

# THE IMPACT OF CHILDHOOD

## Researching the impact of childhood experiences on ageing outdoor enthusiasts



This article considers preliminary findings from a survey of 14 older participants (66+) who have been engaged in outdoor activities throughout their lifespan. It is work in progress. A variety of methods were used, according to the participants' choice. Some selected personally significant photographs that illustrated and prompted insights into what was important to them at this particular life stage and responded either in writing or in an informal recorded interview (photo elicitation) (1). Others chose to respond to face-to-face interviews that focused on their reflections and insights on their involvement in the outdoors. Yet others, on receiving an invitation to take part in this research responded independently, submitting their written thoughts. Names have been changed to support anonymity.

Our main research question is:

How did these older people become interested in the outdoors and how have they adapted throughout their lives? This research may offer insights into how people involved in the outdoors, both in informal and formal settings, develop their ability to address changing situations.

### Popular views of older people

The media tend to polarise older people. The exploits of people like Captain Tom walking to raise money for the NHS charities can be compared to those needing all-round care in nursing homes. Yet like

any group with an age range of 40 years, each 60-100 year old will vary greatly. However, the COVID pandemic created major negative stereotyping of people over 70. Government policy chronologically grouped all those over 70 as 'vulnerable' and media compounded this. Fit healthy older people over 70 were lumped together as one homogeneous group that perhaps changed their/ our self-image and other people's perceptions of generalised 'over 70s'. Di Collins wrote, "*It came as a bit of a shock. I am a lifelong outdoor person. I am robust. I generally see myself as invincible. Yet, during the responses to Covid-19, I am declared to be 'vulnerable', or more at risk than other age groups in the population.*" (2)

Nevertheless, in March 2020, the British Society of Gerontology (BSG) sent an eight-page statement to the UK government making this point and providing evidence of the contributions to society that people in the various age groups over 70 make.

“As a population group, it is wrong and overly simplistic to regard people who are aged 70 and above as being vulnerable, a burden, or presenting risks to other people. Many people in this age group are fit, well, and playing an active role in society” (3)

Evidence from our research supports the statement from the BSG. It further suggests that childhood experiences of the outdoors have significant implications for resilience in later life.





The importance of childhood experiences

Loeffler’s (2019) research emphasises the significance of childhood outdoor experiences (4). Yet Cooper (1998), Louv (2005), Palmer (2006) and Gill (2007) show that children’s freedoms to explore and roam have diminished over time (5-8). Most of the participants in our sample developed their affinity with the outdoors during their childhoods in the 1950s and 1960s when children were more able to explore and often without adults.

We provide here some of these experiences that may no longer be available to today’s children: Anne enjoyed “*the freedom to go outside and wander. The beach, clay cliffs, small woods, stream, a wilder bit of coast at The Point were all there to explore with my brother and local friends*”. Likewise Neil, with his younger brother and sister, and “*sometimes with friends, ranged up to a kilometre away and would visit two parks and a patch of waste ground known to us as the dump. We would catch sticklebacks and minnows*”.

Rob and Mary both roamed some distance from home with friends. Rob says, “*as a kid I was given plenty of freedom to roam and would meet with friends to play football up to two miles from home*”. For Mary “*being able to roam on foot or on our bicycles wherever we wanted, unsupervised by parents*” was important.

These participants shared their space in the outdoors informally with other children, some of whom were their siblings. However, organisations provided outdoor experiences for some. Jean says, “*as an only child living in a terraced house in the city, virtually my only experience of the outdoors was as a Brownie, Guide and Sea Ranger. I owe my access and love for the outdoors to these organisations as well as my summers spent on the local beach*”.

A number of features of our participants emerged from the data. As might be expected from a group of people who had spent a lifetime

engaged in outdoor education and activities they were largely not risk averse and mostly keen to manage outdoor risk. Many were keen to continue to enjoy their chosen outdoor activity, modify it or take up new activities. Through their adventures they recognised uncertainty in life and seemed able to adapt to changing circumstances. For example, Deb says, “*my lack of (physical) flexibility means that I accompany a friend in an open canoe rather than a kayak*”, whilst Jim reflects,

“*The drive for exhilaration and excitement has been replaced by an appreciation of activities more gentle and placid, more suited to an ageing body and temperament.*”

Moreover, some in our sample are now facing disability. Kev remarks, “*the outdoors is part of my identity*”. This has “*led to a pragmatic rather than adventurous enjoyment. Yesterday’s Scottish winter ascent is today’s watercolour trip to the Isle of Skye.*” Sue is learning to live with dementia. It is the outdoors that gives her some

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IMAGES

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ARE YOU AN OLDER ACTIVE OUTDOOR ENTHUSIAST?

If you consider yourself to be an older active outdoor/ nature participant or enthusiast and would like to join us in developing our understanding and knowledge of life course experiences of older folk, then please get in touch. We particularly welcome older folk from all under-represented and minoritised groups.

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stability, an ongoing connection, a purpose, as well as helping her to remain physically fit and active.

This ability to cope with rapidly changing situations in the outdoors provided them with the flexibility to manage other real-life challenges. Rather than accepting ‘fate’, many had developed resilience and on reflecting upon changes in their life course, many thought about when they might not be able to continue to be active in the outdoors and what the alternatives could be. Boyes’ (2013, 2016) research has shown that through clubs and sharing outdoor experiences older people are also able to share their considerable outdoor skills (9-10).

There are also opportunities for Outdoor practitioners to engage with older enthusiasts, offering adventurous activities to the more able groups and gentler activities for less able groups, possibly through GP referrals.

### Conclusion

This preliminary research has highlighted the importance of childhood experiences in how older people have developed their enthusiasm and interests in the outdoors. It also suggests that the flexibility, resilience and healthy lifestyles they often display may have their origins in the freedom and independence they had as children and young people to explore the outdoors. It therefore provides further evidence to support policies designed to extend these outdoor opportunities for young people. Those activities that encourage young people to make their own adventures through transferable skills such as camping, solos, observing nature, recording their experiences and undertaking self-led journeys will be of particular significance ■

### USEFUL RESOURCES

To further explore the themes covered in this article, have a look at these resources:

Guest edited by Hickman, M and Stokes, P, the *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning* JAEOL (2016) published a special issue, ‘Ageing, adventure and the outdoors: issues, contexts, perspectives and learning’. Issue 19, volume 2. For further details go to: [www.outdoor-learning.org/Journal](http://www.outdoor-learning.org/Journal)

Edited by Humberstone, B. and Konstantaki, M (2016). *Ageing, physical activity, recreation and wellbeing*, published by Cambridge Scholars Publications. More details can be found here: <http://bit.ly/Cambridge-Scholars-Publishing>

Edited by Humberstone, B and Prince, H (2020). *Research methods in outdoor studies*, published by Routledge. Visit: <http://bit.ly/Routledge-research-methods> for details.



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