

By Maxwell Ayamba

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Black men walking

Environmental journalist Maxwell Ayamba, co-founded the Black Men Walk for Health Group in Sheffield in 2004. As a new play inspired by the Group takes the stage at the Royal Court, he reflects on how why, 14 years on, Britain still has a diversity problem when it comes to the countryside.



1. The Black Men – and Women – Walk for Health Group meet on the first Saturday of the month.
2. The author, Maxwell Ayamba, Peak District National Park.
3. The author.
© Sheffield Environmental Movement (SEM).



I was born in rural Northern Ghana where our livelihoods were intrinsically linked to the natural environment for sustenance, health and wellbeing. Our concept of nature was not for conservation, leisure and recreation, as espoused in Western circles. Nature to us was biocentric not anthropogenic. We believed that we came from nature and to nature shall we return. We therefore lived our lives as if nature mattered.

I arrived in the UK in 1996 to study journalism at Cardiff University, and later completed an MSc in Environmental Management for Conservation, Leisure and Recreation at Sheffield Hallam University, as I looked to pursue a career that would reconnect me with my roots, with nature. This was a culture shock. Compared to where I came from, I found the environmental field in the UK to be all but white. Undeterred, in 2003, I co-set up a charity in Sheffield working to promote participation of people from ethnic minority communities in the natural environment.

Then, in 2004 two good friends of mine – Donald McLean and Mark Hutchinson – both African-Caribbean born in the UK, approached me with

the idea of setting up a walking group for middle-aged black men. We came up with a name ‘100 Black Men Walk for Health’ themed around the civil rights movement in the US, ‘A Million Man March’. We choose this name not to send out any political message, but because our vision is that one day we will have a 100 black men walking for health reasons. As I write, we have not yet achieved the 100 men mark; nonetheless we have more than 50 people and the UK has since evolved to include women and young people, and is now called the ‘Walk for Health Group’.

We often meet on the first Saturday of the month, usually at the first entrance of Endcliffe Park by Hunters Bar roundabout, having already decided where the next walk will take place. At times we go by public transport and other times we car share to ensure that those without the means are able to go on the walks. We have scaled Ben Nevis, Scafell, Kinder Scout, Mam Tor and many other spaces in the Peak District National Park, the Lake District and Yorkshire Dales National Park. One of the highlights of the group was joining the Ramblers in 2007 to re-enact the Mass Trespass at Kinder Scout for the BBC’s

Griff Rhys Jones documentary series ‘Mountain’. More recently, the group has been the inspiration for a national theatre production at the Royal Court directed by Eclipse Theatre called ‘Black Men Walking’.

Besides the health benefits, our motivations are to create an opportunity and a space for men to walk and talk, because there is a feeling among us that this hasn’t typically been the case. If you go back to our fathers’ generation here in the UK, they often led sedentary lives due to work and family commitments, which has led to a vicious circle of detachment from nature. Often they led very hard, physical lives, maybe working in factories, and didn’t always



have a chance to talk about their hopes, fears and dreams. So we want to have an opportunity to walk together and share that with people who would understand our lives. Through walking and talking you are able to express how you feel, your hopes and desires. There is also a fundamental feeling of becoming connected to a sense of place, because nature is the same everywhere and is not a prerogative of class, background or race.

So far we have completed more than 168 walks since the group started, with most of the walks taking place in the Peak District National Park – my favourite walking spot because it boasts beautiful ecology, scenery and breathtaking flora through the seasons. The diversity, character and ecological history of the Peak District to me makes it attractive to visit. The Dark Peak features the high moors covered with thick, dark peat; while the White Peak, so-called because of its 300-million-year-old history of limestone filled with fossilised corals and other seafloor creatures, includes rolling farmlands. The West Peak boasts moors, woods and pastoral valleys. It has more than 1,600 miles of public rights of way, footpaths, bridleways and tracks, and more than 200 square miles of open access land.

From my experience as a black man, the image of me walking in the countryside is not something that most white people seem to understand. Their perception is that we should be walking in the city – black people in British landscapes is not something that has yet come to light or been written about. However, I don't believe this should



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be the case. The health benefits associated with having contact with the natural world for mental, physical, emotional and psychological well-being is too important. Black people are, genetically, tropical beings, not temperate, and our genotype has made us more vulnerable to all kinds of health issues, especially a lack of Vitamin D, which is known to trigger all kinds of illnesses. Most people do not have money to go on holiday to warmer climates, so to me it is about getting people outdoors, walking to get Vitamin D from the sun and the fresh air that the countryside provides. The physical activity, social interaction and bonding with nature that comes with that is, I believe, a therapy for people's general wellbeing.

Over the past 20 years that I've been walking in the British countryside, I would say that I have seen a gradual change in the number of ethnic minority people visiting the countryside for walks. Nonetheless, the countryside remains a predominantly white middle-class domain, especially when it comes to marketing and publicity materials. You don't see black people in countryside jobs or occupations – there are no black role models in the countryside environment. If we are talking about

promoting equality and diversity, there is still a long way to go bring about the natural world for mental, physical, emotional and psychological well-being is too important.

