

Engaging Urban Audiences with Protected Areas



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Summary:

Peri-urban Parks are a portal to connecting with nature for millions of people. However, the close proximity to urban areas can also bring problems, with large numbers of visitors having detrimental effects on fragile ecosystems. Despite these challenges, there are also wonderful opportunities to introduce new audiences to nature, and to inspire the next generations of conservationists.

This study presents case studies of two European National Parks: Duna-Ipoly Nemzeti Park, close to Budapest, and Loch Lomond National Park, close to Glasgow. In each case, I investigate the issues caused by large visitor numbers, and how each park is trying to tackle these through engagement. There is an especial focus on engaging young people and inspiring them about nature.

Many of the issues found are similar in the two parks, and each park has its own innovative solutions! I also compare these with my experiences working in the Peak District National Park, and present a “toolkit” of some engagement ideas.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, outdoor socialising and ‘staycations’ have brought even more new visitors to National Parks. Parks are being proactive in embracing these opportunities, rising to meet challenges of increasing pressure on the landscape. The pandemic has also created increased awareness of green wellbeing.

Our peri-urban parks will always be under pressure, but engagement work presents real opportunities to inspire future generations to protect them and to embrace nature.

INTRODUCTION

To give some context for my planned study visit, I would first like to give some more information about the protected area where I work. The Peak District National Park, situated in the North of England, is an area of beautiful and contrasting landscapes. The south of the park is rolling limestone country of meadows, rivers, valleys and caves, while the north is formed of wild, rocky moorland scenery. The beauty of this scenery attracts over 13 million visitors a year!

Part of the Peak District's popularity is due to the fact that around 20 million people live within one hour's journey of the park. The cities of Manchester, Sheffield, and Derby, as well as the greater urban areas that surround them, are all very close by. However, there are still many people in these cities who do not visit the park, or remain unaware of its existence. A recent study by the Campaign to Protect Rural England identified that "Britain's poorest people are being denied access to National parks", with lack of access to transport being a major factor. Low social mobility and cultural barriers are also responsible, particularly in inner city areas. Those who might benefit most from the physical and mental health benefits of visiting green spaces and National parks are not doing so. There are still many young people afflicted with the 'nature deficit' identified by Richard Louv.

I have seen this first-hand through my work with schools in the park. My own corner of the National park is on the rural-urban fringe of the Greater Manchester conurbation, from where the majority of our school visitors originate. For an awful lot of these young people, their visit is not only their first to a National Park, but their first to any kind of countryside. They are amazed to see trees, rivers, hills or hear birds sing. While it is fantastically rewarding to witness their awakening to these things, it also saddens us that none of them have visited before. For us, there are some key questions raised:

- 1) "How can we make the most of this "Eureka!" moment, to help young people create a more lasting connection to nature? What activities can help us achieve this?
- 2) How can we persuade these young people to return with their families?
- 2) How can we more proactively and effectively promote the National park (and the wider concept of the outdoors) within urban communities?

As well as encouraging visitors, we also face issues caused by urban visitors who are not particularly sympathetic to the special qualities of the landscape. Many from the nearby areas come to use the space, rather than engage with it. Problems of antisocial behaviour, litter, barbecues and arson are commonplace. This reached a low point in June 2018, when a terrible moorland fire raged across the North of the Park. It burned for three weeks, and damage to the moorland environment – a crucial nesting place for ground-nesting birds and mountain hares – is estimated to last for fifteen years. The cause of the fire was later discovered to be deliberate.

Reaching new audiences, who have either been unaware of the national park, or do not care about it, must be key to our work if we are to overcome these difficulties, and reach out to those disengaged from the natural environment. Over time, if we can educate these potential visitors not just to the existence of the National Park as a resource, but also the precious nature of it, we can hopefully inspire them to take better care of it and help preserve it for the future. I am interested in seeing how other parks engage their visitors about these issues and promote positive action.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the idea of green wellbeing has come increasingly to the forefront of the discussion. This is leading more and more people to seek time outdoors. In the words of John Muir, “thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilised people are beginning to see the mountains is going home, that wildness is a necessity”. This new influx of visitors can potentially introduce additional pressure, but is also a wonderful opportunity to embrace the benefits of connecting people with nature.

These areas provide the focus of this paper; to gather ideas and evidence, I undertook study visits to two European national parks of particular interest. More information on these protected areas follows on the next pages.



Contrasting Peak District landscapes: heather moorland and limestone dales.

DUNA-IPOLY NEMZETI PARK

Duna-Ipoly Nemzeti Park is a national park centred on the River Danube in the vicinity of Budapest, Hungary. As the park's website states, "The diversity of the area is unique in Hungary due to the fact that it is a meeting point of rivers, hills, and plain." ¹

A large part of the park consists of the limestone hills of the Pilis, Visegrád, and Börzsöny Hills. The limestone geology has created impressive crags, and rich grassland habitats for wildflowers and insects. Among these are many rare butterflies, glow-worms, and the Longhorn Beetle chosen as the park's emblem. There are also dense deciduous forests of beech and hornbeam covering the slopes of the hills. Below the ground, the cracks and fissures of the limestone have left impressive cave systems.

Also included as part of the protected area are a part of the Ipoly Valley between Hont and Balassagyarmat, an area of important wetland habitat, and parts of Szentendre Island in the Duna (Danube) river.

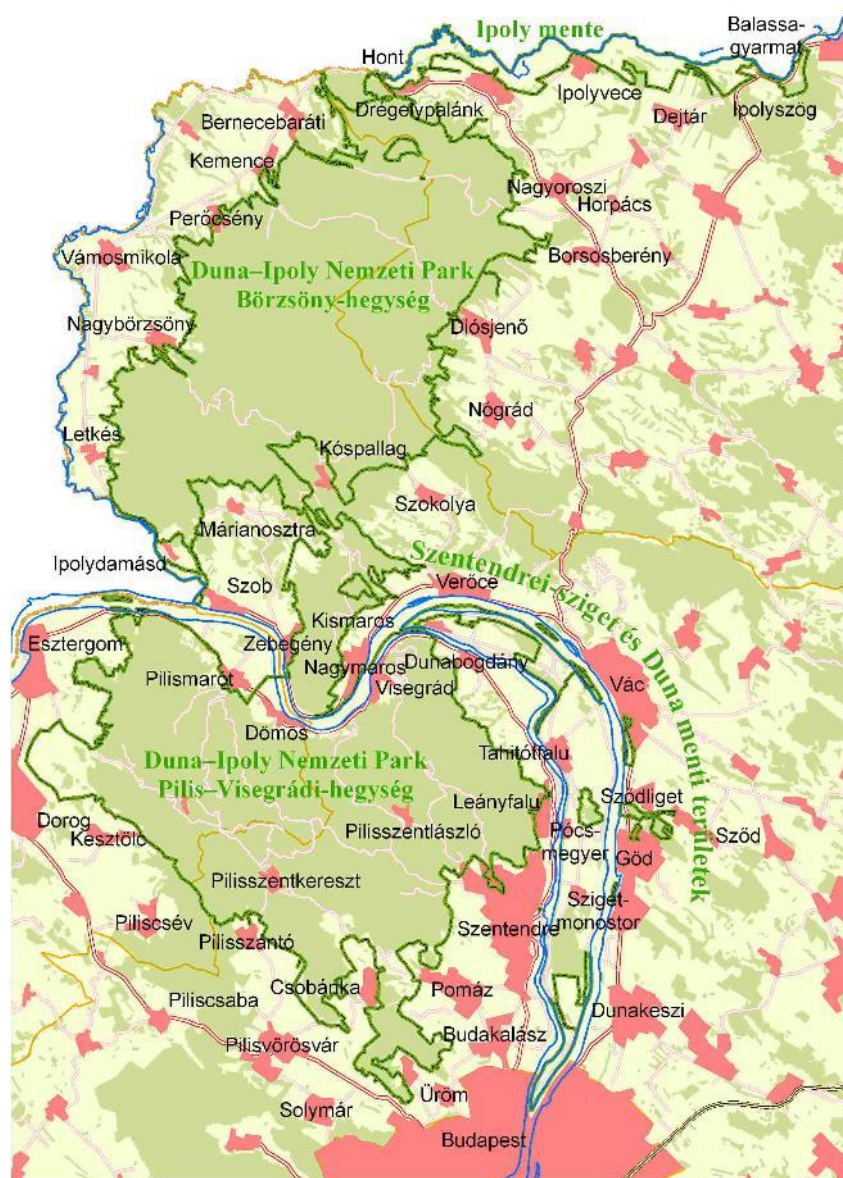
The park contains eight Protected Landscape Areas, and an additional thirty-three nature reserves; some of these are fragmented from the protected landscape, and even exist within the urban environment of Budapest. Examples include Sas Hegy NR and several cave systems within the city.

