
Nature-based integration

The Role of Nature in integration for Lewis and Harris



Summary

This document summarises findings and presents recommendations related to nature-based integration and the role of publicly accessible spaces in nature both in the UK and, specifically, in Lewis and Harris. These findings stem from our 'Nature-Based Integration: connecting communities with/in nature' project, funded by the Nuffield Foundation and the British Academy. Our findings highlight key interventions that enable various stakeholders to harness the transformative, yet often untapped, power of nature to aid integration. This project explored how nature contributes to the integration of migrants and established local communities, utilizing a variety of participatory and reflective methods. These included analyzing participatory mapping surveys, conducting community aesthetic workshops and making reflexive observations of natural spaces. We provide further illustrations of these methods in this document.

Our project recognises the untapped potential for policy related to nature engagement to influence factors such as wellbeing, belonging and social cohesion in a migrant integration context (although our findings also further emphasise related evidence for the positive potential of nature engagement for many diverse intersections of society).

After summarising our research methodology, we present an overview of the natural environments that residents of Lewis and Harris that took part in our study said they feel connected to. We then summarise the findings our findings specifically for Lewis and Harris before we list our recommendations based on these. Finally, we present our UK-wide project findings and conclusions.

The recommendations in this document can be considered alongside those in our final report Nature-Based Integration: Connecting Communities with/in Nature, our Nature-Based Integration Toolkit and other resources listed at the end of this report, which apply to diverse geographical contexts.

Methodology

■ Participatory mapping survey

We employed participatory mapping¹ to gather insights into how the residents of Lewis and Harris engage with the natural environment. We engaged 76 residents in Lewis and Harris. Participants were asked to mark on a local map the places they felt most connected to and discuss their reasons, including details about their activities, transportation means, etc. Another mapping query focused on places they prefer to avoid, seeking explanations and listing any additional unvisited locations. The survey also gathered demographic information—such as country of birth, ethnic background, age, gender, and postcode—to discern patterns of usage linked to intersectional identities.

■ Community aesthetic workshops

In Lewis and Harris, we conducted four community workshops with diverse groups of residents, conducting

visual and sensory artistic activities to leverage collective experiences and explore the nuanced effects of nature on the lives of residents². Informal interviews and discussions complemented these sessions, with the materials generated during the workshops later co-analysed by the research team and Community Researchers through a sensory ethnographic lens, aligned with our Conceptual Framework. Workshop discussion transcripts were also coded and evaluated in line with Braun and Clarke's iterative steps to thematic analysis³.

■ Reflexive observations⁴

As part of our data collection in Blackburn, we also carried out ⁵ reflexive observations, which took place in different natural environments in Lewis and Harris. Both lead and community researchers participated, adopting distinct yet complementary perspectives. The findings of these reflexive observations are also factored into our analysis here.

What public nature spaces are mentioned in our survey of places that people feel connected to in Lewis and Harris?

Our participatory mapping survey asked respondents to select what area in nature they connect most to in the region. The locations highlighted as connections by participants in the mapping survey span almost the length and breadth of Lewis and Harris, as shown in Figure 1 by digital 'sprays' created by participatory mapping respondents in our survey.

1 Brown, G. & Kyttä, M. (2018). Key issues and priorities in participatory mapping: Toward integration or increased specialization? *Applied Geography*, 95, 1–8.

2 Pink, S. (2015). *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. Sage; Bal, M. & Hernández-Navarro, M. A. (2011) *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture: Conflict, Resistance, and Agency*. Brill; and Petersen, A. R. (2018), *Migration into Art: Transcultural identities and art-making in a globalised world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

3 Pink, S. (2015). *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. Sage; Bal, M. & Hernández-Navarro, M. A. (2011) *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture: Conflict, Resistance, and Agency*. Brill; and Petersen, A. R. (2018), *Migration into Art: Transcultural identities and art-making in a globalised world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

4 Reflexive observations involved sessions where the research team visited local natural places in our case studies reflecting on key questions around nature and integration.

