

Research review

OPENspace

OPENspace - the Research Centre for Inclusive Access to Outdoor Environments - was launched earlier this summer. This new research initiative will focus primarily on issues relating to disability and social inclusion in the landscape, and is a collaboration between Edinburgh College of Art and Heriot-Watt University.

Many studies have shown that being outdoors is good for people's health and emotional well-being. The outdoors can also be a great social leveller, providing a place where everyone can come together on an equal footing, regardless of background, age and ethnicity. However, if you are disabled, opportunities to experience and interact with the natural environment in a meaningful way can be few and far between.

Legislation may have forced facilities to open up physical access to the outdoors, but are a few disabled parking spaces and ramps really a substitute for engagement and experience? Is information and experiential access the next barrier? With this in mind a PhD studentship is being set up between OPENspace, The Sensory Trust and The Eden Project to explore and develop innovative interpretative systems for people with disabilities.

The findings of two recent studies, supported by the Forestry Commission, have already been presented. The first addressed 'Local Open Space and Social Inclusion' for 5 communities in central Scotland and their local woodlands. A key finding was the over-riding influence of childhood experiences on adult use of woodlands. Also highlighted was the importance of visitor information in making people feel welcome, as well as allaying fears about personal safety or becoming lost.

The second study was on the effectiveness of wayfinding systems, and it explored and evaluated the sources of information visitors use to find and maximise their experience of forest sites. Case studies across Britain highlighted the challenge of providing visitors with the right information, at the right place and in the right format. Where visitor information was available it was not always assimilated because it was inappropriately located, in an inaccessible format, or simply 'too much too soon'. This project is now into a second phase to assess the 'goodness of fit' between site and user information needs, as well as developing benchmarking criteria. The ultimate output of the project will be a training and decision-making toolkit for site managers.

Other studies in progress include baseline studies on the use of the outdoors environment by people with disabilities, ethnic minorities and teenagers. Interpret Scotland will report on results as they emerge. To find out more about OPENspace contact Dr Cathy Findlay on 0131 221 6277.

Editor's note: We are looking for a volunteer to help source material for the research review and act as a link to the research community. If you are interested, please contact the editor.