

FEATURES

By Maxwell Ayamba

Maxwell Ayamba is co-founder of the Black Men Walk for Health Group and is projects manager for the charity Sheffield Environmental Movement (SEM) semcharity.org.uk

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 Theatre, he reflects on why, 14 years on, Britain still has a diversity problem when it comes to the countryside.



1. The group has evolved to include women and young people, and is now called the Walk for Health Group, co-ordinated by the Sheffield Environmental Movement (SEM).
 2, 3. The author, Maxwell Ayamba, Peak District National Park.”
 © Sheffield Environmental Movement (SEM).



We therefore lived our lives as if nature mattered.

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, as, in contrast to my fellow-students at university, I found the UK environmental sector to be almost all white. Undeterred, in 2003, I was one of the founders of 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’ inspired by the US civil rights movement’s ‘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 100 black men walking for health reasons. As I write, we have not yet achieved this; nonetheless we have more than 50 people and the group has since evolved to include women and young people, and is now called the ‘Walk for Health Group’.

We meet on the first Saturday of the month, usually at the entrance to Endcliffe Park by Hunter’s Bar roundabout, having already decided where the next walk will take place. Sometimes we go by public transport and sometimes we car-share to ensure that those without their own transport are able to go on the walks. We have scaled Ben Nevis, Scafell, Kinder Scout and Mam Tor. We have visited many other spaces in the Peak District National Park, the Lake District and the 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’.

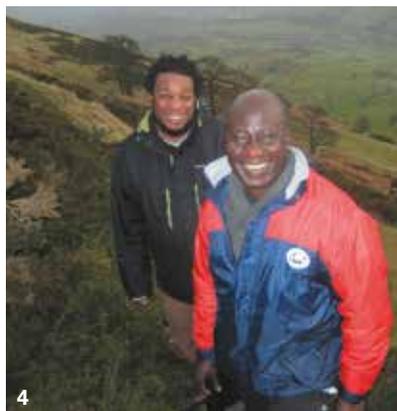
Besides the health benefits, our motivation is to create an opportunity and a space for men to walk and talk, because there is a feeling among us that this hasn’t typically been the case. If you go back to our fathers’ generation here in the UK, they often led sedentary lives due to work and family commitments, 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 any particular class, background or race.

So far we have completed around 170 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 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 history of limestone filled with fossilised corals and other seafloor creatures, includes rolling farmland. 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 the British countryside is not something that has yet come to light or been written about. However, I don't believe this should be the



4. The author with friend, Jenson Grant, at Mam Tor in the Peak District National Park.

5. Lady Cunnings Plantation on the Roman Trail. The Group has completed more than 168 walks since it started.

© Sheffield Environmental Movement (SEM).

case. The health benefits associated with having contact with the natural world for mental, physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing are also important. Black people are genetically suited to tropical, not temperate climates, 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 sunshine 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 positive change in the countryside.

Real change, I believe, will take a lot of commitment, passion and desire. There have been a number of articles, policy documents and pieces of 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.

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.