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Nature Champions: Empowering Ethnically Diverse Communities to Improve Health Through Engaging with the Natural Environment

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Executive Summary.

This report outlines the training sessions that were delivered as part of the Nature Champions project and explains the approach to evaluating its impact on the confidence and knowledge of community leaders about the natural environment of the Humber region, and the impact of the outdoors on mental health. Findings from training delivered for ethnically diverse community leaders to become advocates for the health and wellbeing benefits of the outdoors and nature within their communities are discussed, highlighting the work and its effectiveness. The report explores the barriers that exist for engaging ethnic minorities in the natural environment, and develop recommendations on how to increase engagement with the natural environment for communities where engagement with the natural environment is typically low.

The aim of this project was to empower and upskill ethnically diverse communities to engage with the natural environment. This was achieved through identifying community leaders from five community-based organizations in the Humber region.



These community leaders were then offered three facilitated training sessions and a masterclass workshop all of which focused on different aspects of the natural environment, the wildlife of the Humber region and supporting mental health. A significant component was focused on how engaging with the natural environment, through green and blue spaces, can impact positively on mental, physical and general health and wellbeing. The final workshop focused on the Nature Champions applying what they had learned through the training by designing a nature-based activity. These activities were then tested by the group who fed back on their experience of taking part in the nature-based activity. These activities designed by the Nature Champions on the day included mindful walking in nature, guided visual relaxation by the Humber and sculpting using objects picked up in nature, such as twigs, pebbles and leaves.

This report outlines and summarises the learnings from engaging with ethnically diverse community leaders who attended this training and makes seven recommendations for further development and upscaling of a Nature Champions training programme nationally.

The recommendations we make drawing from our learning are as follows:

- In order for long-term nature engagement strategies with communities to be sustainable, it needs to engage local leaders, be accessible, be participatory in its design, and champion the benefits of responsible engagement with nature for all.
- In any such strategy, power needs to be shared with communities, rather than held over them. This can be achieved by consultations with communities in order to establish what might work best given the specific and cultural needs of individuals in diverse communities.

- Relationships with communities are dependent on trust and this can be established through identifying barriers and facilitating factors to engaging with nature within these communities. Following this, appropriate activities can be co-designed and carried out.
- Engagement with nature (i.e., green and blue spaces) by those from ethnically diverse communities is co-related to a sense of being and belonging in spaces. Therefore, investment in time, relationships and integration is key to successful engagement by all. A sense of belonging and interconnectedness can consequently increase engagement with the natural environment and thus foster a sense of responsibility, benefitting from, and looking after the natural surrounding world.
- In order to make activities meaningful and sustainable, it is important to recognise the barriers that exist for activities that may be away from local walking distances; such as transportation, accessibility and cost.
- Invest in training opportunities for Nature Champions as this offers communities the skills, knowledge and resources so they can engage with nature and outdoor activities.
- Have mechanisms for feedback, evaluation, review and making positive change.

This report outlines and summarises the learnings from engaging with ethnically diverse community leaders.

Introduction and Background.

In February 2023, HEY Smile Foundation (HSF) and researchers at York St John University (YSJU) started working together with five ethnic minority community groups in Hull. These groups offer Green Social Prescribing activities for individuals from ethnically diverse communities within Hull and East Yorkshire. Green Social Prescribing is defined as 'the practice of supporting people to engage in nature-based interventions and activities to improve their mental and physical health' (NHS England, 2022). Building on evidence which suggests a positive link between nature, wellbeing and health, link workers refer individuals to community groups that offer nature-based activities, such as gardening or walking.

This project builds on previous research we conducted with these groups (Berding-Barwick et al., 2024) in which a series of four participatory workshops were offered to support the community groups to develop an understanding of the importance of evaluation and co-designed an evaluation questionnaire to find out about the impact of their green social prescribing projects on their service users. This work indicated that conventional screening tools, such as the PHQ-9 or GAD-7, were deemed by different community leaders to have some limitations in fully representing the experiences and articulation of psychological distress or wellbeing as experienced by individuals from these ethnically diverse minority groups. For example, it was pointed out that from the PHQ-9 words such as 'feeling down, depressed or hopeless' in other cultural context can have a range of idioms and others noted that the words 'depression' did not directly translate within their languages. Thus, a structured approach to supporting grassroots community groups in developing evaluation tools to evidence the impact of their project activities is important to increase their self-reliance and make their project activities sustainable, including through having outcome data which can secure follow-on funding.