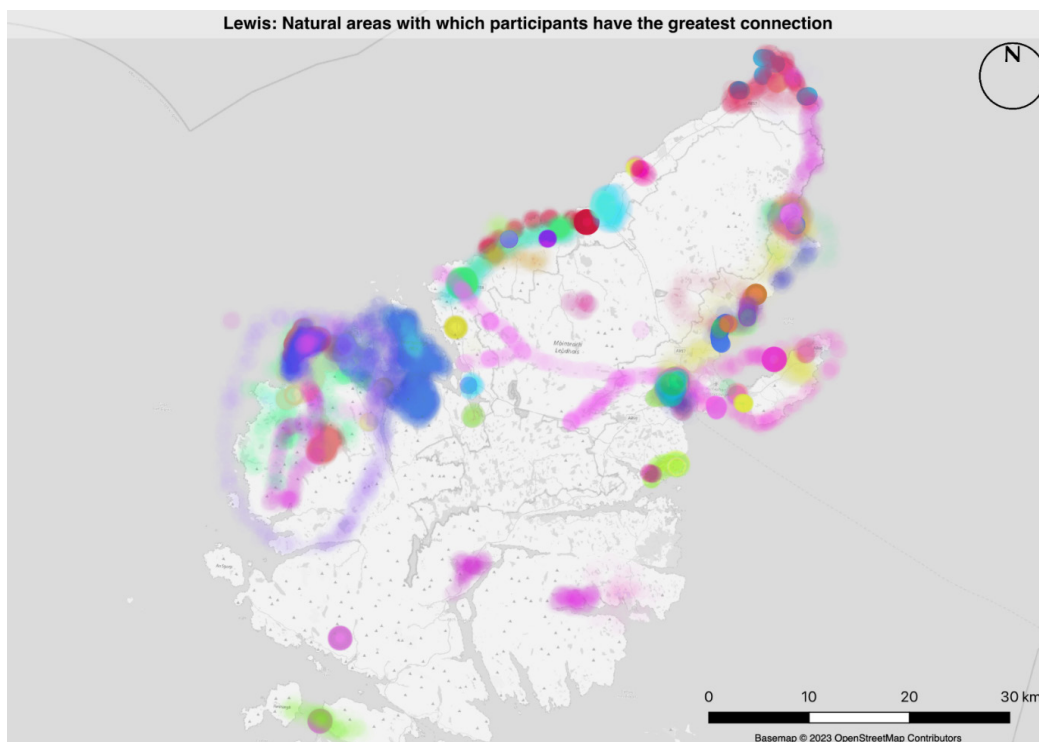


Figure 1: Different respondent 'sprays' represented by different colours. Every colour is a respondent.

In terms of a single location chosen, Lewis Castle and its grounds were the most popular, with 16 of 76 entries of positive connections by participants identifying this location as important. Different coastal areas including beaches were the most popular 'type' of environment chosen by participants, with Coll beach alone being chosen by five participants. This is perhaps owing to the dominance in Lewis and Harris of coasts and lochs across much of its mass. Ness, Uig and Vatisker beach were

examples of other coastal areas selected as important nature connections by multiple participants.

Notably, in the context of nature-based integration, the findings illustrate how Lewis and Harris' ubiquitous and diverse natural environment allows many people to find easily their 'own' place in nature to connect to and establish belonging.

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'Being on a not very built-up island, nature is so easily accessible in most places. Because every village is near the coast, people tend to think of the nearest green space as 'their' space – beach, machair, loch, etc. – and those are the spaces they use most. I think it's like a part of their home. Yes, there may be a garden around the house, but in the country, many people use the open spaces to either walk their dog, or they have sheep or cattle and working dogs. It's a strange mixture of being used for work as well as spare time. Sometimes the work is also the hobby.'

Reflexive observation of Eoropie play park and beach, 10th November 2023

What are the findings from our project on nature and integration in Lewis and Harris?

Below are summaries of our findings organised by the specific key themes that emerged through our wider research of nature-based integration in Lewis and Harris, along with commentary on the relevance of publicly accessible nature spaces to each theme.

1. Nature and physical and mental wellbeing

Health is a recognised means and marker in the Home Office's Indicators of Integration, with good health and wellbeing being foundational for one to engage in socialising, work, education and other activities.⁵ Our findings chart various physical and psychological impacts of engaging with nature in Lewis and Harris, including through walking, horticulture and water sport – and how this illustrates the important role that nature engagement plays in the realisation of integration outcomes as outlined in frameworks such as the Indicators of Integration. As is relevant to subsequent themes, participants across our three research methods, frequently cited the notion of 'escape' acquired by expanses of nature they connected to, which transported them away from daily stresses. With respect to integration, we did identify via our

participatory mapping survey that migrant people were less likely to report engaging with sport in their favoured nature locations. Our reflexive observations carried out in locations including Stornoway Castle grounds also raise the importance of combatting potential stigma felt by ethnically diverse people engaging with nature in public spaces.

