‘Nature in the City’: young people’s perceptions, values and experiences
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Introduction
Since 2009 over half of the world’s population live in cities. In the UK urban areas make up 9% of the total land area, yet 80% of the population live in them (ONS 2010b). As cities grow, urban land becomes denser. When this intensification is combined with arguments for the necessity of green space in urban planning, a dichotomy emerges for the development of land in cities and for the provision of urban green spaces (Wilbey and Perry 2006; Puth and Burns 2009; Ajewole 2008).

There is a growing sense of concern over young people’s dislocation from nature, described as a ‘nature deficit disorder’ (Louv 2005). Furthermore, research shows that indoor lifestyles are accountable for health problems such as obesity (Travlou 2006) and mental health (Bingley and Milligan 2004), particularly in young people.

Resolution appears increasingly reliant on urban greening – investment in and commodification of nature into ‘green infrastructure’ in cities. It is reasoned that this could provide ‘quality-of-life’ benefits, a range of ecosystem services, such as flood prevention and further wildlife habitats, as in the Wildlife Trusts Living Landscapes (2009) and the RSPB’s Futurescape initiatives (2010).

The United Nations Agenda 21 (1992 summit, Rio) and the Habitat Agenda (1996 Habitat II, Istanbul) have prompted research in support of international objectives into urban environments and the role of open green and natural spaces (OGNS) within them. Themes include: the economic value of public space, such as increased property values (Evergreen 2009); the impact on physical and mental health established in policy and strategy by CABE (2004), Natural England and the Forestry Commission (Bingley and Milligan 2007); the value to promote biodiversity (Wildlife Trust, 2009); benefits for children and young people and freedom from market forces (Travlou 2006; Bingley and Milligan 2004) and the need to experience nature in urbanised societies (Chiesura 2004). Kong et al. (1999) highlight the role of OGNS in cultivating environmental citizenship. Youths growing up in Singapore ‘have little interest in and affinity for nature’ and this ‘predisposes them to adopting the rationality of the State in privileging development priorities above conservation imperatives’ (Kong et al. 1999, 1).
It is predicted that the 16-25 age group will see the greatest population expansion in coming years, mostly in developing countries; the majority will migrate to cities (UN 2009). Much empirical knowledge of young people’s perceptions, values and experiences of urban OGNS has focused on teenagers and children, but the 18-24s are under-represented. In the UK, whilst this group is officially adult, the 18-24s are distinct from children, teenagers 13-18, and adults 25 plus. Few studies question the normative idea of ‘natural environments’ or young people’s vision of naturalness and nature, or where that knowledge comes from.

There are, therefore, conflicts of interest between various stakeholders in the provision of urban OGNS for both economic and non-consumptive human needs (Karmonov and Hamel 2008; Chiesura 2004; Chawla 2001) and for nature’s needs including biodiversity and conservation (Goode 1989). Whatmore and Hinchcliffe (2003) highlight shifts in the greening of urban policy in order to balance these needs in the movement of built environments to living cities.

**Aims and Objectives**

This research aims to evaluate the knowledge which underpins official understandings of nature and to examine young people’s attitudes and feelings towards the natural environment. It hopes to reach a better understanding of the ways in which existing facilities are experienced, valued and perceived by young people, and to reveal what their expectations of these spaces are.

To realize these aims the following points were considered:

- The ways in which young people aged between 18 and 24 use local open green and natural spaces and what, if anything, is distinctive about their use.
- What preferences young people express for open, green and natural spaces in the urban environment.
- What limits or facilitates young people’s access to open, green and natural spaces in the urban environment.
- The qualities and characteristics green and open spaces within the urban environment have to have in order to be perceived as ‘natural’.
- What nature/naturalness means to young people and if it has a part to play in their everyday lives.
- How young people view the needs for urban development against conservation initiatives.
An overview of ‘official’ understandings of the role open, green and natural spaces within urban environments.

Interpretation will be informed by an awareness of various concepts of place and nature: phenomenology and existentialism (Tuan 1974; Relph 1976), which seek to question assumptions regarding the nature of things; constructivist concepts (Massey 1997; Rose 1993; Cresswell 2008), in which people construct, through material practices and cultural politics, their own realities; thirspace, which seeks to leave behind old hierarchies to create new discourses and hybrid identities (Homi Bhaba 1994, cited in Smith 2005).

It is hoped that the results may assist in the successful planning, design and management of OGNS in urban environments, whilst also contributing to nature conservation and biodiversity of flora and fauna.