Nature Champions: Empowering Ethnically Diverse Communities to Improve Health Through Engaging with the Natural Environment

Building on this work which was conducted in the context of the benefits of Green Social Prescribing, HSF and YSJU continued working with the community groups to further upskill and empower them to become advocates for the natural environment and the wellbeing and health benefits of engaging with it. Over the course of three months, leaders from the five community groups (BAMEEN, Bora Shabaa, Hull Afro Caribbean Association, Solidarity Hull and Welcome House) participated in a series of four training workshops to become Nature Champions.

The main aim of these workshops was to train community leaders to become advocates for the health and wellbeing benefits of the outdoors and nature within their communities, and increasing responsible engagement with the iconic natural environment that makes up the Humber region.

Researchers at YSJU conducted research into the acceptability and impact of these training sessions that were delivered. The other research aim was to explore the confidence and knowledge of participants before and after the sessions. The final workshop focused on exploring participants' perceptions and experiences of the Nature Champions training sessions, but also opened up discussions around barriers for ethnic minority communities to engage with the natural environment in their local area and beyond.

The development of the training programme and research was guided by the following questions:

- What is the impact of structured training on the natural environment and mental health awareness on the knowledge and confidence of ethnic minority community group leaders?
- What are the barriers and facilitators for ethnic minority communities to become advocates for the health and wellbeing benefits of the outdoors and nature within their communities?
- How can we increase participation of ethnic minorities in outdoor and in-nature activities and within diverse natural environments.

The main aim of these workshops was to train community leaders to become advocates for the health and wellbeing benefits of the outdoors and nature within their communities, and increasing responsible engagement with the iconic natural environment that makes up the Humber region.



Method.

The four training workshops were delivered in collaboration with Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, Natural England and HEY Mind. Pre- and post-evaluation surveys were administered to capture impact of training sessions on existing knowledge and confidence levels of the natural environment in the Humber region, nature connectedness and how to connect with nature; the health and wellbeing benefits of the outdoors; and mental health and how to support others with their mental health. Participants completed one before and end of training survey; as well as one evaluation survey after each training session. Respondents were asked to rate statements on a scale of 0 to 10 (10 being the highest/most understanding and/or confidence); and short answer questions were also asked.

The workshops were as follows:

Session 1 – Wildlife of Hull and the Humber

A one-day outdoor training session split between East Park in Hull and North Cave Wetlands. Yorkshire Wildlife Trust staff led a guided walk, while educating community leaders about the natural environment. Participants learned about nature apps, such as Merlin Bird ID and iNaturalist to identify bird species and plants.

Session 2 – Nature Connection

A one-day session at the Humberhead Peatlands National Nature Reserve facilitated by Natural England and led by Yorkshire Wildlife Trust who delivered a session on Nature Connectedness, what it is, why it is important and how to bring it into any outdoor activity.

Session 3 – Mental Health Awareness for ethnic minority communities

A one-day training session delivered by HEY Mind. This session was tailored for Mental Health Champions from ethnically diverse communities. In this session the trainer encouraged participants to reflect on how engaging in nature can facilitate different communities connecting.

Session 4 – End of training workshop

A one-day end of training co-production workshop was held at Water's Edge Country Park. This was designed to reflect on the training sessions and determine what tools and resources community leaders would need to run nature connectedness activities with their communities. This led to wider discussions around how ethnic minority communities can be encouraged to go out in nature and barriers to engaging in nature. The workshop was captured by a live scribe.

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted online with the training session facilitators to find out about barriers to working with ethnic minority communities.

Four training workshops were delivered in collaboration with Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, Natural England and HEY Mind.

Findings.