The park's administrative headquarters are situated in western Budapest, and they have several interpretation/visitor sites open to the public. The Jokai Garden, Sas Hegy nature reserve and Pál-völgyi cave are among the sites to be found within the city limits.

Budapest has an estimated population of 1.75 million, over an area of 203 square miles. This ensures that there is a ready supply of visitors to Duna-Ipoly! While the park hosts many visitors at its official sites, a great number more visit independently, and not always sensitively. The area around 'The Danube Bend' is a particular hotspot.

¹ [Duna-Ipoly Nemzeti Park about us \(dunaipoly.hu\)](http://dunaipoly.hu)

The park's priorities are defined on its website thus: "The most important duty of the Directorate is the planning and execution of maintenance of the protected areas, organisation of research, and asset management". To this end, there is a large team of rangers, focused on preservation, conservation and visitor management. However, the park also embraces the positive aspects of engagement, especially with younger visitors and families. As well as interpretation centres open to the public, education staff provide school visits, guided walks and activities. There is also a strong online presence through social media, which has been particularly effective throughout the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions.





Scenes from Duna-Ipoly Nemzeti Park. From top: the view to the Danube Bend; spring flowers like hollowroot, hellebores and pasque flowers are part of a rich limestone flora; the view from Sas Hegy nature reserve, showing the proximity of urban Budapest.

LOCH LOMOND & THE TROSSACHS NATIONAL PARK

Loch Lomond & The Trossachs is one of two national parks in Scotland. Like Duna-Ipoly, its protected status is relatively recent; it only became a National park in 2002. With an area of 1,865 km², it is the fourth largest of the U.K's national parks.

It is a beautiful landscape of mountains, lakes and forests. Loch Lomond is the largest and most popular lake in the park, but there are actually more than 20 other lochs here, including Loch Katrine. The park covers much of the Western part of the Southern highlands, and straddles the highland boundary fault line. This results in areas of contrasting geology; to the south are green, fertile valleys, and to the north the rugged Highland mountains.

The mountains are a key reason why visitors are attracted. Walkers and climbers flock to peaks like Ben Lomond, Ben Lui and the Arrochar Alps. For less ambitious hikers, 'mini mountains' like Ben A'an and Conic Hill still provide a challenge, and wonderful panoramic views across the lakes and forests.

The waters of the lochs themselves also provide entertainment. Boat trips on Loch Lomond and Loch Katrine's vintage steamboats are very popular; sailing and other water sports are also big attractions.

Other key tourist hotspots include pretty villages like Luss and Balmaha, the scenic West Highland Railway and the dramatic valley of Glen Erskine.

The park is just outside the Greater Glasgow conurbation, an area of 1.2 million people, with an additional 1.6 million in the surrounding region. This creates a ready audience of visitors. Thanks to its popularity in folklore and popular history, the area is a particular hotspot for international tourists and coach trips.

Balloch, at the southern end of the national park, is the entry point for most visitors from urban areas. There are frequent bus and rail services from here to central Glasgow.

The park's ambition, stated on its website, is to balance responsible visiting with helping the nature crisis and climate crisis. It does lots of work with young people and community groups. A dedicated Education & Inclusion officer helps to coordinate these opportunities, which are often delivered by the team of field rangers. Partnerships with other local organisations, like Forestry Scotland, Stirling Council and The John Muir Trust, are all important to help deliver joint objectives, and widen the reach of the park's work. There is

one national park visitor centre, at Balmaha, which provides information to visitors about the park's special qualities, and how to visit safely and responsibly.





Scenes from Loch Lomond & the Trossachs. From top: Millarochy Bay; view from Ben A'an to Loch Katrine; me at Inchchailloch; a Mountain ringlet butterfly.

STUDY VISIT PLANS.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was delayed in undertaking my study visits until the spring of 2022. I visited Duna-Ipoly Nemzeti Park from 8th – 15th April; my visit to Loch Lomond followed on June 8th - 14th.

In each park, my key aims were as follows:

- Meeting staff from each protected area, particularly staff whose roles are based around public engagement and education work. I intended to discuss with them the opportunities and challenges presented by being so close to urban areas.
- Observing school visits and events in each area, and gaining a broader overview of this work.
- Visiting interpretation centres and trails, to see how each protected area is presented to visitors. In particular, I wanted to see how care messages were conveyed, and how the natural world was presented in a fun and engaging way for young audiences.
- Taking part in tours organised by each park. I also took self-guided tours of key locations, to experience them as visitors from local areas would. Where possible, I took public transport; lack of a car can be a barrier to accessing green areas for audiences with low social mobility, so I wanted to see how easy this was. I also wanted to find out how easy it is to find out directions and travel information to the parks.

Additionally, I was interested in other green spaces in the surrounding urban areas. For many people, nature connection begins even closer to home, in their local parks or gardens. I wanted to find out if there were links between the protected areas and the more urban spaces. Was there interpretation about nature in the urban parks that might inspire people to connect and possibly venture further?

Questions I hoped to answer as a result of my visits were:

How can we deal with the problems associated with being so close to urban areas, and turn them into engagement opportunities?

How can we engage with those of low social mobility in urban areas?

How do we maximise the opportunities presented by school visits, and provide great nature connection activities?

Is transport an issue? How can those without cars access the park?

What kind of projects most engage visitors and young people, especially new audiences?

OUTCOMES & LEARNING POINTS FROM THE VISITS.

I feel that the outcomes from my visits were successful. Despite their very different locations, there was a lot of common ground between the three parks and there were lots of learning points. All parks shared some similar issues; they had noted large increases in visitor numbers during COVID, and environmental pressures resulted. All three parks are also tackling these issues through direct engagement; these variously encompassed school visits, guided tours, family events and online content. All had visitor centres open to the public as well.

