

# **Understanding the Health and Well-being Benefits of the Brecon Beacons National Park for a Community on its Periphery REPORT**

## Executive Summary

*Home is where your heart is, and my heart is in Merthyr Tydfil. Merthyr's a special place, and one of the reasons it is so special is the Brecon Beacons*

**Access to the outdoors has always been viewed as an important and unique part of the identity of south Wales valleys communities.**

**This report of research with a community of residents in Merthyr, reflects on how people use and appreciate the Park for wellbeing, and their experiences of exclusion from it.**

### ***Brecon Beacons National Park: Communities at the Boundaries***

A distinguishing feature of the Brecon Beacons National Park (BBNP) is the proximity of urban communities, towns and villages at the periphery of the park. These communities are economically marginalised, through rurality, high levels of poverty, inequality and social exclusion. When visitor numbers are recorded in BBNP, a relatively low use by some communities at its periphery has been recorded; with Park visitors from affluent, middle class backgrounds are overrepresented (51% of visitors compared to 23% in the population, Brecon Beacon National Park Authority (BBNPA), 2016). This has historically been attributed to a lack of transport and knowledge about the Park.

**The report showed that many people in the valleys communities at the periphery of BBNP do use and benefit from the Park.**

**A better understanding of the assumptions governing the relationship between the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority and communities at its boundaries, and of the wider economic and social conditions that shape access and use of the Park, will help inform future management.**

### ***Research on Nature and Place Connectedness:***

Research has shown that there are wellbeing benefits from being close to, and being able to use, greenspace. These benefits are argued to be greatest for communities that have access to biodiverse and well-managed and protected greenspaces, like those of a National Park. Wellbeing is gained from nature connectedness, a shared relationship with nature, and having a 'sense of place'. Yet the differing resources and capacities of communities can affect peoples' ability to access, use and benefit from nature (MacBride-Stewart, 2019).

Residents report being actively engaged in the landscape in the National Park, moved by the affective force of the scenery and the place. The results of this research suggest that disengagement by the Merthyr community in the National Park is not universal. However, individual and community level barriers do exist.

### ***Findings: A Nuanced Understanding of Wellbeing***

The main findings from the research are described below.

#### **1. A Special Place: Iconic and intergenerational value**

The Park is described as a special place for local residents.

For those who use it, the Park has **symbolic, historical and cultural value**. It is through **generations of use and living nearby, that the park has come to be iconic and of considerable importance**. The Park connects experiences, relationships, personal and family histories and memories. Thus it, contributes to a sense of what it means to come from Merthyr and to live there.

The Park also has physical and psychological presence, and in many ways Merthyr and BBNP are seen to be inseparable. However, its specialness can be 'taken for granted'.

#### **2. A Dynamic and Multifunctional Place**

The Park was described as a **dynamic, multifunctional place that was used in different ways by communities, for diverse activities** from walking, to art, to wild camping. The places visited and activities described differ from those identified as being associated with local groups in the visitor survey.

Social relationships, family connections and intergenerational knowledge (including sharing rides and knowledge of places to visit) contribute to use and knowledge about the Park by the local community.

The community wanted to be a promotor of the Park and its codes of conduct, making use of this experiential knowledge.

#### **3. As inaccessible place, and a 'green' inequality**

Despite its value and use, the Park was also identified as an **(in)accessible place for some people**. Transport poverty, a lack of knowledge or physical capacity were things that make the Park inaccessible.

The proximity of Merthyr to BBNP reflects a **'green inequality'**. It was proposed that while the Park can provide **health benefits** through its scenic views, breathing 'pure' air and opportunities to be active-in-nature, these benefits do not counter the wider impact of **gaps in other health and social services**, or of the economic challenges faced by the communities of Merthyr.

A nuanced understanding of wellbeing helps us understand the barriers and opportunities for individuals and the community.

**Conclusion: A Better Understanding of Barriers and Opportunities for Wellbeing**

Overall this report identifies the positive environment that the Park provides to individuals' health. It also identifies some of the individual and community level barriers that limit access and use.

The positive benefits of the Park **co-exist with other socio-cultural and economic challenges** i.e. significant wellbeing values associated with the panorama of BBNP may coexist with entrenched poverty and or lack of physical access. This leads to nuanced and diverse accounts about the benefits of the Park for the local community. For Merthyr, a **green or environmental inequality** should be considered alongside traditional social and economic inequalities.

**Dr Sara MacBride-Stewart**

**Joshua Headington**

26 November 2019

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## Forward

It has been a little over a year since the introduction of lockdown measures. This – like many things – delayed the release of this report. The last year has seen an increase in the value of local spaces for exercise. Several organizations and charities in Merthyr have been at the forefront of encouraging use of the outdoors; doing this in ever more creative and innovative ways. The community spirit in Merthyr came alive through the support and sharing of ideas and opportunities to access its outdoor spaces. It is now, without a doubt, that the value of the outdoors has become part of a public discourse. It seems timely then to release this report. Its findings are supported by our experiences of lockdown, and it seems we have always known how much places like our national parks, are valued.

This report however also sounds a cautionary note. Merthyr is a community that has been hit hard by the pandemic, not only in terms of lives lost, but also in terms of the social and economic cost of job losses, education closures and health care pressures. This report reminds us that the people of Merthyr regard wellbeing as a relationship that comes from value being given to both the state of the natural environment, and to the social and economic status of the community.

Finally, I would like to give my thanks to all of the people who have contributed to this report.

Dr Sara MacBride-Stewart

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Cardiff School of Social Sciences and Sustainable Places Research Institute

## A message from the Champion for Resilient Communities, Brecon Beacons National Park

I am a great believer in the power of the natural world to transform a sense of well-being and the National Park must continue to extend its role in facilitating access to its natural capital amongst as wide and diverse cross-section of the community as possible. That said, I also know that the great outdoors is not a panacea for the inequities of extreme social disadvantage.

There is a school of thought that genuinely believes that if people have unfettered access to the countryside, it can mitigate deep structural societal problems.