The tables below summarise responses from pre- and post-training surveys which were given to participants. It provides the highest and lowest scores participants gave, as well as an average score for each question. Short answers are summarised.

Before training survey results

Before starting the training sessions, participants were given a survey to capture their awareness and understanding of the natural environment, as well as confidence levels regarding advocating for the natural environment and its health benefits; and mental health support. The survey also included questions adapted

from the Nature Connectedness survey. The concept of Nature connectedness has been defined as “individuals’ experiential sense of oneness with the natural world” (Mayer & Frantz, 2004) (p. 504).

The tables below highlight the questions that the nature champions responded to as well as the highest score, lowest score and the average score to each of the questions.

Table 1: Questions and scores relating to Awareness and understanding of environment and confidence

Questions relating to Awareness and understanding of environment and confidence	Scores		
How would you rate your current understanding and/or awareness of the natural environment and the Humber region?	Highest: 10	Lowest: 1	Average: 5.6
How would you rate your current understanding and/or awareness of nature connectedness and how to connect with nature?	Highest: 10	Lowest: 1	Average: 6.3
How would you rate your current understanding and/or awareness of the health and wellbeing benefits of the outdoors	Highest: 10	Lowest: 3	Average: 8.3
How would you rate your current understanding and/or awareness of mental health and how to support others with their mental health	Highest: 10	Lowest: 4	Average: 7.6
How confident do you feel to educate others about the natural environment of the Humber region?	Highest: 10	Lowest: 1	Average: 5.3
How confident do you feel to be a champion for the natural environment in the Humber region?	Highest: 10	Lowest: 1	Average: 6
How confident do you feel to help others connect with nature?	Highest: 10	Lowest: 1	Average: 6.8
How confident do you feel to be a champion for the benefits of the outdoors for mental health and wellbeing?	Highest: 10	Lowest: 1	Average: 7
How confident do you feel to be able to support others with their mental health and wellbeing?	Highest: 10	Lowest: 1	Average: 7.1

Table 2: Questions and scores relating to nature connectedness

Nature connectedness	Scores		
I like to spend time outdoors.	Highest: 10	Lowest: 7	Average: 9
I feel connected with nature.	Highest: 10	Lowest: 2	Average: 8
If I had enough resources, such as time and money, I would spend some of them to protect the natural environment.	Highest: 10	Lowest: 5	Average: 8.6
Behaving responsibly towards nature – living a sustainable lifestyle – is important to who I am.	Highest: 10	Lowest: 1	Average: 8.7
Learning about the natural world should be part of everybody's upbringing.	Highest: 10	Lowest: 5	Average: 9.2
I feel comfortable out in nature.	Highest: 10	Lowest: 7	Average: 9.1

