recognise that this small research project is part of a much wider field of research and on the ground work around access to nature and the countryside for people of colour. In exploring the potential benefits of commissioning research on this topic, CPRE conducted a short literature review, alongside numerous conversations with experts and leaders in this area, and below is a summary of what was gleaned from the literature. This overview of previous studies and ongoing work in this area is by no means exhaustive – indeed the review found that much of the available literature is now several years old, in part because it was limited to exploring what was just freely and publicly available. However, this brief overview should offer some insight into the broader context. We recommend that readers follow the links in the references to explore for themselves.

Inequalities in access - the data

Despite the clear and well documented benefits of engagement with the countryside, it is evident that these benefits are not enjoyed by everyone equally. Data shows that ethnic minorities have on average 11 times less access to greenspace.[2] And, of the time people from BAME backgrounds ((identification used in original research) spend in green spaces, only 15% of it is in the countryside[3] This is compared to 38% for people from white backgrounds[4] For children, we see the same pattern: Of their visits to the natural environment, 20% of children from a BAME background (identification used in original research)[5] visit the countryside compared to 40% of white children[6].

Beyond the numbers

These inequalities are also identified in more qualitative research and explored through on-the-ground projects. Recently, the Landscapes Review coordinated by Julian Glover, featured an in-depth evaluation of lack of diversity in the countryside (albeit limited to National Parks and AONBs)[7]. A particularly poignant quote from the report states:

"We are all paying for national landscapes through our taxes, and yet sometimes on our visits it has felt as if National Parks are an exclusive, mainly white, mainly middle- class club, with rules only members understand and much too little done to encourage first time visitors".

[2] Natural England (2019) Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment – The national survey on people and the natural environment. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/monitor-of-engagement-with-the-natural-environment-headline-report-and-technical-reports-2018-to-2019

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[6] Natural England (2019) Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment – The national survey on people and the natural environment. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/monitor-of-engagement-with-the-natural-environment-headline-report-and-technical-reports-2018-to-2019

[7] Defra (2019) Landscapes review: final report - summary of findings. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/designated-landscapes-national-parks-and-aonbs-2018-review/landscapes-review-summary-of-findings

The findings came from a range of interviews and ethnographies, however it acknowledges itself that the report is just scratching the surface of understanding the lack of representation of certain groups in the countryside. Further understanding can be gained from the work and experiences of the groups working on the ground directly on this issue.

The report 'Capturing Richness', commissioned by the Countryside Agency back in 2003 and conducted by the Black Environment Network, outlines multiple reasons why there is a lack of BAME representation in the countryside, such as economic circumstances, language barriers and lack of transport.[8] The Black Environment Network also collaborated with Natural England in 2013, producing 'Kaleidoscope: Improving support for black, Asian and ethnic communities to access services from the natural environment and heritage sectors' which proposed a 6-year plan on the design and delivery of an network-hub approach on building BAME champions with training and community inreach/outreach.[9]

While the economic and physical barriers are significant (there is an intersection between people in low income bands and people from an ethnic minority), the report - alongside a further review by the Countryside Agency in 2005[10] - also delves much deeper into the cultural and social barriers people of colour perceive to accessing the countryside. In 2007, Dr Jasber Singh and Sabrina Mazzoni developed an Action Research Project 'Building Inclusive Environments' in partnership with Lancashire Youth and Community Services and Arnside and Silverdale AONB.[11] This project recommended an integrated multiple strategy, where all agencies and individuals involved come together with an inclusive approach to tackle access issues as key to the success and sustainability wider community engagement and environmental justice.

One barrier identified was a perception of rural communities as close-knit, white, privileged, older and more conservative than city people, and resistant to change. The associated feeling with this, and backed up by several experiences of those interviewed, is that of being unwelcome. This perception has been explored further in Black Environment Network literature, which highlights the experiences of ethnic minorities feeling as if they are objects of curiosity in a predominantly white countryside space[12]. These experiences were reported to have been exacerbated by feelings of being uncomfortable amid the excesses of wealth in the countryside when often coming from a lower income background and, for example, not being able to take part in buying a souvenir or an ice cream[13].

[8] The Countryside Agency (2003) Capturing Richness. Available at: http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/292346?category=216216

[9] Evison, S., Friel, J., Burt J. & Preston S. (2013) 'Kaleidoscope: Improving support for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities to access services from the natural environment and heritage sectors', Natural England Commissioned Reports, Number 127 http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/file/4631369804152832

[10] The Countryside Agency (2005) "What about us?": Diversity Review evidence – part one Challenging perceptions: under-represented groups' visitor needs (CRN94). Available at: http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/63060

[11] Dr Jasber Singh and Sabrina Mazzoni (2007) Building Inclusive Environments [Please contact the primary author for details on jasbersingh@gmail.com]

[12] Black Environment Network (1998) Access to the Countryside Trips report – Excerpt. Available at: http://www.ben-network.co.uk//uploaded_Files/Ben_1/Ben_file_1_26.pdf

[13] Ibid.

These barriers have been mentioned by others looking into this area more recently, such as Beth Collier, who conducted ethnographic research into the absence of people of colour in green spaces in 2019[14]. She has stated that the reason most people of colour gather in cities is due to a sense of safety in numbers, but that in the countryside 'a sense of vulnerability increases with increased visibility'. Internalised racism has led to perceptions, overt or covert, about people of colour – that they are 'primitive', that they are 'up to no good', that people of colour 'lack interest in or appreciation of nature'.[15]

In addition, Collier has noted that a generational disconnect has appeared as the parents of people of colour often had to worry about other survival considerations when living in the UK, so they have not had their own experiences to pass down to their children: "In this way nature becomes a stranger, while in countries of heritage it was familiar."[16]

The last year or two has seen an upswell in champions of access to nature for people of colour featured in mainstream media including, but not limited to, Mya-Rose Craig (aka Birdgirl), Zakiya Mackenzie, Rhiane Fatinukin of Black Girls Hike, Maxwell Ayamba, Pammy Johal of Backbone CIC, Mohammed Dhalech of Mosiac Outdoors, Dr Anjana Khatwa and Louisa Adjoa-Parker. These advocates, writers and campaigners have added to the narrative present in the research and the expertise gained from on the ground work by the likes of Wild in the City, and helped raise awareness of this complex and systemic problem via mainstream media.

For example, Zakiya Mackenzie, the recent writer in residence for Forestry England, in an interview on BBC Woman's Hour, mentioned that many people of colour who live in cities often do not like to travel into countryside for fears of going alone, in a place they perceive to be quiet and lonely.[17] Rhiane Fatinukin has also featured on Countryfile and in several print media pieces for her work with Black Girls Hike – with some of that media being a negative backlash to the issues discussed. Maxwell Ayamba also recently featured on Joanna Lumley's *Home Sweet Home* on ITV, where the two of them discussed access to the countryside and race on a walk in the Peak District.

Many projects, of huge importance, have and continue to make significant progress in tackling this issue by organising countryside trips for people of colour, such as the Peak District Mosaic, or Wild in the City. The impacts of these group-led projects is hard to underestimate – as one attendee of a trip organised by Wild in the City mentioned, "'Being with other people of colour made all the difference. I had tried to join a walking group at my university but it just didn't feel enjoyable – I felt uncomfortable being the only black person there and really felt I had to water myself down to fit in with the stereotypical "outdoorsy" crowd."[18]

Funding and the role of established countryside organisations

[14] Collier (2019) Black Absence in Green Spaces. Available at: https://theecologist.org/2019/oct/10/black-absence-green-spaces
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] BBC Woman's Hour (2020) Edith Eger, Breaking Relationship Patterns, Taking up Boxing at Fifty. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000dq1r
[18] Collier (2019) Black Absence in Green Spaces. Available at: https://theecologist.org/2019/oct/10/black-absence-green-spaces

Prevalent in much of the literature and discussions around this issue are references to how limited and short-term funding holds progress back.[19] Despite the data on inequalities being largely consistent over the decades it has been measured for (for reference see Capturing Richness[20], a report from the Countryside Agency, and the 'What About Us' Diversity Review from Natural England), official efforts to tackle this systemic issue have been often piecemeal and lacking in long-term thinking, leaving the many grassroots projects, groups and individuals working to increase representation of certain groups in the countryside without a significant platform or a sustainable source of funding. There has been a gap between established, better funded countryside and access bodies and this grassroots work. Inequalities in access has not featured as enough of a priority for predominantly white, able-bodied, middle-class organisations like CPRE and we recognise the power imbalance and the perpetuation of inequalities this creates.

As a result, while the desire can be there, the means is often not. A self-reinforcing barrier arrives – less people of colour are able to access the countryside, further cementing the perception of the countryside as lacking ethnic diversity and thus an unwelcoming space. A general lack of sustained funding and the absence of a broader conversation about lack of diversity (or even prioritising of it) in the sectors that purport to represent the countryside has continued to fuel this low representation of ethnic minorities in accessing the countryside.

Recently as well, Mya-Rose Craig has joined others in challenging the lack of diversity in the environment/conservation sector, an issue repeatedly identified as a barrier to ethnic diversity in the countryside. This has long been the case and been made clear to the sector, including by Judy Ling Wong of the Black Environment Network over 20 years ago[21]. Evidently a commitment to change from the sector, of which CPRE is a part, has been slow or non-existent.

