

## ROOTED IN THE COMMUNITY? ETHNIC PARTICIPATION IN FOREST RECREATION IN GREAT BRITAIN

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### Abstract

Since 2000, new legislation in UK has required the Forestry Commission (FC) to actively promote opportunities for recreation among socially excluded groups, including members of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities. This paper reports on research, commissioned by FC, to identify the factors which influence BME access to forests, and to recommend how FC should respond to its new legal obligations. An action research methodology was employed, comprising focus groups and accompanied forest visits with forest rangers, BME community leaders, and four different BME groups from Northampton and Wellingborough, two multi-ethnic towns in south England. The selected groups were: elderly South Asians, Somali teenage boys, Afro-Caribbean primary school children, and young Asian mothers. Semi-structured interviews were also used to reveal knowledge, perceptions and practice of FC staff. The findings were supported by a comprehensive literature review.

The research identified four main factors that can influence BME access to woodlands: a) economic factors (leading, e.g. to restricted access to transport), b) lack of awareness, knowledge, familiarity, confidence or interest, c) cultural attitudes and preferences, and d) feeling unwelcome or out of place. The first two factors are typically not due to ethnicity per se, but are a reflection of the fact that the majority of BME people live in urban poor communities. The second pair of factors is directly linked to ethnicity, and forms the focus of discussion in the paper. The paper considers cultural attitudes and preferences towards the countryside, and how these may shape behaviour. Two perspectives on the issue of feeling unwelcome are discussed: firstly, the association in the public imagination of the English countryside with the 'true' English national identity, a refuge from the negative influences of urban multicultural life, and, secondly, a perceived risk of racism, and direct experience of racism, while visiting the countryside. The paper concludes with key recommendations for monitoring and evaluation, outreach, interpretation, training, and research, which, if implemented, should encourage members of BME groups, and forest managers alike, to tackle social and cultural barriers, and increase levels of BME participation in forest recreation in UK.

### Key Words

Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups, social inclusion, forest recreation, action research

### Key References

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