NATURE CHAMPIONS

BUILDING CONNECTION

PARTICIPATION WORKSHOP 18.03.24

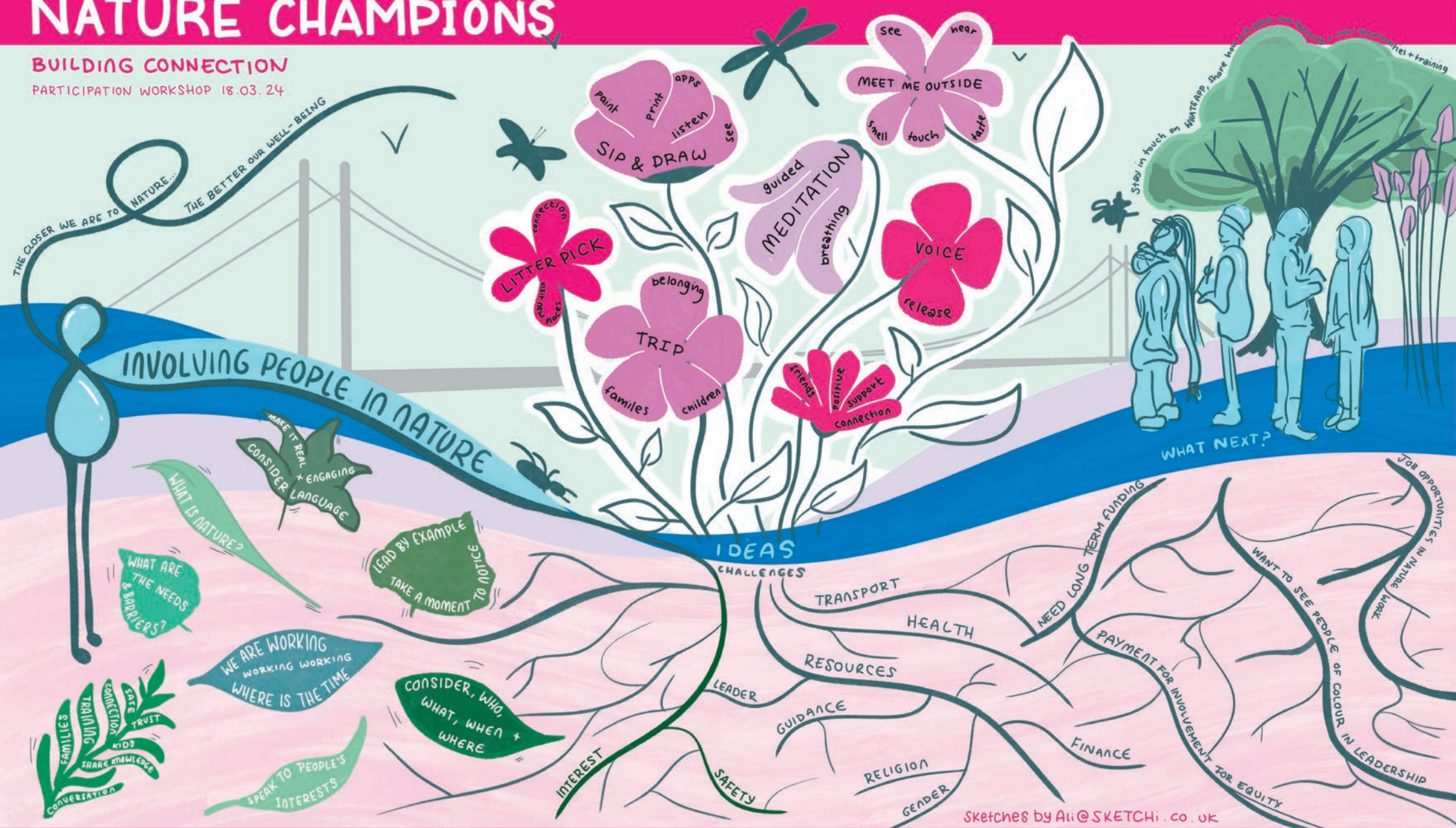


Fig 1: The graphic above was sketched by Ali @ Sketchi who was the live scribe during the 4th workshop to capture the activities and discussion of the session

End of session surveys

After each training session, participants were given evaluation surveys to find out about the impact the training had. Each survey was adapted to reflect the objective of the respective training session.

Table 3: End of workshop 1 questions and scores relating to Wildlife of Hull and the Humber

Session 1: Wildlife of Hull and the Humber	Scores		
I have gained new knowledge today about the natural environment in the Humber region	Highest: 10	Lowest: 7	Average: 9.1
I feel confident to take my community to green spaces in Hull	Highest: 10	Lowest: 8	Average: 9.4
I feel confident to take my community to green spaces beyond Hull	Highest: 10	Lowest: 6	Average: 8.9
I feel confident to educate others about the natural environment in the Humber region	Highest: 10	Lowest: 6	Average: 8.9
How likely is it that you will organise a trip to green spaces in Hull for your community?	Extremely likely (6)	Somewhat likely (3)	Neither likely nor unlikely (0)
Why? Promoting health and wellbeing; help people connect with nature; education; funding			
How likely is it that you will organise a trip to green spaces beyond Hull for your community?	Extremely likely (5)	Somewhat likely (3)	Neither likely nor unlikely (1)
Why? Different green space; funding; good for mental health			
What is your main takeaway from today's session?	Bird sounds; networking; friendship; fun; learning		

