

Executive Summary

Let Nature Feed Your Senses: Engaging people with nature, food and farming

Rachel Bragg, Carly Wood, Jo Barton and Jules Pretty

Introduction

The 'Let Nature Feed Your Senses' (LNFYS) project organises sensory rich farm visits across England for community groups of all ages and abilities. Groups include older people, disabled adults and children, and adults and children from areas of deprivation. The project facilitates visits to both farms and nature reserves, providing access to a diversity of managed environments both with and without livestock.

The emphasis of LNFYS is on providing sensory rich experiences on the farm, rather than purely educational or 'care' visits. The visits are supported both through contact with LNFYS staff and through a wide variety of innovative, interactive resources designed to help hosts develop sensory rich visits.

Let Nature Feed Your Senses aligns with wider challenges facing the health and wellbeing of industrialised societies. These include a lack of opportunity to be active outdoors in everyday life, mental health issues, poor awareness of food and diet and an aging population. Many people feel isolated or disconnected from others, their local communities and wider society, and have become disconnected from the nature around us, from the food that we eat and from those who produce it.

A wide range of international research has evidenced key health benefits experienced for many people after spending time in the natural environment and a link between nature and health seems to be clearly emerging. Health benefits include reduced stress levels, improved mood and self esteem; enhanced psychological wellbeing and improved attention and concentration¹. Natural places facilitate stress recovery, encourage exercise participation, stimulate development in children and provide opportunities for personal development and sense of purpose in adults². The need for initiatives

¹ Bird 2007, Barton and Pretty, 2010, NEA 2011, Wilson 1984, Kaplan and Kaplan 1989, Ulrich 1981 - See introduction section for complete list of references

² Health Council of the Netherlands, 2004

like LNFYS was highlighted in the Government's Natural Environment White Paper³.

Research by the Sensory Trust⁴ has shown that these benefits are less available to groups who face barriers to accessing the outdoors, including disabled adults and children, older people and people with chronic health issues. This issue is recognised by Access to Nature, the Big Lottery funded grant programme administered by Natural England.



Partaking in physical activity in natural surroundings - "green exercise"⁵ - may also have therapeutic properties and collectively, such therapeutic approaches have been referred to as "green care". Green spaces are also ideal surroundings for outdoor

learning, where engaging with nature can lead to enhanced connectedness to nature and increased ecological literacy - "green education".

The realisation that land can provide health and wellbeing services⁶ has provided a basis for using farming and horticulture in social care programmes, and more recently care farming. A number of recent publications have acknowledged the importance of health services from our countryside,⁷ including the UK National Ecosystem Assessment,⁸ which published the first analysis of the UK's natural environment in terms of the benefits it provides to society and continuing economic prosperity. Public bodies such as Natural England and charities such as the National Trust and the RSPB are actively promoting the health benefits of natural landscapes⁹.

Organisations such as Sensory Trust and Natural England have highlighted both the barriers that prevent these benefits being available to disengaged

³ DEFRA June 2011. The Natural Choice; securing the value of nature. Chapter 4 Reconnecting people and nature.

⁴ Price and Stoneham 2001; Making Connections. A Guide to Accessible Greenspace, The Sensory Trust

⁵ See www.greenexercise.org

⁶ Dobbs and Pretty 2004; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005; Hine et al. 2007; Defra 2011

⁷ Economics and Funding SIG 2007; NE 2009;

⁸ NEA 2011,

⁹ <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/enjoying/linkingpeople/Genrale/health/default.aspx>

groups, and ways to overcome them¹⁰, while Linking Environment And Farming (LEAF) and other farming organisations are increasing awareness of the multiple services provided by farms. For example, the huge success of LEAF's Open Farm Sunday initiative has enabled almost a million people to get out onto farms over the last seven years.

The LNFYS project has actively encouraged farmers to explore the opportunities of delivering public good and to build links with groups and individuals deprived of the opportunity to experience the benefits derived from visiting farms. While much work has been conducted into the wellbeing benefits of longer-term care farming initiatives¹¹, to date very little research has been conducted to find out the benefits of 'one-off' farm visits. This research sought to bridge this gap by recording the impacts of sensory rich farm visits on visitors' well-being, confidence and understanding.

Let Nature Feed Your Senses has shown itself to be successful at a number of different



levels. Over 11,800 people have had the opportunity to visit farms and nature reserves across England, many of whom didn't have the opportunity to do so before.

The research has shown that the project has had a positive impact on the wellbeing of participants, has facilitated social inclusion, has improved visitor access to and connection with nature, and has increased understanding of farming and food production, all of which are likely to contribute to healthier lifestyles. These outcomes also support Government calls to connect people with the natural environment and food production, to engage in nature and outside learning, to improve health and promote wellbeing.

