

Well-being from woodlands: The challenge of identifying what's good from woods

Good from Woods (GfW) is a Lottery¹ funded project that gauges how people's experience of woods and forests contributes to their well-being. This article summarises the purpose of the project, the nature of the research, and the early findings.

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Why explore what's good from woods?

The achievement of national well-being has become a growing focus of government policy and service provision, as well as NGO campaigning and academic research. Economic uncertainty has focused this attention on assessing how, where and when to invest in well-being; in effect, how spending can best play a role in establishing and sustaining it.² Interest in gauging how time spent in natural outdoor spaces contributes to well-being has also intensified and activities in these environments are increasingly offered by practitioners, researchers and policy makers as routes to health and happiness.³

The Good from Woods (GfW) project studies people's participation in woodland activities and identifies what type of well-being occurs as a result. Provision of woodland activities for health, education and well-being benefits is rapidly expanding, such as through the forest school movement and National Trust engagement initiatives. The providers of these activities need to justify the various benefits to people's well-being, so that funders and policy makers can see the worth of this activity.⁴ The work of GfW has come about as a response to this situation. Valuable research already exists in this area⁵, but is dispersed, often focusing on the outcomes of specific activities or individual projects. GfW builds on such studies by producing and collating research which covers themes such as increasing health, happiness, and sense of community which are common aims of woodland activity. The research results will be widely available for re-use and replication.

For GfW, the idea of 'well-being' is a useful way of explaining how varied outcomes of woodland activities contribute to people's lives. Reviews of the use of this term within policy and practice highlight its broad definition and its range of applications.⁶ It can be interpreted, for example, as 'happiness', 'quality of life', 'life satisfaction' or 'welfare'⁷ and refer to positive aspects of physical, social, psychological and emotional health. This wide scope allows GfW to express the broad range of services being offered by organisations and covers a diverse audience for the findings. It also means GfW is not imposing partial theories of health and happiness upon the

research, but allows insights that reflect the specific woodland context. Equally, however, GfW ensures woodland well-being still corresponds with models of well-being generated in other environments, a process described below. However, well-being's wide definition has led to a breadth of methods for evaluating and measuring its presence and its indefinite nature poses challenges as an approach to demonstrating what is 'good from woods': what does 'well-being' during or following woodland activity consist of? What does it look or feel like? Is it different in woodland from elsewhere and how can we capture its presence?

How to explore what's good from woods?

GfW considers that the providers of woodland activities are well placed to study the above questions and that collaborative research with them is an important approach to understanding woodland based well-being. GfW asks these bodies to adopt a 'practitioner-researcher' role that develops their own research capacity, including their familiarity with benefits, their creative and communication skills, and their links with woodland activity providers and participants.

GfW works with practitioners doing this research by providing frameworks for and guidance in: developing their research focus; appropriate research methods; data analysis and development of findings and contributes costs for time spent researching. The practitioners doing the research shape, test and modify GfW's methodology with the GfW research team, so it can be used by the next intake of researchers who further trial and develop it. The project has worked with five organisations: The National Trust in Devon and Cornwall; Embercombe, a land-based education centre in Devon; Ruskin Mill, a further education college for students with learning differences in Gloucestershire; The Forest of Avon Trust, a woodland creation charity in Bristol; and Otterhead Forest School in Somerset, over its first 18 months and will partner six more during its lifetime.

The dual practitioner-researcher role can present challenges. For example, practitioners can doubt their own aptitude for research, seeing it as desk-based, and scientific or bureaucratic, in contrast to their own outdoor practical activity.⁸ To help people reassess what it means to be a researcher and develop the associated confidence, GfW emphasises the central role that creativity, communication and people skills have in carrying out research. These are attributes that GfW practitioners value and use widely in their current work.⁹ Recognising that they already possess transferable abilities can help practitioners doing the research to be more confident in pursuing the research tasks.

Likewise, practitioners' prior assumptions of the well-being provided through their work could act as a bias within the research. To address this, the collaborative research identifies where and how they can gauge wider opinions of the anticipated benefits of their work. For practitioners, gathering local and more distant perspectives is both a practical task of establishing who can help them gain understanding, and a reflective one, considering the contrasts between their particular interpretations of well-being and those of others.

GfW helps the researchers give equal weight to each opinion amongst the group being studied, regardless of age, position, or critical opinion, and highlights how views might converge, challenge and complicate one another. Consistent themes are identified which can be explored further.

At a GfW project in Devon, where the National Trust introduce Family Learners to their wooded sites for example, practitioners suspected that well-being outcomes of this activity might include:

- **increased self-confidence** amongst families, successfully introduced to and grown familiar with a new environment
- **increased social well-being** as families interact during this process
- **increased connection with nature** as families interact with woodland.