Table 4: End of workshop 2 questions and scores relating to Nature Connection

Session 2: Nature Connection	Results		
I have gained new knowledge today about the natural environment in the Humber region	Highest: 10	Lowest: 7	Average: 8.8
I understand what Nature Connectedness is	Highest: 10	Lowest: 6	Average: 9
I understand why Nature Connectedness is important	Highest: 10	Lowest: 8	Average: 9.1
I would feel confident leading Nature Connectedness activities	Highest: 10	Lowest: 7	Average: 9
I want to be more connected to nature	Highest: 10	Lowest: 8	Average: 8.9
How likely will you deliver Nature Connectedness activities through your organisation and communities?	Extremely likely (6)	Somewhat likely (2)	Somewhat unlikely (2)
Why? Need more nature training; good for mental health and emotional wellbeing; how to get to beautiful spaces?			
What is your main takeaway from today's session?	Connecting with nature using 5 senses; facilitator was good;		

End of training survey results

After all training sessions and the final workshop, participants completed a final survey to find out about the impact of all training sessions. Similar questions to those in the initial survey were asked; and some short answer questions were also included.



The tables summarise responses from pre- and post-training surveys which were given to participants. It provides the highest and lowest scores participants gave, as well as an average score for each question.

Table 5: Before and after scores on awareness and understanding of environment and confidence

Awareness and understanding of environment and confidence	Scores at start of training workshops			Scores after attending 4 workshops		
How would you rate your current understanding and/or awareness of the natural environment and the Humber region?	Highest: 10	Lowest: 1	Average: 5.6	Highest: 10	Lowest: 6	Average: 8.2
How would you rate your current understanding and/or awareness of nature connectedness and how to connect with nature?	Highest: 10	Lowest: 1	Average: 6.3	Highest: 10	Lowest: 7	Average: 8.5
How would you rate your current understanding and/or awareness of the health and wellbeing benefits of the outdoors	Highest: 10	Lowest: 3	Average: 8.3	Highest: 10	Lowest: 8	Average: 9.2
How would you rate your current understanding and/or awareness of mental health and how to support others with their mental health	Highest: 10	Lowest: 4	Average: 7.6	Highest: 10	Lowest: 5	Average: 8.4
How confident do you feel to educate others about the natural environment of the Humber region?	Highest: 10	Lowest: 1	Average: 5.3	Highest: 10	Lowest: 6	Average: 8.2
How confident do you feel to be a champion for the natural environment in the Humber region?	Highest: 10	Lowest: 1	Average: 6	Highest: 10	Lowest: 6	Average: 8.3
How confident do you feel to help others connect with nature?	Highest: 10	Lowest: 1	Average: 6.8	Highest: 10	Lowest: 7	Average: 8.4
How confident do you feel to be a champion for the benefits of the outdoors for mental health and wellbeing?	Highest: 10	Lowest: 1	Average: 7	Highest: 10	Lowest: 7	Average: 9.6
How confident do you feel to be able to support others with their mental health and wellbeing?	Highest: 10	Lowest: 1	Average: 7.1	Highest: 10	Lowest: 6	Average: 7.4

Table 6: Before and after scores on nature connectedness

Nature connectedness	Scores at start of training workshops			Scores after attending 4 workshops		
I like to spend time outdoors.	Highest: 10	Lowest: 7	Average: 9	Highest: 10	Lowest: 7	Average: 9.1
I feel connected with nature.	Highest: 10	Lowest: 2	Average: 8	Highest: 10	Lowest: 8	Average: 9.3
If I had enough resources, such as time and money, I would spend some of them to protect the natural environment.	Highest: 10	Lowest: 5	Average: 8.6	Highest: 10	Lowest: 8	Average: 9.3
Behaving responsibly towards nature – living a sustainable lifestyle – is important to who I am.	Highest: 10	Lowest: 1	Average: 8.7	Highest: 10	Lowest: 8	Average: 9.6
Learning about the natural world should be part of everybody's upbringing.	Highest: 10	Lowest: 5	Average: 9.2	Highest: 10	Lowest: 6	Average: 9.5
I feel comfortable out in nature.	Highest: 10	Lowest: 7	Average: 9.1	Highest: 10	Lowest: 8	Average: 9.5

