John Muir Trust - Diverse Voices Workshop

Summary Report January 2023

1   Introduction

The John Muir Trust (JMT) is defining a set of criteria for what a wild place is. As part of this process, JMT want to get a rounded view of what wildness means to different people across the UK outside the ecological and environmental sectors.

On 1st December 2022, a diverse group of up to twenty-two people from all four UK nations joined an interactive online workshop. They explored different perceptions of what makes a place wild and began to develop a shared understanding of what defines wild places in the UK. Participants views, experiences, and ideas were drawn from diverse lived experiences. These included different ethnicities, genders, faiths, languages, sexual orientations, neurodiversity, socioeconomic backgrounds, ages, urban and rural living.

The workshop was designed, led, and reported on by Dialogue Matters (DM). Trained volunteer facilitators from JMT facilitated small group conversations. Facilitators captured the essence of points made by participants in response to questions. This summary is based on discussions in the workshop output report. The workshop outputs capture the full essence of everything that was said by participants and can be referred to for more detail.

2   Sense of Direction

Participants began by thinking about their personal interpretation of what a wild place is in response to the vision question:

Imagine it is 2030 and you are out and about in an area you think of as wild. What do you see?

The responses showed how varied perceptions of wildness are across the UK. Ideas ranged from plots of overgrown grass to the restoration of keystone species; from a lack of people to active community management in wild places. Restoring nature, varied habitats, wildlife, greenery, and remoteness were all prominent themes. Visions of managed spaces such as parks and integrating wildlife with infrastructure contrasted with ideas that there should be minimal or no human involvement or presence in wild places. Sense of open space, diversity of people, and information about a place and its history were other ideas associated with wildness.

3   Perceptions of Wildness

The next stage of the workshop gave people the opportunity to explore ideas of wildness by considering what makes a place feel wild to them (what can you see, hear, touch, smell etc.) and what they think wild places are like (what nature, colours, sounds, land use are there etc.). Participants also mapped places that they consider wild on a map of the UK.

3.1   What makes a place feel wild?

Seeing fewer people makes a place feel wilder, as well as a lack of human infrastructure, management, and maintenance. The presence of trees, flowers, overgrown plants, and varied

wildlife (including restored species) also contributes to a place feeling wild. Hearing traffic, drilling, and aeroplane noise is associated with less wild places, while birdsong and the sound of weather represent wildness. Interestingly, silence is associated with both wilder and less wild places. Similarly, smells connected to farming – such as pigs, manure, and slurry – represented both less wild and wild places. Wet leaf and woodland smells are associated with semi-wild areas, while clear and salty air contribute strongly to the feeling that a place is wild. Hard surfaces such as concrete are connected to less wild places, while feeling the earth or grass on bare feet and being able to interact with the environment around you generally makes places feel wilder.

Some wilder places are associated with feelings of being judged by other people because you don't have the 'right' clothes or equipment – contributing to a sense that you are not qualified to be there. Feelings of being overwhelmed and being closed-in are connected to less wild urban spaces, while a sense of space and distance are associated with wilder places.

In terms of people, indigenous and rural communities and other people caring for or managing natural space are connected to wildness. Fewer people in general are found in wild places, while a greater diversity of people is associated with less wild places. You are more likely to come across people you wouldn't expect to find in wild areas, and people are also more open to interacting with each other in wilder places than places felt to be less wild. The harder it is to get to a place, and to get help when you're there, also makes a place feel wilder.

3.2   What are wild places like?

Wild places are characterised as having rare and iconic animal species that behave naturally, abundant non-human nature in general, and low levels of litter and pollution. Common and domesticated animals and people causing disturbances are features of less wild places. Variety in the landscape - in terms of colours, crops, habitats, and biodiversity – is considered wild, while monoculture and intensive farming are characteristic of less wild places. The grey tones of buildings and infrastructure represent less wild places, along with primary, artificial, and starkly contrasting colours. Wild places are more associated with greens, blues, and changing colours, and an absence of colour. The sound of ocean waves and weather is characteristic of wilder places and traffic, sirens, and aeroplanes of less wild areas.

