

Summary Report from Good from Woods Partners

The project: Folly Wood “Good from Woods” Research Project

The organisation: researchers from within the Stroud Woodland Co-op membership

The project researcher: Seb Buckton, Ali Coles, Richard Keating, Jackie Rowanly

Participant group: Stroud Woodland Co-op membership

Number taking part: 68 participants

Activity: buying, using and caring for a community owned woodland

Top 3 messages are that (shared) community ownership of the woodland deliver well being benefits through:

1. simply knowing that you are contributing to preserving and enhancing woodland and increasing well being benefits for others and 'the greater good' even if you never visit the wood yourself
2. feeling safe and free to visit, enjoy and take action based on having had a stake in agreeing what is permissible and desirable with the rest of the group
3. engendering social, political and environmental connectedness

Background

Stroud Woodland Co-op was set up in 2010, as a way of owning woodland co-operatively for the benefit of the environment, shareholders in the Co-op, and other local people. The Co-op currently owns one woodland, Folly Wood, managed by the shareholders for biodiversity, using it for recreation and facilitating its use by local groups.

The research was undertaken during 2013 and 2014 by four shareholders in the co-operative.

Research focus

To explore the well-being benefits of Folly Wood, focussing on the benefits which are related to the fact that Folly Wood is co-operatively owned; that is, on the well-being benefits which could not be provided by a non-community owned wood.

Context

The three and a half acre woodland is on the edge of Stroud in the Cotswolds AONB, overlooking the Slad Valley. It was bought at auction in 2010 and the 64 members each hold a £500 share. The group appoints directors annually. Regular core group meetings (open to the whole membership) developed a plan for the group and the wood between 2010 and 2011 by holding seasonal group gatherings and celebrations. Clearance work, replanting and provision of simple play and other facilities began in 2012.

The woodland is probably a remnant ancient, beech-dominated wood, with larch densely planted approximately 90 years ago and in a state of neglect. The closest National Vegetation Classification (NVC) category is “Beech-Bramble”. The ground layer is dominated by Ivy and Bramble with extensive areas of Sweet Woodruff. There are badger setts in the wood.

Expectations

The expectations were that the community ownership model would provide a range of well being benefits which related to both the ownership of the woodland and to being a part of a group. We were interested in how group membership and collective processes would affect these well being benefits, both positively and negatively.

Methods used

On-line survey: Co-op members and ex-members were contacted by email, and asked to rate reasons for becoming involved in the Co-op, plus questions on demographics, frequency of visits, transport and activities taken part in.

Discussion group: A group of seven people met for two hours. Discussions were based on findings from the survey with probing questions to further explore wellbeing benefits or the lack of.

Interviews: Interviews were conducted in the research participants' homes. Two interviews with individuals, one interview with a couple. The process was similar to the discussion.

Creative workshop: Role-play and art activities in Folly Wood, aimed at delving deeper into people's experience of Folly Wood and the Co-op, drawing on the findings of the survey, focus group and interviews

Seminar session. Co-facilitation of a session at a town-wide seminar looking at developing collaborative projects amongst environmental organisations and potential well being benefits.

Results

The data was analysed for evidence of six different categories of well being, using a set of indicators to assist with identifying instances of each category. The number of references to each indicator is given in brackets. Below these are the headline findings. Together these indicate the value of the specific types of well being benefit.

Psychological

- Feeling of being in control (39)
- Competent and seen by others to be competent (2)
- Purposeful (47)
- Developing oneself (21)
- Secure with personal limitations (4)
- Contributing to the greater good (49)

Being in control related strongly to owning the wood - "I've loved the idea of feeling like I have more of a say in some outdoor sort of space other than my garden" and also experienced through being able to do things: "we're part of a project we've got permission to do things..." Children, in particular, experienced a sense of control through their familiarity with the wood: "I like it here cos... you never get lost..."

Purposefulness was expressed as "a shared purpose", part of this being taking care of the woodland over the long-term. "It's the sense of purpose that's really kind of tangible and concrete..... it's very simple, so the wood is owned by all these people and one of the main purposes is actually to come up and maintain the wood."

Contributing to the greater good referred to "giving others the opportunity to enjoy woodlands" and to "invest in the community and landscape". This also related to the longer-term: "It's exciting to think we can leave it for loads of generations and take that sense of stewardship to create something for future generations".

Emotional

- Positive emotions and moods (117)
- Absence of negative emotions and moods (5)
- Optimistic about the present (9)
- Optimistic about the future (29)

'Positive emotions' was the most cited benefit across all indicators. The Co-operative's process, its members and community ownership contributed to this as did specific activities such as woodland management, the creation of woodland structures and social activities involving adults and children.

"I've always wanted a piece of woodland for myself, but ... on my own wouldn't know what to do with it ... so there was that "oh, what a great idea, I can join in". I haven't managed to do as much as I'd like to for various reasons, ... hopefully if I get to do some work in the woods, that will then carry on even if I'm not around anymore, that's a good feeling, because we never really get to own anything, we just borrow it for a while don't we, while we are here."

Social

- Feeling confident (15)
- Feeling accepted (13)
- Feeling safe and supported within and through social relationships (23)
- Supporting others through social relationships (34)
- Connecting with others through shared beliefs and outlook (48)
- Congruent with political values (18)
- Feeling of belonging (27)

The most cited social benefit was 'connecting with others through shared beliefs and outlook' which we took to mean both an interest in communal activity and environmental concern. This was expressed by one participant as: "the fact that there should be a woodland available for people, and for it to be a shared facility and protected, that's the important thing." A very simple expression of this was "there is a community here, so we have people as well as trees" and another participant said that the motivation for joining Stroud Woodland Co-operative was "to own some land with some like-minded people and therefore to work with nature in a communal way".