Experience of the National Park environment – in the absence of meaningful work and local opportunity – will only provide transitory respite, certainly for those people whose employment prospects are significantly curtailed. I personally believe that unless we fully address the complex multi-dimensional nature of well-being and act accordingly, we will forever only scrape the surface of the social disaffection and green aesthetics inequity that this report forcibly flags up.

I think the concluding sentence in this imaginative piece of grass-roots research is most poignant and is a helpful reminder and reality-check in relation to the over-arching circumstances: The research also shows the limits of green aesthetics, as these benefits do not counter the wider impact of **gaps in other health and social services**, or of the economic challenges faced by the communities of Merthyr.

This inconvenient reality provides the Park with a more grounded framework from which to consider the agency and extent of its obligations towards its most marginalised communities.

Best wishes,

Christopher Coppock

Aelod, Awdurdod Parc Cenedlaethol Bannau Brycheiniog/Member, Brecon Beacons National Park  
Aelod dros Cymunedau Gwydn/Member Champion for Resilient Communities

09 April 2020

## Recommendations

### *Knowledge sharing*

- i) access (knowledge and physical access) could improve through targeting most deprived communities in Merthyr, and those communities in the south of Merthyr and disabled
- ii) establish place/local ambassadors from Merthyr (i.e. older/active users/existing groups, e.g. Merthyr Ramblers) to promote National Park directly to local communities;
- iii) intergenerational transfer of knowledge and experience of BBNP could be further be enhanced by BBNPA applying an intergenerational approach more consistently, learning more generally from existing practices of engagement in local schools and colleges, and with health/social services for those under 18

### *Planning and decision making*

- iv) revise visitor surveys and methods to improve assessment and collection of data on communities at the periphery, including those taking part in non-traditional visitor activities
- v) bring insights from residents at periphery of park into wellbeing planning remit of local Public Statutory Boards (PSB) to ensure that the social inclusion role of the Park is incorporated into wider wellbeing management and planning processes
- vi) support citizens forums in Merthyr to promote knowledge and solution building towards reducing barriers to social inclusion and wellbeing in use of and access to BBNP in an ongoing way, through PSB
- vii) seek to influence transport planning to enable more sustainable ways of accessing the National Park
- viii) continue to be proactive in contributing to shape and raise awareness of role of National Park in building the wellbeing for communities at its periphery working with local and national partners

### *Effectiveness*

- ix) become a centre of excellence in Wales /UK for engagement and networking between marginalised communities and National Parks
- x) improve promotion of bus access to park including less obvious stops (such as T4 layby stop ay Garwnant), and review with residents in an ongoing way
- xi) communicate existing accessible use options for park, with targeted promotion of new website on accessible routes, including to local (social) media
- xii) promote and make available useable information for people wanting to try different walks and areas i.e. mountains but who lack the knowledge or confidence to do so

## Background and Research Aims

The first duty of National Parks in the UK is to conserve and enhance their natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage. The second duty is to promote the enjoyment of the special qualities of national parks - and in carrying out these duties - to seek to foster the social as well and economic wellbeing of local communities. As part of the overall role of BBNPA in undertaking these two statutory purposes and duty, is understand the potential for the diverse communities of people living and working in the vicinity of the Park to realise its unique health and wellbeing benefits. The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015) places a further duty on all public bodies in Wales – including National Park Authorities – to ensure that the social and economic wellbeing of local communities (and across) is improved in such a way so that people in Wales are healthier, more resilient and more equal.

At the present time, indicators for relative deprivation and health outcomes in Wales show that several communities at the periphery of BBNP are some of the most economically deprived in the UK, and have some of the highest level of chronic disease, highest levels of mortality from major diseases, and lowest levels of life expectancy in the UK.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that local communities are – and have always been – avid users of the local green space (personal communication). Recent visitor surveys for the BBNP (BBNPA, 2016) indicate that the users of the Park are much more likely to come from large urban centres in south Wales or England than communities at its periphery. While peripheral communities are well represented in visitor numbers (4% of visitors are from Merthyr), when proximity is taken into account they represent a small proportion of the overall visitors to the Park. This raises a question about the extent to which visitor surveys capture the activities of residents at the periphery of a park and indicates the importance of speaking directly to local communities about the health and wellbeing benefits that they experience. It is an aim of this research described in this report to speak to members of a local community to understand how the Park is used, and to identify any barriers expressed by local communities to access it. The second aim of this study is to understand how a National Park might be a benefit to a community on its periphery that has high levels of poverty and unemployment. It asks what (purported) health and well-being benefits might people from this community experience or feel when using or living near to BBNP.

These questions have underpinned a ten-week PhD research placement that was commissioned, funded, and supervised by Cardiff University's Sustainable Places Research Institute (PLACE) in partnership with Brecon

Beacons National Park Authority (BBNPA). The placement sought to understand the relationship between the BBNP and a town on its periphery – Merthyr Tydfil – a post-industrial town in the south Wales valleys<sup>1</sup>.

The methodology for the project (described below) invited a small group of residents (8) from Merthyr to participate in qualitative interviews that encouraged people to talk in-depth about their own experiences, histories, memories, and perceptions of BBNP. Using social science methods of analysis, the researchers collated together the common themes from the interviews. These focus on the extent to which the Park is perceived to be accessible to members of the local community – drawn from responses that focused on the accessibility of its places and activities, who the people visited with, and the regularity of use. In addition, the report considers the diverse benefits of health and wellbeing that people experienced or felt when engaging in a range of activities in BBNP or that they experienced from living locally to the park.

## Review of the Literature

### *Health and Wellbeing: A Brief Conceptual Overview*

The promotion of wellbeing has become a central aim of the newly designated National Parks in Scotland (Bell and Stockdale, 2015). Moreover, the recent review of designated landscapes in Wales considers national parks as “factories of wellbeing” (Marsden et al., 2015). In the same year, more particularly, wellbeing became a central focus of the national policy of Wales, as the Welsh Government launched its Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015).

