

Researching the Social Values of Urban Nature

A brief guide for individuals and community organisations

Introduction

Every patch of greenery or every tree in the urban environment has a story behind it. Who planted it or maintains it? How do different people feel about it? How do they use it or engage with it? By exploring the stories associated with elements of urban nature we can enrich our understanding of an area. Not only is this interesting, but it can also be empowering. An ability to demonstrate the social value of small patches of urban nature can help us make the case for preserving, maintaining, enhancing, or expanding the natural environment in the city.



These pages have been designed to offer guidance to individuals and groups seeking to uncover the stories associated with elements of urban nature and is aimed primarily at those with little experience of social research. It is not intended as a comprehensive guide to conducting the research, but as an indication of some approaches that are likely to work well. It is easy to find more detailed guidance on research methods online.

What is the purpose of the research?

Having your aims in mind from the outset will help keep your research focused. For example, are you looking for information to support funding applications? To show the value of existing projects? To give residents a better understanding of the social history of their area? Or something else?



Scope and planning

- Define the scope of the project. How will you limit the study? It may be helpful to focus on a geographical area and/or particular groups of people.
- Which aspects of urban nature will you focus on? Everything? Only 'public realm'? Only parks? Private gardens? Are you including fauna?
- Try to come up with at least one overarching research question. This can change as you progress, but it will help guide your research.
- Think about who will do the research. How will you divide up the work? How will you share your findings with each other?
- Make a research timetable including key milestones.



Access

If you are not already familiar with the area (or even if you are), a good way to begin getting to know people and to start developing a degree of trust is to go through community organisations. These include tenants and residents associations or local societies. You may find details from the council. Another excellent way of discovering and making contact with these organisations is through social media. Once these organisations know you, they can then vouch for you and facilitate your engagement with others.



Research methods

There are a wide variety of research methods you may use — these are just some useful suggestions.

Explore

Take a walk around the area — really look at and think about what nature is there. Even if you already know the area, you will be surprised what you notice when you look closely.

Walking interviews

The most valuable source of information will be speaking to people. One particularly effective approach is to ask residents to show you around the area. Walking interviews can trigger stories, memories, thoughts, and feelings. Tell your research participants what you are interested in, but don't be too restrictive — just ask them to tell you about the history of the nature in the area. It can be rewarding to share your own ideas too as it creates a more two-way conversation.

Participatory (or cognitive) mapping

This is a productive and fun research method. There is no set formula. You develop a set of instructions in advance and take people through the process of creating a map. This activity works best when you can get a group of people together sitting down at tables. Make your instructions as clear as possible, but not too restrictive. 'Pilot' your instructions with someone before taking it out to research participants. For example, you may distribute an outline map of the area, and then ask people to think about all the nature within this area and mark on the map features they like or dislike. You can be quite creative with what you ask people to do. Often, the most valuable information comes from discussing the maps afterwards.



Online Research

You can find a wealth of information online, including from the local council, websites of local organisations and community groups, Twitter feeds, and Facebook groups.



Making use of your findings

Give a tour

Organise and lead a tour for residents to tell them about the social history of local nature. Also, guiding people around who have little or no prior knowledge of the area is an excellent way of testing what you have learned. It allows you to see what you already know, and often their questions will alert you to things you still need to find out.



Create a map of the socially important nature in the area

There are many ways to do this, including making an interactive map on Google. Alternatively, you could print a map and annotate it by hand. Or even do the whole thing by hand! This can be a really accessible way of sharing what you have discovered.

Develop case studies

A powerful way of demonstrating the social importance of features of the natural environment is through developing concise, engaging stories or case studies, particularly when these are combined with quotes from your research participants.



This guide was developed by Dr Stephen McConnachie following a research project in South London as part of a placement with Social Life. The placement was funded by the Valuing Nature Programme and supported by the Institute for Global Prosperity at University College London.

You can find out about the research at <https://valuingnatureinwalworth.tumblr.com/>

July 2017