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Angling and Personal Health & Well-being

Angling Participation Research Theme Paper 2



An Interim Report for the Social and Community
Benefits of Angling Research

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*'Angling can offer one the chance to relax; it may offer intense excitement, fresh air, comradeship and even exercise. What each angler gets from it will depend on the angler. Naturally for anglers the green spaces and proximity to water are important, but I am well aware that other people gain similar benefits from more urban, land-based pursuits.'*¹

Background

Delivering positive health and well-being is a key issue for policymakers in contemporary UK society², however there remains a degree of uncertainty about how best to define and measure health and well-being. Rather than generate further conceptual debate in this area, the aim of this paper is to identify the ways in which angling can contribute to health and well-being outcomes. With this in mind, the discussion that follows should be read as inclusive of widely recognised dimensions of health and well-being, such as physical and mental health, personal state of mind, feelings of safety and ability to cope, and a sense of connection with people, communities and the wider environment³.

Over the course of the last decade there has been growing public sector concern about the levels of physical and mental health of individuals living in the UK⁴, and considerable debate about how best to deal with the problem. Anecdotal evidence, and data collected as part of this project, indicates that angling participation is well positioned to contribute to personal health and well-being in a number of ways. These ways include angling participation being:

- an outlet for physical activity
- part of a programme of recovery from ill health
- a means of reducing stress and/or increasing relaxation
- a pathway for feeling connected with

community

- a reason for spending time in 'green spaces'.

Despite an increasing public awareness of angling's potential in this area⁵, to date there has been a lack of formal investigation into these claims.

Initial evidence of the ways that angling contributes to personal health and well-being was found in the results of the 2009 angler survey conducted for this research. Asked about the importance of motivations to participate in angling, the 2,400 survey respondents assigned the highest levels of importance to two closely linked statements: 'to experience nature and scenery' and 'to escape crowds and noise'⁶. Of 149 additional survey comments received about angler motivations, responses themed as 'rest and relaxation' were the most frequently appearing.

Data collected in 2010 from fieldwork and as part of angler interviews supported the 2009 survey findings. Tag Cloud 1 (appears on page 3) contains the words that appeared in 50 responses to an interview question about the personal benefits of angling participation. Aside from the appearance of common words like 'fish' and 'fishing', the most prominent words are 'relaxation', 'relaxing', 'stresses', 'fresh air' and 'wildlife'. Anglers clearly place significant value on the opportunity that angling provides them to wind down, de-stress, and observe wildlife in an outdoor environment. The comments below are typical of angler sentiment about this issue:

*'[Angling is] a chance just to get away from everything, like the stresses of work and everyday stresses.'*⁷

*'It's nice to be closer to nature, [angling] helps to relax and unwind, it helps to build patience as fishing is all about being patient'*⁸

*'I find angling a peaceful experience that helps me to unwind and get away from the day-to-day stresses in my life.'*⁹

demonstrates:

Sea anglers at Chesil Beach:

'I like sitting outside'; 'it gives me some breathing space'; 'it's a nice beach'; 'I enjoy the freedom of being outdoors'.

Game anglers from Fishing for Everyone:

'I love being outdoors and some fisheries are in the most beautiful places you can imagine'; 'Initially, I just enjoyed being out in the fresh air, on my own'.

Coarse anglers from Wakefield Angling Club:

'It's about being outdoors; seeing the changing seasons, the wildlife.'; 'You see plenty of wildlife ... eight mink once walked past my tackle box at Newmillardam'.

Given its significance to anglers, green space is also an important issue for the owners and managers of fisheries. North Third Trout Fishery (NTTF) near Stirling, Scotland, is a focus site for this research that has green space as a central component of the angling experience. NTTF owner George Holdsworth explained that while the site was just 4½ miles from central Stirling, the 'wild' aura of the surrounding landscape and local wildlife were unique selling points – and vital for the success of his fishery:

*'We have this awesome scenery. If it was in the Lake District or something there'd be thousands of people walking all over the place ... [in terms of marketing] quite often I have to spend more time talking about the birds to some anglers – and the ducks, and the deer and the otters, and all that stuff – than I do about fishing.'*¹⁵

The proximity of NTTF to the city of Stirling highlights how angling participation can be an important conduit for residents of urban areas to experience nearby green space. Moreover, contact with green space has a particularly acute value to urban communities - A House of Commons report in 2006¹⁶ recognised the role of 'good quality' green space in enhancing the quality of urban life and

contributing to government objectives around health, neighbourhood renewal and community cohesion.