Even in a short space of time, I was able to gain a good overview of each park's character and the focus of its work. I gained inspiration and some new ideas, especially from the fantastic education staff in each park. In this section of the report, I have attempted to break down the key themes of the visit, and summarise these for each park, comparing with The Peak District where possible:

1. VISITOR CHALLENGES
2. DIRECT ENGAGEMENT: SCHOOLS, YOUNG PEOPLE & FAMILIES
3. ENCOURAGING SELF-LED VISITS
4. ACCESSIBILITY & TRANSPORT

I. CHALLENGES PRESENTED BY URBAN VISITORS, AND SOME SOLUTIONS

In all three parks, visitors present challenges. This is heightened by a particularly large footfall from the nearby urban areas. Additionally, many of these visitors are not “countryside-minded”; while they appreciate the beauty of the parks as a place to escape the bustle of the city, they may not understand how fragile the landscape is, or what is appropriate behaviour while visiting.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath have seen a surge in these visitors, many of whom are taking the first steps to visiting green spaces. It is potentially a wonderful thing for the parks to have so many new visitors – they are new audiences to engage with and inspire for the future, after all – but many do require careful management and education. Below I have detailed some of these challenges, and also some of the ways the parks are tackling these. Creating environmental awareness and promoting positive behaviour change through education is a key tactic for many of the parks, so I have discussed this in more depth in the next sections. Here I focus purely on what we might call the “first line of defence” – messages conveyed through signage, visitor centres and social media.

All three parks had some overlap in the key challenges they faced from urban visitors. Wild camping is especially a problem in all three parks. More specifically, it is not usually the camping itself that presents the problem, but the associated things that come with it: wild fires, barbecues, human waste and littering.

It is important to distinguish between two types of campers, however. Many are actually responsible, with a deep love of the countryside. It is, after all, this that drives them to sleep out under the stars. The types of camper that cause concern are sometimes called “fly campers” in the U.K. These are people who camp disrespectfully, often as a one-off, leaving their litter (and often all their equipment) behind them. In the Peak District, this has sometimes been linked to a drug-fuelled rave culture, where urban visitors set up temporary, unofficial festival sites, and leave chaos behind when they leave.

There has also been a big rise in Bushcraft gimmickry in the U.K., which has seen lots of people taking up for wild camping, and especially, outdoor cooking. It should be noted that wild cooking is not restricted to campers. There are many day visitors who bring disposable barbecues or gas stoves to cook on. For some cultures, cooking outside is a large part of

family time, and their attempts to cook in protected areas are not borne through any malice at all, but simply a lack of understanding that it can be dangerous to do so.

An additional complication is that the legalities of camping are not the same in all countries; even within the U.K., they are different in Scotland and England!

In Hungary, the situation is different again. Camping is not allowed in most areas, but in forests, the Erdőtörvény forest act allows campers on foot to stay overnight, for a maximum of twenty four hours.

However, difficulties are found in the areas of the park within the city. Particularly at Sas Hegy nature reserve, a limestone hill isolated within areas of housing, wild camping and fires are often a problem. Although it is closed to the public, campers often climb the fence to access the land, and there have been a number of wild fires. Specific hotspots like this are great examples of where engaging with the local community can help to educate people about the risk of this (there is more on this in the following section).

In England, camping is unlawful without the landowner's permission. In Scotland, however, there is a right to roam and camp. With this in mind, Loch Lomond National Park perhaps has the trickiest job, trying to balance a legal right to camp with discouraging it from a fragile landscape. The solution has been to create designated camping and no camping areas; furthermore, permits are required to camp. There is clear signage around the national park to indicate this policy. There is a recognition that some of the most picturesque locations will be natural honeypots for campers, and so facilities have been provided in these areas to have some control over the flow of people.

The beautiful island of Inchchailloch, for instance, has a campsite bookable through the national park. This has a limited number of slots available, and composting toilets and dedicated fire pits are provided to prevent the problems of toileting and firefighting spreading to other parts of the island. There is also a ranger information point on the island, ensuring that wild campers are more likely to be connected to the special qualities of the place, and inspired to conserve it.



Messages about responsible camping are frequently shared on social media. Additionally, at the park's Balmaha visitor centre, which is close to many camping hotspots, a display shows good and bad ways to camp.



Displays in Balmaha visitor centre show the right and wrong ways to camp!

The issue of fighting wildfires is being tackled by more co-ordinated partnership working between organisations with similar interests. In the Peak District, dialogue with local supermarkets and shops has resulted in disposable barbecues being removed from sale. Pleasingly, this is something that has been picked up nationally following the 2022 heatwaves, with several supermarket chains banning their sale nationwide.

Other Outdoor Pursuits

Other outdoor pursuits bring more specific problems.

Swimming in Loch Lomond is particularly a problem. The bed of the lake shelves steeply away from the shore, creating very cold water and fast currents. In the Peak District, there are several reservoirs which are also cold and deep, where swimming is prohibited. In hot spells, there are surges in swimming activity.

Inexperienced swimmers, many of them young, get into difficulty and there are frequent accidents. While public swimming pools were closed during COVID restrictions, the problems have increased; during one weekend in 2021, there were a shocking six fatalities.

Again, signage is key to conveying messages. Importantly, these signs describe *why* swimming is not allowed, rather than just being faceless prohibition notices. A common feeling

between all three parks is that signage should not just be of the old-fashioned, prohibitive style (“NO ENTRY!” “NO SWIMMING” “NO CAMPING!”), but instead give an explanation, so that people do not feel they are being needlessly bossed around, and instead gain an understanding of why rules are in place.

However, signs can only go so far to getting messages across, and the park recognises direct engagement as being the most effective. To this end, the issue is also being tackled directly in Loch Lomond, with education sessions with local schools focused on water safety. In the Peak District, water safety is mentioned in related education programmes, and there is a partnership between the ranger team and water company to help manage this and share messages through social media.

In Duna-Ipoly, bigger problems are presented by rock climbing. The park directorate has pioneered a close working relationship with climbing groups, introducing a permit system for the most fragile areas. The Peak District is also a very popular climbing hotspot. No permits are required for climbing, but the park works closely with climbing groups to encourage responsible climbing.

Some of the crags, in areas such as Stanage Edge, are important nesting sites for birds such as Ring Ouzels, and climbers are encouraged to stay away from these areas during nesting seasons. Signs are also displayed to explain more about the birds.

Signs on key rock climbing/camping/hiking routes in Duna-Ipoly also alert visitors to the special qualities of nature. A very interesting idea has been used for these to make them somewhat different. Drawing on the theories of ecological economics, rare species are given a value in Forints, that is displayed on signs, eg “Each of these toads is worth 10,000 forints. Don’t damage their habitat!”. The idea is that visitors who are not particularly interested in nature – and especially urban visitors – can get an idea of just how precious even the most unglamorous creature is. In the words of a staff member, “every Hungarian can understand the value of money, so we apply it to creatures to help them understand how precious they are”.



Duna-Ipoly NP puts a value on rare species to help people understand how precious they are!

1.3 Visitor Congestion & parking problems

The popularity of the parks has led to traffic problems and inconsiderate parking in ‘hotspot’ areas of all parks. This was particularly heightened during times of travel restriction, when people were unable to use public transport. Now that these issues have eased, trying to coax people back to public transport is a major goal. Park and ride schemes, subsidised buses, and clear information about how to travel to protected areas can all help mitigate the tide of cars. Keeping messages about responsible parking on social media is also an effective avenue of communication.

