

People and nature: learning through doing

Action research programme

GalGael Trust



The **GalGael Trust** in Glasgow is one of six community and voluntary sector groups in Scotland to have taken part in the action research programme **People and nature: learning through doing**. This programme aimed to identify successful approaches to involving people in enjoying, learning about and caring for nature and was supported by Scottish Natural Heritage and Scottish Community Development Centre.



Scottish Natural Heritage
Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba

All of nature for all of Scotland
Nàdair air fad airson Alba air fad

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This **People and nature: learning through doing** project aimed to find out what stopped people in deprived communities from accessing and enjoying their cultural and natural heritage — and how they benefited when they did. The research was carried out by staff, volunteers and participants from the GalGael Trust.

Background

The GalGael Trust in Govan (Glasgow) is best known for building traditional wooden boats in a community where the demise of the shipbuilding industry left a legacy of high unemployment, poverty, crime, addiction and homelessness.

On their 12-week programme 'Navigate Life', GalGael uses traditional crafts such as woodworking and boat-building, and visits to sites of cultural and natural heritage, to help people reconnect with the world of work and a sense of identity. A few days planting trees at GalGael's Barmaddy farmhouse on Loch Awe, or sailing on the west coast in GalGael's galley, give participants a 'wider sense of territory' and help them rediscover their place in the world.

GalGael staff regularly witness that participants display a new exuberance on returning from a trip away from the city.

"Eyes reflect the uplifted spirit. Excited conversation and improved posture are evidence of the inspiration provided by reconnecting with the elements."

The research project

GalGael has long believed that lack of contact with nature has a detrimental effect on many levels. They wanted to use their research to explore what stopped people in deprived communities like Govan from engaging with the natural world, and to gather evidence on how deeply this disconnection can impact on physical and mental well-being.

They also wanted to explore the benefits of their work in helping people to experience nature, and to use this to provide improved and more meaningful opportunities.

GalGael used a questionnaire survey to explore the outdoor experiences of their participants

"Offering people a chance to get out in the landscape can go a long way to helping them retrieve a sense of connection and meaning."



and volunteers. The questionnaire was also sent to volunteers at the local LEGUP community garden. 30 questionnaires were distributed, with a 100% response rate due to ongoing contact with respondents.

The questionnaire was designed to find out:

- what kind of outdoor places people visited, what they did there and how they got there;
- how often they got out into nature and what would help them do this more often;
- what benefits they experienced from the natural world.

Two focus groups were held to explore people's experiences in more detail: one round a campfire in Pollok Country Park, the birthplace of GalGael; and the other in GalGael's workshop. A DVD was produced with highlights of the campfire conversations.





“Money. Where to go? Where am I allowed to go?”

Research findings

Access — barriers and enablers

Many people had difficulty accessing natural areas due to **lack of money** or **transport**. This largely restricted them to local parks, but comments were made about the **quality and safety of some urban greenspaces** in poorer areas.

“I would like to get further away from the city but I can’t afford the travel and I don’t drive.”

Having **no-one to go with** was an issue for almost half of those surveyed. This highlighted the value of company and shared experiences in the outdoors; and also issues of confidence perhaps.

Many said that more **information on where to go and how to get there**, particularly by public transport, would help them enjoy nature more often. **Information to help them interpret what they saw** would also be useful.

“You don’t know what you are looking at, the heritage of it. If someone explained it to you, you would enjoy it better.”

Many felt that more **information on access rights** and wild camping together with activities such as fishing would be helpful — as these are often part of a cultural tradition in poorer communities.

Health and well-being

People had a deep and recognised need to get out into nature. 90% said that the natural environment was good for their mental well-being and 83% felt it improved their physical health. 90% gained a sense of peace and relaxation, 67% felt a sense of connectedness and 47% got a sense of achievement in the outdoors.

“Space, clean air... simple things like sitting at a campfire, away from the concrete city.”

“I went to Barmaddy farm for four days and came back a different person.”

Culture and identity

People valued the connection to heritage and culture that came from engaging with the landscape around them. A sense of place was important to a sense of self.

“It’s good to get connected with the land — value yourself among all of nature.”

But many felt excluded from the countryside — land which some saw as their birthright.

“I have the view that we are not allowed to do anything in our own country — fish in our own lochs, camp or hunt.”

“Every time I go away I come back refreshed, fitter. Often when I’m away I don’t smoke at all. It’s amazing.”



Impact on the group

“Our research has helped us realise the depth of the problem when people are disengaged with nature — missing being part of something bigger.”

GalGael's research gave them evidence to back up what they had already observed about the healing power of nature. It has underlined the value of the opportunities they provide and the importance of shared experiences in the outdoors.

