

Enjoying the outdoors: Outdoor visit behaviour and engagement with nature in Scotland during the Coronavirus lockdown

Key results from an SNH survey of the Scottish population – July 2020

SNH and partners commissioned 56 Degree Insight to undertake a survey of the Scottish adult population to provide an understanding of people's outdoor visit behaviour and engagement with nature during the initial period of Coronavirus lockdown (23rd March to 28th May 2020). Just over 1,000 online interviews were undertaken with a representative sample of adults in Scotland between 29th May and 5th June 2020.

The survey revealed that most people changed the amount of time they spent outdoors during this initial lockdown period. While some reduced their time outside to shield from the virus, others increased their engagement with nature as they sought to obtain health and wellbeing benefits. For many, these experiences have sparked a desire to continue to make more of local greenspaces and spend more time outdoors in future.

Background

Scotland entered lockdown following an announcement on the 23rd March 2020, with a number of measures put in place to slow the spread of Coronavirus.

A stay at home message was central with only essential travel to be undertaken and outdoor visits for exercise limited to one per day and involving only other household members. This initial stage of lockdown lasted until the 28th May when some rules were relaxed.

Key findings

Engaging with nature during lockdown

During the initial lockdown period, with a number of 'push' and 'pull' factors at play, levels of participation in outdoor visits for exercise or recreation were varied, with around a third of the population (34%) taking daily visits and almost a fifth (19%) taking no visits at all. However, compared to historical survey data, both daily and weekly participation levels were higher than might have been expected at the time of year.

Compared to the same period in 2019, most people also changed the amount of time they spent outdoors, with 35% of the population spending more time outdoors and 43% spending less time outside.

Those most likely to be spending more time outdoors during lockdown included women, younger people and families. The factors influencing these groups included additional free time due to not being at work, a lack of anything else to do and the good weather.

In contrast, people aged 70 and over and those not in good health were most likely to spend less time outdoors during lockdown, exercising caution by following lockdown rules and staying at home.

How and where people spent their outdoor exercise and recreation time also changed over this period. Over a third of the population (36%) increased the amount of time they spent taking short walks (under 2 miles) and similar proportions spent more time than usual using local parks and roadside pavements (33% and 32% respectively).





For many people, lockdown also provided more time and opportunity to notice and enjoy local nature: 62% of the population sat and relaxed in their garden, 42% took part in gardening activities and 36% enjoyed wildlife in their garden. Others found different ways to engage, including 30% who enjoyed watching nature and wildlife from indoors through a window.

Levels of participation in all of these nature engagement activities increased significantly from the norm during lockdown, even among those who rarely or never left home to take part in outdoor exercise during this period. However, it should be noted that these activities weren't accessible to everyone, with less than three quarters of the population having access to their own private garden (71%).

Physical and mental health benefits

While the pleasant spring weather encouraged many people to spend time outdoors during lockdown (54%), many more were motivated by health reasons (70%). Looking after mental health was particularly important, with around 1 in 3 people specifically referencing managing stress as a reason for exercising outdoors (35%).

Related to this, nearly two-thirds of the population reported mental health benefits as a result of spending time in nature. Specifically, 63% stated that their experiences had helped them to de-stress, relax and unwind and 58% felt energised and revitalised.

Most people also saw positive changes in their local area during lockdown. Some 73% noticed less noise, 61% noticed less pollution and 60% noticed more wildlife.

Problems encountered

However while benefits were gained and positive experiences were enjoyed, many people also experienced anxieties while visiting the outdoors during this period of lockdown. The most common issues were encountering other people behaving inconsiderately (39%), cyclists on pavements (39%) and difficulties maintaining social distancing while outside (37%). A fifth of people reported having to change their route or destination when they took outdoor visits due to difficulties maintaining social distancing (20%).

When lockdown is over...

Around half of the population expect to spend more time outdoors for recreation after lockdown than they did before the crisis (including 18% who want to spend 'a lot more' time outdoors). The people most likely to expect to spend more time outdoors in future are similar to those who enjoyed increased time outside during lockdown: women (52%), those aged under 35 (57%) and those with children (54%).

Many people are also interested in making other positive lifestyle changes when lockdown is over. Around 3 in 5 would like to encourage their children to spend more time outdoors (68%) while similar proportions would like to continue to travel less for non-essential journeys (63%) and make more use of local greenspaces (62%).