

COVID-19 Impacts: It's a pandemic, not a bank holiday

At the time of writing (22/3/20), the message should be clear, to slow the spread of COVID 19 we must practice social distancing. Work from home wherever possible, avoid public transport, avoid social gatherings and non-essential travel. The Scottish Government and [Public Health England \(PHE\)](#) strongly advise that everyone follows this guidance - **we simply must if we are to slow the spread and reduce the impact of this terrible virus.**

However, adhering to this guidance for many weeks, possibly months, is going to have a massive impact on our daily lives. This upheaval, alongside the health and economic worries created by the virus could have a significant impact on our mental wellbeing.

The PHE guidance recognises this impact and provides recommendations on ways to stay mentally and physically active, including spending time doing things you enjoy and eating healthily. The mental health charity Mind goes further providing [valuable suggestions](#) on staying healthy and active, remaining connected to friends and family and finding ways to relax and be creative.

The importance of nature is also recognised in the PHE guidance - whilst at home we should open windows to let in fresh air, seek natural sunlight and spend time in the garden. The guidance also suggests that we should try to exercise outdoors, but in doing so its vital that we **maintain social distancing - stay at least 2 metres from others.**

The inclusion of these recommendation to get fresh air and to exercise outdoors makes sense to us - over the last decade we've undertaken many studies which have clearly illustrated the physical and mental health benefits that spending time in nature provides.

However, the big question is whether we can continue to gain the much needed benefits of spending time outside, whilst properly following the social distancing guidance that are so important if we are going to protect our communities.

The weather this weekend has been beautiful (at least up here in Scotland), the sun is shining, and it definitely feels like spring is in the air. However, the news and social media discussions remain gloomy, including a rising tide of criticism at the number of people who appear to be ignoring the social distancing advice.

Coronavirus: Seaside visitors defy social distancing advice

21 March 2020

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Coronavirus pandemic



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This is a [#pandemic](#) not a Bank Holiday. What bit of non-essential travel means coming from across the UK, potentially with CV, to climb Snowdon; strip local shops of food; put Mountain Rescue at risk at least twice today & pressure on a limited NHS; & ignoring social distancing?



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Crowds at Richmond Park today

There are reports of thousands flocking to coastal resorts and popular walking destinations such as Snowdon, and travelling north to seek refuge in remote rural areas in the Scottish Highlands and Islands.

Has the message on social distancing not been clear or consistent enough? On one hand exercising outdoors is acceptable, encouraged even, but the message that it must not involve unnecessary travel or congregating in groups isn't being received by some.

How do we find a safe balance between social distancing and the benefits of nature?

Stay close to home and following the social distancing guidance

Responding to these challenges, steps have been taken to reduce the risks of infection caused by people spending time outside. Seeing the risk of higher volumes of visitors making social distancing difficult to enforce, the National Trust was quick off the mark, announcing on Saturday that it was closing its parks and gardens. Their countryside and coastal locations remain open for now but they are encouraging people to stay local.

Similar recommendations to try to limit time outdoors to local places have been issued from other organisations ranging from Paths for All and the Ramblers to Mountaineering Scotland, urging people to continue to enjoy walks, but only in places where it is safe to do so, ideally close to home and not involving any unnecessary travel.

And this evening further steps have been taken to reduce the risks. In his daily update, the prime minister recognised that the benefits of keeping parks open outweighed the epidemiological value of closing them. However he also repeatedly emphasised the great importance of social distancing and that tougher measures would be implemented if the current advice was not followed.

In Scotland further steps have been taken this afternoon to reduce travel in remote areas with the Scottish Government limiting travel on island ferries to essential travel only.

Get more from the nature on our doorstep

A report published by University of Derby and National Trust in February used the results of a major national survey of adults and children to clearly illustrate that people with a stronger connection to nature were happier and felt more in control of their lives.

Specifically, feelings of wellbeing were significantly greater amongst people who 'noticed nature' by taking part in simple activities such as smelling wild flowers, listening to birdsong, noticing butterflies, watching wildlife, watching clouds or relaxing in the garden. Importantly the results applied equally to both adults and children.

Natural England's MENE survey, found that most households in England (87%) have a garden or other outdoor private space such as a balcony or yard, providing a safe outdoor space to escape. The Wildlife Trust's website also gives some great ideas and tips on how to attract and see more wildlife in your garden, tips range from bird feeding and bat box building to growing a wildlife friendly vegetable plot.

In these difficult times as mental wellbeing becomes increasingly important whilst the places we can visit become more limited, doing more to notice and appreciate the nature close to home, even if that is in our garden or through a window, could do us a world of good.

I also highly recommend reading more on this topic in Prof. Miles Richardson's blog at <https://findingnature.org.uk/>

The growing risk of social inequalities

So the best course of action is to spend time in the greenspaces close to your home, strictly adhere to social distancing guidance and get more from your garden – but this advice is not easy to follow for many.

There are many challenges. Data from Natural England recorded in the year up to March 2019 found that while 88% of the population in England agreed that their local greenspaces were within easy walking distance, the remaining 12% did not have places they could easily spend time in. Following years of austerity, the proportion of people rating their local greenspaces as somewhere they would want to spend time in has declined and unfortunately people in the last affluent social groups are the least likely to have access to quality local greenspaces.

Similarly, while 87% of the population are lucky enough to have access to a private garden or other private outdoor area, 13% don't. The proportion with no garden access is much higher amongst least affluent social groups, residents of city centre areas and members of ethnic minorities.

There's a risk that, as is the case in many aspects of this crisis, the impacts of the virus and its fallout could disadvantage certain population groups much more than others.



In conclusion

Try to spend some of the time when you are self-isolating or at least socially distancing in the outdoors. This shouldn't involve travel to a remote destination – it may simply be in your back garden – but certainly needs to be close to home. It's not going to be 'normal' – we are all having to adapt our behaviours to keep ourselves, our families and the most vulnerable in society as safe as possible.

And if you find that you're just getting on with your life just now and not changing too many behaviours – ask yourself if you are doing enough. Scotland's First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, eloquently made that point in her daily press conference on Sunday 22nd March:

"Life shouldn't feel normal right now. If your life feels entirely normal ask yourself if you're doing the right things."

So, try to enjoy the outdoors and gain the benefits that engaging with nature can provide, but recognise the limits and make the most of what you have immediately available.

56 Degree Insight are a research and insights consultancy based in Edinburgh. Over the years, the team have undertaken a great deal of research in relation to outdoor recreation, nature and the environment. These views are our own and placed 'out there' for discussion and debate – and we would be happy to discuss them further:

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