Real change, I believe, will take a lot of commitment, passion and desire. There have been a number of articles, policy documents and academic research about issues of exclusion of ethnic minorities in the British countryside environment, but the people who have been written about don't have access to this information or the power to act on it. There is a lack of political will in terms of addressing diversity in the countryside – from my experience, it is all tokenism. If human health and wellbeing is said to be closely linked to access to nature, why shouldn't this be actively promoted to people in lower socio-economic groups where many of the health issues – especially, mental health – are the order of the day?

We of the Black Men Walk for Health Group feel that walking in the countryside is a vehicle to promote our wellbeing. We have demonstrated that the British countryside is open for everyone irrespective of class, race or gender. But our achievements highlight a gap, and that is the critical role that access to the countryside plays in addressing issues of health and wellbeing.

4. With friend, Jenson Grant, at Mam Tor in the Peak District National Park.
5. The Group has completed more than 168 walks since it started.
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2,000 online participants

The author plans to look into the impact of the EIAs once the projects have been delivered, as part of ongoing academic research into the subject of parks and equalities.

FEATURES

By Dr Bridget Snaith CMLI

Dr Bridget Snaith CMLI is a partner at Shape and senior lecturer in landscape architecture at the University of East London.

Equal by design

Dr Bridget Snaith CMLI explains how a formal Equalities Impact Assessment offers a rigorous approach to avoiding exclusion in parks and open spaces.

In 2017, I was part of The Croydon Destination Parks team led by Tyrens UK to develop masterplans for six parks on behalf of Croydon Council. The Council's ambition for the project was that the six parks should form a case study for its parks more widely: parks, Croydon said, should be central to neighbourhood wellbeing in the context of a rapidly growing population. At the same time, the project needed to identify new ways to generate funds and justify spending to ensure a sustainable future for the parks.

Carrying out an Equalities Impact Assessment to evaluate how decisions would impact equalities at every stage of the project – from baseline to masterplan – meant that we were always alive to the potential conflicts between pay-for-use facilities, revenue generation and cost reduction, and the overall goal of enhancing health and wellbeing benefits for Croydon's diverse community.

The Equality Act 2010 requires that when a new public policy or strategy is proposed, the potential impacts with regard to protected characteristics (established by the Act) are assessed. The impact assessment must inform the policy or strategy, so everyone benefits equally. For our Equalities Impact Assessment, we started by identifying findings from research on park use that was associated with each characteristic or combination of characteristics. These are the key issues we identified:

AGE

Safety is a key concern. Equality means ensuring that everyone can use the parks in confidence and that appropriate activity is provided across the spectrum of ages.

DISABILITY

Reducing accessibility barriers for mobility impairments, accessible play facilities, and accessible toilets are a starting point. Health and wellbeing can be enhanced across a range of long-term illness and impairment can be enhanced by providing opportunities for sociability, for quiet, and for activities like gardening, as well as physical exercise.

GENDER REASSIGNMENT, AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Research for both protected characteristics relates mainly to exclusion from park space through fear and harassment. Designs to promote confidence and safety are key.

PREGNANCY AND MATERNITY

Again – perceived safety, but also buggy accessible paths, toilets and baby-changing facilities.

RACE, RELIGION OR BELIEF

Proportionately more people of black and minority ethnicities (BME) are of low income in the UK, so ensuring income generation doesn't exclude low-income users could be an equalities issue under the Act. People of BME are underrepresented as park users, and as managers, designers, and friends of parks. Ensuring that views from all ethnicities were heard was crucial, as a dominant group preference might exclude a less-vocal section of the community.

Issues associated with religion include ensuring some dog control or dog-free space, and provision of changing facilities, or identifying more private outdoor spaces that can be booked for single-sex sessions.

SEX

Men's access to park space can be limited by social pressure if the primary function is perceived to be as a space for children. Women tend to be more fearful in park space than men. Again, ensuring spaces are designed to promote confidence and safety are important. Equitable sport provision, suitable changing space and opportunities for group bookings, including single-sex bookings, were all assessed.

Next, we talked to Croydon residents and stakeholders about the facilities and future funding options for all six parks. We conducted 900 face-to-face discussions in and around the parks, which achieved close to representative sampling based on census data at ward level, supplemented by the views of almost 2,000 online participants.

The engagement data provided direction to the team for our final masterplans; evidence in support of inclusive facilities including accessible surfaced paths and dog controls, even in country parks; and guided Croydon Council as to the likely reaction to different sustainable financing strategies. The actual impacts on park use can't be measured until implementation, but the Equalities Impact Assessment provides a benchmark and we'll be watching with interest.

The EIAs are contained within the masterplan for each park and are available online at: croydon.gov.uk/leisure/parksandopenspaces/ambitious-for-croydon's-parks/our-croydon-parks-vision