Wellbeing is often used synonymously with the concept of health. Where health is defined as a ‘state of complete wellbeing’ (WHO, 1978), wellbeing is about ‘meeting various human needs, some of which are essential (e.g. being in good health), as well as the ability to pursue one’s goals, to thrive and feel satisfied with life’ (OECD, 2011, p.18). In the context of a National Park, health is often directly related to the opportunities that large, green, biodiverse spaces provide for people to be active outdoors, and to enjoy their special qualities, including being away from urban noise and pollution. A range of physical and mental health outcomes of regular use and/or living near to protected areas are reported in the literature such as lowered cardiovascular disease and reduced stress.

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<sup>1</sup>These two communities were originally selected by the project supervisors who had both identified existing community links that would facilitate a short-term research project. As one of the authors of this project had ‘grown up’ in Merthyr, and presently lives there, it was decided to investigate some of the relations between the people of this town and the BBNP

Wellbeing, relatedly, reflects the extent to which a community has the social, educational and economic capital to derive health benefit from a National Park (i.e. the means to travel there in the first place), as well as the capacity of such a Park to contribute to the prosperity, equality and cohesiveness of many users/uses. This thoroughly social understanding of wellbeing alerts us to the potential of communities to benefit in different ways from a National Park, precisely because of the different resources and capacities they may have, that will shape their experience in different ways.

#### *Natural space, wellbeing and economic disadvantage*

The disengagement of some communities from physical activity in natural environments has been widely reported in the health studies literatures (Sanford et al., 2006; Gladwell et al., 2013). This has been linked to social conditions of employment (industrial work, unemployment), along with poor economic and education conditions that are said to shape how communities use the natural world for recreation or for work. For example, young people living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are less likely to participate in physical activities than teens in more affluent neighbourhoods because their local parks were considered to be unsafe (Lee and Maheswaran, 2011, p.217).

Other research has shown that when young people have good access to attractive green space, they are likely to use it (Foster et al., 2009). Protected areas are said to provide greater benefits than urban parks, because they constitute a restorative environment, offer a sense of curiosity or interest and a sense of being away (Hartig et al., 2014; Maller et al., 2006). Protected areas also offer the highest quality opportunities for viewing natural scenes, having contact with plants and animals, and experiencing biodiversity (Romanangosa et al., 2015).

However, National Parks are explained as being inaccessible to some groups due to distance and transport requirements, money and time costs of travel (Li et al., 2018). For working class communities, unfamiliarity and perceived exclusivity are cultural barriers to access also shape the relative lack of money, transport or leisure time for working class groups (Suckall et al., 2009). Access may be policed in subtle ways. For example, teenagers may face hostile attitudes about their use of green space because of 'an inferred association between teenagers and vandalism and crime in public space' (Lee and Maheswaran, 2011, p. 218; Richardson et al., 2010).

The academic findings to date suggest that the wellbeing value of outdoor space is recognised by communities who have regular access to quality green space (van den Berg et al., 2014). As yet, little is known about the values, practices and experiences of a National Park that shape the wellbeing of otherwise disadvantaged communities. These findings may contribute to challenging assumptions about how green space is used and its significance to the local community.

## **Social Inclusion: Welsh National Parks**

In 2005 a Social Inclusion Audit of the Three Welsh National Park Authorities identified that there are specific issues related to social exclusion of local communities in Wales' Parks. These include poverty, poor employment, local services health, education and participation. The report noted that there are particular issues for Wales' National Parks that make social exclusion less visible and more dispersed and differently arranged (i.e. good accessibility but high rates of disability) than urban exclusion. Specific groups such as the young, those on low income, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities are also considered to be most at risk from exclusion from traditional recreation and visitor activities (Cardiff University, 2005).

The latest social inclusion strategy and action plan for Wales National Parks (2012-14) suggests a number of outcomes for improving social inclusion that include: partnership working and engaging deprived communities at periphery, improving the health of local communities and raising awareness of park role in this (via education, communication and sharing best practice), addressing social inclusion in related areas including housing and cultural heritage, having locally proactive communities that value the park and its statutory duties. These goals have been incorporated into the Wellbeing for Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015) and underpin the wellbeing goals that connect the priorities of the park to actions that support inclusive local sustainable development.

### **Merthyr: A Place Perspective**

Merthyr Tydfil (or Merthyr as it is referred to locally) is the main town of the borough council of the same name. In the last UK census, the Town had a population of just over 53,000 (UK Census, 2011). Merthyr lies 23 miles north of Cardiff (the capital of Wales) and 19 miles south of Brecon (the largest town in the BBNP). It is located at the south of the Brecon Beacons National Park boundary. The A470, a major route from north to south Wales, links all three places. The A465 also intersects the A470 at Merthyr to link Swansea in the east to England in the west.

Merthyr is a historically important place in Wales, with evidence of significant activity from the periods of the Celts, Romans, through into the industrial revolution. Once the richest economy in Wales, Merthyr's economic decline started in the 1880s. In the post-war period, several attempts to build Merthyr as an electronics, light manufacturing, and engineering base have seen evidence of short boom and bust opportunities for local employment. Emphasis on Merthyr's cultural and historical contribution to Welsh identity has been the focus of recent investment in the Town. The current major employers of the Town are in the retail sector, public sector (council and hospital); and the new local meat factory.

Merthyr has recently been identified as one of the top 10 places (or 4<sup>th</sup>) in the UK for wellbeing inequality (Abdallah et al., 2017). Wellbeing inequality is defined as ‘a measure of how much wellbeing varies within a population (in our case, a local authority), across the whole population’ (p.7). In this assessment, Blaenau Gwent (1<sup>st</sup>) and Neath Port Talbot (3<sup>rd</sup>) (two authorities also located on the periphery of BBNPA) are all areas where the communities have recorded lowest average wellbeing (based on ONS scoring) and highest wellbeing inequality. The same report notes that between 2012 and 2015, there has been no change in wellbeing inequality for Merthyr, despite one of the largest decreases in wellbeing inequality recorded in the same period in Swansea.

