



Campaign to Protect
Rural England

Tranquillity offers great rewards

Tranquillity is widely recognised as a powerful contributor to the sense of well being of many people. In a survey by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), tranquillity was identified by 58% of respondents as an enjoyable aspect of the countryside and was the most common reason for visiting it.¹ Tranquillity does not mean silence – far from it. Natural sites and sounds of wildlife, water, and ‘wind through leaves’ are associated with ‘peace and quiet’ and identified as key to tranquillity.² Time and again researchers have found that the countryside is integral to our experience of tranquillity.³ Few people have worked out exactly what the benefits of tranquillity are, even though information on the benefits of contact with nature abounds. If contact with nature is good for you, tranquillity is good for you too.

Tranquillity: good for our hearts, minds and bodies

*The wind rustling in the trees, the water running out of a pond, the smell of the damp soil, the feel of the sun warming the skin, face, hands and arms, all this is an encouragement to natural relaxation and brings a feeling of physical and mental well-being*⁴

*As natural green environments have increasingly come under pressure from economic development, so it seems our own wellbeing has suffered as a consequence*⁵

*The countryside can be seen as a great outpatient department whose therapeutic value is yet to be fully realised*⁶

*People in the West have got no happier in the last 50 years. They have become much richer, they work much less, they have longer holidays, they travel more, they live longer, and they are healthier. But they are no happier*⁷

In this country, stress and mental illness are increasingly common, as are physical health problems related to inactivity and obesity, including adult onset diabetes. According to the World Health Organisation, mental illness such as depression is likely to be the primary cause of ill health by 2020⁸. The associated costs to public health care are increasing. This is recognised in the overarching priorities of the Government’s Public Health White Paper of 2004, which are to reduce obesity, increase exercise and improve mental health.

We believe efforts to protect and enhance tranquil areas would help the Government to address these priorities. There is growing and substantial evidence to show that exposure to nature can contribute to physical health and psychological wellbeing. While there are different levels of contact with nature – views of natural features, incidental exposure to nature and being active in a natural environment⁹ - tranquil areas represent reservoirs of natural features. These provide access to a green environment which can offer a wide range of health benefits.

There is convincing evidence, for instance, of the importance of the natural environment in helping people to cope with stress and enhance psychological wellbeing. A recent review of over 100 studies showed that the primary reasons for visiting natural environments include escape from the stress of urban areas and the experience of tranquillity and solitude. In one study, teenagers under stress said they go outdoors to seek privacy and space to relieve stress.¹⁰ Other studies have found exposure to nature helps people recover from drug¹¹ and alcohol addictions.¹²

Stress reduction may have long-term physiological benefits as well as mental health benefits, because stress is believed to reduce the body's ability to resist illness and may adversely affect our metabolism.¹³ Exposure to nature has also been shown to reduce blood pressure, reduce heart attacks, increase mental performance and soothe anxiety. Studies have found that playing in natural surroundings has a positive impact on children's development.¹⁴ And children who visit the countryside regularly are less likely to be obese¹⁵ and to suffer from attention-deficit disorder¹⁶.

In contrast, other studies have shown that artificial noise can have a damaging effect on mental wellbeing. In a survey of people living near airports, 30-60% of respondents at each site perceived their health to be affected by noise from aircraft at night.¹⁷ The World Health Organisation recognises that people living near airports, industry or noisy streets are at risk of stress, sleep disturbance and increased blood pressure due to exposure to noise. This is supported by studies that show how unwanted noise from transport and industry can cause aggressiveness and a feeling of helplessness. It can hinder cognitive performance at work or school, in reading, problem solving, attention and memorisation. The absence of discordant noise is an important characteristic of tranquillity.

In any one year, at least three out of every 10 employees will be off work with a mental health problem.¹⁸ Many people already seek out our tranquil countryside to avert and address mental illness and so are probably already saving NHS resources. But millions more could be saved. A former Government adviser estimates that the cost of mental illness to the UK is as much as £25 billion each year, over half of which is from lost output of people of employable age. Most suffering is caused by treatable illnesses such as depression and anxiety, which exposure to the countryside (especially through exercise) might help to alleviate.¹⁹

Tranquillity underpins rural economies

Not only are there clear social advantages to protecting the tranquillity we all need and value, there is a compelling economic argument for it, too.

Rural areas rely on their tranquillity to attract visitors. According to a recent survey, it's why 49% of us visit the countryside²⁰. Government data on the economic impact of rural tourism suggests that, through rural tourism, tranquillity directly supports 186,200 jobs and 12,250 small businesses and contributes £6.76 billion a year to the economy²¹. The figure may be higher; Defra suggests that as many as 300,000 jobs depend directly on the high quality of the natural environment and it identifies tranquillity as a key quality.²² Tranquillity is promoted as a prized attraction by England's tourist board and each year one and a half billion day trips are made to our countryside and coast.²³ The importance of tranquillity to rural economies is borne out by a survey carried out in Norfolk. An examination of six nature reserves in north Norfolk found that the tranquillity of those sites alone brought £2.8 million into the local economy each year and underpinned 84 jobs²⁴.