It is in this existing context that the scope of the participant led research was drawn up and it is into this space that the stories and narratives presented in this overview will go, as well as the continuing discussions that stem from the project.

[19] Defra (2019) Landscapes review: final report - summary of findings. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/designated-landscapes-national-parks-and-aonbs-2018-review/landscapes-review-summary-of-findings

[20] Countryside Agency (2003) Capturing Richness. Available at: http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/292346?category=216216

[21] Black Environment Network (1998) People and Environment in Multicultural Britain. Available at: http://www.ben-network.co.uk//uploaded_Files/Ben_1/ben_file_1_1.pdf

Overview of research

CPRE commissioned NEF to conduct meaningful and sensitive participatory research into racial inequalities in access to nature in the English countryside. The research project supports CPRE's organisational strategy to widen access to the countryside and create a 'Countryside for all'.

Taking a participatory approach and by combining NEF's skills in research methodologies with the expert insights of those with lived experience of inequality, the research has increased the evidence base and will add to the narrative on the structural barriers to accessing nature. Through peer research methods, a dialogue with relevant communities was developed, building a knowledge base to inform policy and practice, as well as future research.

There are a number of important, grassroots and small organisations who work to overcome racial barriers to accessing the countryside. While often under-resourced, these organisations have a wealth of knowledge and expertise. By working with representatives from some of those organisations, our research project is building on this and seeks to begin filling a gap in knowledge within the more established, often predominantly white, nature and countryside sector.

Research process

The cohort was identified through word of mouth; connections through existing networks in this space; and a call out on the Facebook network 'People of Colour in Nature'. Two training sessions were held: one to introduce basic research skills and ethical considerations; the second for the group to decide on the themes they were interested in exploring, and how to approach the research process. These themes included: health and wellbeing; safety; feelings and emotions; community; gender; identity; distinction between urban and country; motherhood and nature; commodification of nature; philosophy of nature; preparation and planning; relationship - reconnection and disconnection; land and power; access (getting there and getting access); equipment; information and experiences of racism. They were selected through dialogue on how to capture a holistic view on people's relationship and access to nature.

The research itself was conducted by the participant researchers from August to October 2021. An analysis session was held in two parts. The first part, of two hours, involved a discussion on what researchers wished to get out of the four hours of analysis workshops, a reflection on the research process and window for participants to highlight their findings. The second session of two hours, supported the group to identify the research limitations, broader aims for this work and more immediate actions.

Independent to NEF and CPRE, participant researchers wanted to further meaningfully engage in their 100+ hours of stories, through listening-based reflective analysis to relate their findings back to their pre-research themes. This process was designed as 6 two hours sessions: two sessions to share their findings and individual researchers observations; a session to contextualise the stories with intersectional nuance; a session to share their work-related experiences and change-making efforts in the environment sector; a session to shape principles on how this research is used, learning from the stories and each other's experiences of change-making efforts; and finally, a session to imagine creative ways to present the research, drawing on their collective creative skills (ranging from writing, poetry, art, media makers).

Due to COVID-19 disruptions on the lives of researchers, this process could not go ahead. This process halted after the early sessions where a few of the researchers had the opportunity to meaningfully share their findings to the group. The prospect of engaging in a collective analysis to create a creative-based collective report, an intention originally set out for the project as designed by CPRE and NEF, was unable to be achieved. However, the participant researchers have individually collated their insights and stories using chosen creative methods.

The stories and insights shared in the outputs were produced in the months following. Not all of the researchers produced outputs due to other time commitments.

This research was designed to be a catalyst and discussions continue in the researchers' own networks, and with CPRE, on how we can remove the hurdles to accessing the countryside for people of colour. The themes from the research, the broader learnings about a participant led approach to this work and the ideas generated for next steps, inform these discussions.

Findings and themes

The research was deep, qualitative research and so the richness will come from exploring the stories and lived experiences shared through the outputs. Some of the themes that arose from the research includes:

- Experiences of racism – impact on safety and feelings of fear in rural areas. For instance, experiences of racism in rural areas, or indeed urban areas, can create fear around being alone or with smaller groups in a remote area and away from the safety of home.
- Intersectional issues of gender, class and age (generational differences). Many of the researchers reflected on how gender but also age and income can create different barriers and different experiences with nature.
- Mental health and the importance of connecting with nature for wellbeing came out strongly in the research. It was also discussed how a disconnection from nature negatively impacts mental health.
- Loss of heritage, including proximity to nature in country of origin. Many of the stories shared highlighted the close connections people had to nature in their countries of origin but how they were not able to form the same connections here.
- Lack of information, transport and funding. Information on access to the countryside, including about transport, is often only available in English or not targeted towards communities of colour and funding for outreach and community work to tackle that issue is few and far between.
- Lack of visibility for ethnic communities' stories. The countryside and nature sectors are predominantly White and so there remains a lack of visibility of ethnic minority stories and representation, which would work to make people feel more welcome in these spaces.

Potential next steps

This research was designed to build on and contribute to the work already being done by a number of grassroots and local organisations and initiatives. As such the ideas for next steps, generated in the analysis sessions, are a vital outcome from this work.

Some of the ideas generated around where next for this work in general that could be taken up by CPRE, the researchers and their networks or organisations, or other countryside and nature bodies are:

- Setting up a commission to explore solutions to access to nature and the countryside in more detail. This is an idea that CPRE are exploring with partners and taking an iterative approach to.
- An advisory group for charities wanting to work in this space. This suggestion could feed into sector wide work such as that being undertaken by the umbrella body Wildlife and Countryside Link on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and their research on racial inclusion in the sector.
- Work with local authorities as well as national landscape bodies (National Park authorities for instance) on how they advertise, promote or develop access to natural areas within their

boundaries. This could be taken up on a local level and indeed some of the researchers are looking at the importance of this in their communities.

- Sponsorship trips for family and friends. Larger charities and smaller access groups could work to deliver sponsored trips as a way of providing that first, crucial opportunity for people to connect with and fall in love with the countryside.
- Connecting with preventative health experts and looking at social prescribing options as a way of promoting access to nature, and means of accessing the countryside, to people of colour. *Recommendations from health experts could be really valuable for providing information to communities who are not targeted by countryside adverts or information.*
- Connecting with food growing and permaculture programmes. Food and food growing was discussed in the research as one of the ways people who had migrated to England connected with nature in their countries of origin and so diversifying food growing and permaculture programmes would aid greater access to nature in a way that appeals to more people.
- People of Colour right to roam campaign. With the growing campaign for a greater right to roam in the countryside and the expansion of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, it was discussed how a people of colour led campaign around this could see more people feeling they have a stake in the future of the countryside and ensuring that people of colour are also seen as spokespeople for our landscapes.

