

# RESEARCH FINDS INTERACTIONS WITH TREES, WOODLANDS AND WIDER NATURE SUPPORTING PEOPLE THROUGH THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

FEATURE

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The COVID-19 outbreak has brought with it a great deal of change and with that, challenges and opportunities. Routines and relationships with family, friends, colleagues and wider support networks have been disrupted. Many people have needed to find new or adjusted ways to sustain their mental and physical wellbeing.



Further details of Forest Research's survey and interviews, including the report of the survey analysis: [forestresearch.gov.uk/research/engagement-nature-and-during-covid-19-restrictions](https://forestresearch.gov.uk/research/engagement-nature-and-during-covid-19-restrictions)

Results of the qualitative comments in the survey and follow-up interviews will be available soon.

Forest Research has carried out a survey and interviews to find out whether the COVID-19 restrictions of spring to early autumn 2020 led to changes in people's interactions with, and benefits gained from, trees, woodlands and wider nature. The work was carried out as part of the Active Forests Programme funded by Forestry England and Sport England with support from the National Lottery. The survey ran from mid-June until the end of July 2020 and 2,115 responses were received. Follow up interviews were conducted in August and September 2020.

Analysis of the survey responses (O'Brien and Forster, 2020) found that the number of individuals who continued to visit 'woodlands or forests' and 'fields, farmlands, countryside' during the period of COVID-19 restrictions was greater than for other nature spaces. These respondents were also visiting woodlands or forests more frequently, with a larger increase in visits for women than men. For more than two-thirds of respondents, the restrictions increased the time they had taken to appreciate nature, their feelings of connection to nature and their level of happiness when in nature. Over half felt they had an increased appreciation of the trees in their street, garden, park, along footpaths and in woodlands.

There was a varied list of motivations reported for visits to nature during this time, with 12 out of 14 motivations listed in the survey being reported as a 'significant increase' or 'some increase' by more than 50% of respondents. 'Taking children out', 'extra time as schools were closed', 'exercise', 'mental' and 'physical' wellbeing all scored highly. Young people (16–34 years of age) were particularly motivated to visit nature for 'mental' health and wellbeing benefits, 'exercise', 'exploration' and to 'take a break from work or electronic devices'.

Interactions with nature during the restrictions resulted in an increase in a range of benefits, with eight out of the ten benefits listed in the

survey being reported as 'significantly better' or 'having some change for the better' by more than 50% of respondents. Women and younger people (16–34) were more likely to report an increase in nature connection and improvement in benefits from natural spaces than men and older generations. The 'feeling of escape and freedom' was particularly significant to respondents. Other benefits included 'mental wellbeing benefits', 'enjoying activity with family in my household', and 'gaining a sense of solace from engaging with nature'.

Connections to nature also particularly increased for individuals who were very physically active prior to COVID-19. These respondents tended to do more physical activity following the introduction of restrictions and were more motivated to visit nature, not just for 'exercise' but for a range of other benefits including 'exploration', 'connecting with nature' and to 'learn something new/challenge themselves'. Over 50% said that they would 'definitely sustain' any improved physical activity levels they had made in the long-term. Conversely, physically inactive people tended to decrease their activity during the restrictions.



Over half of respondents felt they had an increased appreciation of the trees in their street, garden, park, along footpaths, and in woodlands.

For more than half of respondents, a concern about overcrowding and not being able to keep their distance from others acted as a barrier to them enjoying nature, and this was significantly greater for younger people (16–34). Younger

and older individuals were more likely to report not meeting people and not being able to use facilities as barriers to spending time in nature than middle-aged individuals, while households with children (those under 16) were more likely to report a lack of facilities due to COVID-19 restrictions as a barrier.

The responses to the survey illustrate the important role of nature, trees and woods during the COVID-19 restrictions in providing many people with a chance to maintain or improve their wellbeing by appreciating trees and nature, feeling connected to and accessing nature. The restrictions also provided people with an opportunity to reflect on their relationship with nature, trees and woods and how they value these spaces. However, the survey also showed there were some significant differences between groups in terms of how they interacted and benefited from nature during the period.

The finding about the importance of nature in supporting health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic is echoed by other surveys. Olsen and Mitchell (2020) found that the majority of users of green space stated that these spaces benefited their mental health during the COVID-19 lockdown (65% in the UK and 63% in the Scotland compared to 68% in this survey). More broadly, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for a Green New Deal report (2020) engaged with a wide range of British

## Footnote

The respondents to this survey are a sample of people interested in nature, and with a particular interest, potentially, in woodlands and the types of activities that can be undertaken in woodlands, including family activities. This is because the recruitment of respondents was carried out largely via Forestry England's newsletter and social media. The report of the analysis provides further details.

## References

All Party Parliamentary Party on the Green New Deal. 2020. Time to reset: the public desire for a fairer, greener Britain after COVID-19. All Party Parliamentary Party on the Green New Deal.  
O'Brien, L and Forster, J. 2020. Engagement with nature before and during the Covid-19 restrictions. Quantitative analysis. Forest Research, Farnham  
Olsen, J., Mitchell, R. 2020. Change in use of green and open space following COVID-19 lockdown stay at home phase and initial easing of lockdown. MRC (Medical Research Council)/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, Glasgow.