Why places matter to people

Research report
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I. Foreword

In 1895, the National Trust was founded by Octavia Hill, Robert Hunter and Hardwicke Rawnsley. They set out with the aim of preserving our nation’s heritage and open spaces for everyone to enjoy forever, based on their belief of the value of these places for fulfilling a human need in us all.

‘The need of quiet, the need of air, and I believe the sight of sky and of things growing, seem human needs, common to all.’

Octavia Hill, 1888

124 years since it was founded, National Trust memberships are at an all-time high, so it seems that the benefit of places to people is just as important today as it was in 1895. What are the places that make us feel we belong? Why does this relationship exist between people and places? And what are the benefits of having these deep-rooted emotional connections with a place? These are all questions to which we aim to find answers in this report.

Working with leading researchers at Walnut Unlimited, we have looked at the importance of people having a deep connection to a ‘special place’, and how that influences the factors that have been proven to influence wellbeing: to connect, be active, take notice, keep learning and to give.

The findings of this research reflect Octavia’s words, reinforcing the universal need for special places and the importance they play in people’s lives. People make places, and places make people, and the National Trust’s work ensures these places are there for everyone to connect with and enjoy for years to come.

Christina Finlay,
National Trust Director of Insight and Data
This research report follows up on the research commissioned by the National Trust in 2017 and published as ‘Places That Make Us’. Using brain scanning techniques it found that places which are meaningful to us and hold special importance generate a significant response in areas of the brain most commonly associated with emotions: demonstrating the strong emotional connection between people and places. The research also identified that people connect with their meaningful place in three key ways; connections to the past, connections to significant others and connections to the here and now. But this research left a question hanging - how do these connections affect us as people?

To help answer this, we commissioned this new research in March 2019, conducted by Walnut Unlimited, which tells us that those who say that they have a deep connection to a particular place report higher levels of wellbeing and life satisfaction.

Our 2019 research began with a literature review to explore existing research used to understand the benefits of natural and cultural spaces to people. This informed our quantitative research conducted online with a nationally representative sample of over 2,000 adults from the UK.

With wellbeing encompassing both physical and mental health factors, we looked to capture both aspects in our research. Following our literature review, we then looked to understand people’s general state of wellbeing, incorporating measures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) personal wellbeing questions (ONS, 2018) as well as statements designed to capture aspects of the New Economics Foundation’s Five Ways to Wellbeing. These measures formed part of our quantitative research, where we asked respondents a series of questions to determine the extent to which special places may have an impact on our wellbeing.

In our research, we asked participants if they have a ‘special place’; by this we mean that we asked them to think about a place that they feel they have a strong connection with and is important to them. This could be a specific geographical area or a specific location, but we specified it should be somewhere outside of their own home but within the UK. With their special place in mind, we asked a separate series of questions to explore a limited number of benefits and feelings evoked by this place.
People with a special place also reported an increase in experiencing elements that make up the Five Ways to Wellbeing:

Q1. Feelings towards general aspects of life. ONS personal wellbeing questions. Mean Score (Out of 10) Base. All respondents N=2002. Those with a special place (n=1132) Those without a special place (n=870). Walnut Unlimited, March 2019

- Happiness
  - 6.63 vs. 6.25 out of 10

- Life satisfaction
  - 6.60 vs. 6.12 out of 10

- Feeling their life is worthwhile
  - 6.83 vs. 6.26 out of 10

compared to those that don’t have a connection to a special place.

Q9. Please can you tell us if you feel each of these more, less, or about the same compared to how you feel generally ...

- I take time to notice what’s around me e.g. beautiful scenery, art (77%)
- I get outside and enjoy fresh air/nature (74%)
- I take time to notice what I am feeling e.g. happiness, loneliness, at peace (66%)
- I take time to be in the moment – I am a person who tries to be mindful (64%)
- I feel inspired (61%)
- I am physically active (56%)
- I have good relationships with others e.g. friends and family (47%)
- It gives me the opportunity to have new experiences (43%)
- It gives me the opportunity to learn something new (31%)
- I give my time or talents to help others (18%)

The top 10 things people feel, do, or notice when visiting their special place, which all make up the Five Ways to Wellbeing:

1. I take time to notice what’s around me e.g. beautiful scenery, art (77%)
2. I get outside and enjoy fresh air/nature (74%)
3. I take time to notice what I am feeling e.g. happiness, loneliness, at peace (66%)
4. I take time to be in the moment – I am a person who tries to be mindful (64%)
5. I feel inspired (61%)
6. I am physically active (56%)
7. I have good relationships with others e.g. friends and family (47%)
8. It gives me the opportunity to have new experiences (43%)
9. It gives me the opportunity to learn something new (31%)
10. I give my time or talents to help others (18%)

For those without a special place, however, over a quarter (26%) state there is nowhere near where they live that is ‘special’, highlighting the need for organisations like the National Trust to explore how to help people build their connections to local places.