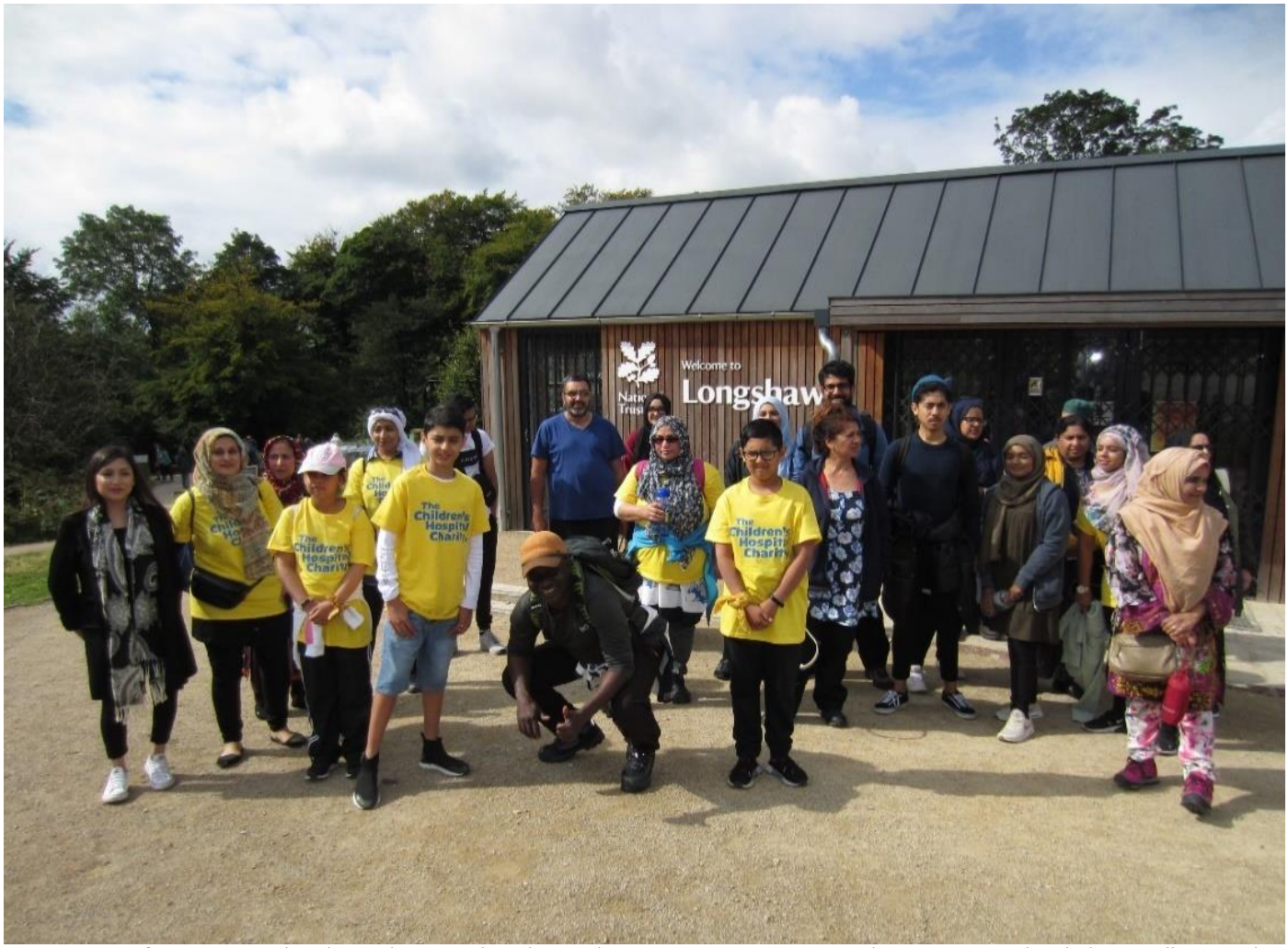
Reflections, Learning and Evaluation

Participant-led qualitative research process is essential to any access to nature work. During the research, there were many lessons and reflections on improving the supporting infrastructure for participant-led research including how the findings and researcher's field-based and lived knowledge could be more meaningfully engaged with to initiate the much-needed change. A full evaluation, with the participants, to explore the experience and project design process is intended to take place when the participants are able to do so (as described previously COVID-19 and other personal reasons have meant some researchers have had to step back). This will be essential for the curation of future peer-led research by CPRE and NEF, as well as, it's hoped, other organisations. Serayna Keya Solanki, one of the peer-led researchers will be contributing to this.

Stories and insights from the research project

Ethnographic peer research for CPRE, the countryside charity

By Maxwell A. Ayamba

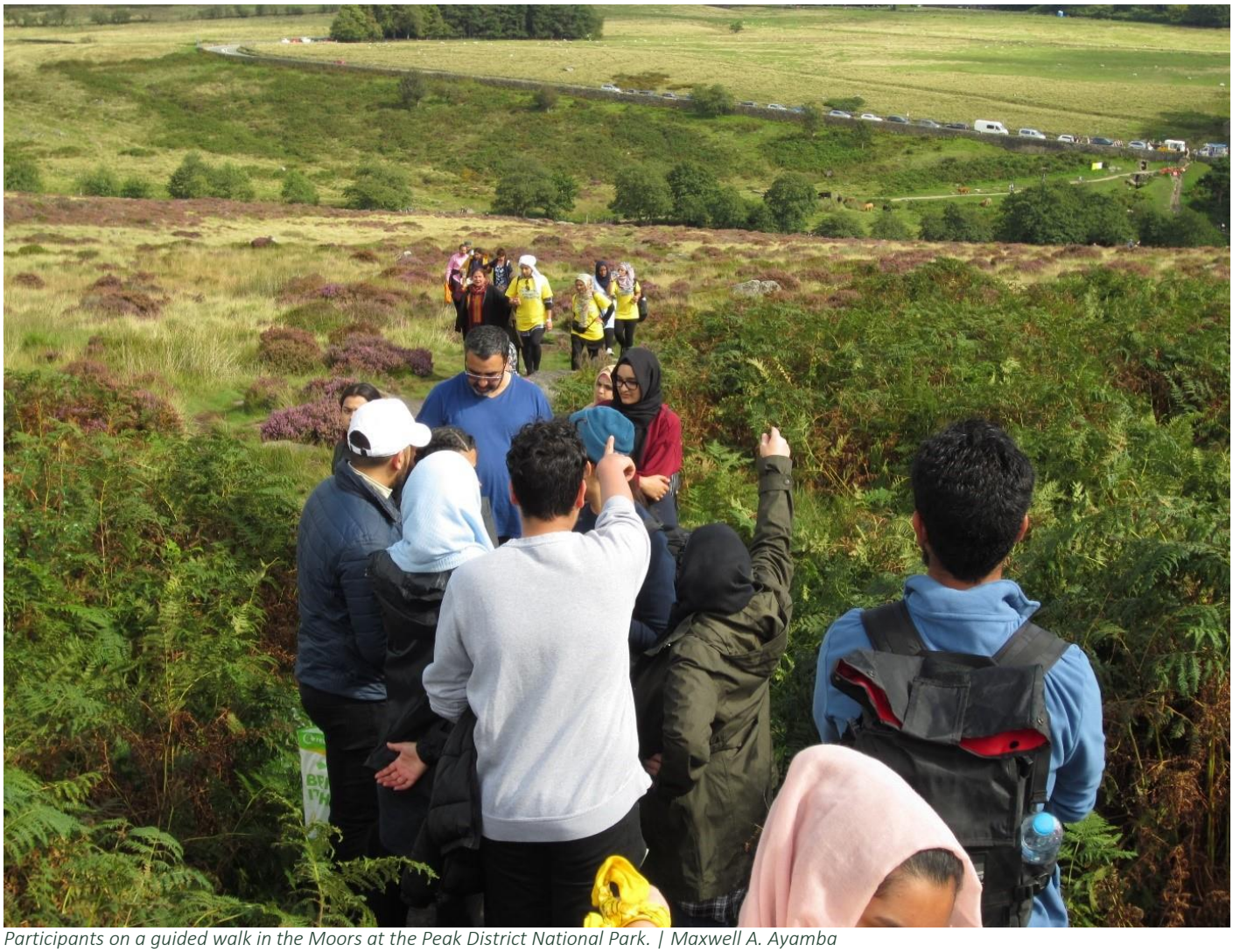


Group picture of participants taken during the research at the Longhaw Estates Visitor Centre, Peak District National Park. | Maxwell A. Ayamba

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



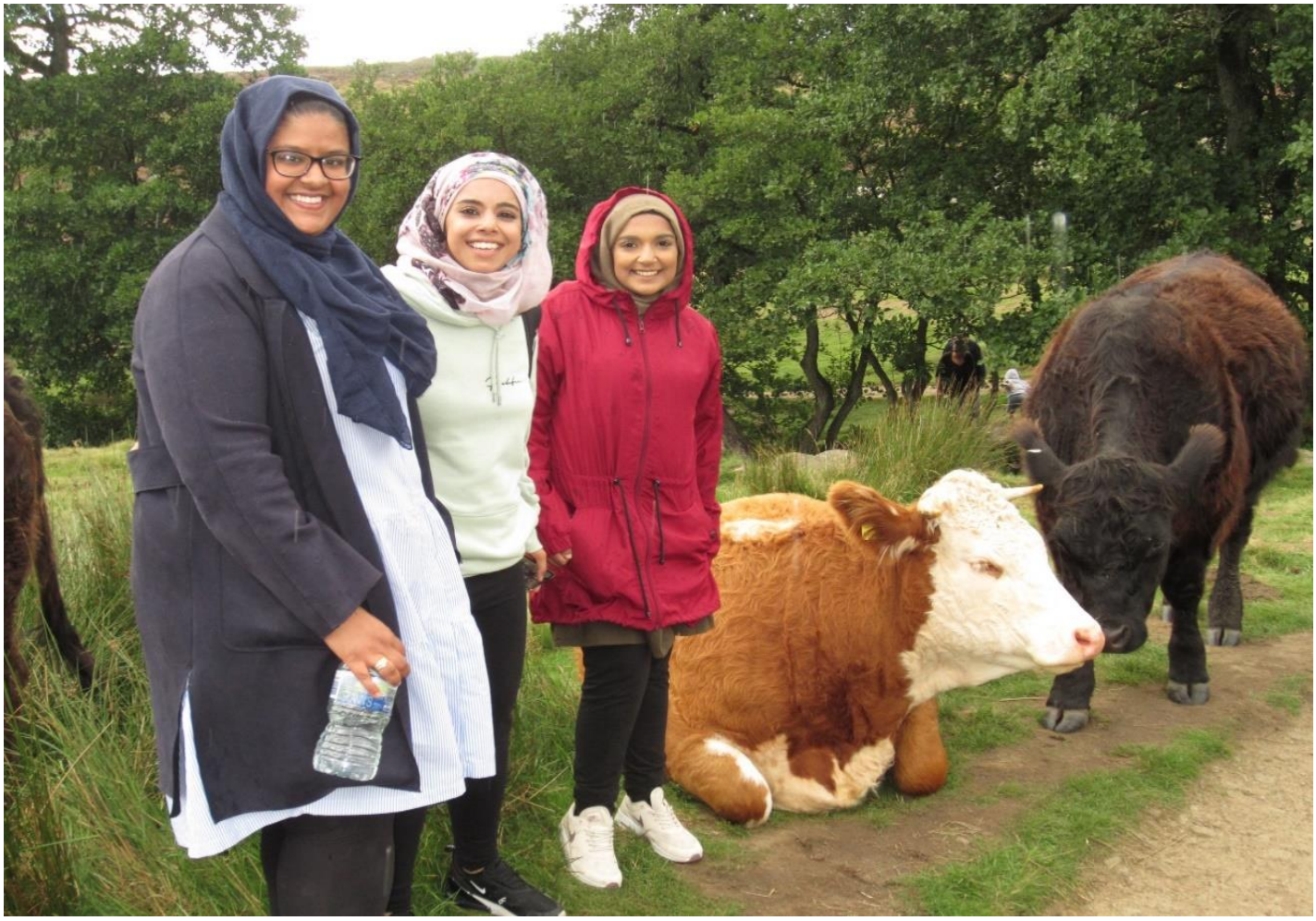
Participants on a guided walk in the Moors at the Peak District National Park. | Maxwell A. Ayamba

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)[22]. Participants involved in this ethnographic study in the Peak Park did make very positive comments when asked about first

[22] Ayamba, M.A., & Rotherham, I.D. (2014). Exploring the cultural severance of English Black & Ethnic Minorities from nature In: Rotherham, I.D., Agnoletti, M., and Handley, C (eds.) The End of Tradition? Wildtrack Publishing, UK

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.