The issues presented above are certainly not exclusive to these three national parks, but they are made much more severe by the high density of people visiting the parks, creating more potential for problems. However, we must not focus purely on the negative. There are many positive examples of parks promoting multi-agency teamwork solutions, and providing clear and innovative ways of communicating. Engaging and communicating directly with visitors is one of the best ways to achieve understanding of these issues; more broadly, if engagement can inspire a love of nature from an early age, it can make positive behaviour automatic and help to inspire the will to conserve protected areas. In the next section of this report, I will examine how all three parks are drawing on the urban audience as a fantastic resource for education.

2. DIRECT ENGAGEMENT: SCHOOL VISITS

All three parks have a focus on engaging directly with young people. This creates both formal and informal learning opportunities. Formal learning sessions are usually directly linked to school curriculums and objectives – for instance, a science focus on habitats, identifying species, or geographical characteristics of the area. Informal learning is usually more play-based, and is aimed at developing the whole child. It may include life skills, or simply activities connecting them with nature purely for the joy and well-being this brings.

Additionally, parks use these two kinds of learning to promote their own aims and objectives, as well as the special qualities of each park's landscape. This is a key way to get to the root cause of some of the issues and challenges we have already examined, and the three parks frequently include direct content about these in their education work. Engaging with young people directly gives the chance to shape their perceptions of the value of protected areas, and to explain care messages properly. Young people are frequently the most receptive to such messages, and will take them home to their parents. Research also suggests that peer pressure is a big influence on under 25s' perceptions of littering², so being able to successfully convey care messages to young people can offer benefits beyond the group of participants.

School and community groups are also a great way of reaching diverse groups, who may usually be harder-to-reach or less socially mobile. A school represents a slice through a community, and so enables us to engage with a wider demographic than visitors who already access the park. It is these groups who may have the most benefits from the new experience of visiting national parks. However, it may also be these less experienced demographics who need more contextual knowledge to help them access the countryside safely.

By inspiring young minds from all communities about nature in their environment, the national park education teams hope to create a future generation that will cherish nature, feel connected to special places and want to help protect them for the future. This should also help reduce negative impacts from visitors.

² [Peer-Power revealed as crucial factor in changing litter behaviour in under 25's \(politicshome.com\)](https://www.politicshome.com/peer-power-revealed-as-crucial-factor-in-changing-litter-behaviour-in-under-25s/)

Education Staff Structure for each park:

While all three parks have similar aims, they have very varied ways of achieving these. Partly, this is due to the fact that there are different staffing set ups in each park. In the Peak District, we have a team of four 'Learning & Discovery Rangers', who deliver education opportunities to all age groups. Two of these roles are focused on young people (under 25) while one of the other roles focuses on green wellbeing, and the other on engaging diverse audiences from hard-to-reach areas in nearby urban areas. Delivery of objectives is also helped by two assistant ranger posts, and a small number of casual staff. The team have three education centres, at Longdendale, Macclesfield Forest and Longshaw.

Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park has a smaller team of one overall Education ranger, and an assistant post. However, many of the park's field rangers are crucial to the delivery of education workshops, creating a larger team of staff for engaging. Additionally, there is a big focus on enabling schools and community groups to run self-led visits.

Duna-Ipoly has education staff at a number of centres, including Sas Hegy nature reserve and the Kirelety Forest House. These are supplemented by a number of staff who lead visits and tours. There is also a Communications manager who organises events and live streams on social media to help disseminate education opportunities.

2.1 Education ‘in the field’: At Nature reserves and dedicated sites.

An important part of all three parks’ education is providing experiences for young people in some of the most beautiful and special locations of the protected area. Taking learners straight to the heart of what makes our parks awe-inspiring can amaze and inspire them, opening up new experiences and potential to connect with nature. It is often special visits or school trips that stick in learners’ minds, even for years after the visit has taken place. With this in mind, these visits offer not just one day of engagement, but a doorway to a lifetime of interaction with the natural world. This is especially true for urban children, who may not have much access to green space in their day-to-day life.

In my own experience, I have seen children and young people have a “Eureka!” moment when they first step into a nature reserve or beautiful landscape. This moment of connection can be so valuable to building a relationship with nature, and starting to understand the need to treat it with respect. Staff at all three parks hold similar views, and creating these moments is an aim of all the teams, with the goal of it having longer benefits.

So, how do we engage with these young people in our spaces to create such moments, and inspire lasting connection?



Guided visit at Sas Hegy nature reserve, on the edge of Budapest

First of all, it’s a case of providing access to protected areas for school parties. There may initially be some nervousness about bringing in large groups to these areas, but with careful stewardship, the payback can be huge. In more sensitive areas, guided tours can be arranged,

such as at Sas Hegy nature reserve in Duna-Ipoly. The island of Inchchailloch is a very popular place for visits in Loch Lomond & the Trossachs NP; one of the education staff described to me vividly described how “being on an island” is a wonderfully exciting feeling of adventure that children never forget. One could argue that visiting isolated nature reserves within urban areas gives that feeling also – surrounded by the city while watching butterflies flit through almond blossom on the limestone hill of Sas Hegy, I had the feeling of being totally cut off from the rest of Budapest’s bustle.

Providing the means for immersive contact with nature like this is one of the most crucial aspects to providing education opportunities in these areas. This seems particularly effective when close contact with a living thing is enabled, so giving the children dedicated time and space to find creatures or plants for themselves and observe them carefully is a very effective method. The search for creatures becomes a kind of treasure hunt; if the creatures are seen as treasure, then already they have acquired a value in the learners’ minds. Viewing them close up enables us to appreciate their special qualities and often amazing adaptations – it is then much easier to convey the importance of conserving them.

A particularly great way of viewing creatures close up has been innovated by Duna-Ipoly. Their ‘Dunavirág Visibusz’ is a mobile pond-dipping van, with a large visualiser screen inside, enabling the creatures to be magnified and displayed for everyone to see. There is also a large dichotomous key displayed on the side of the van to help with identifying the different species. Children can even wear labcoats, making the idea of being a scientist studying these small creatures very exciting!



Above: the Dunavirág Visibusz – a mobile pond dipping and water quality laboratory! (photo from dinpi.hu website)

For younger children, the more charismatic creatures can be made into characters. Duna-Ipoly park has created a mascot from their Longhorn Beetle logo. This charming cartoon character appears on educational information and display boards around nature reserves like Sas Hegy. There is even a puppet version that staff use in storytelling and in conveying information about the creatures to children.

For older children, the more scientific side of nature provides us with opportunities to engage school curriculums. In the Peak District, we run ecology workshops based on limestone and moorland habitats; the MICCI (Moorland Indicators of Climate Change Initiative) scheme has run in both the Peak District and Loch Lomond for several years, enabling children to examine upland habitats, and learn about their potential as a weapon against climate change.



Creating characters out of species found in our national parks is a good way to engage young audiences; this is a longhorn beetle at Sas Hegy, Duna-Ipoly NP.