Table 7: Other qualitative questions and responses

Going forward, what is one thing you will do in your community group taking into account the learnings from the training?	Take learnings to encourage others and organise outdoor activities for community group; increased confidence; people need to find out about immediate environment; nature connection is important and can help increase health and mental wellbeing; use Merlin app; advocate for protecting nature; organise nature mindfulness activity; create resources in different languages;		
How likely is it that you will lead outdoor events for your community?	Extremely likely (6)	Somewhat likely (2)	Extremely unlikely (1)
What resources would you need to lead outdoor events for your community?	Funding; transport; tools for nature connectedness/outdoor activities (such as art supplies, yoga, football, litter picking; binoculars); first aid; willingness of community;		
Any other comments?	More training; resources in other languages; nature has potential to improve mental health and wellbeing; useful training; nice facilitators		

In this project we were also interested in the following questions:

- What is the impact of structured training on the natural environment and mental health awareness on the knowledge and confidence of ethnic minority community group leaders?
- What are the barriers and facilitators for ethnic minority communities to become advocates for the health and wellbeing benefits of the outdoors and nature within their communities?
- How can we increase participation of ethnic minorities in outdoor and in-nature activities and engagement with natural environments?

As can be seen by the results and findings presented in tables 5, 6, and 7, participants reported that their awareness and understanding of environment and confidence to engage more outdoors, and within natural environments increased after the training sessions.

The scores recorded after the sessions [tables 5, and 6], demonstrate an increase in each of the areas they were questioned in. These quantitative results are also supported by positive qualitative comments that the nature champions offered.

These included:



I have really enjoyed the activities, the connections that I made with different people including trainers

The 4 sessions in this training I learnt a lot. It was very useful. More training like this will connect more people to the nature.

The sessions have been quite helpful in understanding how connecting with nature can be beneficial. If this training can be made available more often and to involve more community members, it would be good. Also, if the resources can be made available in other languages to engage ethnic minority groups more.

Nature is power! Nature is healing! Nature is refreshing! And nature is the natural cure to some of our health and mental wellbeing issues.

Great training – more!!