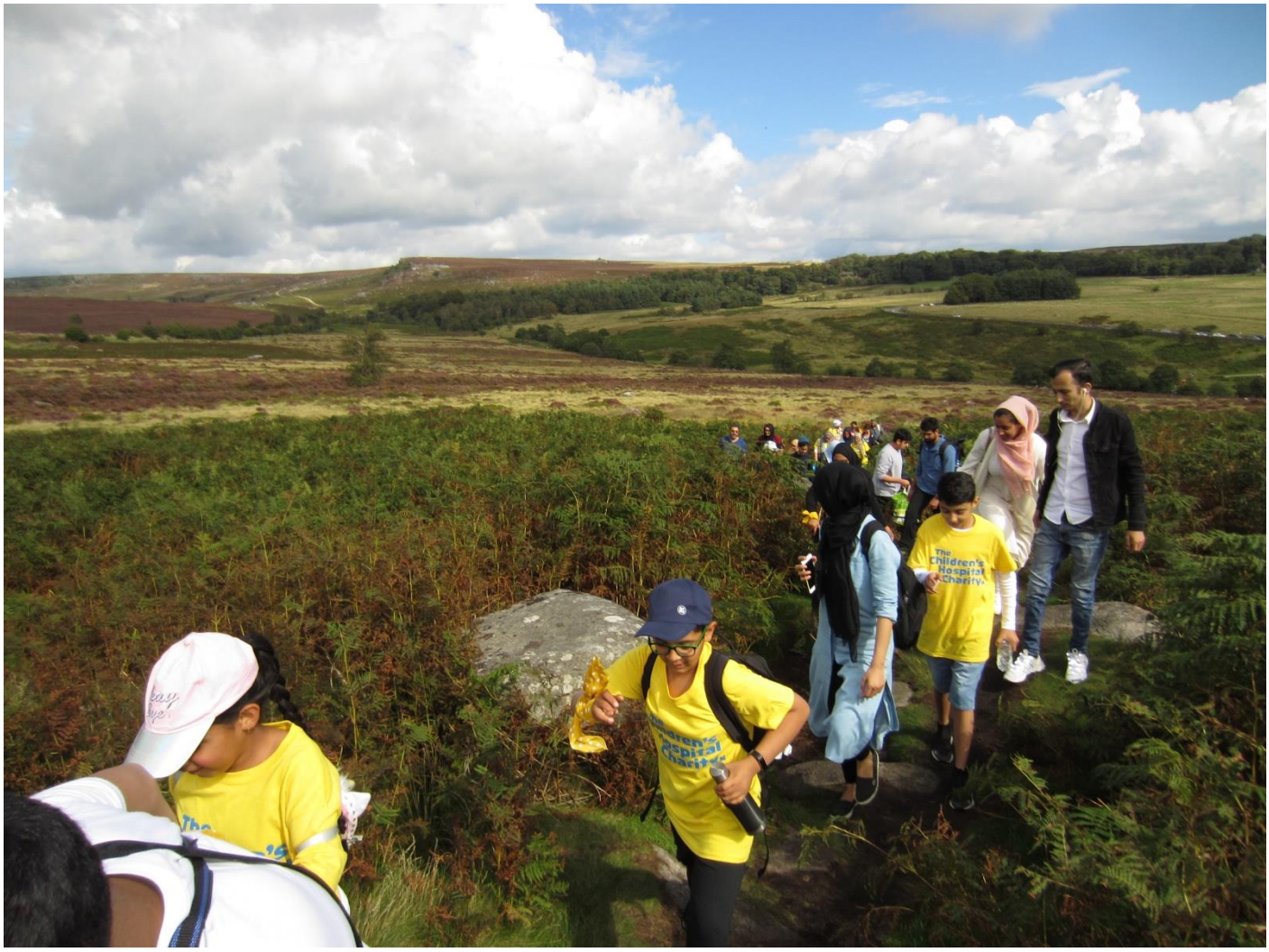
However, when discussing the issue of access to the countryside, most participants were unfamiliar of walking routes or how to get to places within the Peak District and would not choose public transport to get there, even if this is available. Some had concerns about safety, fearful getting lost, attacked, 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.



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

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.



Participants walking with the rocks in the background or the Moor landscape | 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.

The invisible barriers that hold people back from enjoying the countryside

By Sarah Hussain

The scent of fresh green leaves, tall evergreen trees, the sound of birds tweeting, breathtaking landscape views; it's enough to invite even those who claim not to be close to nature. Who wouldn't want to roam the Yorkshire Moors, or visit the picturesque Ingleton Waterfalls Trail? But what might to some seem like a day of escapism does not quite evoke the same feeling for everyone; there is a list of factors for some to consider before deciding to go.

I had never truly reflected on this until I was asked by a friend how often I went for walks – and where did I like to go? I fell embarrassingly quiet and had to think for a few seconds before responding, naming only a few places. I was then asked if I wanted to go on a walk at Hebden Bridge, to which I quickly responded: 'I'd love to.'

But the truth is that I began to feel a little anxious at the thought of going and had to question why. I started to realise my experiences of visiting such places had made me feel weary because I was continually met with cold stares that gave the message: 'What the hell are you doing here?'

Of course, nobody said it out loud. For someone travelling across the country freely without ever being made to feel like they don't belong, this may come as a shock, but it is frustrating to have your lived experiences doubted.

Further research

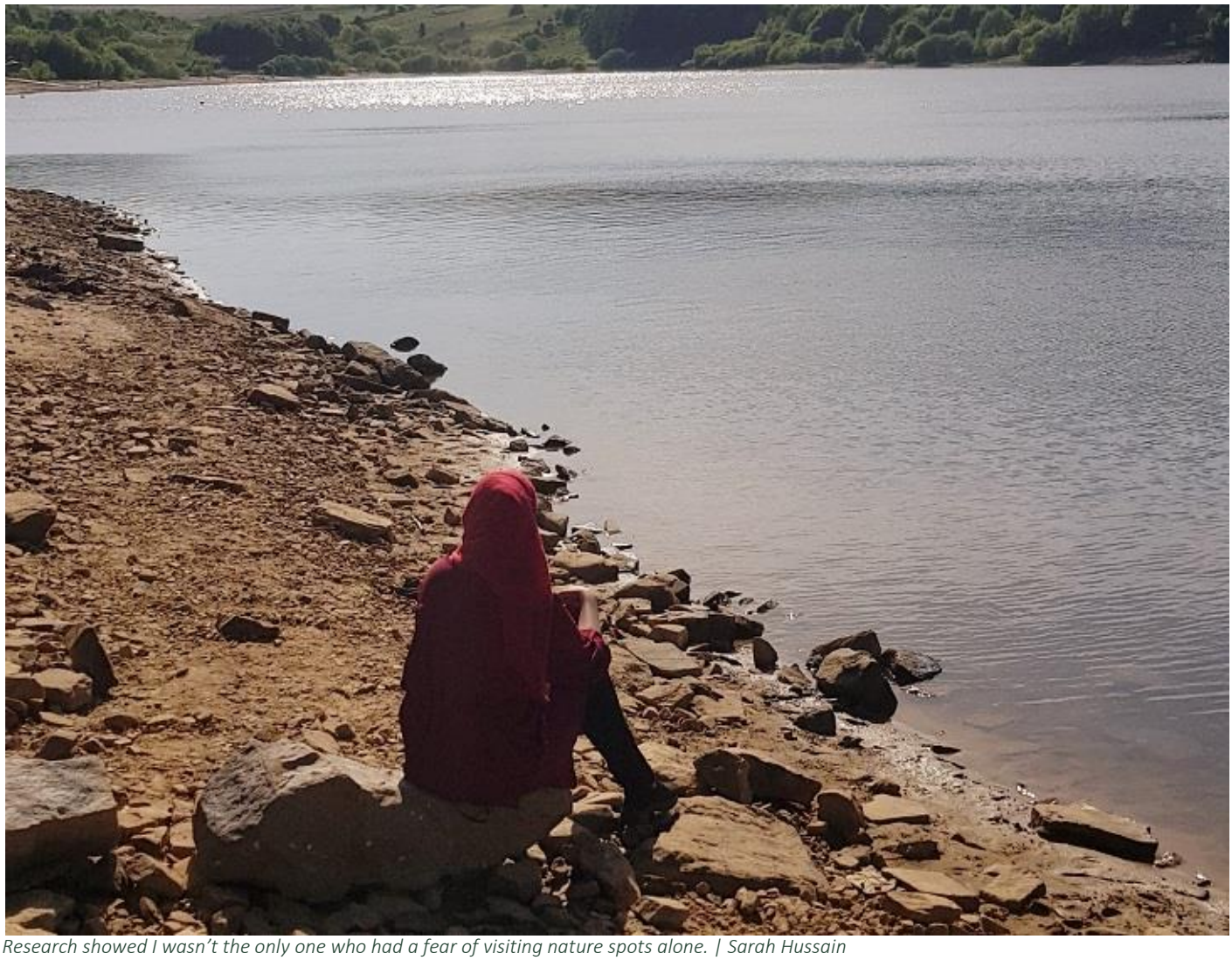
Having the opportunity to be part of a research project with CPRE that looked at the barriers to accessing nature, I wanted to focus primarily on women of colour because I knew my experiences were not unique. Through discussions with other women, I found I wasn't the only one who had fear of visiting nature spots alone.

