

# Understanding outdoor sports participants' motivations, connectedness to nature, and wellbeing in Northern Ireland.

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Sport Northern Ireland and Tollymore National Outdoor Centre sought to better understand and support a continued surge in outdoor sport participation post COVID-19. A team from the Centre for Health, Activity and Wellbeing Research (CAWR) at Cardiff Metropolitan University was contracted to conduct a four-year project aimed at better understanding the demographic profiles of individuals participating in outdoor sports, their motivations, and the potential relationship between outdoor sport and both nature connectedness and wellbeing. Starting in 2021, the project used a cross-sectional, quantitative approach via an annual anonymised online survey.

- A total of 1556 survey responses were captured across four years.
- 76.5% of participants were outdoor sport club members, aged 18 - 90 years with a mean age of 50. Most participants identified as male 60.4% or female 38.7%, heterosexual 93%, of white ethnicity 98%, and of Irish 27.6%, British 25.3%, or Both 24.1% (British and Irish) nationality. Additionally, 7% stated they had a disability, and 57% had dependent child(ren).
- The most frequently cited main outdoor sport types were cycling (n=455; 29%), hiking (n=170; 11%), angling (n=139; 9%), and orienteering (n=121; 8%).
- The mean time individuals spent per week participating in their main outdoor sport was 5.77 hours (SD = 14.61 hours), and for all physical activity 8.66 hours (SD = 16.54 hours). On average, their main outdoor sport accounted for 66.64% of all sport and physical activity completed by the participants.
- 63% (n=971) of participants reached the World Health Organization guideline of at least 150 to 300 minutes of moderate, or 75 mins vigorous aerobic activity per week participating in their main outdoor sport. This was irrespective of age, gender, disability, and dependent children status.
- The time spent in nature is notably higher in this study, than the amount per week thought to be associated with good health and wellbeing.
- Findings relating to the reasons for outdoor sport participation are multiple and include combinations of mental, physical, and social health benefits, and nature-based reasons, with no significant differences found across different age groups.
- Experiencing nature was the third most important motivation for participation in outdoor sport for both males and females. When exploring nature connectedness, it was found that females were significantly more connected to nature than males.
- When sport type was split into water or land -based, those who participated in water-based sports were found to have a greater association with the natural environment.
- Reflecting global population level wellbeing scores, 25% of the participants scored in the poor wellbeing or potential depression category. The mean score for outdoor sport participants in Northern Ireland was 62.12 (SD=19.1), above the low wellbeing threshold (a score of  $\leq 50$ ).
- The highest scored reason for outdoor sport participation was for mental health. Participating in outdoor sport for mental wellbeing was particularly important for people with a disability and people with dependent children.

## Recommendations

Based upon the project findings, recommendations for Sport Northern Ireland and National Governing Bodies are suggested in an aim to support continued outdoor sport participation for all and the associated physical, mental, and social benefits.

### Sport Northern Ireland

#### Facilitate lifelong engagement in outdoor sport

The associated physical activity and wellbeing benefits of outdoor sport were found to be relatively stable regardless of age. Therefore, the promotion of outdoor sport should be targeted and accessible for all ages.

#### Mental health and wellbeing focus

Promoting the mental health and wellbeing benefits of outdoor sport alongside other benefits is encouraged, and can be aided through collaborations with national and local public health and wellbeing specialists.

#### Outdoor sport and physical activity for social prescribing

Sport Northern Ireland are well placed to support social prescribing through physical activity via a range of activities in different outdoor environments.

#### United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

To support people and planet, Sport Northern Ireland should continue to support the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals with particular attention for 'good health and wellbeing' and 'climate action'.

### National Governing Bodies

#### Consultations

Meaningful consultation and engagement with participants may help to better understand their motivations for participation in specific outdoor sports and subsequent recruitment and retention.

#### Peer support

The main motivation for participating in outdoor sport was for mental wellbeing. As such, to support wellbeing and continued physical activity the development of peer support for outdoor sport should be considered.

#### Additional support for people at risk of low wellbeing

To support wellbeing of sport participants, consideration should be given to; providing staff with mental health and wellbeing training; assigning mental health and wellbeing leads; and clear and accessible signposting.

#### Specific promotion for women

Targeted events for women which focus upon connectedness to nature may be beneficial in seeking to engage them in outdoor sport and support positive mental health and wellbeing outcomes.

#### Club membership flexibility

To engage non sport club members, national governing bodies could explore flexible membership approaches (e.g., seasonal membership).

#### Nature and conservation

Due to the high levels of connection to nature held by participants, where possible seek to engage members in conservation opportunities.