

Involving People with Disabilities in Countryside Recreation

Ian Newman

Fieldfare Trust
Sheffield, UK

P. Chambers

Fieldfare Trust
Sheffield, UK

Background

The research project under consideration was undertaken as a thesis linked to a Sports Council National Demonstration Project at Sunderland Polytechnic. The research objective for the thesis was to identify (rather than quantify) the factors which affect countryside recreation participation for people with physical and sensory disabilities.

The initial problem of defining the study population was a major hurdle. Whom do we count as *disabled*? It was felt inappropriate to focus solely on people involved in existing countryside activity programs or on people who were in some way associated with disability support organizations because of the possibility that being part of either such group could be a significant influence on an individual's propensity or ability to participate. The definitions of disability adopted were based on the recent

Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) survey (Martin et al, 1988).

Sampling

The adoption of the OPCS disability categorization provided a basis for identifying individuals from the community at large. Because of practical constraints the study was limited to people between 16 and 59 years of age living within Sheffield. Enumeration districts in Sheffield were ranked according to socio-economic groups and three selected at random from each of the quartiles of the ranked list. In the twelve selected areas 2,441 addresses were identified and 1,010 selected at random. A member of each household was asked a series of questions to determine whether there was anyone in the household who was "disabled." Positive responses were obtained from a total of 642 households containing 1,648 individuals.



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- reciprocity was achieved as interviewees were able to see the picture of their leisure histories unfolding and reflect on the information they were giving.

In addition to using the personal leisure history chart, a structured interview was pursued with each individual. A series of questions focusing especially on involvement in countryside recreation and their membership in disability or leisure groups was used to direct the interview. However, the interviews were allowed to range to other issues and into other areas of leisure and disability according to the course of each discussion.

The methodology includes one further aspect, which at the time of writing has yet to be completed. A number of interviewees have agreed to further discussion individually and in groups along with other interviewees to discuss and negotiate meaning in the preliminary findings of the study.

Preliminary Findings

Only preliminary analysis of the data has so far been undertaken. In looking at rates of participation and correlates, only the 65 interviews from the random sample have been considered. In reviewing the significance of the qualitative data, information from all 100 interviews has been included. The first stage of analysis has focused on certain central issues that have recurred throughout the interviews and which are to form the basis of later dialogues with the respondents.

Participation Rates in the Random Sample

A number of general points emerge from analysis of the random sample as a whole. The number of people participating in some form of countryside recreation in 1988, the last period on which data were collected, was 40 (62%). The National Countryside Recreation Survey 1984 (Countryside Commission, 1985) reported 85% of

the population visited the countryside in the twelve-month period prior to the interview.

The demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the sample provide limited indication of why participation is lower than might be expected. The sample included a high proportion of unemployed people (58%) and indeed, 51% of the sample lived in households where the head of household was unemployed or retired.

These are preliminary findings only and will be subject to further analysis. There is no basis for saying that participation among people with disabilities is not influenced by similar demographic and socio-economic factors as operate in the community at large as demonstrated by other surveys of sport and recreation participation (Countryside Commission, 1985, Boothby et al., 1981). However, some of these factors, especially employment status, affect people with disabilities in the community disproportionately. Whether these factors account for the full extent of the lower participation would better be determined by a further survey and a larger sample.

The qualitative data collected from the sample suggests that there are other factors operating as far as people with disabilities are concerned. In particular two areas for further investigation through the dialogue discussions were generated by the interviews.

The Impaired Role

Aspects of the impaired role as a derivative of the "sick role" (Parsons, 1951, Siegler & Osmond, 1973) were apparent from many interviews. One of the main effects of accepting the impaired role is in tolerating a lowering of expectations with respect to various aspects of social life and responsibilities. Several people with disabilities in the sample saw that their chances of enjoying the countryside as they would like had been severely affected by the onset of disabilities. This was not always solely associ-

ated with a loss of ability in recreation. For many the changes in social relationships brought about by disability had as great an influence as the direct effect of impairment.

Dependency

A major feature of participation for many people was the degree to which they were dependent on other people in order to pursue their chosen activities. For many this is because of the social nature of a great deal of countryside recreation (see Countryside Commission, 1985). However, dependency appears as one of the most obvious and important consequences of the impaired role.

However, for many people with disabilities the need for accompaniment is not merely a matter of choice but a necessity, real or perceived. Often this dependency related to physical access problems and the need for help with transport to the countryside, for assistance with mobility when in the countryside, and to feelings of vulnerability or lack of confidence.

Levels of dependency could be seen with respect to participation in countryside recreation. At one extreme the person with disabilities can independently decide what they want to do and where they want to go and then invite others to join them. The next level is where the person with disabilities is obliged to ask for countryside recreation opportunities to be provided through the involvement of other people. On the other hand some people with disabilities are merely presented with countryside recreation options constructed for them by those on whom they are dependent. At the extreme they are asked for a yes/no response to being involved in a particular activity.