Schools often need to have a link to their curriculum in order to justify a visit to a nature reserve, so there are plenty of science learning points from minibeast or plant hunts.³ However, it is important to remember that not all children are scientifically minded, and there are other engagement techniques to be had from activities such as these. Drawing on Howard Gardner's theories of Multiple Intelligences, we should consider multi-disciplinary

³ *In England, particularly, the curriculum is restrictive, and in the Peak District we often have to justify our visits to connect with the curriculum. In Scotland, there is more freedom, so Loch Lomond NP can be more broad in the visits it offers.*

approaches to connecting with nature, to engage a wider variety of learners: music, art, storytelling, physical activity, for instance.

Artwork or stories inspired by the creatures or plants can be particularly effective techniques to convey the special beauty of the natural world. In the Peak District, we have recently worked with artists from a project called GuideLine to create new and artistic ways of seeing nature. Examples have included making mini moss terrariums, and using lumenography techniques to present nature in new ways.

At a wider scale, landscape art can also be a great way to help people connect with natural beauty. While the thought of drawing can be off-putting to those who don't see themselves as artistic, the Loch Lomond team have created a novel way of enabling the activity. Each participant is given a small frame, which they then use to pick their personal favourite view of the scenery. A sheet of acetate is then fixed to the frame, enabling the artist to simply draw over the lines they see, rather than creating a picture from scratch.



Above: creating natural art is another way of interacting with nature

A sense of playfulness is important to letting learners find their own ways to connect with nature. All three national parks draw on some activities inspired by the Forest School style of learning, especially in wooded areas. Activities based around the senses can be particularly good here; one example is an activity sometimes known as “Meet a Tree”, where participants wear blindfolds, and are guided to a tree. There, they must get to know it very well, by feeling it up and down, wrapping their arms around it and describing. When the blindfold is removed, can they find their tree again using the same senses?

More loosely, free play with mud and sticks can be a really effective way for young people (of all ages!) to connect with nature. While we might tend to think of this as more suitable for pre-school learners, older children and young adults still enjoy these kind of activities and gain great connection from them: it's just that they're not often given a chance. In U.K. national parks, the recent 'Generation Green' project has linked up with the Youth Hostel Association and other bodies to provide residential in the countryside for urban teenagers. Part of this has been to build in nature play and connection activities, such as den building and hammocking. One young person spoke of their hammocking experience: "I could forget all my worries and just hear the sound of the birds. I felt so relaxed I could fall asleep!". This sense of peace in nature, particularly for teenagers who have the stress of exams, and especially coming out of the COVID pandemic, is certainly something to capitalise on. In the Peak District, we have recently been running green well-being sessions for older people which use similar activities – forest school for adults, if you will – and these prove that the same techniques are effective with people of all ages.

Building space within our educational programmes for learners to explore and find their own connections to nature is very important. It's tempting to fill the days with activities and information, but for the deepest connections we must allow learners to have their own special moments.

Loch Lomond staff spoke of creating space in all their ranger-led sessions for children to do just this. It's also a key feature of programmes in the Peak District. One way of doing this encourages children to spread out and each find a "Magic spot" – a place where they can sit quietly and enjoy only the sights and sounds of nature for a moment. For urban audiences used to constant noise and bustle, this can be a really eye-opening moment. On a personal level, I will never forget the time I was with a group doing this activity when a herd of deer suddenly appeared and trotted right in front of us. The silent astonishment on the young people's faces was a wonderful moment that I am sure many of them will always remember. We can't plan such moments, but we can allow space in our visits for them to happen. As John Muir said, "every encounter with nature delivers more than one expects".

With moments of stimulation like these, we hope that young people will begin to care more deeply about the natural world, and want to look after it. However, we can also use our education sessions to more directly help the environment and tackle some of the care messages discussed earlier.

In all three national parks, incorporating key messages about protecting nature and promoting positive behaviour are key. Loch Lomond NP runs water safety workshops as part of their visits, telling children the risks of cold water swimming, but also showing them how to use throwlines and life rings. In the Peak District, we have run workshops on rural crime (for older children) and wildfires.

As well as tackling negative issues, promoting positive action through conservation jobs is an important part of education. In the UK, the Generation Green project has recently had a big focus on this for teenagers and young adults. In Loch Lomond NP, I took part in a session where students removed the invasive plant Himalayan Balsam from a local nature reserve. Other sessions included tree planting. Photos and reflections from the children were collected and displayed in the park's Balmaha visitor centre, creating pride in their actions, sharing the work and helping to inspire other visitors. The children's work also counted towards their John Muir award, and working with the John Muir trust helped enable schools to take part.



Above: In Loch Lomond's Balmaha visitor centre, practical conservation work done by school groups, including photos and children's work, is publicised to heighten awareness and inspire others

2.2 EVENTS & FAMILY ACTIVITIES

As well as direct school visits, all three parks run open events. These work especially well when situated next to main visitor attractions. Duna-Ipoly has run “Bio Blitz” events at the Tokai Garden, and a large fair to celebrate Earth Day situated in the green space next to the Pál-Volgyi caves. The fact that there are already visitors at these attractions means that there is a guaranteed footfall, and the chance to provide a deeper connection with nature to the visitors already in place. The Peak District has run similar events, particularly at its Castleton visitor centre, a major tourist hotspot.

As well as these drop-in events, there are planned events such as “Nature Tots” sessions for young children and their families, as well as seasonal activities like bat walks. These events have the advantage of engaging not just school children, but whole families including parents. Older children are also engaged as part of the Junior Rangers scheme.

The examples above are just a snapshot of the work that all three parks are doing to engage young audiences in their protected areas. They represent some wonderful ways of creating “Eureka!” moments for young people connecting with nature and promoting positive behaviour. However, making sure that these benefits are more long lived can necessitate carrying on the work outside the boundaries of the protected area, as well as promoting self-led visits in the future.

2.3 Connection to Nature begins at Home: outreach education in young people's home areas.

“The most often mentioned places and experiences of urban nature were ‘everyday’, not often special or spectacular: trees in parks and on streets; well-kept parks; green pathways; views across the city; skies, sunrises and sunsets; animals (city farms, dog walking) and wildlife; water (natural and designed water features); the wilder edges of the city; open spaces to be active; seats and benches outdoors.” IWUN report, 2019

While our key goal is of course to engage audiences with our protected areas, and inspire them to protect them, it does not mean our work should be restricted to within our boundaries. Sometimes, the basis of great relationships with protected areas can be formed within cities.

Some urban audiences may be completely disconnected from nature. Others may connect with it on a local level, in parks or gardens, but be unaware of the protected areas close by. Some groups may see these areas as “not for them”. Rural areas tend to be less demographically diverse, and this can be off-putting for those from under-represented groups, particularly when they see themselves as “not welcome”.

The prospect of big landscapes, full of mountains, caves and forests, can initially be quite intimidating for people not used to it! To first connect them with nature on a more manageable level has proven to be a rewarding strategy, that then encourages them to build towards a visit to a National park or protected area.

The three parks have a three-fold approach to removing barriers

- 1) Providing nature connection and engagement opportunities in local areas
- 2) Enabling self-led visits for schools and groups
- 3) Making sure that information is available when visitors arrive, through apps, visitor centres and information boards.

To this end, local green spaces, such as parks and school grounds, can be helpful resources. They can create what are sometimes known as “Zones of Proximal Development” (ZPDs) or, if you like, ‘stepping stones’ to move people gently from their normality to new experiences.