Researching the views of the families participating both corroborated and expanded these ideas, establishing that many participants appeared to use activities to:

- **deepen connection with nature:** through developing familiarity with the woodland environment
- **increase social engagement amongst children:** with parents seeing natural environments as important settings for enhancing their children's social interaction
- **achieve feelings of psychological well-being:** with parents feeling part of purposeful families that are developing themselves.

This open style of the research lessens the risk of bias and circularity, whereby practitioner-researchers define the main benefits of their work and then look for evidence to support their hypothesis. The preliminary stage of the project has shown that practitioners' thoughts on types of well-being generated by their woodland activities are regularly supported, but also developed by this wider evidence.

This process both highlights practitioner-researchers' relative ease of access to their field of research, which might require much negotiation by an outsider, and draws attention to ethical concerns associated with the dual practitioner-researcher role. Although practitioner-researchers struggle with the time taken to comply with GfW's rigorous ethics procedure, required by Plymouth University to ensure fully informed consent by research subjects, it encourages them to consider how their prior working cultures and relationships may influence the research process and findings. Practitioner-researchers who've previously worked with their research subjects, as tutors for example, may be helped as researchers by the trust established in this previous relationship, but it is important that participants don't feel obliged to be involved in the research, or won't give critical feedback, because they value the provider and activity. Likewise practitioner-researchers sometimes feel awkward adopting dual identities in their workplace, sensing that their new 'researcher' role is misunderstood by research subjects or unsupported by fellow staff.

At this early stage of GfW, however, it seems that when access to the research setting and subjects is uncomplicated and with skills they identify as central to their existing roles, practitioner-researchers are well positioned to investigate how activity in woodland is generating well-being for the participants. In these circumstances, practitioner-researchers have many opportunities to test, creatively adapt and refine methodology so it is appropriate and successful. One GfW project in Gloucestershire based at Ruskin Mill College and one in Bristol, at The Forest of Avon Trust, for instance, are both working with students with learning difficulties. Familiarity with the practitioners' previous work led the organisations, carers and guardians to quickly agree to and engage with the research, although its focus on a potentially vulnerable group of people increases ethical considerations. Although student's verbal communication skills are often limited, practitioner-researchers build understanding with them, during and through woodland activity, with repeated opportunities to immerse themselves in participants' experiences and develop ways of gaining insights.

What is good from woods?

Whilst GfW data collection involves a variety of approaches, the findings are easier to share, communicate and re-use if aligned with other ways of measuring quality of life. To achieve this, GfW also works with categories and indicators of health and happiness drawn from existing tools measuring subjective well-being.¹⁰ GfW's practitioner-researchers compare their evidence with the outcomes that existing assessments consider symptomatic of social, psychological, physical, emotional or natural connection well-being and link them where there is a good fit. They also identify experiences they feel fall outside, or further develop, these categories and indications of well-being. Practitioner-researchers also explore the people, processes and places associated with outcomes, clustering these factors around the feelings of wellbeing they contribute to, and explaining the characteristics of the woodland activity that makes a difference. This interrogative way of assessing indicators is aimed at establishing durable and shareable measures for evaluating woodland-based well-being.

What have we learnt from this comparative analysis so far? Woodlands are complex and contradictory environments and their environmental, social and cultural richness all offer potential for varied well-being experiences. With GfW evidence still being collected, it is too early to identify definitive themes within the data. However, initial evidence suggests several features of woodland based activity associated with well-being.

Activity based in woodland appears to increase participation in social (peer, inter-generational, community), cultural (ideas, knowledge, practices) and environmental (sensory, physical, biophilic) interactions and this potentially increases opportunities to access well-being experiences. Furthermore, woodland situations are regularly reported as distinct from other everyday settings and being present in this different context often stimulates these increased interactions and well-being opportunities.

However, the social, cultural and environmental diversity of woodlands also makes them potentially contrary places; presenting both challenges to and opportunities

for well-being simultaneously; and sometimes challenge triggers opportunities. Providers of woodland activity may take advantage of this diverse context to stimulate different types of well-being appropriate to different types of participant.

Finally, experiences of health and happiness stimulated by activity in woodland, like the environment itself, are sometimes varied, not necessarily belonging to a single area of well-being (social, psychological, emotional, physical or natural connection) but may bring together different types of well-being experience.

GfW will continue testing and developing its methods and interpretations, with practitioner-researchers, to challenge and develop these initial observations; creating a robust methodology for discovering and substantiating what is 'good from woods'.

References and notes

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Whittling in the woods - a therapy with many functions.

Photo: James Thomson

