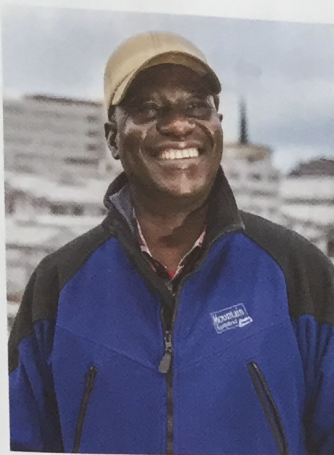


In 2015, I took a group of 22 black walkers up Ben Nevis. We hired guides to help us get to the summit and we went in May, hoping there would be no snow, but that was not the case! Visibility was so bad that a quarter of the way up, some of the group turned around. Halfway, another guide took seven more walkers back down, leaving a final seven to reach the top. We felt overwhelmed by the achievement. One of the mountain guides said it was the first time he'd seen so many black men on Ben Nevis at one time. It certainly seemed to be the first time that 23 black people had stayed in the youth hostel at Fort William. When we first went into the restaurant, all heads turned to look at us.

I came to Britain from rural northern Ghana in 1996 to study journalism. Back home, daily life was intrinsically bonded with nature. Walking was a necessity for travel and local livelihoods, like farming. In Britain it was a different ball game: much of the black community was urbanised and removed from the countryside.

I co-founded the Black Men Walk For Health Group in Sheffield in 2004, to encourage regular exercise. Black men tend to be active when younger, but in middle age they often become inactive, increasing health risks such as diabetes, high blood pressure and vitamin D deficiency. So we started walking on the first Saturday of every month, no matter how bad the weather.

Our original thinking was to create a men's group to encourage free and open conversation, without barriers. The banter on walks is excellent, and talking relieves stress and depression. You make new friends and learn new things from the life experience of others. Then three years ago,



## MY WALK OF LIFE

# MAXWELL AYAMBA

Inspiring black communities to discover Britain's countryside

INTERVIEW SUSAN GRAY



📍 Clockwise from top left: Maxwell in Sheffield; the group at Wasdale in the Lake District; a performance of the play *Black Men Walking*

a member came along with his wife. She said, 'How can it be only for men? I'm going to come on the walk!' We now have six women walkers and the group is 30 strong, and still growing.

When they join, walkers have different levels of physical fitness and stamina, so before taking on bigger challenges we normally do preparatory walks up Mam Tor and Kinder Scout

in the Peak District. As well as scaling Ben Nevis, 14 of us climbed Scafell Pike in 2017.

Recently, a theatre company put together a play inspired by our group, *Black Men Walking*, which has been touring the UK. It was written by the rapper Testament and is the story of three black men who go walking in the Peak District. It's about celebrating blackness,

Britishness and Yorkshire, which is pretty much what we do on our weekly walks.

People in the city are grumpy and angry, but when you go to the countryside, there's a sense of freedom: bonding with nature, bonding with other people. So the benefits are really obvious, but the difficulty is trying to engage with communities who, historically or traditionally, don't understand why they should go out walking in the countryside. We stress the health benefits, and also that walking is one of the best ways to see Britain.

We've set up other initiatives, like the Sheffield Environmental Movement and a health walk group for women aged 60 and over. We took them on the Five Weirs Walk in Sheffield, a local trail along the Don River. They'd never heard of it, even though they'd lived in the city all their lives, because no one had reached out to them.

I was the first black man to be a Ramblers trustee, from 2005 to 2009. It gave me the opportunity to understand the British countryside, and to see how the Ramblers promotes access and protects rights of way. I've also sat on various boards, including the Peak District National Park Equality Standard Audit Group. Some in the outdoor sector have goodwill, but others see minority groups solely as tourists. That's a shame.

You need black and minority ethnic role models and ambassadors in outdoor organisations, to act as champions and to encourage others to join. Otherwise, how can you expect change? Black people will simply think that the countryside is not their place. If any of what I have done encourages more minority people to care for Britain's countryside, that will be a wonderful thing.