Q11. How likely do you feel it is that the place that is meaningful to you will always be there?
Q12. If the place that is meaningful to you no longer existed, how would this affect your wellbeing?
Q17. Do any of these factors hamper you in having a special place?

Walnut Unlimited, March 2019
The ‘Places That Make Us’ (2017) research commissioned by the National Trust showed that places which are meaningful to us and hold special significance, generate a significant response in areas of the brain most commonly associated with emotions: demonstrating the strong emotional connection between people and places. This was the first experiment of its kind to understand the depths of people’s neurophysiological connection with place.

In 2019, the National Trust asked Walnut Unlimited to conduct further research to explore the connections people have with places, and how these places are intrinsically linked to heightened wellbeing.

Wellbeing has been defined as a ‘dynamic state in which the individual is able to develop their potential, work productively and creatively, build strong and positive relationships with others, and contribute to their community (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, 2017). It has two main elements: feeling good and functioning well in the world around us. Feelings of happiness, contentment, enjoyment, curiosity and engagement are characteristic of someone who has a positive experience of their life. It refers to a person’s spirit and their prevailing mood and attitudes but equally important for wellbeing is our functioning in the world. Experiencing positive relationships, having some control over one’s life, and having a sense of purpose are all important attributes of wellbeing.
There are various models which look to define the components of wellbeing. One of the most widely used is the New Economics Foundation’s Five Ways to Wellbeing (https://neweconomics.org/2008/10/five-ways-to-wellbeing-the-evidence) which was commissioned by the Government’s Foresight project on Mental Capital and Wellbeing in 2008 to develop a set of evidence-based actions to improve personal wellbeing. The five components of wellbeing they identified are: to connect, be active, take notice, keep learning and to give.

Research has shown that there are associated links between wellbeing and being in nature, particularly with regards to physical health (Lovell, R. 2016 & 2017) and that even brief contact with nature can have positive effects on our wellbeing (Neil, Gerard & Arbuthnott, 2018).

Similarly, evidence suggests that significant associations exist between historic sites and museums and indicators of wellbeing e.g. higher life satisfaction (Leadbetter & O’Connor, 2013). In a recent study it was also found that people were found to be happier in more scenic locations, including both natural and built up areas (Seresinhe, Preis, MacKerron & Moat, 2019) indicating the importance of the aesthetics of environments for supporting our everyday wellbeing.

Limited existing research has shown that connections to meaningful places has numerous psychological and emotional benefits for people (K.M. Korpela & Ylen, 2009; Scannel & Gifford, 2017) but little is known about the benefits of having these deep-rooted connections to specific places and in the context of The Five Ways to Wellbeing.

To build on the previous research conducted by the National Trust and to explore the purpose of the relationship between people and places we set out to understand the benefits of having deep-rooted connections to a place from a personal wellbeing perspective.

Three visitors in the Long Gallery at Osterley Park and House, London
©National Trust Images/Rob Stothard
IV. Results

The relationship between having a special place and personal wellbeing

To understand if there is a specific link between having a special place and people’s enduring sense of wellbeing, we asked people a series of questions about perceptions of their personal wellbeing before they were asked any questions related to their ‘special place’. Replicating the four personal wellbeing questions used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2018) we found that those with a special place score significantly higher on three of the four measures about life satisfaction, happiness and feeling that what they do in their life is worthwhile (see figure 1).

General wellbeing about life satisfaction, worthwhile, happiness and anxiety

- Mean Score out of 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Have a special place</th>
<th>No special place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>6.39</td>
<td>6.60</td>
<td>6.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worthwhile</td>
<td>6.58</td>
<td>6.83</td>
<td>6.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(figure 1)

Q1: Feelings towards general aspects of life. ONS personal wellbeing questions. Mean Score (Out of 10) Base: All respondents N=2002. Those with a special place (n=1132) Those without a special place (n=870).
On other measures related to wellbeing, we also found those with a special place score significantly higher across wellbeing measures which make-up the Five Ways to Wellbeing (see figures 2 and 3).

**Extent you agree that you generally feel/do each of the following…**

- Mean Score out of 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Have a special place</th>
<th>No special place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>6.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a special place</td>
<td>6.29</td>
<td>6.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No special place</td>
<td>5.98</td>
<td>6.34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Look for opportunities to have new experiences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Have a special place</th>
<th>No special place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>6.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a special place</td>
<td>5.74</td>
<td>6.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No special place</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Take time to be in the moment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Have a special place</th>
<th>No special place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>5.74</td>
<td>6.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a special place</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No special place</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>6.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**I give my time to help others**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Have a special place</th>
<th>No special place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>5.98</td>
<td>6.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a special place</td>
<td>5.74</td>
<td>6.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No special place</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**I donate to charitable causes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Have a special place</th>
<th>No special place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>6.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a special place</td>
<td>5.74</td>
<td>6.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No special place</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**I feel inspired**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Have a special place</th>
<th>No special place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>6.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a special place</td>
<td>5.74</td>
<td>6.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No special place</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**I often feel lonely**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Have a special place</th>
<th>No special place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>6.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a special place</td>
<td>5.74</td>
<td>6.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No special place</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Walnut Unlimited, March 2019*
These results suggest that there is a link between having a deep-rooted emotional connection with a place and having higher wellbeing.