2. Sensemaking and aesthetics

This theme links closely with wellbeing and relates to how the multisensory ways we interact with diverse natural environments enable us to establish meaningful connections with nature and place more broadly. Our data from Lewis and Harris draws on evidence of individuals and families interacting with wide open spaces to establish a feeling of 'escape' and find equilibrium in nature – which emerges as critically important to help people cope with a myriad of stresses in daily life. Aesthetic elements were highlighted as crucial, as this process of escape was associated strongly with inspiring and diverse settings that allowed people to feel closer to nature

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'So, uh, we um, I just like the space. We go hill walking a lot. It's great. You can walk out and you can be in a place where there is absolutely no sign of civilization, no roads, no people, no nothing. It's great space. That's what I like. Space. Yeah. A lot of space.'

Lewis and Harris, Aesthetic workshop participant

3. The relationship between social connections and nature engagement

Contemporary integration literature stresses the importance of social connections in processes associated with progress, belonging and social cohesion⁶. Our findings place strong emphasis on social connections, particularly with family, as a primary motivator for

engaging with nature, highlights the integral role of communal experiences in enhancing the enjoyment and benefits of nature engagement. Physical activity, notably walking, emerged as a significant aspect of these engagements, offering both health benefits and deeper connections with the natural surroundings.

5 Ndofor-Tah, C., Strang, A., Phillimore, J., Morrice, L., Michael, L., Wood, P., & Simmons, J. (2019) Indicators of integration framework 2019: third edition. [Online]. Accessible at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/835573/home-office-indicators-of-integration-framework-2019-horr109.pdf.

6 Alison B. Strang, Neil Quinn, Integration or Isolation? Refugees' Social Connections and Wellbeing, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Volume 34, Issue 1, March 2021, Pages 328–353, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fezo40>; and Käkälä E, Baillot H, Kerlaff L, Vera-Espinoza M. From Acts of Care to Practice-Based Resistance: Refugee-Sector Service Provision and Its Impact(s) on Integration. *Social Sciences*. 2023; 12(1):39.

4. Memory and heritage

Our findings support that nature engagement is intrinsically linked to memory generation and recollection, and connecting to one's heritage fulfils a central role in connecting them with an area. As we explore further below in the context of Belonging, Identity, and Authentic Connections with Nature, people's relationship with nature is key to establishing ties with place, and thus to the process of integration⁷.

Interestingly, aesthetic workshop participants who moved to Lewis and Harris from places with contrasting landscapes were able to relate their connection to

Lewis and Harris' natural environment to memories of their own. Heritage also arose as a strong theme from participatory mapping survey respondents explaining why they connected to certain areas. However, over a third of non-migrant mapping respondents drew this link to heritage while only one in fourteen migrant mapping respondents did so. This disparity was not so evident from our aesthetic workshop or reflexive observation experiences, however – perhaps as more creative activities and greater time afforded migrant individuals, for example, the chance to connect Lewis and Harris' natural environment with their own heritage.

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‘Does this nature support integration? I for instance feel like I connect with the smell rather than what I see. The smell of the forest brings me back to Italy and going picking mushrooms with my grandad. But what I see doesn't look familiar to me’

Reflexive observation of Stornoway Castle grounds, 31st August 2023

5. Belonging, identity and authentic connections with nature

While we state the importance of social connections in nature engagement, the findings emphasise the ways in which authentic connections with nature can uniquely influence personal identity and a sense of belonging in an area. We can associate this sense of belonging with literature demonstrating the importance of processes of place-attachment⁸. Thus, in these ways, our findings

illustrate that authentic connections with nature are important to integration.

Given certain circumstances, including those related to aesthetic diversity and accessibility, publicly accessible green and blue spaces provide ample opportunity to connect with nature. The significance of this concept of developing an authentic connection with nature is supported by numbers of participatory mapping respondents mentioning that they visit their favoured location sometimes or routinely alone (29 of 76 people).

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‘So to be outside and walking, um, it's good for our, our fitness, which is great for our sort of general health and wellbeing. We need to keep moving <laugh>. Um, so it's always gonna have a positive impact on our mental health as well. Fresh air space, openness, um, and even better if you can share it with family and friends for that sort of community. Um, which is just, yeah, just basic human simple needs really. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Um, um, it, it would be great to gain a knowledge and learn more from others about different species of birds and varieties of plants and flowers. Um, growing our own veg and herbs has a positive impact on our mental health and it's more nutritious. So, so just all in all, it is great for our, the more you can get of it, the better for our health.’