Merthyr has a range of public open green (over 619 hectares of parks, woodlands/forest) and blue spaces (e.g. the river Taff) supported by the local council (e.g. playgrounds and sports fields) and community trusts (e.g. Cyfarthfa Park). In the surrounds of the Town there are other green spaces managed by the third sector, other councils/bodies and Welsh government (e.g. Taff Trail; Valleys Regional Park). These areas link to other green spaces and long-distance trails that continue outside of the town centre. The Town is laid out along a series of hills and valleys, which are noted in local residents’ discussions about local barriers to exercise (i.e. limited flat areas) and health (i.e. high pollution index in the flatter/valley areas in the centre of the Town).

## Methodology and Ethics

*Summary:* Methodologies that are appropriate for engaging local communities were used. A **researcher with existing local expertise** worked proactively and in partnership with the research team to engage a **small diverse network of local informants (8)** living in an urban centre at the periphery of the park. **In-depth qualitative interviews** about the **park, its uses, barriers and impacts** on wellbeing were recorded and transcribed. The **main themes were identified and verified**. Each **theme provides an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of the park** for the local community, established through linking individual discussions to interpretation presented from the existing body of academic research.

The present research was comprised of 8 semi-structured interviews with residents from Merthyr Tydfil. The project had a ten-week deadline, which placed constraints on having a larger sample. Within the sample, there was a good distribution of age (from 20-70 years), gender, and professional class. There was also good range of participants from different areas within Merthyr, who live in contrasting proximity to the BBNP.

The interviews were carried out by the co-author of the report, who had ‘grown up’ in the area, and presently lives there. This meant that it was possible for him to initially recruit research participants through his personal contacts, and then produce a snowball sample. Being an ‘insider’ within the community also made it easier for him to interview people in their own homes, and establish a relationship of trust. For instance, some of the participants seemed more willing to open up and discuss such topics as their personal mental health, either because they, or a close associate of theirs, were known to the researcher. This insider status meant that it was

necessary to ensure that participants did not feel pressured or obliged to have an interview. This was important because the researcher sought out the views of people who may be considered to be excluded in some way from accessing the Park and its benefits.

The interviews were open-ended and invited a discussion about the participant's perceptions of, and experiences in the Park, together with their views of its possible health and wellbeing benefits for individuals and the local community. The participants were also asked about any barriers that may prevent their participation, or the participation of the community, and how these might be overcome.

The interviews were digitally recorded (with consent) and transcribed by the first author. The transcripts of the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, a process of identifying, and reporting and interpreting patterns (themes) in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Initial analysis of the interview data was conducted by the first author. This involved reading and rereading the data to develop codes of patterns within the data. Themes were checked with the second author for consistency, reliability, and appropriateness. After this, the codes were grouped to see any similarities or differences. During analysis, four themes were created: i) "A special place", ii) An (in)accessible place and transport poverty iii) A dynamic and multifunctional place iv) A green inequality. These are described in detail the next section and briefly summarised in the table below (Figure 1).

Approval to conduct the research was given by the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

This section outlines the four key themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews.

## Figure 1: Summary of Themes

### A Special Place

*Home and Family memories:* The Park has significance culturally, socially and personally. It connects experiences, their relationships, personal and family histories and memories. The Park has physical and psychological presence, and in many ways Merthyr and BBNPA are seen to be inseparable. It connected families – often through activities there that had been repeated through the generations.

*Taking the Park for Granted:* People suggested the Park was taken for granted, because of its proximity, and because of a tendency to ignore beliefs that appear to set Merthyr apart from other places and other people.

### An (In)Accessible Place

BBNP is considered to be accessible if you live in the Northern areas of Merthyr, are able to walk and/or have a car. BBNP is considered relatively inaccessible if your mobility is poor (little was known about accessible paths), are reliant on public transport, or only visit the tourist hotspots.

*Transport Poverty:* Transport poverty in particular (lack of public transport and/or knowledge about options) is argued to be a real barrier to access to and use of the Park by Merthyr residents.

### A Dynamic and Multifunctional Place

BBNP is considered to be a dynamic place, which allowed for diverse types of activities (recreational, cultural, artistic, family) and experiences. This diversity shapes people's needs and attachments to it in different ways at different times. These local uses of the BBNP are distinct from the functional (dog walkers) or tourism experiences recorded in visitor surveys, because they reflect changing relationships over the life course. Despite substantial variation about what the Park contributes to individuals, there was also a shared or common appreciation of nature (present) and the cultural heritage of BBNP (past), and a sense that this needed to be protected for the future

### A Green Inequality

The proximity of Merthyr's council estates to panoramic views, opportunities for walking and other activities, and a general sense of the wellbeing benefits derived from BBNP suggests that Merthyr appears to be the exception to much of the literature on greenspace and wellbeing. For many of the participants, they noted physical, mental and therapeutic health benefits that were derived from viewing scenic beauty, being active-in-nature, and breathing pure air. The level of analysis here is on the individual. Wellbeing requires us to take account of the social, economic and environmental factors at the community or local level. For Merthyr this includes accounting for impacts of gaps in other health and social services and in the economic landscape, rather than focusing only on individual-level benefits.

## Brecon Beacons National Park: A Special Place for Merthyr

*'Home is where your heart is, and my heart is in Merthyr Tydfil. Merthyr's a special place, and one of the reasons it is so special is the Brecon Beacons.'*

The Brecon Beacons National Park (BBNP) has great social, cultural, and personal significance for the people of Merthyr. It appears to be deeply and intricately connected to local peoples' experiences, relationships, personal and family histories, and memories. Through such perceptions and understandings of the BBNP, together with its close geographical proximity, the Park has something of an enduring physical and psychological presence for the people of Merthyr. *'To be on the doorstep of such a beautiful, natural park', as one resident explained, 'is such a huge part of living in Merthyr.'*

One might associate the BBNP with a sense of home, too, which in part is associated with one's memories of family. Participants who were born in Merthyr (or had at least lived here for a considerable period) remembered time spent with family members (parents, grandparents, children, grandchildren, siblings, cousins, nephews and nieces), friends, and partners, in the Park. One interviewee (in his late twenties), who had grown up in Merthyr, said he had 'nothing but good memories' of the area; he recounted 'spen[ding] countless hours' there, from his childhood to the present day. Similarly, for another participant (in her early twenties) her memories of the area were entwined with her experience and memories of 'growing up':