LNFYS has made nature and greenspaces more interesting, appealing and accessible through focusing on the sensory experience. The rich diversity of activities undertaken on the farms and

nature reserves, designed and developed to stimulate the senses, has meant that visits to all types of host sites have been rewarding. Initial concerns that farms and nature reserves without opportunities to interact with livestock could be of lesser interest and perhaps offer fewer benefits to visitors as a result, proved to be unfounded, with no significant differences identified between benefits to participants from farms with livestock and those without.

Another important accomplishment of LNFYS has been the increased understanding of food production and farming practices by visitors and for many the realisation that not all food originates in a supermarket. In times where there is a call to reconnect consumers to producers and to encourage healthy eating, these outcomes will be welcome.

Methodology

Six 'SMART' project outcomes were identified by LNFYS and ICARUS (Natural England's external monitoring and evaluation consultants for the whole of their Access to Nature programme) for the LNFYS project. Of those, the first three are the focus for this evaluation:

- 1) Young, older and disabled people report they feel better – mentally or physically – as a result of participating in LNFYS events.
- 2) Young, older and disabled people report they have more confidence in accessing the natural environment.
- 3) Young, older and disabled people report they better understand links between the natural environment and their everyday lives.

LEAF and the Sensory Trust commissioned the University of Essex to provide an independent academic evaluation of the extent to which the Let Nature Feed Your Senses project achieved the above outcomes. The University of Essex used a mixed methods approach, utilising data derived from a variety of different sources;

- A before and after study which took place on 10 LNFYS visits at nine different farms over the period May 2010 to May 2012 with a total number of 91 people (max), to directly assess any changes occurring as a result of a LNFYS visit.
- An associated after visit group evaluation study, which was devised for participants unable to complete questionnaires. The group evaluation took place on 61 LNFYS visits on 25 farms over

¹⁰ Diversity Review. Countryside Agency, Cheltenham. 2005.

www.naturalengland.org.uk

¹¹ <http://www.carefarminguk.org/Reports.aspx>

the same period as the before and after study with a total number of 812 people (max).

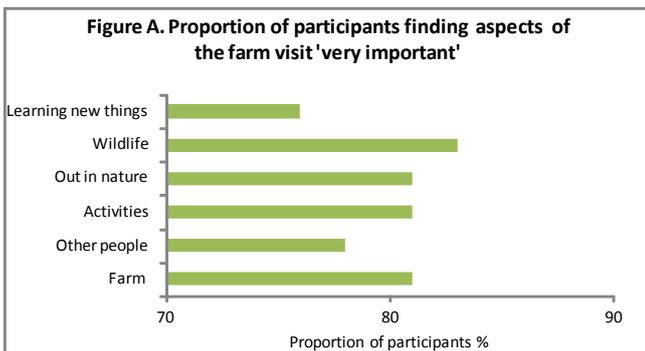
- A follow-up interview carried out by LNFYS staff, with leaders of groups that had recently taken part in a LNFYS visit. Group leaders from 38 groups were contacted to take part in the follow-up telephone interview, typically two–six months after a visit had taken place.
- A group leader focus group facilitated by the Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI) in January 2012, with 10 staff members from six different initiatives that had participated in LNFYS visits across the West Midlands.
- Testimonials and case study data from participants and group leaders, collated by LNFYS staff.

Key findings

Let Nature Feed Your Senses has shown itself to be successful at a number of different levels. Over 11,800 people have had the opportunity to visit farms and nature reserves across England, many of whom didn't have the opportunity to do so before. Activities undertaken on LNFYS evaluated visits varied, but were all designed to explore as many of the senses as possible and included:

- Harvesting, cooking or eating produce.
- Watching, handling or working with livestock, observing, handling or working with different arable crops.
- Watching, identifying or handling wildlife.
- Learning about, sitting on or riding in farm machinery.
- Taking part in creative activities using natural materials.

After the visit, participants rated the importance of a range of different aspects of the visit to the farms by giving a score of 1-5 for each aspect on an 'importance scale'. All elements scored quite highly with the highest scoring being outside in nature, the farm environment, and activities and walk (see Figure A).



Outcome 1. Young, older and disabled people report they feel better – mentally or physically – as a result of participating in LNFYS events.

This study included measures of three human wellbeing elements: mental wellbeing, health status, and social inclusion.

i. Mental wellbeing

“Visiting a farm might sound like just a nice day out, which it certainly is, but for our residents the benefit to their physical and mental wellbeing was huge. When residents have visited a farm we’ve seen a huge transformation with people laughing, smiling and talking. Even after the visits we’ve noticed that the residents seem calmer, happier and will sleep better at night.”