Some Implications for Fieldfare Trust Programs

British Telecom Kielder Challenge

The British Telecom Kielder Challenge is a national adventure competition for mixed teams

of four able-bodied and four disabled young people between the ages of 13 and 16. The teams always include severely disabled young people such as those with muscular dystrophy and spastic quadriplegia. (See Newman & Sharples, 1987.)

In the challenge situations there is inevitably a need for the young people with disabilities to depend on the young people without disabilities where physical work is involved or if mobility across difficult terrain is needed. However, activities are designed so that this role can be reversed.

Awareness, if not expectations, can be influenced to some extent by the challenge as the young people with disabilities realize there are more opportunities than they had thought of in which they can play an active and positive part. The individuals with and without disabilities learn to accept the contributions each can make in various circumstances. However, these impacts are not achieved with all participants. The competition is an artificial situation lasting a relatively short time. There are dangers involved where teams come with the helper/impaired roles well entrenched and they may be reinforced if the team does not approach the activities appropriately.

The program is continually monitored to ensure that the following criteria for the participating young people (with and without disabilities) are satisfied. It must:

- be enjoyable
- allow everyone to play a positive role in the team *regardless* of their abilities acknowledge support for team mates as important and necessary but should not reinforce dependency and inaccurate disability stereotypes
- Set appropriate challenges for all levels of ability

- allow for participants to become aware of their individual abilities and their roles as team members.

Site Information and Access Grading

A part of the dependency identified in the study above is the difficulty some people with disabilities have in making choices. The Site Information & Access Grading Project set up by Fieldfare in northeast England seeks to address just one aspect of making choices with respect to countryside recreation.

The project, made possible through the sponsorship of British Gas (Northern) and Hill-Samuel Merchant Bank together with grant aid support from the Countryside Commission, has three main aims:

- To develop a grading mechanism so that countryside recreation sites, facilities and services could be assessed with respect to their accessibility for people with disabilities;
- To collect and manage information relevant to people with disabilities who want to take advantage of countryside recreation opportunities in the northeast England;
- To set up and make available to people with disabilities information services which will promote, enable and encourage them to take full advantage of countryside recreation opportunities.

It is too common for people with disabilities to view the countryside as inaccessible. At too many sites they are confronted with access difficulties that reinforce this view but in fact there are a great many countryside sites where even people with severe disabilities can gain access sufficient to enjoy themselves. The problem that arises is how to tell at which sites access is reasonable and at which difficulties are likely to be encountered.

The overall concept of the project is, therefore, to look at information needs from the point of view of people with disabilities. People with disabilities can only be assumed to be the same as everyone else with respect to their interests in bird watching, orienteering or just wanting a family outing to the countryside. They need additional information relevant to their special requirements as opposed to a completely separate set of information to that used by other sections of the community.

Accepting the variety of needs that exist was the first step in setting up the information system. The project grades sites so that the person with a disability can make her or his own judgment as to whether they can gain adequate access. For instance, someone might recognize that they can manage well on a grade 5 site but would experience a little difficulty at a grade 4 site; some one else would find grade 4 too difficult. At the same time people might decide that the extra effort required at a grade 4 site is worth it because of what one is offered. With a grading system covering a wide range of sites, from the tops of mountains (grade 1) to the most fully adapted facility (grade 10), there should be greater choice available for people with disabilities. In any event the decision is more easily made by people with disabilities themselves. The difference in the approach is to grade the sites independently of assumptions about disability by using criteria relevant to the needs of people with disabilities.

Darlington Life and Leisure Scheme

This project involves a leisure counselling program focusing on young people with disabilities and their interests in countryside recreation. The measure of its success will be the degree to which sustained integrated participation is carried on after the intervention of the project has been withdrawn.

Some programs have achieved increased participation by directly providing the transportation, facility and escort support necessary to overcome the access and physical barriers to leisure involvement. These will remain problems for the Life and Leisure Scheme to tackle. However, this project is seeking to identify these and other dependencies which are currently impeding participation and to progress on to overcoming these difficulties in a sustainable way.

While acknowledging the need for support for some people with special needs, support must be available in a way that does not undermine independence or become too onerous for those providing it. Many young people with disabilities have limited experience of the countryside and what it has to offer. Their ability to make their own decisions as to which activities they might like to pursue is therefore limited. In addition before some of them can begin to participate in community environments, they need to upgrade their skills and confidence (see Hutchinson & Lord, 1979.) The other difficulty has arisen with respect to the apprehensions some community recreation organizations have to accepting people with disabilities into their programs. There is a fear that they will not be able to cope with the special needs of these newcomers and that the recreational element of a member's involvement will be diluted as they take on a role as caregiver.

These situations reflect the level of dependency that has been built up by many young people with disabilities. The impaired role which they have accepted not only requires that they relinquish responsibility for themselves with respect to leisure activity but that they accept the expectations of other people in how they can be accepted into community recreation environments. Although in its

early stages, the Life & Leisure Scheme will need to address these issues in a practical way if it is not to become just another intervention which has substituted one set of dependencies for another.

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