

What can help older people enjoy the outdoors more? Choice-based scenarios comparing natural and non-natural physical features

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Our research on outdoor spaces for older people has indicated that people are more satisfied with life when having pleasant, safe and well-furnished outdoor spaces. Abundance of trees and plants not only contributes to the pleasantness of such places but, when coupled with high-quality pathways, has a significant impact on walking behaviour. The knowledge of key features in outdoor spaces lead us to question how best to target them in environmental interventions. This study, using choice-based conjoint analysis, examined: 1) the relative importance of natural features in older people's preference for local open spaces; and 2) potential trade-offs between natural and non-natural attributes, based on real-life scenarios. A choice-based conjoint questionnaire was constructed with 15 attributes of outdoor open space, each taking up to 4 levels. A sample of 237 older people in the UK evaluated 14 paired comparisons of these environmental attributes. When considering the natural elements: trees along paths, trees/plants in the park, and water features, the results showed that "trees and plants in the park" is the most preferred attribute. People also prefer to have dense trees and plants in their local park, rather than many trees/plants, some trees/plants, or no trees/few plants. When considering the trade-offs between natural versus non-natural features, the results indicated that participants would be willing to trade lack of facilities in order to have tree-lined paths and dense trees/plants. Participants would also trade a poorly maintained open space for an aesthetically pleasing one. However, participants would rather have an open space with light traffic, no trees along paths and some trees/plants in the park than one with heavy traffic, dense trees/plants and trees along pathways. Choice-based preferences thus provide significant information to understand the trade off between competing environmental attributes and help those involved in the design of outdoor environments to prioritise interventions.