Manmade bodies of water such as canals and reservoirs are considered less wild, and naturally occurring features such as rivers, lakes, bogs, and floods indicate wilder environments. On land, sudden transitions between habitats characterise less wild places, whilst harshness and ruggedness are typical of wilder places. Expanses of beach and the sea are features of wild coastal areas, with these places considered wilder in the winter. Clear skies and being able to see the stars are features of wilder places. Light pollution and aeroplane contrails are most characteristic of less wild spaces. Industrial farming, trawling, and clear felling are associated with a lack of wildness. In contrast open grazing and low-impact farming are land uses characteristic of wilder places, as are brownfield sites in urban environments.

At a higher level, two persistent and contrasting themes emerged from the workshop throughout this session. On the one hand, that lower levels of human intervention were features of wilder places, and on the other that wildness could not simply be judged by a lack of human presence and activity.

3.3   Mapping wild places in different parts of the UK

Northern Ireland: The places where the Mourne Mountains meet the sea, the Ring of Gullion and Strangford Lough were all identified as wild places specifically, while high moorlands, mudflats, tidal zones and islands in the north-east, and Machairs (low-lying grassy plains) were all identified as wild features of the Northern Irish landscape.

Wales: Snowdonia, the Brecon Beacons, the hills of Pembrokeshire, and the Gower peninsula were included among named wild places in Wales. Areas of ancient woodland, upland, heathland, waterfalls, and Silurian rocks across mid-Wales were also mapped.

Scotland: Peat bogs, sand dunes, lochs, moorland, heathland, mountains, and different types of woodland (Atlantic oakwood on the west coast and Caledonian pinewood in Inverness-shire, for example) were mapped as wild features of the Scottish landscape. The Highlands, the Hermitage at Dunkeld, parts of Glasgow, the Tarras Valley, and nature reserves along the Moray coast were among named wild places.

England: Derelict areas becoming overgrown with buddleia and community farms are wild places in densely urban parts of England. Identified as wild elsewhere were forests, fens, saltmarsh, upland, coastal cliffs, canals, wild horses, and abandoned military sites. Places named as wild included Victoria Park (London), Trafford Ecology Park (Greater Manchester), Dartmoor, the Knepp Estate, the Norfolk Broads, and Formby on Merseyside.

4   Getting to and Enjoying Wild Places

In the last stage of the workshop participants discussed the benefits of wild places, what makes it easier or more difficult to enjoy them, and how any difficulties might be overcome.

Wild places provide connection to nature, wide ranging health and wellbeing benefits, economic and recreation opportunities, a chance to break routine and find new experiences, freedom, space for biodiversity, food, ecosystem services (absorbing carbon, flood regulation, nutrient cycling etc.), opportunities to challenge yourself, and an open, non-judgemental space to either socialise or simply be.

Having the right clothing and equipment, experienced people to help you navigate safely, nearby infrastructure and facilities, environmental education, better accessibility via public transport, and better information about accessibility can all make it easier for people to enjoy wild places. Transport, access issues (such as conflict between landowners and users), perceived risks to health and safety, financial barriers such as lack of money or affordable accommodation, feelings of unfamiliarity or fear, and a lack of welcome or in the diversity of people are among factors that make it more difficult to enjoy wild places.

Improving provision of the right clothing and equipment (e.g. via an outdoor brand donation system) and transport could help overcome some of the difficulties in accessing or enjoying wild places. Increasing funding of wild areas and opportunities for people to live closer to them would also help. Land reform to reduce property pressure on areas, reducing risk for landowners, and providing information, education and guidance about wild areas can also contribute. Creating opportunities to access wild places can remove barriers for everyone, including people living in urban areas and seldom heard or vulnerable groups. Making wild places feel more welcoming and safer (e.g. by increasing diversity) can also help overcome difficulties that people experience trying to enjoy wild spaces.

5   Summary and Next Steps

We are grateful and thank those who took part in the online workshop and gave their time to share their knowledge and perspectives.

The purpose of the Diverse Voices workshop was to explore perceptions of wild places across the UK, involving participants from all four nations. The perspectives of a diverse group of people were captured and explored to help develop a shared and inclusive understanding of what wildness is.

The reports and outputs from workshop discussions will be used by JMT to inform the design of a UK-wide 'Wild Places' survey. It is anticipated that this survey, when finalised, will be sent to both workshop participants and wider public stakeholders across the UK - with the results used by JMT to create and inform their criteria for wild places.