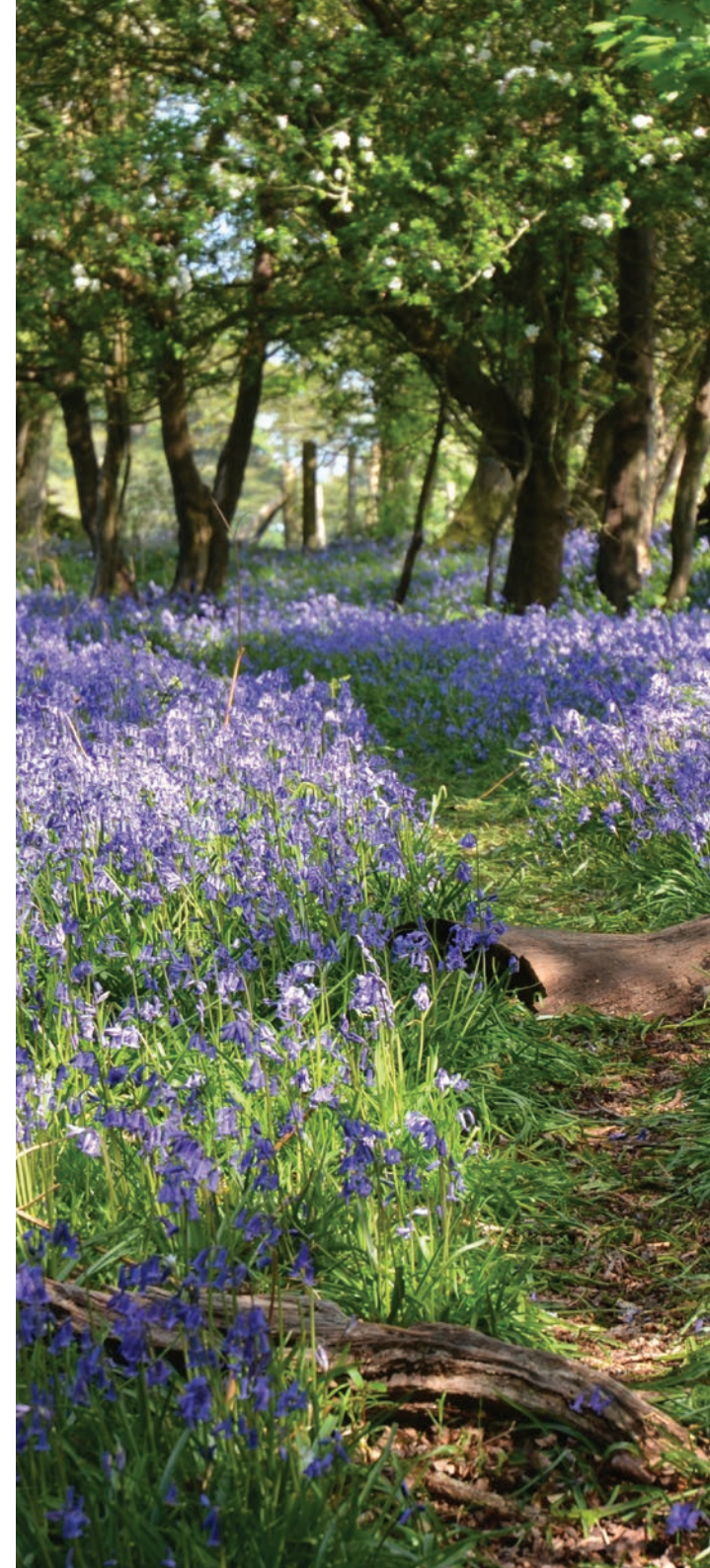
Workshop Discussions.

During the workshop, participants engaged in a discussion around the following question: *How do you use your knowledge to persuade someone who is reluctant to get out into nature?*

Participants reflected on what they have learned during the training sessions and suggested to use this knowledge to educate others about how nature is connected to health, after asking how people were feeling. In addition, participants said that it was important to carefully think about how any nature or outdoor activities were advertised or talked about. For example, the phrase 'let's take a walk' might be much more meaningful to individuals, especially if English is not their first language. In addition, language such as 'fell walking', 'wetlands', or 'reserve' can be unknown to individuals, or even triggering if those terms mean something else in a different cultural context. In this context, 'nature' does not necessarily equate with forests, but it can mean fresh air, or a less built-up area within a city. It is then about recognising and showing individuals that nature can be around the corner, and they do not have to go far to look at birds, flowers or leaves. This kind of nature is accessible all year round, and it is important to speak with communities and ask what they needed and/or wanted to involve them in activities.

Using the right language level is important, and giving individuals enough information about activities and the area in which they take place (e.g. What is there? Facilities? Accessibility? Water? How to get there?) will give people confidence to participate in activities, and not be afraid. This also applies to educating others about the natural environment, such as the benefits of being outdoors. The language used needs to make individuals feel comfortable and included.

The group also spoke about barriers to getting out into nature, such as safety. For example, one female participant spoke about how she did not feel safe in a local park, and feel intimidated by groups of teenagers. Other barriers were caring responsibilities, as well as low income and lack of time due to working multiple jobs or longer hours. In this context it was mentioned that employers play a role in giving employees sufficient breaks to go outside and make use of the nature which is close to work places.



Perspectives and Themes from Interviews with Facilitators.

Interviews with two facilitators from Yorkshire Wildlife Trust who delivered training for the Nature Champions programme were conducted to get insight into their perspective of engaging with ethnic minority communities through their organisation.

Connecting and Belonging

Both facilitators highlighted the importance of connecting communities with nature, for example through walking, nature connectedness and conservation activities. This was important to give individuals confidence to come to nature space by themselves, but also to forge a sense of belonging to increase a sense of caring for the natural world for individuals. In addition, connecting with the community, for example through linking nature with sport activities such as in local sporting clubs, was also seen as important in eliminating boundaries and differences that exist between ethnic minority and local communities and creating points of contact.