Physical

- Feelings of physical health (2)
- Confidence in physical activity (8)
- Enjoyment in physical activity (22)
- Energetic (10)
- Relaxed (19)

Enjoyment of physical activity and feeling relaxed were the most cited examples of physical benefits. Fire building and lighting for example provided social and physical, even elemental experiences, much mentioned by adults. For children it was swinging or climbing in the trees that were mentioned most: "I like being on the swing and looking out across the wood...", or, "two or three things that make the wood really special to me, which are basically all the fun stuff you do on the swing, just doing a massive log bridge thing ...".

Specific physical attributes of the wood also contributed to feelings of relaxation, such as "homeliness, cos it's not very big," and "I wouldn't walk in a very big wood on my own, but I can go to Folly Wood and feel quite alright about it." Similarly, "you can relax and the kids can just play anywhere and go anywhere."

Biophilic

- Feeling of closeness to the natural world (45)
- Being engaged in a relationship with nature (38)

Participants made reference to how being in Folly Wood contributed to feelings of being connected to nature: “when you go into the wood it’s a different kind of being at one with nature I think, which is really a pleasure to enjoy.” Similar feelings were expressed regards badgers - “how precious they are”; light coming through the leaves - “it’s just lovely, it’s just beautiful... the natural patterns and puddles of light and sort of more organic shapes..”; sounds - “I love to hear the tapestry of different sounds...”

The active relationship with the wood was also mentioned : “there’s something very special about being there, and it’s something about helping – its helping me to ground myself and literally have my feet on the earth”

Spiritual

- Feelings of awe and wonder (8)
- Feeling of being part of a bigger picture (7)

An aspect of being in the wood was interpreted by some as a spiritual experiences, such as this participant saying, “I actually connect on a more pagan level, on a nature level, all those other things fall away and I’m there, it’s a much deeper connection, I can understand how the Druids might have worshipped trees, you know I feel it, I don’t have to think it”.

Reflections

As expected, the community ownership of Folly Wood greatly influenced feelings of well being; it could be seen to influence well being benefits across most indicators. Amongst research participants there was an overwhelming sense of positivity both towards the Co-op and to owning and being in the wood. Few participants cited examples of frustration with the slowness of the process and the majority appreciated a collective approach.

A high degree of altruism was evident from our findings, a real sense that Folly Wood provided a tangible means for people to take local action for the common and long-term good.

However, a few points need to be considered:

- The group, including the research participants, were self selecting and could be seen to be especially motivated regards community ownership of woodland
- Stroud has a history of community activism and environmentalism – an existing network of ‘like-minded’ people and community facilitators
- At the time of this research Stroud Woodland Co-op had been in existence for between 3 and 4 years during which time much effort and facilitation by a handful of members and enthusiasm for a new project has created a strong sense of shared endeavour focused on a specific task.
- Related to this, self development such as learning woodland skills and gaining a deeper understanding of woodland may increase over the years for a variety of reasons.
- The research would benefit from comparison with similarly owned but non-woodland community enterprises – farms, shops, transport etc.
- Many share holders did not take part in the research.
- An important element of the group, the directors, were not interviewed ; four of them being otherwise involved in the research

Action points

These action points fall into two categories. Firstly relating to well being benefits from the ongoing management of Folly Wood, and secondly regards the establishment of community woods elsewhere.

Ongoing Management of Folly Wood.

- Continue to adopt methods that enable the entire Co-op membership to participate in decision making processes and to disseminate information throughout the membership – many shareholders benefit just from knowing what is happening without playing an active part
- Develop activities that continue to enable members, and particularly new members, to participate in group events that benefit the woodland, the members and other users. Well being benefits arise from simply being with others in the wood, having a shared purpose with others and experiencing a closeness to nature – the balance of providing activity infrastructure and nature will be an ongoing issue for discussion and action

Establishment of new community woods

- Explore and work through existing networks
- Clearly define aims and objectives
- Facilitate a democratic, transparent process that enables all shareholders to feel in control
- Keep the woodland to the forefront as an equal ‘stakeholder’ itself – avoid endless indoor meetings
- Consider size and location of woodland – small and nearby seem to be important

Summary of findings

| Rank (most reported) | Wellbeing outcome | Associated factors |
|----------------------|--|---|
| 117 | Positive emotions and moods | Owning woodland, being a part of a positive group, taking part in activities |
| 49 | Contributing to the greater good | Enabling others to enjoy woodland, building community and caring for landscape, positive contribution for the future |
| 48 | Connecting with others through shared beliefs and outlook | Sense of community around caring for woodland |
| 47 | Purposeful | Tangible shared endeavour |
| 45 | Feeling of closeness to the natural world | Being in the wood and aware of natural processes and features |
| 39 | Feeling of being in control | Sense of ownership, such as shared and agreed project aims, belonging. |
| 38 | Being engaged in a relationship with nature | Undertaking activities in conjunction with nature. |
| 34 | Supporting others through social relationships | Helping people care for the wood and for woodland species, involving children. |
| 29 | Optimistic about the future | Feelings of long-term benefits through woodland management |
| 27 | Feeling of belonging | Part of the group and of the wood |
| 23 | Feeling safe and supported within and through social relationships | Group ethos of shared responsibility for the project – the wood and all in the group. Both actual, i.e. in the wood and virtual, i.e. via email updates |

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|----|--------------------------------|--|
| 22 | Enjoyment in physical activity | Playing, firelighting, tree planting, felling trees and gathering firewood, being outside in the wood. |
| 21 | Developing oneself | Learning about trees and woodland, artistic and spiritual experiences |



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