A study for the former Office of the Deputy Prime Minister recognises that the tranquillity of undeveloped land *outside* of the open countryside should add significantly to its value. By providing a buffer zone between development and local residents, reducing exposure to noise and light pollution (and so creating an area of relative tranquillity), such land has an economic value based on its contribution to human welfare.

And tranquillity also contributes indirectly to the nation's economic performance by improving our physical and psychological well being. Healthy people are likely to be more economically productive and require fewer NHS resources than unhealthy people.

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- ¹ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, *Survey of Public Attitudes to Quality of Life and to the Environment: 2001*, 2002
- ² Countryside Agency, *Understanding tranquillity - the role of Participatory Appraisal consultation in defining and assessing a valuable resource*, 2005
- ³ For example see DEFRA, 2002 *op cit*, The National Trust, *Landscapes in Britain* MORI poll, 2004, and Mace *et al*, 1999, Powe and Shaw, 2003, Macnaghten and Urry, 2000, cited in Jackson, S, Fuller, D, Dunsford, H, Mowbray, R, Hext, S, MacFarlane R. and Haggett, C, *Tranquillity Mapping: developing a robust methodology for planning support*, 2006
- ⁴ Oussett *et al*, 1998, cited in Morris, N., *Health, Well-Being and Open Space, Literature review*, Open Space, 2003
- ⁵ Pretty, J., Griffin, M., Peacock, J., Hine, R., Sellens, M., and South, N., 'A Countryside for Health and Wellbeing: The Physical and Mental Health Benefits of Green Exercise – Executive Summary' in *Countryside Recreation*, Volume 13 Number 1, Spring 2005
- ⁶ Bird W, *Natural Fit – Can Green Space and Biodiversity Increase Levels of Physical Activity?*, 2004
- ⁷ Layard, R. *Happiness: has social science got a clue?*, 2003
- ⁸ World Health Organisation, *World Health Report 2001 & 2002*, cited in Pretty *et al*, 2005 *op cit*
- ⁹ Pretty *et al*, 2005, *op cit*
- ¹⁰ 16-21 year olds stressed from studies, family and personal problems cited going outdoors to seek privacy and space as one of their most common stress-relieving strategies. Institute for Health Research, Lancaster University, *Climbing trees and building dens: Mental health and well-being in young adults and the long-term effects of childhood play experience*, Forestry Commission, 2004
- ¹¹ Kennedy, 1993, cited in Morris, 2003, *op cit*
- ¹² Bennett LW, Cardone S, Jarczyk J, 'Effects of a therapeutic camping program on addiction recovery. The Algonquin Haymarket Relapse Prevention Program,' *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment* 15 (5), 1998 (cited in Morris, 2003)
- ¹³ Parsons, R, 'The potential influences of environmental perception on human health,' *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 1991 (cited in Jorgensen, A, *Why is it important to encourage nature and wildlife near the home?*, 2001)
- ¹⁴ Bang *et al*, 1989; Grahn, 1991; Fjortoft, 1995, 1998, 1999; Grahn *et al*, 1997, cited in Jorgensen, 2001 *op cit*
- ¹⁵ Bird, W, presentation to CABE Health Week conference, May 2006
- ¹⁶ Faber Taylor, A, Kuo, F, Sullivan, C, 'Coping with ADD: The Surprising Connection to Green Play Settings', *Environment and Behavior*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 54-77, 2001, and Bird, 2006, *op cit*
- ¹⁷ Diamond, I, Stephenson, R, Sheppard, Z, Smith, A, Hayward S, Heatherley, S, Raw, G, and Stansfeld, S, *Perceptions of Aircraft Noise, Sleep and Health*, Civil Aviation Authority, 2000
- ¹⁸ Duncan, F, in *Countryside Recreation*, 2005, *op cit*
- ¹⁹ Layard, R, *Mental Health: Britain's biggest social problem?*, 2004, and see, for example, Bird, 2004, *ob. cit.*, Duncan, *ob cit*
- ²⁰ Mori, *Landscapes in Britain*, poll, 2004
- ²¹ Figures in *The Rural Strategy 2004* suggest that rural tourism nationally supports around 380,000 jobs and 25,000 small and micro businesses and contributes around £13.8 billion annually to the economy.
- ²² Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2004, *op cit*
- ²³ The English Tourism Board (online), accessed August 2006 and Pretty *et al*, 2005, *op cit*. The figure of 1.5 billion refers to UK-wide trips.
- ²⁴ RSPB, *Valuing Norfolk's coast – environment, wildlife, tourism, quality of life – The economic benefits of a high quality environment*, 2000. The 84 jobs were found to be equivalent to 60 full-time jobs The figures were derived from the total contribution to the local economy of tourists going to those six sites and the proportion of visitors who stated their main reason for visiting was tranquillity.