*I used to go to Garwnant when I was little; I used to play with all the kids in the park, and they had a really cool swing, but it's gone now. When I was teenager I used to go for walks up there as well, with my friends, and go for a drive around there. And then, when I started seeing [my fiancée,] he took me for walks up Pen-y-fan.*

Participants who visited the Park frequently in their youth appeared to continue the practice of returning to the same sites first visited and learnt about in childhood (i.e. Garwnant, Pen-Y-Fan, Ystradfellte, Llwyn On), and would not venture much farther afield. As one interviewee explained: *'we tend to do the same routes [in Garwnant], and the same with Pen-y-fan, we always just do the same routes. It would be nice to do something different: to go to different places and mountains in the Beacons.'* The reason he gave for not visiting other sites within the BBNP was simply not knowing 'about other places to see: *'Obviously there's a lot more to see in the Park', he explained, 'but I don't really know about it'*. On further reflection, he thought *'it's almost as if it's not advertised well'*, and believed he would be more likely to venture to more unfamiliar places in the Park if he was made more aware of them.

From the interviews, furthermore, the park is also space where some local people want their lives to be remembered and celebrated, after death. It became apparent through the relatively small sample of interviews conducted for this research, that the Park is both used and perceived in relation to the life-course of local people.

### ***'Taking the Park for Granted'***

*'It would be interesting to know how many people from Merthyr actually spend time in the Beacons. Um ... I've got the feeling that it's not as much as we think – which is surprising, and a shame.'*

*'I think some people do take it for granted, but if it was taken away it would be missed, it would be missed.'*

When participants were asked about the relationship people from Merthyr have with the BBNP, it was often believed the Park is 'taken for granted'. It was expressed so frequently by the vast majority of these participants (and is a phrase the co-researcher has heard expressed throughout his life) that it seems to be something of a local, socio-cultural cliché. Although there appeared to be some general shared understandings in the use of this phrase, in each case the notion of 'taking the Park for granted' was seen in a somewhat contrasting light. For instance, one interviewee believed that the Park is taken for granted by the people of Merthyr because it is 'on the doorstep':

*Well we take them for granted, you know, because we're living locally we take it for granted. It's on the doorstep, isn't it, and I feel that we don't make the most of it, even though it's on the doorstep. I feel like we don't utilise it, you know, as much as we should do, really. If it was anywhere else, we'd be raving about how good it is, how beautiful it is. We just don't appreciate it enough, really.*

This metaphor of the Town 'being on the doorstep' of the BBNP was frequently used by other participants from Merthyr. While one participant recounted stories about how visitors spoke positively of BBNP in relation to other well-known English National Parks, it is believed that people of Merthyr are unable to perceive its value precisely because they are 'on the doorstep' of the Park. The experience of living away from Merthyr and the BBNP for a short time often led to an appreciation of both the Town and the Park. It was the belief that one had to leave Merthyr Tydfil, and the BBNP, in order to value these places more.

There were other meanings of 'taking the Park for granted', however. One of which highlighted a common cultural assumption that people in Merthyr spend most of their time in the pub:

*Even though you have some of the most beautiful places here in Merthyr, the people spend most of their time in the pub, don't they? You know, it's a heavy drinking area, so that stops you from wanting to go outdoors, and getting a bit of sweat on your brow, and so forth.*

While it is possible that other residents of Merthyr may feel a similar way about the Town and its people, a participant who had recently moved to Merthyr from Cardiff was the only interviewee who drew attention to the stigmatisation and resulting 'blemish of place' (Wacquant, 2007) that came from such a view. She believed 'most

[local] people use [the Park], or the surrounding areas at least.’ The interviewee revealed that this high frequency of local participation came as something as a surprise to her since, as she explains,

*during my studies, Merthyr Tydfil was always used as an example of a place where people wouldn't exercise, where they would be overweight, not just in academic things but on the news. I think there's a lot of stigma attached to Merthyr Tydfil as a place, and TV shows like Skint don't help. I can't speak for everyone from Merthyr, but in my experience I've found they have a stronger relationship to the Park than what I would've thought, based on all those things I mentioned.*

It is likely that such ideas may have influenced the participants' belief that people in the Town do not regularly use the Park. All the interviewees from Merthyr acknowledged that they and others they knew (more or less) regularly visited the Park. Yet by separating of their use of the Park from others who were perceived to use it more infrequently, can be a strategy that protects the interviewee from being attached to the stigma. The importance of identifying this strategy here is to identify that it provides some evidence that negative views about Merthyr residents' use of green space exist and are known, including to the people of Merthyr themselves.

### **An (In)Accessible Place and 'Transport Poverty'**

*'Accessible? Not if you haven't got a car, I'd say.'*

The proximity to green and natural spaces is seen as a central determining factor for a community's access to such spaces (Eckel and Vries, 2017, p.217). It has been claimed that people who live closer to green space are more likely to access it (Irvine et al., 2013), and that the frequency of such use tends to decline with increasing distance (Coombes et al., 2010). Since the BBNP is 'on the doorstep' of Merthyr, one might assume that it is easily accessible for the Town's residents. In some ways, and for some residents, it is. Even for those who do not own, or have access to a car, it is possible to walk to some areas of the Park. As a resident from Gellideg explained, *'I walked in to the Park yesterday [...] and all of a sudden there was the sign – Brecon Beacons National Park – and I thought, "Oh, it's so close". We are right there, so I can walk there no problem at all.'*

However, one's ability to walk to the Park can depend upon where one lives within Merthyr. Residents of Twyncarmel, Gellideg, Cefn Coed, the Gurnos, and Trefechan, have the advantage of being close to, or directly on, the borders of the BBNP. It is possible for people from these areas to access different spaces on the borderlands between Merthyr and the BBNP by foot. This would be more difficult, however, for residents who live elsewhere in Merthyr. Yet, to access other places in the Park, it was recognised by every participant that one needs a car. As the Gellideg resident (quoted above) suggested, in order *'to climb the peaks – which I think of as the Brecon Beacons peaks – you need a car, to get to a certain point.'* In this way, then, access to the BBNP appeared to be dependent upon access to a car.