**Methodology**

A qualitative method was adopted, to tell, rather than evoke, in order to successfully explore, reflect on and interpret how meanings and experiences are negotiated and to better understand the lived experience (Dwyer and Limb 2001). However, in the context of application to PPS it was recognized that quantitative elements would present a more robust and accessible study.

Thus a triangulation of methods was adopted in which quantitative data formed a backdrop to the qualitative elements to gain a clearer and more detailed picture. Likewise, when qualitative data relates to aspects of ‘official’ strategy and understandings, a more in-depth analysis can be made.

Primary data was gathered through an online questionnaire survey from a random sample of people aged 18-24 recruited from within the urban core; a focus group discussion with six participants; a social value mapping exercise; a ‘rate the environment’ survey and a role play discussion. Finally, there was a two week participant photo assignment and subsequent semi-structured interviews with one male and one female participant.

Secondary data was gathered through desk research to represent a selection of relevant, local ‘official’ understandings of OGNS in Preston, including PPS documents representing both governmental and non-governmental organisations and stakeholders. Against this a selection of secondary national and international ‘official’ understandings were analysed to compare with the
primary data. An analysis of the processes and frameworks within which PPS are formulated, whereby decisions about OGNS are made, was completed so as to understand the implications.

It should be noted that research of ‘official’ understandings is representative of priorities and processes of the previous labour government rather than the current coalition. The government white paper ‘An Invitation to Shape the Nature of England’ (DEFRA 2010) was released in July 2010 for public consultation.

Case Study Area
Data was collected between April and July 2010 in Preston (PR1), Lancashire, OS Ref: SD542290 and SD531298.

Preston is located on the River Ribble which has the seventh largest estuary in the UK internationally recognized for its biodiversity (EA 2010). A textile town from the sixteenth century, it is now undergoing post industrial regeneration. It is a centre for local and regional government as well as a retail and commercial centre for the county. Preston became England’s newest city in 2002. It has a population of 129,633 and density of 9.11 people per hectare (ONS, 2010a).

The district is made up of 22 Wards. Wealthy rural areas contrast with wards in the urban core having seven Lower Super Output Areas (SOAs) in the 1,000 lowest ranked areas. At the last audit in 2007 overall provision of parks and open spaces was 717.05 hectares (POSS 2008) giving an overall standard of 5.33 ha per 1000 population.

The sampling frame included people (18-24 years) who live in or regularly use Preston, acknowledging the flow of people in and out of the city, regional status and stretched social relations. Two sample areas were identified that encompassed Preston's urban core; University ward and Town Centre ward located in the South of the district (PCC 2010).

University ward mainly consists of the University campus (student housing, low rise and gated), and pockets of other housing (mainly terraces), bordered by the city centre to the south and the community of Plungington to the north. Official OGNS comprise of a portion of the Preston to Longridge disused railway, now a nature reserve, Riversway regenerated docks, plus two of Preston’s seven publicly owned and maintained parks – Moor Park and Haslam Park, the latter also a nature reserve.
Town Centre ward consists of the city centre, the central communities of Avenham and Frenchwood with the River Ribble at its southern edge and the university campus at its northern edge. Housing is in mixed terraces, new build flats and high rises. Official OGNS comprise five out of six civic spaces including the Cenotaph, Market Square, Flag Market, Peace Gardens and Memorial, one of seven publicly owned and maintained parks, Avenham and Miller Park, Preston’s only privately owned and maintained park – Winckley Square, and part of one of four nature reserves, Preston Junction

Analysis
Secondary data
Much of the official literature concerned with OGNS emphasises the value of ‘quality’ open spaces and ‘nature’ or ‘natural environments’ (Natural England 2009, 2010). Quality is generally measured by the criteria of the nationally accepted Green Flag Award: marketing and management, welcoming place, conservation and heritage. Naturalness is not clearly defined.

Funding for OGNS includes Government funding from departments and sponsored agencies, the Heritage Lottery Fund, non-governmental organisations and charities e.g. Wildlife Trust and RSPB, the Greenspace Fund, which locates private funding within local areas, plus the European Union Regional Development Fund. There is a clear divide between Governmental and non-governmental organisations objectives, intrinsic values, and environmental perspectives.

A distillation of high level principles through to individual sites takes place via international strategy, national Government policy and local Government frameworks. The Regional Development Authority (RDA) framework is the primary route through which local development takes place with Regional Economic Strategy ultimately being approved by the Department of Business Innovation and Skills. Urban green spaces are the responsibility of a number of national Government departments which sponsor agencies for instance DEFRA sponsors Natural England and the Environment Agency. Emphasis at local level rests on the Core Strategy and the ability to allocate ‘strategic sites’ (Natural England 2010) for precise detail of how local authority should prepare a local development plan. Preston has joined with South Ribble and Chorley under the banner of Central Lancashire to produce a Core Strategy (LDF 2008).