I interviewed a range of women of colour from different backgrounds and what I came to learn is that they had all experienced similar feelings of 'fear' due to those spaces not being welcoming. When asked 'how often do you access nature?' nearly all the women answered, 'Not as much as I'd like to.' There were many reasons for this response, but what really stood out for me was the amount of thought that went into actually going. What might seem like a simple walk for many, involved a short risk assessment for these women.

The visibly Muslim women explained how they would have to consider what they wear and try to dress in a more westernised fashion to make their white British counterpart feel more comfortable. One woman said: 'I even change the way I wear my scarf to a turban style and, honestly, people seem more at ease.'

Another woman explained how she would never go at all when she wore a face veil. I could resonate with what they were saying because I too consider what I wear when I plan to go for a walk further from home.

Anything but black seems appropriate; the more colourful the better. Some of you might wonder why. It's because people feel uneasy around Muslim women who wear black as all media representations are negative.



Research showed I wasn't the only one who had a fear of visiting nature spots alone. | Sarah Hussain

For me, having to conform to western dress in order to be accepted makes me furious, but it seems an attitude groups of white British people have adopted. I can't help wonder how many English traders wore a kurta when ravaging through the forests of the Himalayas.

Some might say, who cares if you get a few stares? Wear what you want! But you don't want to attract unwanted negative attention. With videos appearing in our feeds showing Muslim women being pushed into moving trains, safety is critical and, in recent years, statistics have shown that it is women who have been an easy target.

Safety in numbers

However, it wasn't just Muslim women as other women of colour, too, explained their apprehensions about going out on walks. Most expressed wanting to keep closer to home where they knew it was safe, so visited parks, rather than roaming further out of town.

One woman spoke about 'those' spaces not ever being welcoming since her parents first arrived in England. I wanted to understand this better because a lot of Black, Asian and minorities live in urban areas rather than living out in the countryside, but they come from rural villages. Why had they never accessed any of the nature spots that helped them feel closer to home?

Many women of colour felt they could only walk where they felt safe. | CPRE

I spoke to a first-generation lady who came from a Pakistani village and she explained that when she arrived, she had to get on with factory work and would never have known where to go. I asked her if she missed living surrounded by open fields and cooking fresh food. 'Of course,' she said, 'but it was different when we first arrived and we had to stay where it was safe.'

A lost connection with nature

I felt sad after hearing this as I realised that the connection with nature had been lost through generations as there was no access for these women. One interviewee also mentioned her frustration at not being able to enter scenic private land and her disgust of stately homes that had been built on the back of colonisation.

'We would love to live out there,' said one woman, 'but that's never going to happen.' I asked, 'why?'

'Well there are no facilities for our people.'

Then it made sense; people feel safe where they see people who look like them being accepted. There has never been any attempt at making these places more welcoming.

Right back from when our grandparents arrived here, there was no attempt to make those places inclusive, almost as if those spaces were reserved for white British middle-class folk. It has always felt like a no-go area, so even though a lot of people who go out to these places are actually lovely and friendly, people from ethnic minorities are not given a chance to experience that due to fear built up through a history of structural racism in this country.

People get defensive when you bring up race and I have heard the 'don't talk identity politics' counter-argument, but the sad truth is, for those of us who have to make our day-to-day choices informed by our race and gender, we cannot stop talking about it because it makes people feel uncomfortable.

Unless, we don’t acknowledge that people are feeling this apprehension, the situation won’t change. The natural land should be accessible for everyone and we need to work together to make these spaces more inclusive.

Access to Nature

By Frederique Lanoix

Frederique shared the stories of the people she spoke to as bonus episodes on '!Visible', her podcast project. Describing the project, Frederique states:

'The purpose of the podcast project '!Visible' is to enable those who suffer from Anxiety & Depression to have a platform to be heard, to voice their views and opinions, and help them to come out of their isolation. By letting us tell our own stories it will educate and empower others, help us build confidence in a safe way, help us connect to a larger narrative, and increase the representation available of these misunderstood conditions. Mainstream conversations about anxiety and depression are often not led by those of us who currently have this, and do not consider the intersectional and diverse experiences and challenges that people face.'

You can hear her discussions with Musah, Julia and Ciril and William on '!Visible' website: http://www.ivisible.co.uk/episodes/

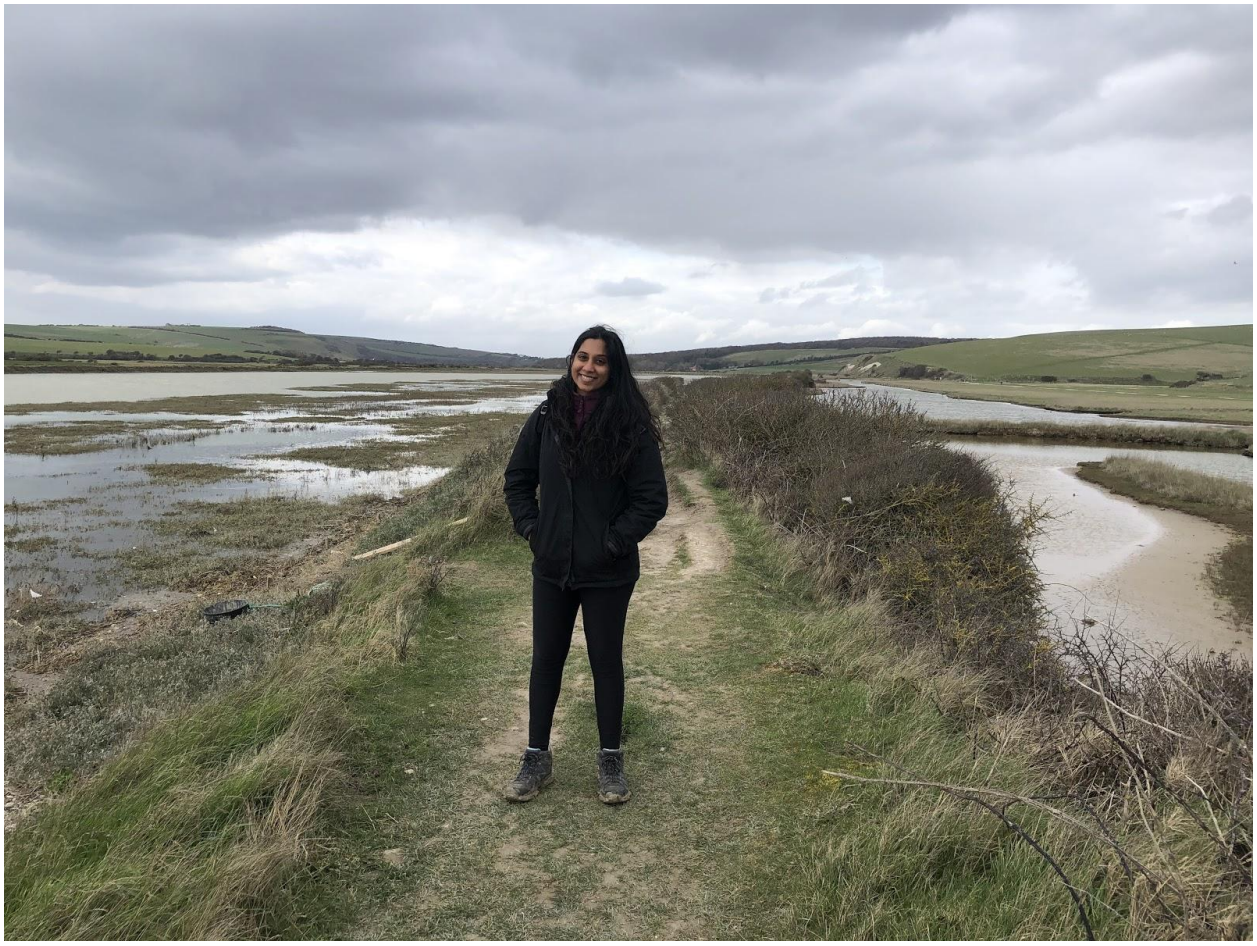
Countryside Dreams in Leicester's South Asian communities

In February 2020, right before lockdown, I caught the Thameslink down to Brighton from Finsbury Park. I hopped on the 12X for 45 minutes to Seven Sisters Country Park Stop, to wander down to the shores of Cuckmere Haven and over the hills to Birling Gap. Seven Sisters Road to Seven Sisters Cliffs.