A number of interviewees expressed their frustration with this. One explained that she was not able to go as regularly as she would like, as she doesn't drive 'and it's quite difficult to get to': 'My partner drives', she explained, 'so it depends on us both wanting to go at the same time. Yeah, like, he's pretty good, you know, he's happy to go whenever really; but yeah, I'm not able to get there independently.' Another participant, similarly, explained that as she no longer owns a car, she is reliant 'on lifts' to access the Park. As she states, 'I have been frustrated that maybe I can't just get there, if I wanted to, you know. I would need to ask somebody for a lift. So that's the only thing.' She described how, on the one hand, she 'would like the independence of getting out there with [her] walking shoes, and deciding that's what [she] want[s] to do'.

The participant was aware there are 'buses and everything'; however, this form of transport was seen to be infrequent and inconvenient, as they only passed certain areas of the BBNP: 'The buses don't stop at Garwnant; they don't stop off at the visitor's centre; they don't stop off at the Roman Road. So, if these places were accessible through a local bus stop, I think that would be nice.' Other interviewees also believed there should be better public transport access to the BBNP and that this needed to improve, particularly since 'car ownership is quite low' in Merthyr, as one participant recognised. Another interviewee thought it would 'encourage more people' to go to the Park, 'if there was a bus that went up there and could drop you off at a particular point, like the car park at the bottom of the Roman Road area, a couple of times a day. That would be great, but as far as I'm aware, there's nothing like that.'

Another interviewee also voiced this concern: 'a lot of young mams can't drive, but would like to be able to take their kids to the Park', and 'elderly people who are too frightened to drive might want to take a bus to Garwnant for the day.' Again it was felt that there was a lack of information on such access arrangements. A bus route from Merthyr, with a stop on the main A470 located 0.3 mile from the Garwnant Forest Visitor centre was not well known about. 'I don't know what access there is', the interviewee explained: 'Where would I look for it? Considering we're right at the borders of the Brecon Beacons and we want to get there, the information isn't easy to see or easy to find about getting there.'

It was also recognised that, in some ways, 'the nature of the Park' itself made it difficult to access: 'It's the nature of the Park to be rugged isn't it', one interviewee explained. She noted that 'people's own mobility' problems often hindered them from accessing the Park. The participant said that she worked with elderly people and acknowledged that 'there seems to be a lot of people in the area who once used the Park and are unable to use the Park now.' But then, even if access were possible she wondered: 'how can you, sort of, negotiate wheelchairs or whatever on that landscape?' There are however many places in the Park that have been made accessible for such users. There is an easier access guide (online and paper). No one spoken with, however, seemed to be aware of any public access arrangements or schemes whereby these have been made possible.

Considering that one's access to the BBNP was widely seen to be contingent upon one's access to a car, it would appear, that transport poverty in Merthyr works to limit local access to BBNP. Aside from being an area where car ownership is relatively low, it was found that some people in Merthyr had limited access to personal transport (having to rely on a partner or others for lifts to the Park), public transport (buses were seen to only travel to some areas of the Park within a limited timeframe), and transport information (participants were largely unaware of any public transport or other infrastructure that made the Park accessible). All of the participants believed, as one interviewee expressed, that *'something needs to change.'*

## **A Dynamic and Multifunctional Place**

Walking was by far the most popular activity the interviewees participated in, and Garwnant and Pen-Y-Fan were seen to be the most common places to visit for this. The high frequency of visits to Garwnant and Pen-Y-Fan can perhaps be explained by the close proximity of these places to Merthyr itself. As one respondent supposed, *'we probably go there so much because it's closer to us, and easy to get to'*.

The forestry surrounding Garwnant was often seen as a popular space to take one's family, as *'they have facilities for children and food, [...] and you do see kids who have the freedom and space to run around safely, and to explore and discover new things.'* Another participant noted it was a popular space for picnics, and that his church had organised one in Garwnant on the weekend (following his interview); he believed this area was a common place for local people to visit: *'it is well used, I can tell you that now.'* Furthermore, the forestry was also seen as a good place for couples to visit together, as one interviewee explained: *'Most of the time just the two of us go to get out on a Sunday and do something, like a Sunday afternoon chill-out – to get out and get some fresh air. We would sometimes go to the little café, after, but sometimes just walk around there.'* This area was also seen as a good place to walk one's dog; as one participant observed, *'I used to go, until I broke my back, every morning i'd go with the dog.'*

Although Pen-Y-Fan happens to be highest mountain in southern Britain, it is also nevertheless a popular place for families and couples to visit. One interviewee thought it was *'a safe place to go with the children. Although Pen-y-fan, has its dangerous spots [...] All of my children and grandchildren go up there.'* Another participant also revealed that her partner's eighty-four year old grandparents still liked to regularly visit the mountain. As they both still drive, she explained, they would leave their car in the parking space by the Roman Road, and *'although they can't climb to the top of the mountain anymore, they still like to see it, and walk around its base.'* Following their walk, she said, they would habitually *'drive to a nearby burger van, have a bacon roll, and then go home.'*

To walk Pen-Y-Fan itself, however, the most popular route appeared to be from the Storey Arms on the A470. However, the participants also described other paths they used to reach the summit of Pen-Y-Fan, such as from

Talybont, Brecon Town, and the 'Horseshoe' route that begins at the Roman Road. It was also found, unsurprisingly, most participants said they would usually follow the same routes to Pen-Y-Fan that they were familiar with; for instance, one interviewee said *'It would be nice to do different routes'*, he explained, *'but I don't know much about them.'* He wondered whether the BBNPA *'could try and promote it more, really; and promote like different areas and routes and walks, a little bit better'*.