Working in these ZPDs, we can plant the seeds of nature connection. Then, as next steps we can hopefully inspire visitors to visit our protected areas for themselves, but also equip them with the tools to visit responsibly. Being proactive in this way can help remove some of the issues we have already discussed, and remove the velvet curtain that exists between protected areas and cities.

In terms of interaction with urban areas, the different parks find themselves in slightly different contexts. Duna-Ipoly NP has the advantage of owning land within the city limits, which in theory makes it easier for it to engage with urban audiences. Sas Hegy, for instance, is ideally placed to make links with local schools and offer them free visits. This is a great opportunity to relay care messages to local communities about this fragile environment and the importance of not trespassing or starting fires. The Pal Volgyi caves are also within the city, and can help connect local communities with their fascinating geology. These places can then serve as a stepping stone, inspiring visitors to explore the wider national park beyond Budapest.

The Peak District and Loch Lomond NPs have some overlap on their boundaries with the surrounding urban areas, but there is a physical distance, albeit a small one, between the parks and the majority of the urban population.

This distance can be a barrier to both park staff and potential visitors, but it is important that we reach across this barrier to promote better working and understanding between parks and people.

All three parks are working closely with schools and community groups within the urban areas. Physically reaching out into the communities is one important way of achieving this. The Dunavirág Visibusz water lab is a particularly innovative solution; this mobile water ecology lab takes staff and their equipment to a variety of locations in and out of the national park boundary. The pond-dipping activities take place in local waters, and feed into an analysis of water quality; the fact that local waters are connected to the river Danube can help connect local people and their environmental issues with the larger scale, and the National park.

A recent project in the Peak District was “Play Wild”, which ran in partnership with Derbyshire Wildlife Trust. This created pairs of visits for groups – one in their local urban area, and then one taking them slightly more out of their comfort zone to explore the

National Park. In Loch Lomond, Balloch Country Park provides an ideal stepping stone from urban area to the wilder national park landscape. Although it has the comfortable feel of an urban park, it reaches right down to the shores of Loch Lomond, with great views of the mountain landscape beyond. It is a great spot for much of the National Park's education work.

However, the limits on staffing and time mean that it is not always possible to engage directly with as many people as we would like to, especially through outreach. Digital Reach is of course a help, and all three parks have produced online content and live streams in recent years. This was particularly a useful avenue during lockdowns and restrictions. However, a way of reaching an even wider audience is by enabling groups to make self-led visits; by giving them support and resources, we can ensure that they gain benefits of visiting our national parks, but also know how to do so in a safe, sustainable way that does not cause environmental damage.

3. ENABLING SELF-LED VISITS

We may find ourselves asking the question, “but do we really want to be encouraging more visitors, given all the issues they can cause?”. However, this is precisely why protected areas should be providing support and materials for groups to visit. If we are able to convey our messages before the groups visit, then we can hopefully remove many of the visitor issues at the source, and encourage sustainable visiting. I believe we also have a duty to make the opportunity of visiting our spaces open to all, and should be attempting to remove barriers for less socially mobile groups.

Key to successfully enabling visitors to come is creating “Intelligent Clients”. In this model, key champions are found within urban communities, and are then given training to help lead and inspire others to visit the park. Essentially, this means creating a pool of informed people who will be armed with knowledge, and be briefed in our values. They can then act as spokespeople for the park out in the community, spreading the word of our special qualities and values. This model is something at all parks are working towards at different levels, from working with interest groups (eg. the rock climbing groups in Duna-Ipoly), to enabling teachers to lead their own school trips, and expedition leaders to camp safely and responsibly.

In the U.K., visitors who have traditionally been less represented as national park visitors include economically disadvantaged, BAME and refugee communities. Trying to engage with these groups, and break down barriers that stop them from engaging with nature, is key. As we have seen, one way is to engage with them closer to home; but enabling them to access our protected areas is the key goal. By creating champions within their communities, we can hopefully enable this. Creating funding opportunities to remove cost barriers is also very important. Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park has been pioneering this with an Educational Travel grant. The travel grant can cover up to 75% of a group’s travel costs. They have also sought funding opportunities to enable other groups to come, such as refugee groups. This has been a particularly valuable piece of work, with funding available to enable camping trips in the park for these groups. Groups such as these, who have had difficult experiences in life, can really benefit from access to green spaces.

Working in partnership with schools and giving them the tools to learn about, visit and enjoy our parks is also a very important way to create ‘champions’. Skilling up teachers with knowledge about our protected areas and how to visit can be a very effective tool to

encourage wider learning and responsible visiting. Running teacher training workshops is something that The Peak District and Loch Lomond national parks have both been trialling.

One of the big demands on the landscape is secondary school (13-18 year old children) groups wanting to access the area for carrying out geography and biology fieldwork. In the Peak District, we do offer direct engagement sessions covering these areas, but our capacity is limited and so many groups come independently. This can present issues with litter and congestion at particularly popular sites. In Loch Lomond, there are similar demands to use the landscape for fieldwork. Providing information on the website for these groups on where and how to conduct their fieldwork, as well as providing training opportunities and seminars, are beginning to help tackle these issues and create positive opportunities.

Creating a particularly close relationships with particular schools can make connecting with nature (and our protected areas) an integral part of their everyday curriculum. In Loch Lomond, rangers have worked closely with schools to form in-class Junior Ranger groups. These groups are able to learn lots about the park, and help with practical conservation work. In the Peak District, we are currently launching an 'Ambassador schools' programme; this two-way partnership involves schools incorporating the national park and its values into their curricular learning. In return, they receive support from our education staff, access to online resources as well as travel bursaries and discounts for using our paid services.

Another partnership in UK national parks, with the John Muir Trust, encourages schools and groups to take part in the John Muir award, and helps to provide a framework for their visit.

Though less formal than schools, families and day trippers can be considered self-led visitors. Can they find the specific information they require as well? Information about attractions, toilet facilities, campsites and cafes, as well as specifically about the natural environment is all very important to ensure they have successful, enriching visits.

Visitor centres at key locations are a key asset. As well as providing useful visitor information, staff and displays at these places can really inspire. The creative, colourful and informative displays at Sas Hegy nature reserve are great examples; they are both great fun for children and scientific! They are tactile, multi-sensory and interactive; in this way, visitors really *want* to learn more and connect with nature. Nature themed play areas can add to the fun, too!

Souvenirs to take home are also available from the Sas Hegy visitor centre, including nature-themed playing cards based around species found in the National Park. It's a great idea to incorporate nature into games in this way, so visitors can take a reminder of the special qualities home with them, and continue to embed nature in their play and learning.

4. ACCESSIBILITY & INFORMATION FOR VISITORS

It is important to remember that, for many potential visitors, access to transport can be a key barrier to inclusion. Even if we are giving people the ideas and skills to visit our areas, are they actually able to do so? Economically disadvantaged groups may not have cars, and so have to rely on walking or public transport. While the provision of educational travel grants is a big help to groups, removing barriers for individuals and families is also important if they are to engage with our protected areas.

Access to public transport is very important in this respect, and also has the benefit of reducing car congestion. Furthermore, it is even more important that these services are publicised so that they are accessed and actually used!

In the Peak District, this is something that we have been working on recently; the National Park Authority has helped fund a “Hope Valley Explorer” bus, that connects some of the key hotspots with the local urban areas of Sheffield and Chesterfield. Leaflets are also available that publicise the service.