The ocean was calling and so was the fresh air on the top of the cliffs. I remember the squeamish feeling of walking on large pebbles, when the cold shore rushes through and over my toes. I desired to splash sea water on my face and feel the gentle salty sting. It always takes a while to settle into nature's forces, to accept that the wind now has control over my hair.

When I sat near the cliff edge to look out at sea, I muse on all the possible lost non-English words to describe the sun that reflects a pathway over the sea. After a while, I'm consumed with delight and gratitude for being able to be here, amongst the satin glazed wetlands, chalk-tinted waves that crash into the cliffs and in shared space with ravens (and other dwelling non-human creatures). The puddles I would usually walk around are intentionally stomped through.

I was out and just being.



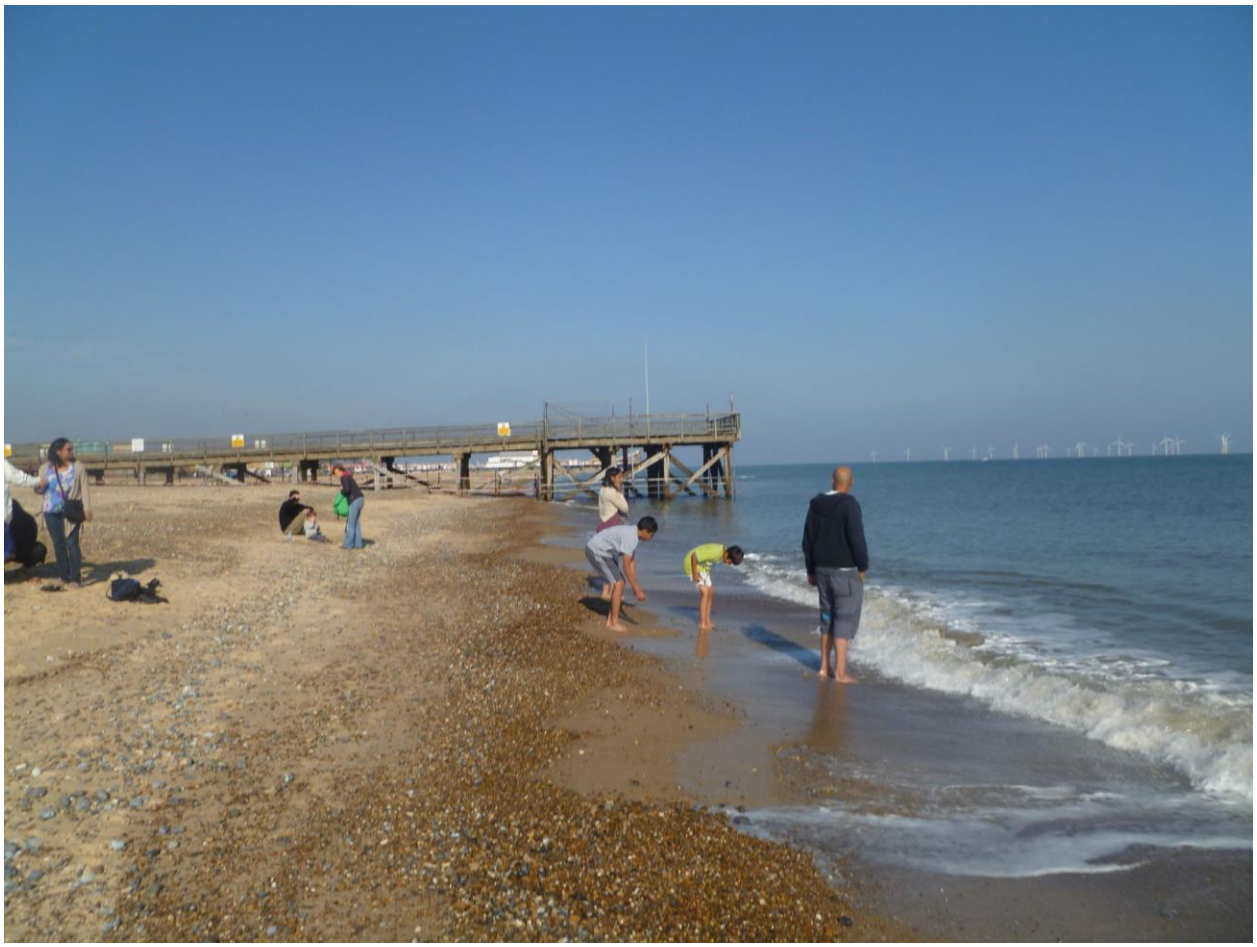
Serayna at Birling Gap, February 2020 | Serayna Solanki

‘Will there be people like me?’

To access the countryside is a range of experiences. From going on a walk on a nearby trail, through nature conservation sites. Visiting a national park within the regional area. Going to the fields that neighbour cities, perhaps to forage and follow streams. Day trips to scenic Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Hikes with overnight B&B stays. Organising longer trips, where you get to enjoy the landscape, place to place. Camping in the wild, hopefully with the spontaneity of wild swimming. Having an environmental job based in the countryside; perhaps as an ecologist, ranger or scientist. Being an artist, poet or writer who attends countryside art residencies to be absorbent to the wild landscape. Moving to and living in a rural village. Being a sports hobbyist, like a mountain cyclist or canoeist. Owning land, working on the land.

I imagine there are many in between and more that I have missed, because my imagination cannot imagine the endless experiences of the countryside.

My experiences are limited - I once hiked East Devon with overnight B&B stays. As I work through the possibilities listed above, questions creep up. Is the opportunity even attainable? Or is the equipment and activity affordable? Wherever I go, will it even be welcoming? Will there be people like me? Why are these range of experiences not afforded to everyone? Will it be accessible if I wanted to go with my community?



Serayna’s family on a beach trip to Great Yarmouth, 2012 | Serayna Solanki

Unveiling realities

Commissioned by CPRE, the countryside charity, I listened, learnt and connected to the stories of seven people within the diverse South Asian community of my hometown, Leicester.

Like everyone, we all have our own journey and story. I wanted to know about their experiences of the countryside, the source of their relationship to nature, and the barriers to that source and the countryside as a place.

Each individual story was powerful, detailed with unique moments, memories and desires. The sharings were rich in deep meanings of nature, sourced from cultural traditions that have survived through time, across seas and generations.

Everyone's story had many joyful memories of being in nature in many places; in countries that were once home, and urban green areas like parks, gardens and allotments. What was noticeable was the shallow presence of countryside experiences, highlighting the little access or experiences that once had. The details of how class and racial barriers play a role were very visible. All people came from historically rural residing communities ranging from Kashmir, Pakistan, Punjab and (South) Gujarat.

Making space

I captured over 14 hours of dialogue. Every person contributed to the making of a collective multi-generational and multi-ethnic story of South Asians in Leicester. These stories are not representative of all South Asians in Leicester, nor all South Asians around the UK, nor all ethnic minority communities. However, people may relate to the experiences of structural barriers that dominate access or experiences of nature itself.

When we don't have space to acknowledge, make deeper sense of and connect our stories, it can disempower and disable our ability to bring about real change. When these spaces of reflection are created, though, perceptions mature, ideas and approaches are exchanged, many realities are made visible. That is what these conversations did.

For me, it's important that communities are funded and supported to curate programmes that centre their realities and improve access to nature. When programmes are created by and for communities, they use the skills that are natural to being part of a complex collective narrative, whilst acknowledging the deep human experiences we have within and around society's structures.

Some things are clear from these stories: I have repeatedly heard experiences of financial deprivation, racial hostility, and outdoors organisations' culture of one-size, one-path standards and single-culture world perceptions.

It's the responsibility of the outdoors and environment sector to challenge these barriers. Directing resources and support to community-led projects, both emerging now and as-yet dormant in our imaginations, can be a step forward.

Serayna with Mum at a farm near Leicester, 2001

Snippets of life

A note for readers: these are some very, very small extracts from what was shared. Be mindful that these are tiny snippets of people's life stories, that in turn are part of a bigger collective narrative that you, the reader, may not have visibility and comprehension of.

'When my grandma grows stuff, like tomatoes, they grow so differently - she grew a tomato plant that was tiny but had hundreds of tomatoes on. It was beautiful to see. She finds peace and solace in nature, and works with the soil. When I visit her today, you can tell she has been working on it for years because of how fertile, soft and porous the soil is.'

'There is a desire and passion to see more. My grandma likes going to parks, I don't know how far she has been… I imagine, being middle class, you have the opportunity to see more places.'

'I have access to a garden. Speaking to people who live more towards the inner city about gardens, they just have a yard. I have access to fields in 5 minutes. Leicester is a small city, not that far from the countryside and if you have access to a car, you can go wandering in the country.'