Lewis and Harris, Aesthetic workshop participant

⁷ Zisakou, A., Figgou, L., & Andreouli, E. (2024). Integration and urban citizenship: A social-psychological approach to refugee integration through active constructions of place attachment to the city. *Political Psychology*, 45, 215–233. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12919>.

⁸ Zisakou et al. *Ibid*.

6. Accessibility

Factors associated with accessibility, namely transport, were strongly associated with the process of forging meaningful and beneficial connections with nature. 44 of 76 mapping survey respondents stated they walked to their chosen location in which they felt connected to

nature; 36 of the respondents mentioned they always or sometimes travelled to these locations by car or other private motor vehicle; while 14 of the respondents chose bike or public transport (bus) as the common or only mode of transportation to their chosen area. These findings are shown in Figure 2, which one of our participatory maps created for Lewis and Harris.

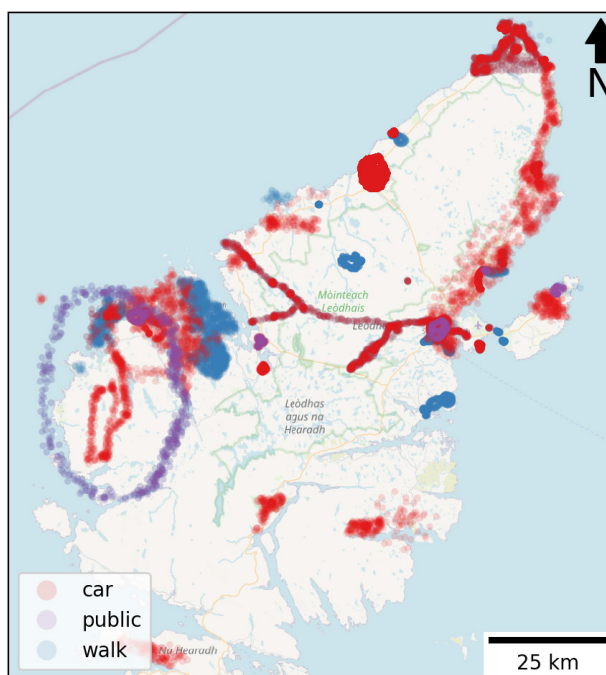


Figure 2: Participatory map showing favoured areas distinguished by mode of transportation

While this and other data across our mapping survey and aesthetic workshops pointed to the importance of proximity and general accessibility in supporting the building of meaningful connections with nature, it also emerged that transport was a barrier. For some without

a car, lack of public transport options over land and even water was mentioned as impeding their aspirations to build new connections with nature. This general transport barrier was more common among female- and migrant-identifying respondents in our mapping survey.

Recommendations

The research conducted in Lewis and Harris not only maps out the terrain of nature engagement but also charts a course for future initiatives aimed at breaking down barriers and making use of the environmental and social riches of the region. By doing so, the potential of natural spaces as catalysts for community cohesion, personal wellbeing, and ecological stewardship can be fully realized. The recommended interventions

below should be considered alongside the UK-wide recommendations available in our full report and our Nature-Based Integration Toolkit (see section Additional Resources). Underpinning these interventions should be an agile user-centred approach⁹ that prioritises consultation with and co-development of strategies alongside communities.

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/open-policy-making-toolkit/getting-started-with-open-policy-making> has more information on the merits and approaches inherent in agile policymaking.

■ Promoting Social Connections and Physical Activity

The strong emphasis on social connections, particularly with family, as a primary motivator for engaging with nature, highlights the integral role of communal experiences in enhancing the enjoyment and benefits of nature engagement. Physical activity, notably walking, emerged as a significant aspect of these engagements, offering both health benefits and deeper connections with the natural surroundings. Campaigns that advertise these benefits and efforts to improve infrastructure to aid activities will be impactful. These could take the form of public education campaigns, community group initiatives or physical signposting to encourage nature walks in Lewis and Harris. Our findings suggest such campaigns should especially be targeted at migrant groups who may be less likely to engage in certain sports in nature.

■ Tackling Transportation Challenges

Despite the inclination to access favoured natural locations on foot, a substantial number of individuals reported reliance on cars due to a perceived shortage of public or other private transport options. The barrier to accessing desired locations, particularly pronounced among female and migrant-identifying respondents in our participatory mapping survey, highlights a crucial area for policy intervention. Enhancing environmentally and financially sustainable transport options could

significantly improve access to natural spaces, ensuring that all community members can enjoy the benefits of nature engagement. Approaches should be in line with the diverse needs of Lewis and Harris residents.