Partnerships with the Hope Valley (Manchester – Sheffield) railway line have also been developed. In my own area, I am trying to launch a project to work with schools along the Glossop & Hadfield Railway Line, working with schools to visit by public transport.

When visitors arrive by public transport, it is important that they can find information for their onward journey – whether this is walking, or visiting attractions. As well as signposts and directions, availability of interpretation and information is key. This makes sure that visitors do not only know where they are going, but can learn more about our protected areas and connect with our values.



In Loch Lomond, the railway line to Balloch is a key point to access the park. A thirty minute train service runs here from central Glasgow, passing through many of the city’s suburbs. Loch Lomond NP have realised the value of engaging with this influx of visitors. There is clear signage leading from the station to the main popular tourist route beside Loch

Lomond. Additionally, the old station building is used as a tourist information centre (not run by the national park), providing information about attractions and further transport in the area. While the park itself no longer has a visitor centre here, it makes its presence felt in very clear and effective interpretation boards. These “Welcome to Balloch” boards are large, double-sided constructions in prominent locations near to the railway station, bus station and car parks. Many of the day visitors coming may not initially get further than Balloch on their visit to the National park, so local information is the focus of one side of each board, but the other side has information about the national park as a whole. This hopefully gives them a better context and understanding of the landscape, and may inspire them to visit other areas next time.



The Balmaha visitor centre is situated right next to the bus stop in the village. As well as displays and information boards, there are volunteers with information and maps about key hiking routes and attractions. To remove the barrier of having to buy expensive guidebooks, there are free maps available, and visitors are encouraged to take photographs to save paper.

In Duna-Ipoly, information about Sas Hegy visitor centre and the Pál-völgyi caves are displayed at nearby bus and tram stops, along with information on which services to use to get there. This is a great way of not just informing intending visitors, but also catching the eye of people not currently aware of the park, potentially inspiring them to visit in the future.

One of the best innovations of Duna-Ipoly is their National Park app. This contains maps and routes for key hiking trails to hotspots – with this focus attracting a wide range of users, especially more casual visitors who may be taking their first steps to discover the national park. However, the app makes the most of this opportunity to engage visitors with nature, including information about the species they may see on their walk, about how the fragile habitats can be protected, and how to visit responsibly.

Although the app would benefit from including a wider range of locations, the principle is a really good one that gives visitors the information they need, while inspiring them to learn more and care about the environment. The hike I used the app for, near Esztergom, was

very enjoyable and made more so by the information presented by the app. Introducing similar apps in other national parks could be a really good way of engaging with the large visitor numbers.



Screenshots of Duna-Ipoly's official app

Loch Lomond National Park is currently piloting its own app, a project that will make using public transport from urban areas to the park a lot easier. This is potentially a really useful tool for urban audiences that can help the park seem more accessible.

Before finishing the subject of accessibility, it is worth considering the importance of language communication. Urban groups often have a wide variety of cultures, backgrounds and languages. Are we catering for those who do not share our first language? Multi-language information can be very useful. On guided tours at Pal-Volgyi caves and Sas Hegy, different language guides were available as well as those in Native Hungarian. This made the experience much more valuable for me when joining in on tours, and made me consider if we could be doing more of this in U.K. national parks.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

My findings above are inevitably just a snapshot of some of the issues, opportunities and challenges for these three national parks. With a qualitative, observation and conversation based approach to research, I do not pretend to be offering a comprehensive overview of all the issues, opportunities and strategies in each park.

In particular, there were some limitations that impacted my study.

Obviously the COVID pandemic has had a huge impact on several aspects of the study: the national parks themselves, on travel, and on how events and activities may be run. In particular, it did alter and limit my plans somewhat, as it became harder to plan with travel restrictions. I am very grateful that I was able to make the trips at all, but given restrictions and a compressed time scale (plus changes in my own role that made it harder to leave the Peak District to carry out my study visits), I did end up making shorter visits than I had originally hoped, and at different times of year.

Time was the chief constraint, and limited the amount of experiences I could observe and take part in. This was also true for my host countries, who had lots of demands on their time. I'm very grateful for the time they were able to give to me.

Travelling to national parks at any one particular season, one is only ever likely to see a snapshot of the work that happens across the year. Our work tends to have a lot of seasonal variation, especially for themed engagement events and visits. Given that COVID travel restrictions shifted my plans to different times of year, I was unable to visit at my originally chosen peak times of year. In an ideal world, with no limits on my time, I would have visited for longer or more than once in a year, and tried to speak to a greater variety of staff. Nevertheless, I feel that I made the most of the time, had some very valuable experiences, and gained a solid insight into the special qualities and work of each protected area.

Observing school visits, tours and events was very useful, but inevitably I could only see a scattered handful during my limited time. In Duna-Ipoly, visits were obviously conducted in Hungarian, so some of the nuances of the language and activities were lost on me!

While there was a lot of overlap between the different national parks, we also had different contexts that don't make us strictly comparable. The overall aims of the parks vary, as well as their staffing structures and key goals. Inevitably, my findings have been skewed by own perceptions, and experience working for one particular national park.

The funding of each national park also makes a big difference! Our aspirations are not always matched by our staffing capacity or available funding, especially with the financial impacts of COVID-19 and the global inflation crisis.

Despite these limitations, I believe that my study visits were very valuable, and have enabled me to draw some useful comparisons between the three national parks. I hope it provides a useful overview (and perhaps some inspiration!) for those wanting to discover more about peri-urban national parks, and ways of engaging with audiences.

CONCLUSIONS: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM EACH OTHER?

Despite the different contexts, languages and landscapes of the three protected areas, I believe that there are many useful comparisons, and many learning points.

Although local conditions vary, we have seen that many of the environmental pressures on the three national parks are similar. While problems like wildfire, wild camping, irresponsible behaviour and congestion impact on many of the national parks across Europe, the increased volume of visitors from the surrounding urban areas makes these problems especially noticeable in peri-urban parks.

Engaging with visitors to communicate, reduce and prevent these issues is crucial. All three parks have shown how signage, social media and permit systems can have positive effects. Working closely with user groups and speaking their language is an important way to maximise the effectiveness of these. Examples of close working between users like campers and rock climbers seen in the different national parks are positive moves in the right direction.

All three parks recognise that direct engagement offers a way, perhaps the best way, to communicate about these issues. Education sessions and materials can provide direct messages to audiences about environmental issues and care messages, helping to prevent problems and inspiring positive action. Beyond the immediate benefits, all three national parks are “playing the long game” in trying to inspire a love of nature, and of their protected landscapes, that will filter through generations and inspire a long-lasting stewardship. Young people are seen as particularly key to this. Engaging them and providing “Eureka!” moments is the best way to engage them with nature. Having trained, expert staff directly delivering these engagement opportunities really maximises their effectiveness.

School visits, family events and more informal interpretation boards and activity trails all provide great ways of enabling this. Activities that allow young people to have their own, close-up connections with nature, are especially valuable and all three parks made this a key feature of their work. ‘Bio-Blitz’ activities, Duna-Ipoly’s innovation of mobile pond dipping was particularly inspiring, introducing an extra, exciting aspect to pond-dipping activities while relating local areas to the national park via water catchment and quality.