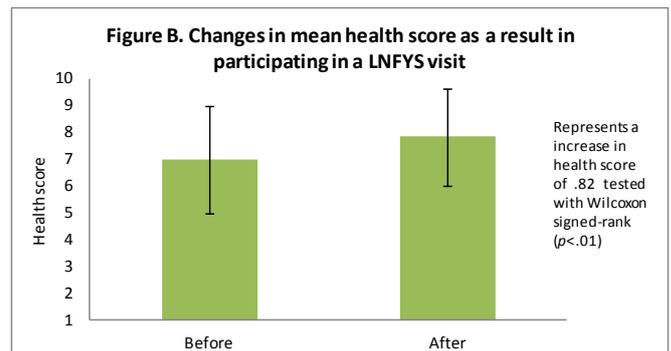
Comments received from group leaders and visitors relating to the impact of farm visits on visitors’ mental wellbeing included a calming and therapeutic effect of being on a farm, a relaxing and stress-reducing environment, an increase in self esteem and independence of usually shy, aggressive or disempowered individuals, and improvements in memory function and reminiscence ability for older visitors.

“The group was very enthusiastic. Some had never been on a farm before. For some, it provides a way of managing mental health.”

ii. Health status

Participants of the before and after visit study were asked “how healthy do you feel at the moment?” both before and after their visit, on a scale of one to ten. There was a statistically significant increase in self perceived health scores as a result of the LNFYS visit with 42% of visitors recording an increase in health score (Figure B).

Furthermore, 67% of visitors who took part in the



before and after or group evaluation said they were more likely to eat healthy food after taking part in a LNFYS visit. However, in the follow-up interviews only 18% of group leaders said they thought their group would be more likely to eat fresh healthy food as a result of the farm visit.

iii. Social inclusion

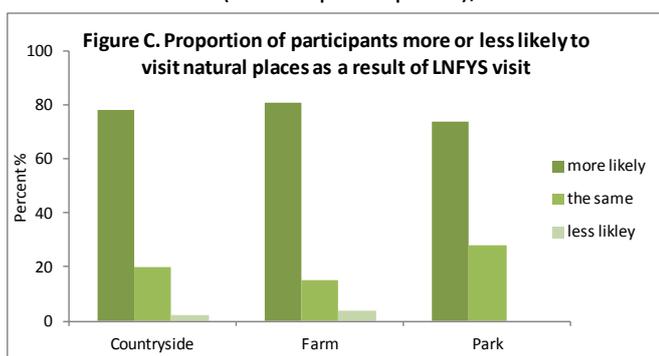
In the before and after study participant perceptions on the importance of being with other people were assessed through the question “how important is being with other people to you?” The mean scores increased very slightly after the visit compared to before, however these results were not found to be statistically significant. In the group evaluation, 78% of participants said that being with other people during the visit was ‘very important’ to them. Interestingly, in the follow up interviews, group leaders scored the importance of being with other people with a mean score of 4.68 out of 5 which was higher than the scores given by participants on the day of their visit.

Narrative and anecdotal evidence from group leaders and host farmers on social inclusion effects indicate that participants not only bonded with each other, group leaders and farm staff during their visit, but have also experienced increased communication with friends and family or with other people in a care setting since the LNFYS visits.

Outcome 2. Young, older and disabled people report they have more confidence in accessing the natural environment.

“This is such a valuable experience for our pupils; many never experience life outside of the home, never mind being able to engage with nature. It is such a grounding and rewarding experience.”

Visitors who took part in the before and after study or the group discussion were asked if their farm visit would make them more or less likely to visit various types of natural places. Results show that participants felt that they were much more likely to visit a local farm (81% of participants), the



countryside (78%) or local parks and greenspaces (74%) as a result of their visit. The responses from the group evaluation also supported these findings with 636 participants (89%) agreeing that they would like to visit the countryside more often.

However, there appears to be a difference between intention to increase contact with nature (through questionnaires completed on the day of the visit) and actual change (group leader interviews two–six months after a group’s visit), as in the follow up interviews with group leaders, 32% said that changes to their group’s frequency of contact with nature had occurred as a result of their farm visit. Some group leaders cited group members wanting to go outside more often, some said that group members were going independently to re-visit the farm, while others said that they were planning other trips to different natural places. 24% of group leaders also said that there had been changes in the types of nature visited by group members, with examples cited including bringing nature inside the home, going for more walks outside, and reduced misgivings and worries about accessing nature.

