Location
Wide range of countryside sites in Midlothian.

Summary
Midlothian Ranger Service has used a variety of techniques to evaluate visitors’ perception of the link between health, well-being and the natural environment, and to assess the health benefits of conservation volunteer work.

Health benefits
- Increased physical fitness through walking and conservation volunteering tasks.
- Stress reduction as a result of undertaking physical exercise or work in the outdoors.
- Conservation volunteers report increased confidence, self-esteem and motivation.
- Majority of schoolchildren report feeling happy, relaxed and excited during environmental education sessions.

Keys to success and learning points
- Evaluation of outcomes, such as health improvements, is as important if not more so than numerical quantification of outputs, such as numbers of events and activities.
- Evaluating positive health improvements generated by one-off interventions is often more challenging than monitoring change over a longer period of environmental engagement.
- Ranger Service activities play an important part in delivering Scottish Government national outcome “We live longer, healthier lives”, and local Single Outcome Agreement indicators such as promoting active lifestyles and improving mental health.
- Recognition of the role Ranger Services can play in delivering national and local health outcomes is important to maintaining financial and political support.
- Establishing conservation or path volunteer input as a key performance indicator can help provide a positive focus for increasing health benefits of Ranger Service work programmes.
- Experience in Midlothian suggests that most people don’t mind answering questions about perceived health benefits, provided the questions are worded appropriately and do not take too much time to answer.
- Feedback forms and questionnaires need careful structuring and wording to produce valid data – close scrutiny will soon dismiss responses to leading questions.
- Open questions and invitations for feedback should be balanced with closed questions to guide which activities and events generate most benefit.
More about the project

Midlothian Ranger Service’s aims include conserving, enhancing and encouraging participation in Midlothian’s natural environment and cultural heritage, working in partnership with communities and others. Health is not specifically mentioned within these aims, but is intrinsically linked. During 2009, Scottish Natural Heritage appointed consultants to help Midlothian Ranger Service and four other case studies develop and test an outcome focused planning and evaluation framework to demonstrate the links between nature, health and well-being.

Examples of the type of activities included within the framework were: visitor use of country parks and facilities, monitored by car park usage; and activity focused events beneficial to health such as walking, cycling, horse riding and practical conservation work, evidenced by the number of participants.

Further Midlothian Ranger Service activities which contribute towards delivery of outcomes such as living longer, healthier lives and promoting active lifestyles are: organisation of an annual walking festival, and environmental education sessions for local schools. Some of the results of evaluation techniques to generate quantitative data on the health benefits of these activities are summarised in the table below, together with the results of a survey of volunteers involved in conservation tasks. The surveys used mainly closed questions asking people to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with a range of health-related statements, and also invited more general comments. The results of these surveys demonstrated that visitors, school children and volunteers perceived health benefits from a visit to or volunteer work in the countryside.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranger service output</th>
<th>Method of data collection</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organisation of Midlothian Walking Festival with 16 walks, 1 cycle and 1 horse ride to promote Midlothian countryside opportunities</td>
<td>Feedback form distributed amongst all participants asking people whether they considered enjoying the outdoors was important to their health and well-being (264 responses).</td>
<td>89% of respondents strongly agreed and 11% agreed that enjoying the outdoors is important to their health and well-being.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Delivery of environmental education sessions for local schools</td>
<td>Record total number of pupils participating. Questionnaire survey of 223 pupils over a 3 month period asking whether visiting the countryside or outdoors made them feel healthier and how it made them feel.</td>
<td>2,334 pupils took part in active ranger-led education activities over a 12 month period. 81% of questionnaire respondents agreed that visiting places like those to which rangers had taken them made them feel happy; 83% agreed it made them feel relaxed; 93% that it made them feel excited and 90% that it made them feel cheerful.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provision of outdoor tasks related to the needs of countryside volunteers</td>
<td>Record total number of volunteer per active event organised as part of the implementation of site management plans. Questionnaire survey of 56 conservation volunteers</td>
<td>24 conservation groups and 1,139 volunteers (of whom 690 were Criminal Justice team participants) were involved in tasks. 57% of respondents strongly agreed and 36% agreed that volunteering is beneficial to their mental health and well-being. 79% agreed that volunteering increases confidence; 82% agreed that volunteering increases self-esteem; 86% agreed that volunteering is beneficial to physical health and well-being.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

“Volunteering improves my health by making me stronger, healthier, happier and gives me more confidence.”

“Being in the countryside doing physical activities is ten times better than a gym workout, and ten times more sociable.”

“For me the mental health benefits are the most important – avoiding lethargy and depression, especially in winter. Sometimes it’s a lifesaver.”

Further information
Jo Cooke, Senior Ranger, Midlothian Council
Tel: 01875 821990 Jo.cooke@midlothian.gov.uk

To find out more about SNH’s work on encouraging green exercise, and the work of the Green Exercise Partnership, visit
www.snh.gov.uk/snh-for-you/health-professionals/