‘Being in nature is great for health and wellbeing, to take you away from everyday stress, free your brain and have fresh air. By strolling through nature, I am closer to nature, I have a relationship. I can appreciate it more, the fresh air and I need slow time to be able to be with nature because it is a slow and gentle part of life.

‘Some plants and trees, I know the names in Gujarati’.

‘I think, if I am going to the countryside, I would like to be able to have meaningful discussions with other people from different cultures to see what we share and love what’s different. I would love to be able to have information about the trees, birds and animals, so I have better awareness.’

‘I’m just trying to survive, I have three jobs and I don’t have time to invest in other things. I went through a phase of loving nature photography, and I found it hard to get a job because of all the equipment I needed and I thought it was very white-dominated.

‘If I had the opportunity to, I would love to take up a job working in nature and perhaps with children again.’

‘As a taxi driver too, I am always driving everywhere - in the city and to other cities, so I learn a lot about where things are and where the great nature spots are just by being able to drive around and speak to people. But even then, I’m in my car, I don’t know where to stop to explore it.’

‘I would love to create spaces that are more meaningful for us, like fruit tree gardens where you can sit under trees at leisure and no rush, it has to be no rush. It’s more special in giving people memories that remind us of places.’

‘British culture has helped me at the same time, to show me what was different to see from their side and to appreciate it for what it was from their perspective. To me, it’s just grass, trees and views. But I think that’s because I’ve grown up knowing how diverse nature is, and seeing the rich biodiversity.

‘In Uganda and India, we use nature more - through fruit trees and food. It’s not just in one spot but everywhere, amlee trees and mango trees. I think the connection with nature is very different, as we make our connection through touch. In Britain, it’s that you go to see the view.”

‘Our community is losing its cultural knowledge and has more of an ‘English’ type of mind. In our community, it feels like no one wants to learn, I don’t know if that’s because we don’t value our cultural environmental knowledge, or if it’s because children don’t know it’s available or as important.

‘I think this knowledge is being lost, because they don’t have time to keep learning about it or share it. People want to make money really quickly because we can’t survive otherwise.’

‘In Uganda, my mother had a garden full of things to grow. I remember this huge chilli plant with so many white flowers. She told me to not pick the flowers one day, after she caught me collecting them. Then, hundreds of chillies appeared.

‘When she came to the UK, she cried so much because of what they left behind. When we came here, all 7 siblings and parents were living in one room, we were given times to use the bathroom because it was outside and shared. We then moved into another property that had a little garden. So we would grow methi, dhana and spinach.’

‘Our community has experienced racism in the countryside. One time we wanted to use the bathrooms and have a cup of tea, it felt like everyone was staring at us for wearing indian clothing. We decided to leave, we didn’t like it.’

‘Last year, I was in a random work meeting, when I worked in corporate. A (white) senior manager asked me ‘Why do all the BAME people come to Rutland Water now? They keep parking on my drive.’ I was gob smacked, I didn’t know what to say in a corporate setting where it might have jeopardised my career.’

‘When we came here, we knew we had to get jobs to survive, that’s what our focus was. We had a yard in our garden, which was covered in rocks and we transformed it into a garden to grow methi and dhana.’

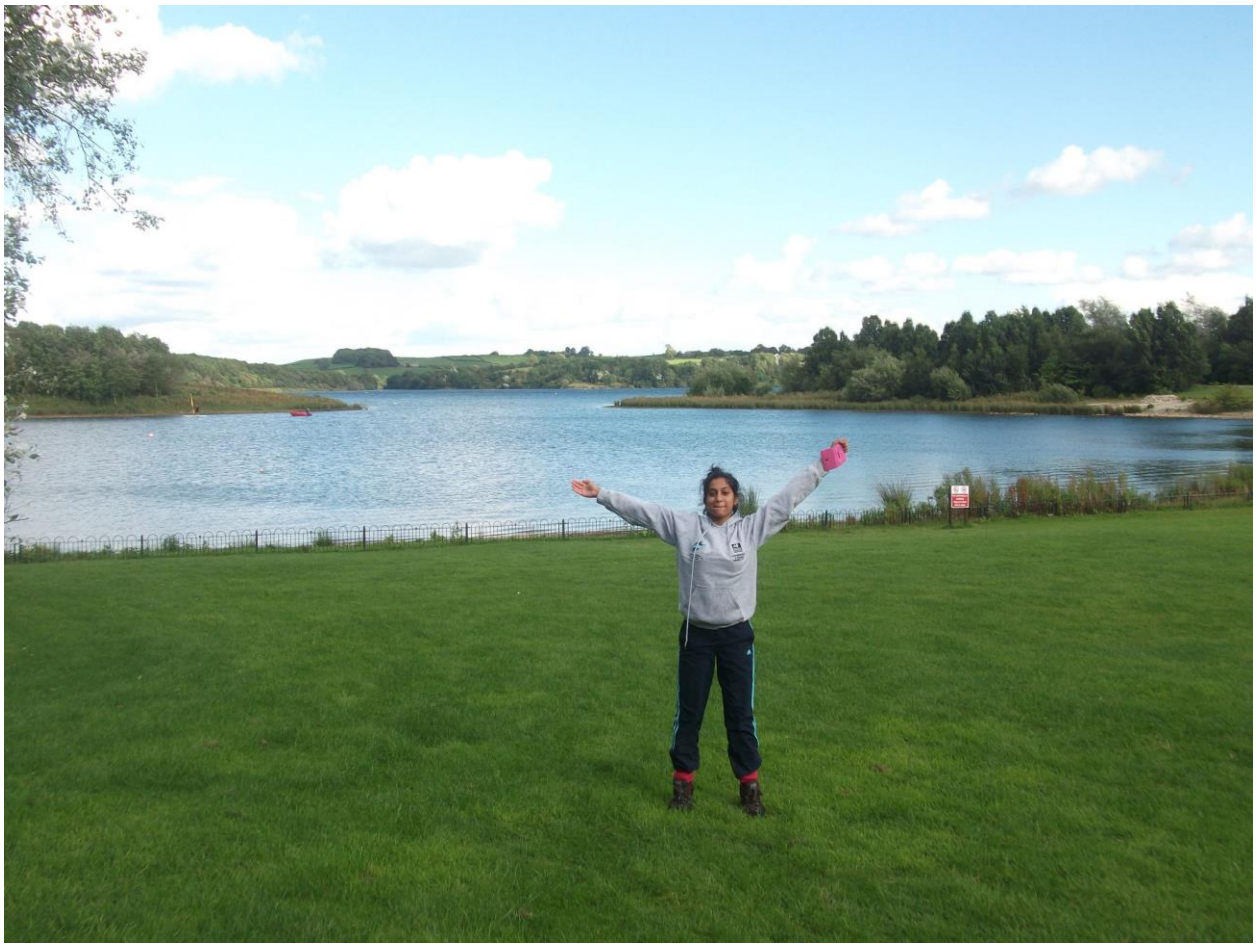
‘When I was younger in the 80s, me and my friends would take trips to Bradgate Park and Rutland Water. We would take our marinated meat and booze for BBQs. We only heard about it through word of mouth that there was this open area, nothing official.’

‘I think that in our religion and traditions, there is a deeper meaning of the earth, river and we use plants in our rituals for what they symbolise. The banana leaves are used for certain things, even though we don’t have these items around us, we have found a way to adapt.

‘We do believe that we are at one with nature but I see over generations that value is being lost. I think it’s because of parents not passing down the knowledge, but that’s because the way we need to survive is different now - we’re pressured to survive in a way that doesn’t consider these things are important.’

‘I did the Duke of Edinburgh award when I was younger but I didn’t have the same appreciation of nature - that seemed more like a challenge rather than an adventure. I also did it because of employability, not thinking I was doing it because it was actually something to equip me with the skills to explore the outdoors again.

‘My love for nature has come from knowing its loss and environmental campaigning and realising that I didn’t have a connection to it, which was so beautiful to rediscover. Reuniting with cultural knowledge has bought deeper meaning. Because I knew how to read a map, plan a route and know what equipment I needed, I felt confident to do this on my own, even 7 years later.’



Serayna finishing Duke of Edinburgh, 2010

Dreaming on

When inviting people to imagine what projects they would like to see, they were all inspired by their histories and memories.

Their dreams were imagined from a place without access or resources - yet. I'm excited to witness how big these dreams can become when access, opportunities and agency are available and resources are distributed to bring dreams into reality. All of the people I have interviewed (and more) would openly welcome the co-creation of outdoor programmes and acquire skills where we get to be in the countryside.

This can be done in a way that's mindful of the elderly, and of disabled and health needs; can respect cultural knowledge and languages; restores the possibility of lost dreams of working outdoors; imagines job alternatives for younger generations based on newly-found hobbies; contribute to the design of landscape; be enriched by nature to enrich our lives and wellbeing; bring better intra and cross-community cohesion; gives access to equipment for outdoor hobbies.

