



## Introduction

In the last decade, there has been a growing body of work to evidence the tangible benefits of access to the countryside for the mental and physical well-being of people (Plate 1). If access to quality green space potentially saves the NHS around £2.1 billion in health care costs (Natural England 2009), and a saving of £1.44 billion in health care costs could be achieved with a 1% reduction in sedentary behaviour (Willis & Osman 2005), there remains an exigent public health requirement to encourage people to better connect with their local environment. Moreover, O'Brien (2009) stipulates that the social well-being and 'natural capital' agenda has become increasingly important in Government forestry policy.

The therapeutic value and wellbeing boost that people obtain from being in and looking after the environment is acknowledged by Mind (2013) as having a determinable impact on people's physical and mental wellbeing. Amongst the retirement age generation this engagement with the natural outdoor environment may also have benefits for promoting social aspects alongside physical activity.

Accordingly, this work aims to discern the impacts of outdoor sessions run in a woodland environment on the wellbeing of adults attending the green work days run by Outdoor Tribe CIC. These sessions aim to improve the wellbeing of adults and children through facilitating connections with nature within a woodland environment.



Plate 1: Access to woodland working parties has social benefits, as well as physical. Pic: S. Collini.

## Aims and Objectives

**Aim:** To capture attitudes towards the outdoor conservation work parties from retirement aged individuals attending woodland working party activities co-ordinated by Outdoor Tribe CIC.

**Objectives:**

- (i). Attend work parties organised by Outdoor Tribe CIC at Round Lown Wood, Sudborough.
- (ii). Conduct a brief questionnaire and interview assessment from participants to gauge opinions.

## Methods

A qualitative questionnaire was designed in collaboration with Outdoor Tribe CIC Director Susan Collini and an appropriate post-retired group (N=6; ages 65 years+) was identified. These were individuals who attended regularly from The University of the Third Age. A range of ordinal and Likert-scale questions were posed, alongside more open questions. Data were collected in May, 2017.

## Results

Attitudes towards woodland social activities were highly positive and opinions were relatively consistent across all people interviewed (Figure 1). The strongest benefits for participants were 'happiness' and 'relaxation', illustrating the value of social forestry for mental wellbeing,