Genuine Engagement

It was emphasised that engagement with minority communities through YWT needed to be genuine, that is not simply a tick box exercise to satisfy funder requirements. It is important to understand communities and what their needs are. Within the Nature Champions training programme, the Nature Connectedness session was considered a 'high-quality' session as it was reported by the participants to have enabled them to become upskilled, and to build stronger connections with nature. As an objective, individuals would then feel encouraged to lead nature/outdoor activities (e.g., guided walks). This also links with widening participation of YWT staff in community activities with ethnic minority individuals and engaging in reflection about these activities.



Recognising and Accommodating Differences

While YWT does not exclude individuals, one facilitator questioned whether they did enough to include. In this sense, it was emphasised that it was important to recognise different previous experiences with nature of different individuals, as well as recognising cultural differences and incorporating them in guided outdoor activities. While it is important to help individuals understand British nature, it was also important to find connections on a cultural level which facilitate a sense of care for nature (e.g. foraging).

Benefits of Nature Connection

While the long-term benefits of the nature activities are not monitored, facilitators spoke positively about short-term benefits they could observe in nature engagement activities with ethnic minority communities, for example being visibly happy. Regarding the Nature Champions training, there is anecdotal evidence of a longer-lasting effect, as one

organisation that participated said they were looking for ways to implement learnings from the Nature Champions training in their organisation's activities at a board level.

Barriers

Meaningful engagement and building connection with communities to increase their sense of care for the environment is a lengthy process. There is no direction with regards to who to target and instead the focus is on 'targeting people'. However, communities are not all the same and different approaches are required. Much of the work is on-site delivery rather than going out into communities. This can lower the enthusiasm of groups as they know they cannot easily access spaces after guided activities. Funding for engaging communities and lead guided activities was also mentioned as a barrier, as this is unsustainable and requires a 'cut-throat' approach to what activities can be delivered and to whom.

Conclusion.

The aim of this project was to empower and upskill diverse ethnic minority communities to engage with the natural environment. Through identifying community leaders from five charities in the Humberside region and successfully engaging them in three facilitated training workshops and a masterclass workshop all of which focused on different aspects of the natural environment, education about natural environments, wildlife and biodiversity we have highlighted a number of key and impactful learning points.

These include:

- The feasibility and acceptability of recruiting and training nature champions from Diverse Ethnic Minority Communities to Improve Health Through Engaging with the Natural Environment
- Formulation of a project focusing on Nature Champions applying what they had learned through the training by designing a feasible and acceptable nature-based activities
- Learning together with community leaders as a way of empowering groups to become more engaged in mobilising other members to engage with the outdoors and natural environments. Such groups that are often marginalised and who may not ordinarily engage with outdoor and natural environments close to them.
- Identified barriers and facilitators of engaging with the with the natural environment, green and blue spaces
- Identification of the positively mental, physical health and wellbeing
- Formulation of a project focusing on Nature Champions applying what they had learned through the training by designing a feasible and acceptable nature-based activities

- Designed a template of training that can be adopted in other contexts nationally to achieve impactful and wider engagement

In relation to taking things forward, participants relayed the acceptability and positive impact of the training. In particular what was relayed a number of times by the nature champions was that they would take the learnings from the training and apply it to their own context. All the nature champions highlighted that they now felt more confident to organise outdoor activities for their community groups. In order for this to be achieved we conclude by sharing our knowledge gained from this project which includes: the importance of working directly with communities; engaging together in harnessing the enthusiasm for engaging with the natural environment, green and blue spaces; facilitating feelings of belonging; power with community; paying attention to sensitivities to languages and culture in any training provided; exploring culturally appropriate ways of transferring knowledge and experiences; and identifying ways of evaluating long-term impact.

... participants relayed the positive impact of the training.

Dissemination: A documentary of different participants and community leaders in the Nature Champions Training was commissioned by HEY Smile foundation and can be accessed through this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TcZ8Y_ERpaE





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