Special places don’t stop us from experiencing difficult emotional states

Having a special place does not make people less likely to experience difficult emotional states such as stress, fatigue, loneliness, anxiety (see figure 1) or loneliness (see figure 4) compared to those without a connection to a special place (see figure 4).

So, while those with a special place are just as likely to experience these states as those without a special place and in some cases more so, they may be better able to cope with and manage them to reduce the negative impact they can create, as seen in the associations with higher general wellbeing (see figures 1, 2 and 3).
IV. Results

Extent you agree that you generally feel/do each of the following...

- Mean Score out of 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Have a special place</th>
<th>No special place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I feel undue stress</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.37</td>
<td>5.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel fatigued by life</td>
<td>5.37</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q1. Overall, how anxious do you generally feel each day? Mean Score (Out of 10) Base. All respondents N=2002. Those with a special place (n=1132) Those without a special place (n=870).

Walnut Unlimited, March 2019

Q2. Please tell us to what extent you agree that you generally feel/do each of the following...

Mean Score (Out of 10) Base. All respondents N=2002. Those with a special place (n=1132) Those without a special place (n=870).

Walnut Unlimited, March 2019

Experiencing special places

We asked our nationally representative sample of adults; Is there a place in the UK that is meaningful to you or that you have a strong connection to? For example, a wood, beach or a particular building? From this we found that 56% of people have a place that is special to them and that they have a strong connection with, whilst 44% report not having a place that is special to them. Of these places, they tended to be outdoors (58%) e.g. coastlines and beaches (23%), woodland and farm land (10%) mountains and hills (9%), A park (8%), rivers and lakes (7%), and a further 1% gave an outdoor countryside place.

This was followed by 23% having a connection with urban locations such as seaside towns and resort, (13%) other towns and villages, (4%) homes of family members, and sports stadiums (1%). A further 15% of people claimed to have a special place that is an historic building (12%) or garden (3%). The word cloud shown below (diagram1) shows the range of different types of places people described as their special place.

Walnut Unlimited, March 2019

Q5. What is the name of the place that is meaningful to you? Base. Those with a special place (n=1132).

Walnut Unlimited, March 2019
On visiting their special place many emotional experiences are evoked impacting on attitudes, mood, sense of self, and spirit (see figure 6). The majority have positive emotional experiences, feeling happiness (63%) and calmness (61%). Furthermore, over one third of people also experience feeling a sense of belonging (38%) when they visit their special place, being transported to a meaningful time (37%), feeling safe and secure (36%), and connected to others (34%). Each of these suggest that special places help people to feel grounded and connected to themselves as well as others.

Feelings experienced when visiting their special place
- %

- Happy 63%
- Calm 61%
- Connected to others 34%
- Transports back to a meaningful time 37%
- Safe and secure 36%
- Inspired 27%
- It gives me perspective 27%
- Aware of my own identity / being 23%
- Connected to my country 21%
- Awe-struck 15%
- Connected to my community 14%
- Creative 12%

Q8. When you visit the place that is meaningful to you, which of the following describe what you experience by going to this place? Base: Those with a special place (n=1132). Walnut Unlimited, March 2019
This feeling of belonging and security also came through in the 2018 interviews conducted by an in-field content production team when respondents described the connection they had with a particular National Trust place important to them. They described feeling the place is a part of them and they a part of it, having a sense of ownership of the place.

In one interview, the respondent spoke about ‘nature’s medication’, and how experiencing outdoor places that are special to them creates feelings of exhilaration, accomplishment and being inspired by the beauty of their surroundings.

‘It creates a sense of belonging, where people belong and where people enjoy coming.’

Mal, The Gower National Trust interviews 2018 ©National Trust Images/Trevor Ray Hart/Chris Lacey

‘It’s a deep sense of calm...you can feel your shoulders drop and feel that your breathing is getting deeper.’

Julie, Mount Stewart National Trust interviews 2018 ©National Trust Images/Oskar Proctor/James Dobson

The March 2019 research conversely shows, those with a connection to historic buildings/gardens were more likely to say they experience feelings of belonging (45%) and feeling awe-struck (24%) when they visit their special place compared to those with connections to outdoor places.