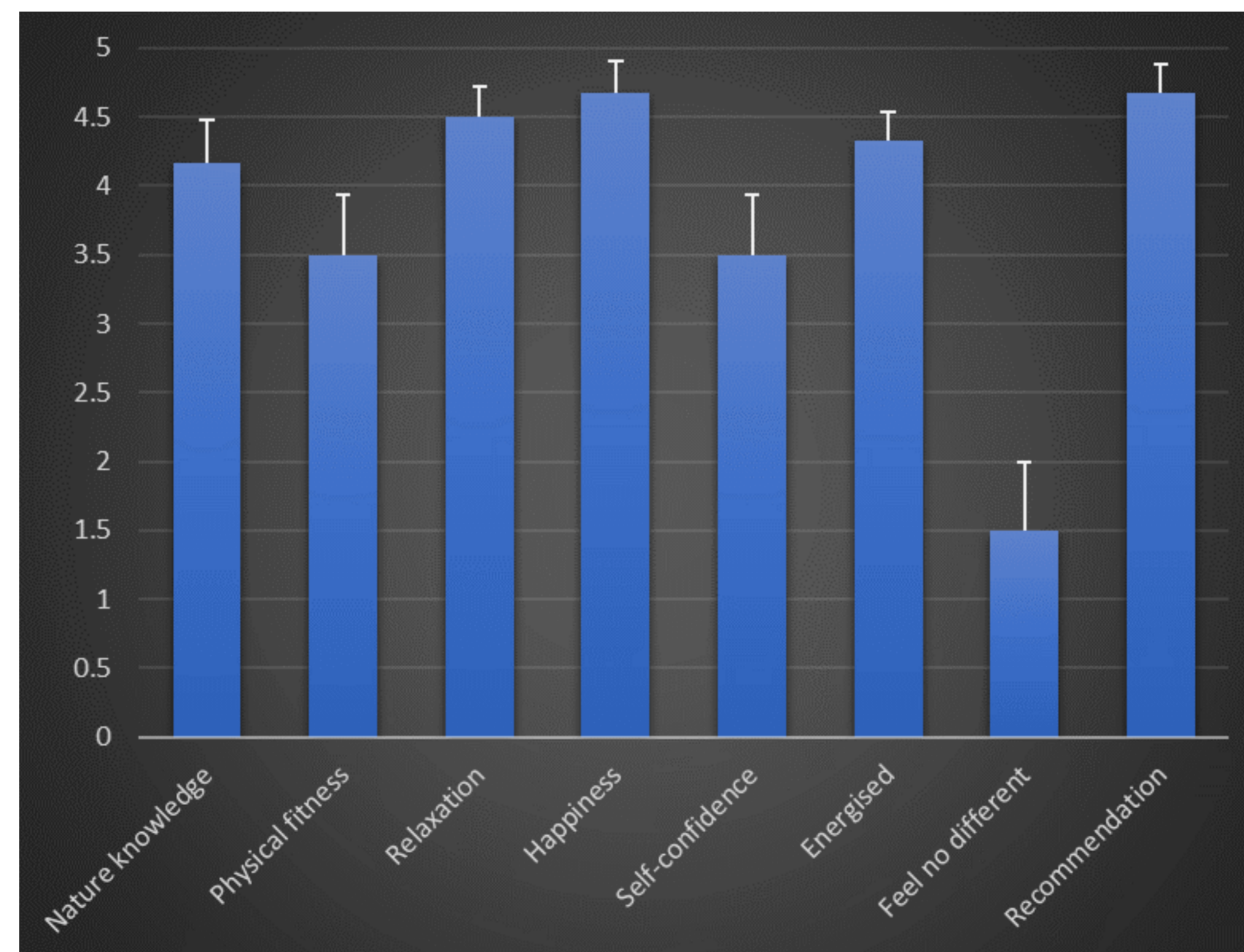


Figure 1: Mean scores for the key Likert-scale questions across the respondents (N=6). The scale of the y-axis runs from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree on a 5 point Likert scale. Error bars represent one SE above the mean.

Participants enjoyed and perceived clear benefits from the sessions that they attended, with specific mention of friendship groups and a greater appreciation for the environment (Box 1). From an pedagogical perspective, experiences mirrored experiential outdoor learning practice.

**Box 1:** Open answer quotes from respondents (N=6) to the question: 'Why did you originally start attending sessions and what do you enjoy the most?'.

*'Working outside with friends, general relaxed atmosphere, stress less'*

*'I enjoy all of my day at the wood. It has given me an insight into woodland management and the annual cycle of the wood.'*

*'I live in a flat so enjoy being outside on a woodland near my home, it has made me more aware of nature and seeing the four seasons.'*

*'To meet people and enjoy the outdoors'*

*'I have always loved woodland and outdoors so now I have the time and opportunity wanted to make the most of it – I enjoy the woodland peace and sounds'*

*'I recently retired from office work and wanted to spend some time outside and feel useful. Also gives structure to my week, enjoy interaction with other people learning more about nature and myself.'*

## Discussion

Although based on subjective opinion, this study vindicates the application of a social forestry model to the ecotherapy and wellbeing agenda for a retirement age demographic in practical woodland work organised at this wood (Plate 2). Length of attendance at the woodland sessions, participant age and gender had little impact on the outcome of the questionnaire showing that these sessions have a positive, inclusive affect for all participants. However, opportunities for an older demographic to undertake these kinds of activities are still slim.

There is a clear focus therefore to better develop awareness of wellbeing improvements pertaining to working in unique native woodland environments, perhaps giving health professionals the confidence to prescribe a 'green prescription' as the ultimate form of ecotherapy.



### Acknowledgements

Thanks to Susan and Gerald Collini, owners of Round Lown Wood. To read Susan's fascinating blog, why not scan the QR code (left).



Plate 2: A day in the woods may provide an ecotherapy cure. Pic: S. Collini.