Aside from walking, the BBNP was used for numerous 'outdoor' pursuits. For instance, some participants had cycled (i.e. from the Taff Trail in Merthyr into the Park, and around reservoirs such as Llwyn-On and Talybont) and had also been mountain biking in the area (on the Roman Road, in particular). Other participants had spent time camping in the Park, both in designated camping sites and in the 'wild'. *'I've been camping up there loads of times'*, one interviewee remarked. Another interviewee revealed that he used to take his wife and children camping, when they were young, and that this is a practice his children continue today with his grandchildren. Some interviewees said that they or their extended families also liked to go fishing in the reservoirs of the BBNP. A participant had recently been fishing for the first time: *'I caught some fish and ate them, which was nice.'* Another interviewee recounted that her teenage nephews *'love fishing for trout, there. They love that, and they've been doing it since they were young [...] and I think they feel replenished from it.'* Swimming was seen to be another popular activity (in the Blue Pool, Ystradfellte, and Ponsticill reservoir), as was gorge walking – one participant claimed that he had walked the whole length of the river through Ystradfellte (which is no mean feat).

One participant believed such activities were commonly seen by *'lots of people'* in Merthyr *'as a way of developing character' and 'improv[ing] life skills and confidence.'* Yet she also emphasised that people like to use the Park for swimming and other activities, as a means to connect to 'nature':

*I think people like to go swimming where they like to: it's a real river, you know, compared to a manmade lido or outdoor pool. And it's the excitement of stepping through a fast-moving river; it is actually stepping into something alive, isn't it!*

Other people were also interested in taking photographs of the Park's landscape. One interviewee mentioned that she takes *'lots of photographs'* of her views of the Park, and would *'sometimes post them on Instagram'* as a means of *'shar[ing]' this landscape, 'because it is beautiful.'* An artist also shared how the Park had influenced her creative practice. She said that after early morning walks in the park:

*I could see I was painting the colours that influenced me in that day, through the seasons. I could see the seasonally changing palette. I feel my art was very receptive to those colours in the landscape.*

People described the wildlife they had seen *"Ah, otters!" And you never see otters do you" or 'listening to birds.'* Another interviewee found it 'fascinating' to be able to see farmers work in the BBNP, such as *'bringing [sheep] down off the mountain or taking them in to the mountain.'* She also said that she would see

*'cows up there, walking', particularly on the Roman Road: 'You sort of think, "Oh, what you doing walking on the trail?" So the cows are there; lots of birds; water and the sound of water. It's just wonderful!'*

Together with seeing nature, participants also discussed visiting heritage sites in the area, such as the Roman Road, 'old farmhouses', or 'derelict buildings' from the recent industrial past. Participants talked about being '*fascinated by the history and heritage*', '*imagining what might've been there, what lives were lived.*' Another participant, similarly, said that they were:

*always fascinated by the Roman Road that runs straight through the Brecon Beacons. I do imagine the Romans having to build that road, that path, through the Brecon Beacons. [...] I do imagine the Beacons beings used as beacons, and the lights being lit for warning signs.*

Regardless of the activity, the affect that BBNP had on them appeared to be the same; the most frequent adjectives used to describe this setting and experience of seeing and being-in-nature were '*amazing*', '*stunning*', and '*beautiful*'. They expressed a responsibility towards and a need to preserve the area for the future. '*Because I've had the pleasure of growing up with it*', one participant argued, and because:

*over the past couple of years Pen-y-fan has become really popular. There's hundreds and hundreds of people going up there every day, that's going to produce more wear and tear of the path, and more litter. It is important to preserve that because, yeah, you don't want it to degrade for future generations, really.*

## **Health and Wellbeing: A Green Inequality**

Typically, when one thinks of a UK council estate, one does not imagine its houses and blocks of flats to be surrounded by a panorama of rolling hills, mountains, and open skies. Nevertheless, from the perspectives of Merthyr's largest council estates (the Gurnos, Gellideg, and Trefechan), one can see sweeping views of the BBNP, and also appreciate how green and tree-filled the Town and surrounding valleys are. A number of interviewees from these council estates believed they were fortunate to have such privileged views of, and access to, green space. One resident, who lives in Gellideg, described how 'lucky' she felt to live where she lives:

*I mean we're lucky we live here: we're surrounded by trees where we particularly live – we're lucky we don't live in a terraced estate – and we can hear the birds now, from the window. So I mean, we're lucky; a lot of people don't hear birds unless they actively seek out nature, but because we live right on the edge of the Brecon Beacons I feel that we are, you know, in nature. I look over [through the window], and see that is part of my landscape, is part of my environment.*

The view from her living room window, together with the sound of birdsong, made her feel that she was both connected to, and '*in nature*'. The notion of 'nature connectedness' has been conceptualised, straightforwardly,

as 'one's subjective sense of connection to the natural world' (Capaldi et al., 2015, p.2). It is interesting that this participant was able to feel such a '*connectedness to nature*' through the view from her council-estate, living-room window. When asked what impact this view may have upon her, she replied that it has '*a tremendous affect*'. The interviewee had lived in different parts of Merthyr, '*in miner's cottages or terraced houses*', which always seemed to afford claustrophobic views '*of someone else's car or living room window*'. Now, however, she was able to '*look[...] at the clouds*' through the window, and '*watch[...] the light change in the sky*'.

Another resident, from the Gurnos estate, had a similar subjective relationship to the green spaces of Merthyr Tydfil and the BBNP. She explained that these surrounding spaces gave her a 'sense of calm':

*You know, whatever you've been doing in your working day, when it's been quite hectic, you look out your window and you can see all this green space. I can see Pen-y-fan, to some degree, if it's a clear day. I find tranquillity, and that it's calming, when I just look out the window.*

In research on the relations between green space and well-being, this notion of feeling 'uplifted' by nature has been connected to 'hedonic' or 'emotional' well-being: a subjective state in which one feels 'high levels of positive emotions, low levels of negative emotions, and a sense of satisfaction with one's life' (Capaldi et al., 2015, p.3). In sum, hedonic well-being is seen as 'the *feeling good* component of well-being' (ibid.). To explain how such views can promote feelings of 'tranquillity' and 'calm', stress-reduction theory (Ulrich et al., 1991), based on empirical research, contends that views of natural environments contra urban settings, '*tend to foster greater stress recovery*' (ibid., p.209). In line with these findings, it would appear that the participants' views from their windows have a restorative and stress-reducing affect upon their mental wellbeing.