Preston has a higher resident percentage of 15-24s than the national average, being the highest in Lancashire. The University has a strong impact on age distribution. There are high levels of
deprivation and health inequalities of men in particular in deprived areas. Unemployment, below average earnings for those employed and low mobility (LCC 2010) are all issues for consideration in the planning of OGNS.

Town Centre ward has a decreasing population of 6671 (Census 2001; ONS 2010a) 65.24% 16 – pensionable age, a diverse mix of ethnicity and an increasing student population. 51.04% of the population have no car.

The University ward has an increasing population of 3501 (Census 2001; ONS 2010a), 76.46% 16 – pensionable age and a 1197.80% rise in student population between 1991 and 2001. There is less diverse ethnicity than the town centre ward: 88.89% white. Those with one car or no car are similar at around 40% of the population.

**Primary Data (collected in this survey)**

Perceptions
An urban rural divide was evident in perceptions of the best quality natural spaces with fewer significant OGNS in the core than rural outskirts. Urban OGNS were thought passive rather than interactive, perceived differently and more dangerous in darkness, whereas spaces in the immediate and more rural outskirts were not.

According to the questionnaires, nearby nature and accessible OGNS were regarded as important especially for encouraging a connection with ‘nature’ at an early age. Those that did not consider the place that they grew up in as having brought them into contact with nature had the perception that green spaces were not close by and therefore they could not access them, or that areas were green but not natural.

There was a consensus regarding the lack of effective and meaningful involvement in planning OGNS by the council, symbolic of the absence of a framework for the expression of opinions. However, there was enthusiasm for envisioning the potential that urban environments could offer, and for alternative approaches to urban design: grass instead of concrete, natural building materials, sculpture or artwork. Clearly defined, multi-purpose spaces were perceived as important, plus the need for a feeling of wildness and community involvement. Preston was not perceived as providing or using these approaches.
Values

As indicated in Fig.1, there was a preference for wild and unmanaged places, rather than organised, well maintained places, and for ‘free to roam’ rather than ‘away from it all’.

**Fig. 1 Preferred places** (Template: www.surveymonkey.com)

![Bar graph showing preferences for different types of places.](image)

OGNS were seen as valuable for social interaction and networking, for practices such as riding bikes, having barbecues, or as places to get away from it all, or to experience positive feelings. Accessible places, or those within close proximity, were valued, as were aesthetically pleasing and beautiful places for relaxation, thinking, and reflection, beneficial for healthy, active and balanced lifestyles, for learning about the natural world and for providing a connection with the recent and historic past. The majority valued OGNS more than the development of a shopping or office block.

Experiences

Being in OGNS made people feel relaxed, calm, refreshed, happy, healthy, nostalgic, fulfilled, content and free. Formal parks and civic spaces were the most frequently used, private gardens the least. Formal parks were visited more than once per month, but less than weekly and thought of good or average in quality. Avenham Park and Moor Park emerged as the most visited because of close proximity. Others were visited for sport or to meet friends. Lack of time was the most common constraint to visiting OGNS, followed by lack of awareness and poor quality facilities. Safety concerns restricted access, more than vandalism or the cost or lack of transport facilities.
The SVM exercise asked the group to tag places of personal importance which represented aspects of positivity and negativity.

**Fig. 2 Clusters of 3 or more SVM tags**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Urban Core (UC)</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Star</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avenham Park</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winckley Square</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outskirts &amp; Nearby Rural Areas (ONRA)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moor Park</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Docks</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South R. Ribble near Avenham Park</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beacon Fell Country Park</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As indicated in Fig. 2 above, there were slightly more positive than negative responses to places in the UC. ONRA were tagged as positive over 3 times more than places in the UC. Within the UC Avenham park was the most positively tagged place and within the ONRA the Docks.

Space became meaningful through direct and indirect experience, through camping, partying or biking, spectacular events, places that enabled links with the past through shared and private memories, sounds, such as birdsong or the wind, or the absence of sounds, such as traffic noise or other people. Places that offered varying degrees of privacy were seen as positive. The preferred size of a space was mostly large but sometimes small. Positive experiences were linked to lack of supervision, ownership, or aesthetically pleasing, including trees, lights on water, artwork, graffiti, derelict buildings or other people.