Physical activity in green spaces: Green exercise

Both the concept of green exercise and the well-being benefits related to green exercise have been advocated in a number of recent studies¹⁷. In essence, green exercise is physical activity that is undertaken outdoors – preferably in natural settings/green spaces. The substantial mental health benefits associated with being present in green spaces, combined with the positive physical and mental health outcomes of exercise, build a compelling argument for the widespread promotion of green exercise.

Most participation in angling could easily be classified as green exercise. Angling participation requires physical activity (albeit in variable amounts depending on a number of factors), and as already noted, angling frequently occurs in natural or semi-natural environments. Angling is also well-placed to deliver the benefits typically associated with green exercise activities. Research by the University of Essex¹⁸ has summarised these particular benefits as being:

- Improved psychological well-being by enhancing mood and self-esteem, while reducing anger, confusion, depression and tension;
- A wide range of physical and health benefits;
- The facilitation of social networking and creativity.

Summarising the benefits

Table 1 (see p.7) is an adaptation of a table originally published as part of the University of Essex research on green exercise. The four principles (natural and social connections, sensory stimulation, activity and escape), subcategories and the descriptors in the table are identical to those attributed to

green exercise by the University of Essex research; however, this research argues that they are equally representative of the ways that angling delivers health and well-being benefit. The fourth column of the table shows examples of how angling connects with each of the principles and sub-categories. The examples are drawn from data collected as

part of the Social and Community Benefits of Angling project, and are evidence of the capacity of angling to provide participants with the kind of positive outcomes that contribute to an improved sense of personal well-being.



Two anglers fish from a boat at North Third Trout Fishery, Scotland

Table 1: Four principles summarising the health and well-being benefits of angling participation

Principles	Subcategories	Descriptors	Connection with Angling
Natural and social connections	Social	Being with friends and families, companionship and social interaction, creation of collective identity, making new friends, conviviality.	A lot of angling participation occurs with family and friends. Clubs, associations and internet discussion boards provide a sense of companionship and collective identity for anglers
	Animals and wildlife	Direct bonding with pets (e.g. dogs and horses) and/or wild animals (e.g. birds).	Anglers are not simply interested in fish – angling is an opportunity for spotting birds, mammals and invertebrates.
	Memories and knowledge	Visiting special places where memories and stories are evoked and recalled (childhood associations), story-telling, personal identity, links to myths, stimulation of imagination, ecological literacy.	Many anglers are introduced to fishing at an early age by family & friends. Participation can have nostalgic importance / links to the past.
	Spiritual	Large scale and longevity of nature in contrast to humans, transformative capacity of green nature, oneness with nature.	Anglers and angling literature sometimes refer to participation facilitating a deeper personal connection with nature, e.g. 'Hearing nature's calls from dawn till dusk is like the start of life and the end of life'.
Sensory stimulation	Colours and sounds	Diverse colours of nature and landscapes, views of landscapes, beauty of scenery, bird-song and sounds of other animals, light (especially sunrise/sunset), visual and aesthetic appreciation of landscapes	The type of environments in which angling takes place invariably stimulate the senses – the sound of running water, smell of lush foliage, scenic vistas, the feel of sand underfoot.
	Fresh air	Smell and other senses, being outdoors, exposed to all types of weather, changing of seasons, a contrast to indoor and city life, escape from urban pollution	Fresh air and being outdoors are fundamental elements of any fishing excursion.
	Excitement	Adrenalin rush, exhilaration, fun, arising from a physical activity or experience of risk (e.g. rock climbing), sense of adventure.	The excitement or 'buzz' associated with the moment when a fish takes your bait, fly or lure is central to angling's appeal.
Activity	Manual tasks	Learning a skill and completing a manual task (e.g. conservation activity), challenging, fulfilling and rewarding, sense of achievement, leading to sense of worth and value.	Unassisted angling participation requires competency in a range of manual tasks that test both fine and gross motor skills – such as tying knots, casting, and landing a fish.
	Physical activity	Enjoyment of the activity itself and the physical and mental health benefits associated with it, makes people feel good, more energetic, less lethargic.	Participation in angling requires varying levels of physical exertion. More strenuous components include walking, wading, casting and retrieving.
Escape	Escape from modern life	Getting away from modern life, relaxing (as a contrast), time alone or with family, a time to think and clear the head, peace and quiet, tranquillity and freedom, privacy, escape from pressure, stress and the 'ratrace', recharging batteries.	The opportunity to get away and relax – to escape from work or other obligations on personal - is a key driver for people to go angling.