Exploring the bigger landscape, such as hills, rivers, forests, mountains and caves, is also a great way to connect young people. Climbing a hill, being on an island or walking through a river are all exciting activities, especially for urban children who cannot have such experiences on a regular basis. Activities that connect them with it further, such as art, games or scientific activities offer different ways of accessing it for multiple intelligences.

As well as formal, led activities, spaces for children to independently explore and make their own connections with nature are very important. Loch Lomond and the Peak District, especially, have made this an integral part of their sessions

A similar angle is found through elements of free play, in the Forest school mode. All three parks use these at different sites, and UK parks have begun to roll out these activities beyond the usual lower age groups; the “Generation Green” project in 2021 showed the benefits that these nature connection activities can have when offered to teenagers and young adults. These sort of activities are even beginning to be a larger part of green well-being activities for adults. In the Peak District, we have been developing several projects on these lines – a kind of “forest school for adults”. Continued development of these activities is a very interesting area for future development and research, with benefits potentially to be enjoyed in all three parks. The various economic and political stresses of our time, as well as the fallout from the COVID pandemic, are only increasing the mental health crisis, and green well-being activities are likely to be a huge resource to help people through this.

Direct engagement offers a great way to inspire visitors in the moment, but really we want to plant a longer love of nature that inspires them to return and care for the environment. Showing them ways to “give back” to nature, such as through practical conservation, are effective. Helping visitors to realise that nature exists everywhere, not just in protected areas, can be a very good way to carry on their enthusiasm.

To this end, community engagement reaching beyond our boundaries can be very effective. Green spaces in urban areas can provide useful stepping stones to the wider countryside for less confident urban audiences, and in some cases our work may introduce them to green spaces for the first time. All three parks dabble in this a little, but more work reaching across boundaries into urban areas seems like a very useful way to develop. Work in this area also helps to remove barriers to less socially mobile and economically deprived groups. Our protected spaces should be available to all, and our engagement techniques can help

these groups to access the benefits of visiting, while also encouraging them to do so in a safe and sustainable way.

The Loch Lomond national park's travel bursary is an excellent innovation to reach out to schools and communities in these urban areas. Their work offering camping trips for refugee groups and enabling schools to visit is really inspirational. As the cost of transport goes up, seeking funding opportunities like these is something we should all be aiming for.

Finding and empowering "champions" within urban communities is another terrific way to increase our reach. This could be within interest groups such as Duna-Ipoly's rock climbers, or through creating close working relationships with schools or diverse urban community groups (Peak District, Loch Lomond). This is definitely a development area for all national parks. It is one that could potentially have very significant mutual benefits for both our protected areas, and for the communities themselves. Close working with different groups is maybe the biggest single recommendation that I can identify from my findings. Making good relationships with schools, community groups, health services and other environmental organisations can only strengthen our engagement work.

Budget is a key to engagement. All three parks had fairly limited budgets, though this did vary between them. Some of the most effective engagement work was by Loch Lomond, who had a small team, but crucially had a core-funded budget each year. This is very helpful in enabling them to offer travel bursaries and funded opportunities for the groups who needed most.

We are likely to have to stretch our money further in coming years, with the looming financial crisis and costs of inflation. Making sure that our work is efficient and targeted to the areas and groups who need it most will be crucial.

In the light of the climate change crisis, and economic and political turmoil in Europe, I believe it is more important than ever that protected areas across the continent work together to innovate and find solutions. Together, we can also find inspiration for positive opportunities. If we can remain flexible in our approach, and innovate where possible, we can continue to capitalise on the benefits of engagement.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS & ASPIRATIONS

On a personal level, I found my study visits very inspiring. Observing the excellent work of staff members in other parks, “comparing notes” and discussing our ideas and aspirations really made me reflect on my own work. It has made me evaluate much of the work that we do in the Peak District; I realise that we are making good progress in several areas, but also that there is much more we could do. Trying something different, and “thinking outside the box” the way that the other national parks have done should remain key aspirations.

Some of the key ways that I am hoping to use my learning from the study visits are as follows:

KNOWLEDGE CASCADE:

Sharing the good practise with colleagues across my team, to help inspire them. I hope this will lead to discussions on how we can learn from other parks’ ideas and progress, and adapt our own practice. I have already been asked to give a presentation at our whole-team staff briefings to share the information, so I feel actively encouraged to share the findings.

ACTIVITIES:

Several of the activities I saw while observing school visits were particularly inspiring, and I have already planned to use these in my own education sessions!

Embracing a multi-disciplinary approach to activities, to help inspire multiple intelligences, is something else I would like to build on. This summer, I have arranged workshops run by local artists and archaeologists, and have also agreed to host an artist residency at Longdendale Environment Centre. I hope that this will inspire new participants to come along to engage with nature. I am keen to also work with storytellers and musicians.

DISPLAYS FOR VISITORS:

The fantastic displays at Duna-Ipoly visitor centres are inspiring. They have made me consider how we can improve our own displays at our Education Centres, and at other key locations around the park.

CREATING CHAMPIONS:

This is a key area of development for us in the Peak District. On the Eastern side of the park, we have worked with several community and wellbeing groups, including MOSAIC and CRISIS, based in Sheffield. A key focus is now to replicate and develop this work on the western side of the park, in Manchester, Tameside and Cheshire. I am beginning to forge some relationships with key groups, and this is a key focus for the next year, enabling diverse audiences to engage with the park more easily and effectively.

Running teacher training workshops to inspire responsible, sustainable visits (especially secondary schools) is another area for focus in the Peak District. We are also rolling out our Ambassador school scheme this year, which we hope will create better links with local schools, and encourage them to visit independently.

TRANSPORT:

Inspired by Loch Lomond's Educational Travel Grant, we are currently trialling a similar scheme, to remove barriers to transport for those who need it most. Although we do not have core funding available for this, the charitable arm of the national park has enabled us to apply for funding. This is currently only a limited pot of money, enabling eight schools to have free transport – however it is a starting point and we hope to build on this in the future.

I would like to improve links with the local train company, increasing publicity about how urban audiences can access the Peak District without a car, and also improving the information available when they get here. I would also like to see if we can work with local schools along the railway line, perhaps running engagement sessions in their local area, and then travelling with them on the train so that they can be return visitors with their parents in future. There is also currently a project to investigate public transport accessibility into the national park.

ENHANCING GREEN WELL-BEING OPORTUNITIES

Last year, our team piloted a green well-being group in my area of the Peak District. This is an area that our team is currently looking to develop and build. I have also been trialling similar sessions with young people at risk of exclusion from mainstream education.

ASPIRATIONS FOR INNOVATION

Inspired by the innovations in other parks, I am trying to think outside the box. My team were particularly inspired by Duna-Ipoly's mobile water lab and phone app, and by Loch Lomond's educational travel grant. These aspirations are longer-term, but might include:

- Working with urban community groups more closely
- Climate change resources
- A Portable Peak district classroom
- Taking the National park into the city?
- An app promoting the park's nature

...and who knows what else??

WORKING MORE CLOSELY WITH OTHER NATIONAL PARKS

Finally, seeing other national park staff and learning from them reminds us that we should not work alone in our bubble. We should share best practise as a matter of course, and try to incorporate more study visits. We have set up joint training opportunities, and plan to visit both the North York Moors and Yorkshire Dales for learning trips. I have loosely made plans to stay in touch with my study visit hosts, and hopefully let them visit us one day!

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