■ Appreciation for Aesthetic Diversity and Tranquillity

Respondents in Lewis and Harris expressed a deep appreciation for the aesthetic diversity of natural sites and the tranquillity these settings provide, enabling individuals to escape daily stresses and find peace. This underscores the importance of preserving and promoting access to a variety of natural landscapes that offer both physical and psychological benefits.

■ Supporting Engagement Through Group Initiatives

The findings suggest that groups or initiatives employing social and artistic methods could play a vital role in fostering nature engagement among residents of Lewis and Harris. By facilitating personal connections to the natural world through heritage and shared experiences, these initiatives can enhance individuals' appreciation for and relationship with their natural environment. Involving groups at risk of additional barriers as identified in this study, such as women or migrant people more likely to face transport barriers, or migrant people less likely to engage in nature-based sports, could be particularly impactful.

UK-wide project findings

Nature-based integration fosters relationships between humans, nature, and culture in different time periods and locations. Our project found that nature has a beneficial effect on the integration of various communities, including migrants, non-migrants, people with migrant backgrounds, refugees, and asylum seekers. The project focused on nature's impact on health, well-being, identity, social connections, and accessibility, leading to the following key findings:

- **Health and Wellbeing:** Nature engagement was universally recognized for its physical and psychological benefits, with exercise and

horticulture mentioned as key activities enhancing physical health and offering psychological solace. Participants shared experiences of nature as a source of joy, motivation, and a means of escape from daily stresses.

- **Identity and Culture:** The natural environment played a crucial role in shaping participants' sense of identity and cultural integration, with nature acting as a common ground for diverse communities. Engaging with nature facilitated connections, creative expression, and a rediscovery

of cultural and personal heritage through memories and sensory experiences.

- **Social Connections:** Nature served as a vital arena for building social bonds, with its universal appeal bridging gaps between different community segments. The analysis underscored nature's role in fostering community cohesion and providing a space for meaningful interactions among residents with varied settlement histories.

Accessibility: Despite the recognized benefits, challenges in accessing nature were identified, particularly for certain demographics and geographies. Barriers included lifestyle constraints, socio-economic factors, and infrastructural limitations. The importance of inclusive, supportive infrastructures and programs to enhance nature accessibility was highlighted.

- **Nature and Sense of Belonging:** The discussions suggested that connecting with nature can aid in the adaptive phase of settling into a new area, fostering a sense of belonging. This connection needs to

be nurtured, akin to building social connections, highlighting nature's role in both personal and communal integration processes.

Aesthetic Workshops: The effectiveness of aesthetic workshops as a research and integration tool was affirmed, with their multisensory, creative approach enriching the data collection and providing a platform for intercultural exchange and learning about nature.

The findings indicate that connecting with nature can aid in the process of adapting to a new area and foster a sense of belonging. Nature connects us with ecosystems, ecologies, sociologies, geologies, and cosmologies beyond our immediate understanding. This connection needs to be nurtured, similar to building social connections, highlighting nature's role in both personal and communal integration processes. Therefore, by intertwining nature engagement with the Home Office Indicators of Integration, there is potential to foster more inclusive and cohesive communities.

Conclusion

Our research project findings showed that nature engagement impacts integration through its influence on wellbeing, sensemaking, social connections, memory and heritage, belonging and identity, and authentic connections with nature and place. Although our findings show that people connect to a very diverse range of types of natural environments, and that Lewis and Harris' unique geography lends itself to this, we can still place value on the importance of close-by and accessible public nature spaces which facilitate routine engagement and the opportunity to build meaningful social connections as well as authentic connections with nature that, as our findings demonstrate, can impact on integration outcomes.

Addressing accessibility means addressing transport infrastructure and park planning, as the findings suggest, which adversely impacted migrant and female people in our mapping survey sample. However, there are also social or intercultural processes to consider. While our data from Lewis and Harris evidences people with diverse backgrounds connecting with nature in their own ways, it raises issues such as lack of participation in sport in nature areas by people with a migrant background. Given the constructive and inspiring discussions between a diverse group of participants in our aesthetic workshops, we can identify the potential for further proliferation of intercultural projects that aim to capitalise on the exchange of heritages and traditions from different communities living in Lewis and Harris.

Additional Resources



Link to our project website



Link to report



Link to toolkit

Contact details

Azadeh Fatehrad



a.fatehrad@kingston.ac.uk

Davide Natalini



davide.natalini@aru.ac.uk