Table adapted from University of Essex research, as reprinted in Mind (2007) *Ecotherapy – the green agenda for mental health*, Mind week report May 2007, p.6.

In Focus: Angling's potential as a form of ecotherapy

Sitting on the bank of a pond at **Mill Farm Fishery** in West Sussex, Stephen carefully explained how the 'peaceful, relaxing' experience of going fishing 'takes your mind off [the passing of] time'. By contrast a day at home, he said, fills him with anxiety about what to do. Going fishing takes Stephen out of his domestic setting – where anxiety attacks can be triggered by a ringing telephone or knock at the door – and brings him to a tranquil environment where he has greater control over the amount of interaction he has with other people.

Stephen participates in regular fishing events coordinated by local **Environment Agency** staff on behalf of the Worthing office of the mental health charity **Mind**. Angling is an occasional activity offered to clients under Mind's **Get Active** programme, which is aimed at improving the mental and physical health of individuals through exercise and physical activities. Jackie Barlow, the Get Active coordinator, explained that although angling wasn't something she'd usually choose to do herself, it was 'good for the soul' of Get Active participants. Environment Agency officer Mark Bennett, who assists the Mind clientele with more technical aspects of fishing (i.e. baiting a line, casting, and landing a fish), shared his thoughts about the value of these days:

'I believe the clients enjoy the events - catching the fish, being out in the countryside, mixing with others. I've seen some of the clients grow in confidence [as a result of] coming along to these events. Even one guy who first came along and had a go but said it wasn't for him came back and tried again - he expressed a great deal of excitement when he caught a couple of decent-sized fish.'



Environment Agency coach Brian Smart assists an angler during a MIND Get Active event at Mill Farm Fishery

(Continued overleaf)

In Focus: Angling's potential as a form of ecotherapy (cont.)

Albrighton Trust Moat & Gardens is another example of how angling – or in this case angling-focused green space – is improving the quality of life for disadvantaged people and those with special needs. Located near Telford in the West Midlands, the Moat & Gardens is an initiative that aims *'to provide inclusive social, learning and recreational opportunities for people with disabilities'*. The architect-designed site incorporates a network of wheelchair-friendly paths that enable access to a moat stocked with coarse fish species, seven large fishing platforms, a themed garden, and a resource and learning centre.

The Moat & Gardens serves a varied clientele, from young people with a physical or mental disability through to groups of the elderly or infirm. Angling is not sole attraction of the site – there are 35 themed garden beds, a horticulture greenhouse, a small putting green, a boules pitch, and numerous picnic spaces – but it is central to the enjoyment of many visitors. Sylvie, who has volunteered at the Moat & Gardens and also coordinates group visits in her role as a director of **Mencap**, told how a group of autistic children became captivated by angling during their visit to the Moat & Gardens:

'We do tend to bring people [i.e. clients of Mencap] out here quite a bit. It's the fishing side of it that they do love ... we have children who have got autism. You cannot sit autistic children down for two minutes, [but] you put them on those [fishing platform], give them a rod – with [supervision from] a carer – and the parents are just absolutely amazed when the children don't move. Now that is something for a child with autism.'



Albrighton Trust Moat & Gardens has seven wheelchair-accessible fishing platforms

Ecotherapy – the use of green exercise as a treatment option for mental distress – has been recommended by Mind as a clinically valid approach to improving mental health. Activities such as gardening, walking, conservation work, running, and cycling tend to be the ones associated with ecotherapy. Based on the evidence collected by this research, angling deserves greater recognition in this regard.