Negative reactions stemmed from feelings of marginalisation through lack of mobility or transport costs, or associated with feelings of trespass, individually or in groups, or intolerance of police or the older citizens, or that certain practices were disallowed. Contested use by young people and tramps was a major issue that restricted use. Tramps were perceived as receiving better treatment by the police, and their presence seen as preferential in OGNS. Inadequate signage was another negative issue, as were spaces used for drug use or dealing.
Contrasts between individual experiences of the same spaces were apparent, as were gender differences and preferences. As, for example, the accounts of participant M (Male) and F (Female). F’s story was a discourse of solutions; M’s was a discourse of fear.

F was concerned about environmental issues, spoke of a love of trees and natural spaces, used OGNS nearly every day and highlighted their potential for environmental education. Preferred OGNS offered opportunities for privacy, were large empty, peaceful, beautiful or combined purpose with discrete elements. Positive spaces were linked with childhood memories or with ‘nature’. ‘Nature’ was woodland and trees, certain trees were ‘places of solace and peace’ (F). Negative experiences resulted from unpredictable behaviour, litter, crowds and feelings of stigma. Darkness did not deter use of lit routes, unlit routes were avoided.

OGNS were a crucial part of M’s everyday local world for transport, activities, and socialising, but also for inspiration, for talking over problems with siblings or friends, or to hide. Natural spaces were wild, away from it all. A preference for small, intimate, quiet and ‘natural’ spaces was expressed; also enclosed green space within University Halls for social activities. Each signified safety. Unpredictability and vulnerability as a single male was a key issue in the production of fear of using OGNS, as was darkness; OGNS would not be used after dark if at all possible.

M and F both used OGNS to move around the city, but also because public transport was ‘extortionate’.

The Nature of Nature
Nature is a complex concept and this survey aimed to tease out its meaning for young people. Words associated with nature included general or specifically named flora and fauna (trees or grass, cows or birds), the word ‘green’ or ‘greenness’, and feelings such as ‘peace’ or ‘relaxation’. Word combinations included ‘Wild, Space, Free’, ‘Animal, Tree, Tree Hugger’. Associated sounds and smells included cut grass, birds and the wind. Memories were associated with nature, as were practices such as camping. For some nature was fragile while for others it was robust.

Unsurprisingly woods and country parks were described as the most natural. Facilities for young people/teenagers were described as not natural. Qualities associated with ‘Natural’ included ‘untarnished or unspoilpt’, ‘imperfect’, ‘left to its own devices’, ‘purity’, ‘beauty’, ‘organic’, ‘disorder or wildness’. Combinations included ‘declining, chaotic, essential’, ‘simple, health, organic’.
The focus group developed into an extended discussion on the theme of ‘naturalness’ which included associations with and challenges to personal safety. Only one participant talked about naturalness negatively.

**Discussion**

The critical evaluation and RDA framework assessment are of paramount importance. The policy framework raises issues such as where, by whom and for what reasons knowledge is produced. There is a clear divide between Governmental and non-governmental organisations’ objectives, intrinsic values, environmental perspectives and ultimately understandings of nature.

Ideological dependent nature (Hinchcliffe, 2007) may be used as a tool culturally, politically or socially; objectified independent nature introduces the notion of fragile or pristine nature, wilderness and stewardship that Cronon (1996) famously questioned. These opposing ideologies seek to find shared political values; more often there is a bias towards one rather than the other, with a core set of philosophical or political beliefs that inform scientific hypotheses, policy and moral concern. Which becomes dominant and which is marginalised becomes a political act of persuasion and power. These decisions embody our knowledge of nature. It is therefore necessary, as Soper (1995) argues, to assess and be suspicious of the agenda for Planning Policy Statements (PPS) because of the number of ideological roles ‘nature’ has been called upon to play.

Consider for instance Britain’s urban parks which have evolved to reflect social values (Cruikshank, 2010). From Royal hunting parks in the 1600s, egalitarian pleasure gardens in the 1660s, to the municipal park movement in the mid 1800s; a reaction to industrialisation with parks conceived as the ‘lungs of the city’, the time when many of Preston’s parks were established. The 1930s brought civic pride and an emphasis on recreation, but WW2 saw their dismantling to make way for food production or munitions. Increased mobility in post war Britain took people out of the city to national and country parks, and the era of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s saw their further decline with rate capping. In the last ten years there has been increased demand for a common resource of OGNs in urban environments.