When asked if the group had any plans to visit the farm again in the future, 30 out of the 38 group leaders (79%) interviewed replied that they did plan to revisit for a variety of different reasons including to see the seasonal changes on the farm, to bring back the feeling of being out in the open for people who usually spend their time inside, to enhance wellbeing and self esteem, and because participants enjoyed the first LNFYS experience.

Visitors who took part in the before and after study were also asked if they felt confident to visit local green space. The number of participants who said they felt confident to visit local green spaces before their LNFYS visit was 59% compared to 83% afterwards. The majority of participants in the group evaluation (72%) also said that they felt confident to visit local greenspaces.

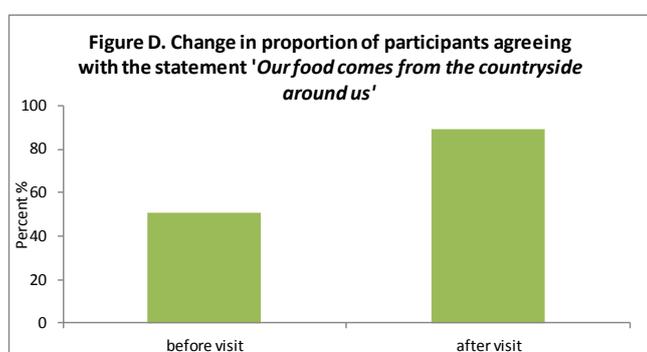
“The residents have been talking about the visit for weeks. They discuss how the baby beef cattle will have grown, the interesting things they learnt from the farmer and they have fond memories of the afternoon tea and homemade cake. We are wanting to bring another group of residents as they are keen to get out having heard and seen so much of the visit from their housemates.”

Outcome 3. Young, older and disabled people report they better understand links between the natural environment and their everyday lives.

"It's real life, sometimes we have to stage things, but this is real life. That is what is so important. All about nature, how food gets to the table. That sausage is in front of them but they wouldn't have thought about how it has got to them – has provoked a lot of discussion."

When participants of the before and after study were asked if they agreed with the statement "farmers work together with nature to produce our food", the proportion of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing to this statement rose from 66% before the farm visit to 89% afterwards. 655 participants (91%) of participants in the group evaluation also agreed that farmers work with nature to produce our food.

When comparing participants' of the before and after study level of agreement with the statement "our food comes from the countryside around us", there was a statistically significant increase in the extent of agreement before the farm visit compared to afterwards, with 51% of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing to the statement before the farm visit compared to 89% afterwards (see Figure D).



Furthermore, 78% of the before and after study participants said that the visit had changed their views of farming and farmland, with the main changes being a better understanding of food production processes (livestock, dairy, arable and vegetables), how farmers work alongside nature, and where food comes from.

Conclusions

It is clear from the findings discussed above that the LNFYS experience has contributed significantly to a range of important outcomes for the beneficiaries,

for the project and for the wider communities of agriculture, green care and education.

A combination of attributes, needs and other factors are likely to affect any scaling up and mainstreaming of this type of initiative to more farms, target groups and natural worked landscapes in the UK and beyond:

- The dissemination of a combination of quantitative and anecdotal evidence of the success of this LNFYS project in terms of personal outcomes, social aspects and understanding of food and farming - in order to convince potential beneficiary groups, partners and funders.
- Resources – finances (longer-term funding), time, trained staff to support host farmers and nature reserve managers.
- Political will to facilitate more such initiatives to connect the UK population to the natural environment and the food that we eat in order to reap the health and wellbeing rewards - there is still limited acceptance of therapeutic value of the outdoors (both rural and urban) for delivering physical and mental health and wellbeing – 'green care'.

Participating in the Let Nature Feed Your Senses project has been a profound experience for many of the participants involved. The majority of visitors will leave the farms and nature reserves with a legacy of enhanced wellbeing, a confidence and desire to access nature more frequently and a better understanding of nature and the food that we eat. Those responsible for improving quality of life, encouraging healthier lifestyle choices and facilitating access to nature for vulnerable or disengaged groups should consider these multiple wellbeing benefits to participants in nature based initiatives such as LNFYS, when commissioning and funding services.

"A lot haven't had opportunity to go out before now. The visit has helped with confidence. They left passionate and inspired."

For further information about the LNFYS project:

www.letnaturefeedyoursenses.org/

James Taylor - james.taylor@leafuk.org

Jen Bartlett - jbartlett@sensorytrust.org.uk

For further information about the research:

Rachel Bragg, Deputy Director, Essex Sustainability Institute and, Department of Biological Sciences, University of Essex - rebragg@essex.ac.uk

www.greenexercise.org