Conclusions

- It is evident that participation in angling – either alone or in the company of others – can have a positive effect on personal health and well-being, most notably as means by which an individual can escape or recover from stress, trouble or illness. Angling participation also invariably involves contact with green space, and the combination of outdoor air, wildlife and landscape present in green spaces provides a restorative environment that improves mood, mental well-being, psychological health and social contact.
- The positive effects that angling participation has on personal health and well-being are inextricably linked to the subject matter of the three other theme papers in this series – angling and the environment, angling and physical activity and the social aspects of angling participation. All three of these domains have the potential to have a positive impact on personal health and well-being, but the means by which the effect occurs can vary greatly dependent on a number of factors, such as an individual's motivation to participate, the type of angling involved, and the environment in which angling takes place.

For example, fly-fishing alone in a fast-flowing river can have a positive effect on personal fitness levels (e.g. from wading) and sensory stimulation (being outdoors, taking in views, encountering wildlife). Likewise, sea angling with friends from a pier might be a chance to renew social connections, to enjoy the fresh air and share the excitement of catching a fish.

It is important that the various, and occasionally contradictory, means by which angling participation facilitates positive health and well-being outcomes are both recognised and appreciated.

- Angling can be thought of as having both preventative and restorative value to an individual's health and well-being.

The data in this paper has demonstrated that angling participation is something of a preventative measure for ill health, insofar as participation can help an individual relax, unwind and cope with stress. For some people, 'going fishing' is a valuable reprieve from obligations or responsibilities that might otherwise prove overwhelming. A fishing experience can involve be much needed time alone, or equally it can be an opportunity to be social and share stories, jokes and a laugh with others.

The data in this paper has also shown that angling offers restorative or therapeutic value to people who are overstressed, overworked or have a physical or mental health condition. Participation in angling engages a balance of mental and physical activity, which is a quality that the Department of Health has identified as fundamental to active leisure interventions that enhance well-being¹⁹.

Angling clearly has something to offer public health strategies and health treatment plans, but tends to be overlooked in favour of other outdoor activities, like walking, cycling and gardening. Improvements to the monitoring and evaluation of angling projects currently working with people with physical or mental health problems would strengthen arguments that angling participation contributes positively to health and well-being.

¹ Online comment submitted to www.anglingresearch.org.uk 10th June 2010.

² DEFRA (2005) *Securing the Future: UK Government Sustainable Development Strategy*.

³ Department of Health: Mental Health Division (2010) *Confident Communities, Brighter Futures: A framework for developing well-being*. London: Department of Health.

⁴ Audit Commission and Healthcare Commission (2008) *Are We Choosing Health? The impact of policy on the delivery of health improvement programmes and services*. London: Audit Commission.

⁵ Monbiot, G. (2009) Hooked. Guardian Weekend, *The Guardian*, 22.8.09.

⁶ Stolk, P. (2009) *The Social and Community Benefits of Angling Interim Report: Angling Participation*. Manchester: Substance.

⁷ Interview comment made by James, 49 year old male.

⁸ Interview comment made by Robbie, 39 year old male.

⁹ Interview comment made by Nigel, 65 year old male.

¹⁰ Comment by surveyed angler, 43 year old male.

¹¹ Comment by surveyed angler, 38 year old male.

¹² Comment by surveyed angler, 44 year old male.

¹³ Newton, J. (2007) Wellbeing and the Natural Environment: A brief overview of the evidence. DEFRA.

¹⁴ Wilson, E. (1984) *Biophilia: The human bond with other species*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge.

¹⁵ Interview with George Holdsworth at North Third Trout Fishery, 22nd April 2010.

¹⁶ House of Commons (2006) *Enhancing urban green space*, House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts

¹⁷ Mind (2007) *Ecotherapy – the green agenda for mental health*, Mind week report May 2007; Countryside Recreation

Network (2005) *A countryside for health and well-being: The physical and mental health benefits of green exercise*;

Pretty, J., Hine, R. and Peacock, J. (2006) Green exercise: The benefits of activities in green places, *The Biologist*, 53 (3), 143-148.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Department of Health: Mental Health Division, op. cit. p.14