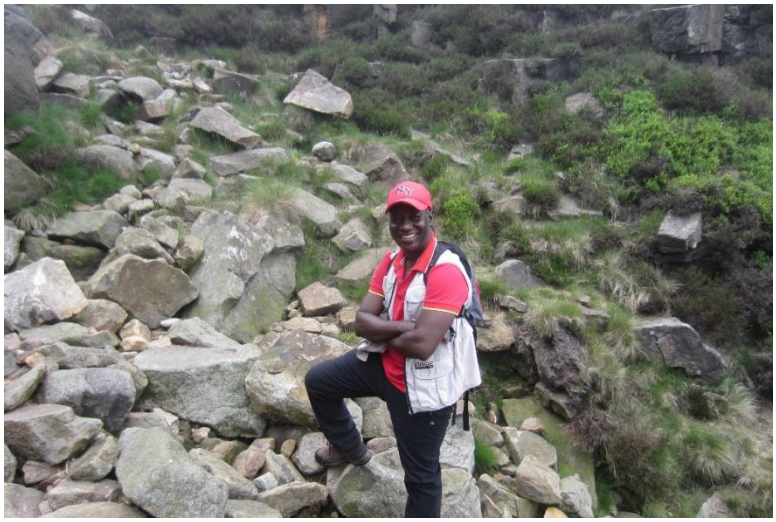
But for as long as funding, finance, time, support and skills are inaccessible and unavailable? Then access is unattainable and these experiences remain just that - dreams.

Serayna with brother and dad, picnic in a local park, 1999

Further information

About the researchers

Maxwell A. Ayamba



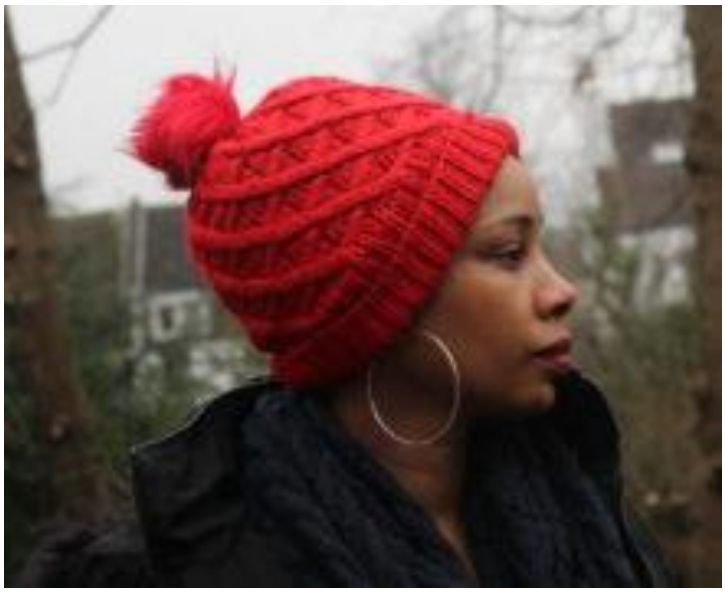
Maxwell A. Ayamba is a PhD Research Student in Black Studies, at the Department of American & Canadian Studies University of Nottingham, M4C/AHRC. He is an environmental journalist, who worked previously as an Associate Lecturer/Research Associate at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU). He is the Founder and Projects Co-ordinator of the Sheffield Environmental Movement (2016) and Co-Founder of the 100 Black Men Walk for Health Group (2004) which inspired production of the national play "Black Men Walking". Maxwell was the first Black person to serve on the Board of the Ramblers Association (2005 – 2009).

www.semcharity.org.uk

Sarah Hussain

Sarah Hussain is a Huddersfield based author and educator. Her first novel 'Escaped from Syria' was a winner finalist in the People's Book Prize Award and her short story collection 'Sit up, Stand up, Speak up' was released in 2017. In 2018 she won the Ms Shakespeare competition and was shortlisted in a competition run by The University of Huddersfield and her short story, 'You will be free one day, my dearest India', is included in the anthology 'Trouble', celebrating protest, published by Grist and was 'highly commended'. Sarah uses her writing as a means of expression to enable her to use her voice to promote tolerance. She is currently completing a PhD and her research is looking at ecological degradation in the Himalayan region from a postcolonial ecofeminist perspective. She aims to use her research to amplify women's knowledge and she wants to challenge negative representations of South Asian women.

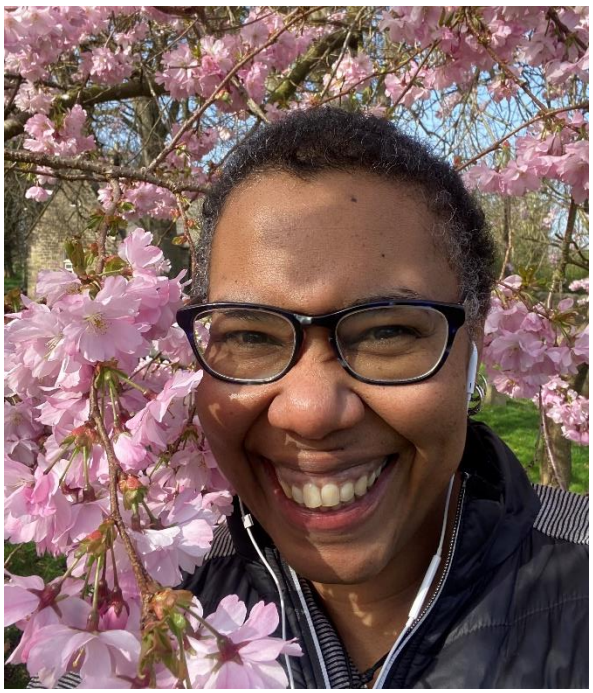
Frederique Lanoix



Frederique Lanoix is a black woman who works to highlight and explore the diversity of the stories that are told about people experiencing anxiety and depression, and the ways in which our identities and others' assumptions affect the care we receive and the support we are given in the community and the media. She is the host and founder of !Visible, a podcast project that provides insight into mental health issues in a time where it is more elevated than ever.

https://www.linkedin.com/in/frederique-loetitia-lanoix-06220337/

Sheree Mack



Living in England's north east, Dr Sheree Mack uses hybrid writing to explore the experiences of people of colour in nature and the countryside. Sheree is part of a National Lottery Heritage funded project to understand and eliminate barriers that limit the experience and enjoyment of the countryside for people of colour and their communities. She is currently working on a mixed-genre memoir exploring a Black woman's body with/in nature.
She also set up the The Earth Sea Love Podcast, which amplifies the voices and stories of women of colour and their relationship with nature.

www.earthsealove.com

Serayna Solanki

Serayna Solanki is 25 years old and from Leicester. She became unemployed just before the COVID pandemic and starting freelancing to financially survive and work on her interest in climate and environmental issues through the lens of equity and justice. Throughout lockdown, she has launched Grandmothers' Garden, a climate and environmental education and knowledge sharing programme from ethnic minorities. Serayna has supported EU based racial justice civil society coalition, Equinox, on a policy analysis of the European Green Deal through the lens of racial justice titled 'Towards Climate Justice'. Beyond this, she has supported community-led climate action projects, such as Camden Think and Do and Transition Towns Leytonstone to be more foundationally and structurally inclusive of those from low-income and racial minority communities.

Her next line of work is supporting Aarve and Crowther Lab in Switzerland, in the creation of an 'in practice' impact measurement tool for authentic collaboration between artists, scientists, and regional environmental experts on biodiversity, climate and restoration projects. Serayna has also supported Sustainability First with their 'Sustainable Futures Programme' Consultant on challenging and advising the design and content on their National independent curriculum on the interrelation of climate change and social justice. Other research projects she has been part of are, Navigating Space Under Lockdown with Ubele and UCL, which explored how 18-35 BAME people experienced lockdown across varying themes including wellbeing, space, financial circumstances, housing and many more. She also supports arts and culture activism networks such as Culture Declares Emergency. In the Climate Justice space, Serayna has supported the Loss and Damage Youth Coalition on a meeting with COP26 President, Alok Sharma. In her personal time, she is a volunteer apprentice beekeeper at Hackney City Farm, a painter, an outdoors explorer, and a hobbyist creative writer.

Serayna's approach in collaboration centres creating collective meaning and the spirit of understanding. She also used the funds to provide a peer-led review and feedback on the process formulated by NEF and CPRE for learning and improvement.

www.seraynakeyasolanki.co.uk

Please note: Not all of the researchers are named due to some having had to drop out of the project since the analysis sessions in 2020 and before this research overview was compiled.

About CPRE, the countryside charity

Founded in 1926, CPRE believes in countryside and green spaces that are accessible to all, rich in nature and playing a crucial role in responding to the climate emergency. With a local CPRE group in almost every county, we're advocating nationwide for the kind of countryside we all want: one with sustainable, healthy communities and available to more people than ever, including those who haven't benefited before. We stand for a countryside that enriches all of our lives, regenerating our wellbeing, and that we in turn regenerate, protect and celebrate. We've worked for almost a century to support and promote the countryside, and we'll be doing this for generations to come. That's why we call ourselves 'the countryside charity'.

If you would like to hear more about CPRE's work on equality of access to the countryside, please contact externalaffairs@cpre.org.uk

About New Economics Foundation

New Economics Foundation (NEF) works to transform the economy to one which works for people and planet, and which is socially and environmentally just. NEF has a rich body of research on health and wellbeing inequalities; the health and wellbeing benefits of a healthy environment and access to nature; and throughout our work we build links between the social, environmental, and economic determinants of living a decent quality of life. We are internationally recognised as a leader in participatory research, and have led the development and promotion of co-production practices in the UK.