Participants who visited the park (rather than just viewing it) also described feelings of tranquillity that came from '*being in a vast expanse of openness and nature*', where there was a sense of being able to '*forget worries, and gain some mental space*.' This sense of mental space was further described as a subjective feeling of freedom: the '*open space and sky*' of BBNP; not feeling '*boxed in by buildings*'; being '*free from [other] humans*' and '*technology*', including 'that nothing [i.e. mobile phones] work up there'). There was also the opportunity the Park affords to escape '*the pace of modern life*'. Such feelings of freedom in nature have been associated with 'eudaimonic' wellbeing: a concept which includes such states as autonomy, meaning, and vitality (Capaldi et al., 2015, p.5).

Participants framed the wellbeing benefits of visiting the BBNP as the opportunity to raise 'private self-awareness' and focus on personal goals and autonomy (ibid., p.612). This was described as '*a nice way to escape from the busyness of your everyday activities, your job and the stresses that come with that, and just get out in the open, and you just forget about it all really. It's a nice way to relax*.' Participants talked about feeling '*chilled*' and '*relaxed*' in the Park: '*You don't think about anything work related...[you] switch off*.' The Park afforded one

couple the space where they felt free to discuss *'things going on in our lives that are stressing us out, like work, or whatever.'*

The participants also described how the positive health and wellbeing benefits of breathing *'pure oxygen and air'* in the BBNP and *'getting away from the noise of traffic'* had *'all obvious mental health and physical health benefits.'* One interviewee explained: *'It does me, you know, it does me good to get out and breathe – the air does change, you know.'* The purity of the air was an important factor of the Park's health and wellbeing benefits. An interviewee who had recently moved from to Merthyr thought that *'the air is a lot fresher, here'*. She noted that whenever she returned to Cardiff now, she could *'taste the pollution in the air'*.

The activity of walking in the BBNP also appeared to have a number of benefits, which often seemed to work together with other features of the Park (e.g. viewing scenic beauty, being-in-nature, breathing pure air) to impart a sense of physical health and mental wellbeing. For one interviewee, the activity of walking in the Park helped her to be *'more conscious and more aware of everything around.'* In this heightened consciousness and *'connectedness'* to nature, the participant also appeared to feel a sense of eudaimonic wellbeing in relation to herself and to nature (MacBride-Stewart, 2019).

*My face was stinging with the cold but I [got] to see things, experience that air and that cold and you're using your body; you're forcing your body to move... you can hear your feet on the gravel, or the snow, or on the ice, and you're more conscious and more aware of everything around you.*

Some participants simply emphasised the physical health benefits of walking in the Park. One life-long resident of Merthyr, who was now approaching eighty, ascribed walking within the BBNP to the longevity of his life. This person walked with the Ramblers for many years, and would walk (until very recently) in the vicinity of the BBNP every weekday morning. The activity of trekking up Pen-y-fan, which was *'seen to be a tough walk'*, sometimes worked as a complimentary exercise to participants' exercise regimes. It was seen as a good complement to their physical exercise because of the mental well-being benefits of these activities.

The positive benefits discussed above are derived from seeing, being in, and experiencing the BBNP, do not explain the otherwise relatively high level of mental illness in Merthyr. In a recent population assessment, for instance, Cwm Taf health board (responsible for the health care of Merthyr, the Rhondda, and Bridgend) claims that the area *'has the highest rates of mental illness and poor well-being in Wales'* (2018, p.4). As a community's wellbeing is determined by a number of complex factors other than its proximity to green space alone, poor local economy will have a detrimental effect upon community wellbeing. Even with such a wealth of local natural and green spaces, unless such material economic and social conditions of a lack of jobs, higher educational opportunities, and poor transport are alleviated for the people of Merthyr and the south Wales valleys, it is unlikely that the area's overall health and wellbeing will improve.

## Conclusions

The emergent interest in wellbeing and UK's National Parks has focused on how to improve access for particular groups. This is based on research that has tended to focus either on the underrepresentation of working-class communities in visitor surveys or on wider issues of poor health outcomes recorded in national surveys. This project has sought to extend this work by concentrating on a community at the periphery of the Brecon Beacons National Park, who have been recognised as being at risk from social exclusion from the wellbeing benefits of traditional recreation and visitor activities (Cardiff University, 2005; 2012).

The aesthetics of the park connect local people to nature. The Park has a special value for local residents particularly those who live within view or walking distance of it. Some benefit from seeing the park; and individuals who regularly use the Park emphasise its contribution to their health and wellbeing. They express the value of being immersed in nature (its fresh air, the feeling of greenery) that uplifted, was a source of positive 'feel-good' emotions, and provided a sense of calm from 'being away'.

The results of this research suggest that disengagement by a community in the National Park is not universal. Residents find themselves immersed in the landscape in the National Park, moved by the affective force of the scenery and the landscape. The park in particular has come to have iconic and intergenerational value. This is more than BBNP providing mental health benefits. This is a sense of wellbeing that is intrinsically linked to the positive sense of living in or belonging to and having a Merthyr identity. The BBNP also has symbolic, historical and cultural value that contributes to this local sense of wellbeing.

A sense of place and knowledge about the park links existing generations (i.e places that are visited regularly by a family), as well as connects the people of Merthyr to its cultural and historical past. However, the understandings and uses of the Park are diverse. The Park is used in many different ways by the local community – from walking, to art, to wild camping. It is valued as a place for diverse activities. The places visited and activities described often differ from those uses traditionally represented in the visitor survey.

The results reported here support the idea that while residents of Merthyr access and use the Park, the benefits experienced were not universal and were mostly expressed by people who were familiar with the park, had a car or could walk or engage in another activity. The park was seen to be 'taken for granted' and experiences could be limited by the economic and material constraints of transport, income and or physical capacity. Transport poverty, a lack of knowledge or physical capacity make the Park largely inaccessible to some individuals.

A nuanced understanding of wellbeing is needed to help us understand the barriers and opportunities for the community. Included in the recommendations for enhancing the relationship with the park is the view held by the local community that they wanted to be the promoter of the park including its codes of conduct. The research also shows the limits of green aesthetics, as these benefits do not counter the wider impact of **gaps in other health and social services**, or of the economic challenges faced by the communities of Merthyr.

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