

From Stanage to the STAGE

Fiona Stubbs meets the Peak District walking group which inspired one of this year's most talked-about stage productions.

Three black ramblers stride out in some of the Peak District's harshest conditions, losing their way as the stories of their lives unfold...

Black Men Walking is one of the UK's theatre hits of the year, attracting rave reviews throughout a recent 14-week tour, while its themes of race and identity have been scrutinised by national media.

Its success has also thrust into the spotlight the real-life, Sheffield-based walking group which inspired the production.

The 100 Black Men Walking for Health group was launched in 2004 by journalist and academic Maxwell A. Ayamba and his friends, teacher Mark Hutchinson and college vice-principal Donald McLean.

"The walking group wasn't set up to send out a political message or to be a campaign," says Maxwell. "The ethos was simply to get middle aged black men walking. As youngsters, we're fairly active but in middle age we tend to become sedentary and all the stresses of life begin to take their toll.

“Walking helps to de-stress... whatever your background, health comes first”

"Black people genetically are tropical beings. Living in a temperate climate like the UK, our intake of Vitamin D from sunlight is very low, which can trigger all kinds of illnesses. Our genotype is also



Maxwell Ayamba and a group of walkers ready to set off on a hike.

susceptible to diabetes, high blood pressure and stroke, prostate cancer and other health issues.

"Walking is beneficial for both physical and mental health. When you walk, you talk...you share a lot. It helps you to de-stress. Without your health, you have nothing. Whatever your background, health comes first."

Maxwell was born in Ghana and has lived in Sheffield for 22 years. He studied journalism before gaining a Masters degree in Environment Management and



Maxwell Ayamba and walking group colleague Jenson Grant at Mam Tor.

Conservation for Leisure and Recreation at Sheffield Hallam University, where he has worked as an associate lecturer/research associate and is now an environmental consultant.

He was previously a member of a Peak District National Park Authority Equality & Diversity Comprehensive Committee and



Young walkers exploring the countryside.

Enjoying a trip to Whirlow Hall Farm organised by SEM.

Enjoying the bluebells!

was involved in setting up Mosaic, which encourages black and minority ethnic communities to explore and enjoy the countryside.

A former Ramblers UK board member, Maxwell is now projects co-ordinator of the charity Sheffield Environmental Movement (SEM), where he organises outdoor activities for people from Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic and Refugee (BAMER) communities.

"There's so much written in academia and policy documents about the lack of participation in the environment by minority groups," he says. "But policy alone doesn't bring about the desired change. To do that we need people with passion and commitment who are willing to change perceptions.

"Walking has to be promoted as an attractive hobby, a positive experience. As the message gets around, more people will become enthused and motivated. That's where the sea of change will begin."

Maxwell considers it especially important to encourage young people to experience the countryside. "When you give people the opportunity to have positive experiences, they are likely to form a habit to continue," he explains. "They begin to appreciate the eco-history of the countryside, its flora and fauna - and to develop a sense of belonging to the place. Then issues like inclusion, diversity and equality can begin to be addressed in a more systematic way."

He is keen, however, not to compartmentalise the involvement of ethnic groups in countryside matters. "I don't see colour, I see people," insists Maxwell. "As human beings we are part of nature - we are biocentric. If we see people as people it doesn't matter about race or class - and we'll have a better environment for everyone."

"I haven't experienced racism in the countryside. People are friendlier there - they say 'hello' when they pass. If you say hello to strangers in the city, people think you are weird! Nature is a platform to promote the one-ness of humanity."

“If we see people as people... we'll have a better environment for everyone”

Nevertheless, he concedes there are barriers for town and city-dwellers on low incomes to access the countryside. "The cost of outdoor clothing and pressures on public transport make it difficult for some," he says. "And, ideally, people should be able to walk at all times, in all weathers."

The Black Men Walking for Health group - which now also includes women and young people - heads out to the Peak District on the first Saturday of each month. As a result of the stage play - produced by Sheffield's Eclipse theatre company and written by Yorkshire-based rapper Testament - its numbers have recently been swelled by accompanying actors, theatre teams and media people.

"The play has attracted so much publicity nationwide, but we just hope it will serve as a vehicle to encourage more people to go walking into green spaces and the wider countryside," says Maxwell. "This will help to promote the health and wellbeing of people, regardless of race or background. The countryside is for all of us."

• ALL PICTURES COURTESY OF SEM.

Black Men Walking

Donald McLean

"For me, the walking group has been a fantastic source of companionship amidst the highs and lows of life. At first, we were like brothers. Now it's like a group of brothers and sisters.

"I was already reasonably fit, but the group has helped me to maintain an interest in staying fit. Walking is beneficial for both physical and mental well-being. Exploring the countryside triggers a slow release of feel-good endorphins - and their effects last well beyond the end of the walk."



Noida Darien-Campbell

"I was the first woman to join the group - my husband suggested I went along after he'd been on some of the walks and really enjoyed them. It's lovely to walk and chat, to learn about each others' work and different backgrounds.

"I've always loved the countryside and nature. I'm an artist and art therapist and the walks not only give me inspiration for my work but also clear my mind. They give me space to think and be creative."



Mark Hutchinson

"In my parents' generation, the people you bonded with were from your family or neighbourhood - but it's different in the UK.

"The walks are an opportunity for people of colour to come together, talk and share in a safe space. It's interesting how walking helps people of different generations to talk to each other in a way they don't do generally."