Q9. Please can you tell us if you feel each of these more, less or about the same compared to how you feel generally? Base. Those with a special place (n=1132). Buildings & grounds (n=365) place. Walnut Unlimited, March 2019

Experiencing special places supports people on other aspects of the Five Ways to Wellbeing as well. For example, 31% report how their special place helps them to learn new things, and a further 43% say that their special place gives them the opportunity to have new experiences more than they experience generally, which resonates with the ‘keep learning’ way to wellbeing (see figure 8).
Do you experience the following more, less or about the same when visiting your special place

- % more

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All with a special place</th>
<th>Outdoor</th>
<th>Buildings and Grounds</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gives me the opportunity to learn something new</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel inspired</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gives me the opportunity to have new experiences</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the eight interviews we heard how special places play an important role in being facilitators of activities such as photography and dancing, but also learning about people’s stories through historic places.

In our most recent research we also find that people with a connection to a special place feel transported to a meaningful time in their life (37%) when they visit their special place and feel connected to others past and present (34%).

Also, almost half (47%) of those with a special connection say they feel they have good relationships with others when they visit this special place vs how they feel generally. This highlights the role special places play in supporting relationships and feeling connected with others.

IV. Results

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Also, almost half (47%) of those with a special connection say they feel they have good relationships with others when they visit this special place vs how they feel generally. This highlights the role special places play in supporting relationships and feeling connected with others.
Do you experience the following more, less or about the same when visiting your special place

- % more

47%
Good relationships with others

18%
I give my time to help others

13%
I donate to charitable causes

Growing connections between people and places

Improving access to ‘special’ places

Just over a quarter (26%) of people without a special place feel they are prevented from having one because ‘there is nowhere ‘special’ near where I live’ (see figure 10). Improving accessibility to a variety of places is important to help facilitate these connections to make sure everyone has access to somewhere that could become their special place. As is helping people to experience and appreciate ‘special’ places in their community.

With just 18% of people saying they give their time or talents to others more when at their special place compared with how much they do generally (see figure 9), the results could suggest that the relationship between special places and wellbeing is more important for self-actualised components of wellbeing, such as taking notice, being active and keep learning.
Protecting Special Places

This research suggests that there is an expectation that special places will always be there, with 82% of people saying they find it likely that their special place will always be there.

(Q11. How likely do you feel it is that the place that is meaningful to you will always be there?) Walnut Unlimited, March 2019

But if it were to disappear or change, 69% say that it would affect them in a negative way. This is even higher amongst people who are connected to a historic building or grounds (74%).

(Q12. If the place that is meaningful to you no longer existed, how would this affect your wellbeing?) Walnut Unlimited, March 2019.

“For all my happy times, my sad times, Gable’s been there.”

Sylvia, Great Gable

© National Trust Images/Trevor Ray Hart/Joe Cornish

Do any of these factors hamper you in having a special place?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>%</th>
<th>Factor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26%</td>
<td>There is nowhere ‘special’ near where I live</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18%</td>
<td>Cost - I cannot afford to visit these sorts of places</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13%</td>
<td>Life is too busy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11%</td>
<td>No access to a car</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7%</td>
<td>Can’t access due to not being able to get there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6%</td>
<td>Don’t feel I would fit in in that sort of place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5%</td>
<td>No transport links</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4%</td>
<td>Can’t access these sorts of places due to a disability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(figure 10)

Q17. Do any of these factors hamper you in having a special place? Base: Those without a special place (n=870)

Walnut Unlimited, March 2019

Penrhyn Castle, North Wales

© National Trust Images/John Millar
This research suggests that there is a link between having a deep-rooted emotional connection to a place and reporting higher levels of wellbeing. This link indicates that having a special place in life may be a contributing factor to people reporting higher happiness, life satisfaction and feeling their life is worthwhile compared to those that don’t have a connection to a special place.

‘Given higher levels of wellbeing reported by those who say they do have a special place, it is worth organisations like the National Trust exploring how to help people build their connections to local places. For example, 99% of the population of England and Wales live within one mile of a listed building or scheduled monument. Prompting and inspiring people to explore and learn about what is available and what could be regarded as special and cared-for in their local area may help with this – the extraordinary and inspiring may be closer than they think.’

‘The findings from this report emphasise the importance of continuing to ensure that protections like listing, scheduling, nature conservation protections, and the National Trust’s inalienability of place, make sure that special places will be cared for long into the future.’

Walnut Unlimited Dr. Andy Myers
VI. Appendix

References


If you’d like this information in an alternative format please contact 01793 817400 or email contentandpr@nationaltrust.org.uk

The National Trust is a registered charity, no. 205846. Our registered office is Heelis, Kemble Drive, Swindon, Wiltshire SN2 2NA.
Visitors enjoying the view of the Menai Strait from the terrace at Penrhyn Castle and Garden, Wales ©National Trust Images/John Miller