GalGael now has a better understanding of the issues people in deprived areas can face in enjoying their natural and cultural heritage and will use this in developing new areas of their work.

The team gained new skills in planning and carrying out research, analysing their findings and engaging people in the wider Govan community. They are using these new skills, through the Govan Folk University¹, for research into the health and well-being benefits of involvement in the local community garden.

The project involved 40 days of staff and volunteer time from the GalGael Trust.

Future actions

GalGael plans to set up a notice-board to help people arrange camping or fishing trips with others and to highlight green volunteering opportunities. They would like to produce a leaflet on places people can visit, with information on how to get there and how to interpret what they see.

They hope their research will help raise awareness among other organisations of the issues that hinder or enable access to the natural environment, and the impact this has on individual and community well-being. They would like health and addiction agencies to see that treatment could often be avoided if people had the opportunity to heal themselves through work and nature.

GalGael believes that one of the biggest problems in deprived areas is that people don't have anything to do. Places like community gardens can provide opportunities for people to come together in meaningful activity for the mutual advantage of people and place.



“There are lots of places in need of environmental improvement — and lots of people desperate for something valuable to do. We need to bring these opportunities together.”

¹ Govan Folk University is a partnership of local organisations working to reclaim the meaning of education in ways that deepen the many forms it can take in the community. www.govanfolkuniversity.org/



Key learning for other organisations

- “Cultural heritage is often intertwined with natural heritage like a strand of DNA”
- Engaging with nature can have a very positive impact on the health, well-being and identity of people in deprived communities
- More and better urban green spaces are needed — and better information on places that can be reached by foot, bike or public transport
- Doing things in the company of others is important — for shared experiences and being part of something bigger
- People want to contribute — reclaiming vacant land for nature or growing can give local people a sense of ownership and purpose
- Environmental volunteering can provide meaningful and shared opportunities — and overcome cost and transport barriers

“More places like our Barmaddy farm are needed — where urban folk can get out and do stuff in nature, like planting trees.”



What did GalGael learn from the action research process?

“We learned that you get different types of evidence from different research methods. We’d gathered plenty of anecdotal evidence through our work, and in our focus groups, but the questionnaire gave us robust, quantitative evidence to support this.”

For GalGael participants, an outdoor campfire provided a perfect setting for a focus group and helped people to connect with their memories of outdoor experiences, some from childhood. A professional storyteller was employed to ‘warm people up’ and set the scene.

The focus groups were video-recorded so that GalGael could review what they’d captured to write into their report. However, the heartfelt discussion turned out to be an ideal way to share an emotive snapshot of their research on DVD.

People and nature: learning through doing

was an action research programme supported by Scottish Natural Heritage and Scottish Community Development Centre which ran from Autumn 2009 until Spring 2011 with six participating groups. The programme aimed to increase understanding and improve the ways in which voluntary and community sector organisations, and the agencies and organisations which support them, work with excluded and disadvantaged groups to involve them in the natural heritage.

Action research is often defined as research done *of and by* a particular group of people, rather than *on and to* them — and with the aim of achieving change. The benefit of this approach is that the skills, knowledge and understanding developed through the research remain within the group and are directly relevant to their work. The wider benefit from the **People and nature: learning through doing** research is in providing others with an insight into what works ‘in practice’ from the perspectives of those directly involved in engaging people with nature.

Each group had mentoring support from Scottish Community Development Centre to help them develop and carry out their research, plus a small amount of funding for research and dissemination expenses. All of the groups gained new skills and contacts from their action research, as well as insights and evidence that will shape and encourage support for their work in helping more people to enjoy Scotland's nature and outdoors.

To find out more

Read the full action research reports at www.snh.gov.uk/learning-through-doing

For more information on SNH's work on increasing and broadening participation in outdoor recreation, see www.snh.gov.uk/increasing-participation or contact Elaine Macintosh at Scottish Natural Heritage elaine.macintosh@snh.gov.uk, 0141 951 4488

For more information on the GalGael Trust, or to request a copy of their action research DVD, see www.galgael.org or email tam@galgael.org

For more information on action research see www.scdc.org.uk/what/community-led-action-research

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The People and nature: learning through doing projects

- Blarbuie Woodland Enterprise, Lochgilphead
- Broughty Ferry Environmental Project / DightyConnect, Dundee
- Clackmannanshire Disability Awareness Group, Alloa
- GalGael Trust, Glasgow
- Neilston Development Trust, Neilston
- SAMH Chrysalis Project, Dundee (*focus group only*)

“Learning to appreciate the landscape and spending time in the elements are well-known catalysts not only for health and well-being but for rebuilding a sense of identity contributing to better citizenship.”

GalGael Trust