Recent Governmental PPS relate to internationally set goals and ambitions. It is interesting to note that the evolving prioritisation of environmental perspectives seems to indicate a shift from the investment of public funds in terms of sustainability to consideration of environmental, social and
resource issues, alongside more traditional economic values such as employment and wealth creation. Although it would appear that in order to make those gains there has been a commodification of nature into ecosystem services, signified by a shift in language from Green Spaces, Better Places of 2006, to ‘An Invitation to Shape the Nature of England’ in July 2010. The budget for government departments was cut from £2.260 billion in 2009/2010 to £1.760 billion in 2010/2011; and is unlikely to increase considering the current economic climate.

Within official literature there is emphasis on ‘quality’ and ‘natural’ environments. Both are ambiguous terms, questioned by writers and philosophers (Hinchcliffe 2007; Cronon 1996; Soper 1995) that until recently have not been clearly defined within PPS. Yet benefits such as health or economic value remain attached to them. Nature Nearby (2010) recognizes this paradox and attempts a proxy measure of ‘naturalness’ (Natural England 2010, 48). Greenspace quality, according to Natural England, is measured by the nationally accepted Green Flag Award (GFA) established in 1996 alongside a Greenspace Visitor Service standard.

The GFA standard, which many of Preston’s parks aspire to, is predominantly objective rather than subjective in approach. There are eight judging criteria: 1) welcoming, 2) healthy, 3) safe and secure; 4) clean and maintained; 5) sustainability; 6) conservation and heritage; 7) community involvement; 8) marketing and management. These worthy criteria address many key issues of negative experience that this research has revealed. However, they do not necessarily relate to the more complex subjective perceptions of ‘naturalness’ revealed in the research exercises, nor do they relate to the provision of the type of natural environment established as necessary for people to gain the restorative and quality of life benefits that policy and strategy aim towards. This indicates problematic gaps between young people’s understandings and ‘official’ understandings.

In general terms OGNS were seen as positive or negative according to direct or indirect experiences, signifiers were physical landmarks and mental landmarks associated with perceptions such as fear or marginalisation. Spaces were regarded as places because they had involved interaction which created meaning. Passive spaces with little association were referred to as spaces. Cresswell (2009) links materiality, meaning and practice and positions experience at the heart of what place means. Pretty (2007) argues that as interaction with nature and green places declines, places become anonymous commodities or spaces with only abstract economic value.
Conclusion

To some, young people are the future stewards of our environment and, as such, their understandings of nature are regarded as a valuable insight. Local Agenda 21, identifies children and youth involvement as paramount in achieving goals of sustainability.

Kevin Lynch’s *Growing Up in Cities* (1977) pioneered research in young people’s perceptions and experience of their local environment with the goal of exposing planners misperceptions. The current UNESCO (2010) project, directed by Louise Chawla, continues to use Lynch’s approach to link global initiatives and policy statements to local processes and actions.

However, this research exercise suggests that it is predominantly the perception of ‘naturalness’, rather than objectively judged ‘quality’, that young people seek in the natural environment. Emphasis is placed on the opportunities that environments afford young people. In nature, experiences or practical engagement are more valuable than detached on-looking. This is more complex and requires an understanding of young people’s local worlds in relation to OGNS, and this can only be achieved through consultation within any given area at a given time, similar to Lynch (1977) and Chawla’s (2001) aspirations, rather than an homogenous approach.

The research finds commonalities between 18-24’s use of these spaces and the studies focused on children, younger teenagers or adults. However, this age group appears distinct: first in their independence from the restrictions of childhood with freedom to roam or to party; secondly, these spaces are key for socialising or moving about the city; and thirdly, they are valued as important additional space to the home either rented or the family home. There was an understanding of the benefits associated with nature and a passion for naturalness signified by nature that could not be described as being dislocated from nature. Perceptions of marginalisation fear or stigma restricted their use of these spaces which is descriptive of social exclusion.

Whilst the research revealed discontent with ‘the council’ and a perception of lack of involvement, there was apathy toward being involved in environmental campaigns. Whilst not unexpected, this is perhaps symbolic of the lack of a framework within which young people may express and effectively implement their ideas and suggestions for the transformation of OGNS into places that have positive and enduring meaning. There was no apathy in envisioning the potential that urban environments could offer; this, in the researcher’s opinion, also distinguishes this age group from children, teenagers and adults and warrants further research.
Acronyms
OGNS  Open Green and Natural Space/s
ONRA  Outskirts and Nearby Rural Areas
LDF   Local Development Framework
PPS   Planning Policy Strategy
RDA   Regional Development Agency
SVM   Social Value Mapping
UC    Urban Core

References


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