

Report lays bare public priorities for the natural environment

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Children in the countryside

Public views on the challenges facing policy and decision makers to manage the natural environment have been revealed in a major national public dialogue project.

Led by the University of Exeter's Centre for Rural Policy Research, the research has informed a major report explaining why the natural environment matters to people. It also explores how current approaches to environmental [policy](#) and decision making resonate with public concerns and priorities.

The 'Naturally Speaking...' public dialogue process was run in partnership with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural

Affairs (Defra), the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and Sciencewise, the UK's national centre for public dialogue in policy making involving science and technology issues.

The [report](#) reveals that people value their natural environment for a range of cultural and health benefits and its contribution to human livelihoods and prosperity. As well as important for economic activity the natural environment is viewed as a place to enhance relationships with family and friends; encourage physical exercise; enable inner peace and mental calm; reconnect with the past; and find meaning in life.

A key finding of the report is that people support the need for making a strong economic case for the environment, yet they emphasise we should be careful not to think about the natural environment as a 'bottomless pit', but as something that helps us to function and therefore we need to cherish and look after it.

In addition the report highlights the need for more active and creative involvement of local communities in decisions about the natural environment. The role of government and publicly funded research in addressing the big environmental challenges of the day is also emphasised. People stressed that decision-making should prioritise long-term public gain and saw risks in decisions being driven by financial concerns and commercial interests.

Dr Robert Fish, who led the project whilst at Exeter (now based at the University of Kent) said: "This was an ambitious and wide-ranging study that both confirms and challenges prevailing wisdoms about how people think about the natural environment and what they think policy makers should be doing about it. There is a depth of expertise and imagination that the public can bring to complex issues that can help take the environmental agenda forward."

He added: "In our talks with the public the most prominent elements that shone through were the cultural and health dimensions. Alongside these benefits participants also understood the natural environment as a physical power that could threaten and overwhelm human livelihoods."

Nine one day events were held with members of the public in Birmingham, Exeter and Glasgow, culminating in a day and half event in London with a range of participants from the three locations and specialist representatives from national and local government, academics, policy delivery and non-governmental organisations.

Simon Kerley, Head of Terrestrial Sciences at NERC and chair of the dialogue's oversight group, welcomed the report. He said: "This was a wide ranging and thorough dialogue process that offers us original insight into [public](#) aspirations and concerns about the natural environment and helps us to reflect on how science and policy might be developed to meet and address them. The dialogue has offered us a new dimension and evidence base to help inform our work, such as through the NERC led Valuing Nature research programme."

Provided by University of Exeter

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