

**ECOCLUB.com E-Paper Series, Nr. 10, Jan 2004**

**Assessing the Urban Ecotourism Potential of a Local Nature Reserve:  
The case of Corstorphine Hill, Edinburgh, Scotland**

by

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*The following document is a summary of the dissertation from Vasileios Tsipidis, MSc Ecotourism, Napier University of Edinburgh, titled : Natural green spaces and their potential use as nature appreciation and ecotourism sites in urban areas.*

*Case study of the Corstorphine Hill Local Nature Reserve South Area.*

## **Introduction**

The scope of the research is to assess the use of the case study site, focusing on nature appreciation and the potential of an urban ecotourism<sup>1</sup> activity development theme. The research consists of two parts. The first part is a literature review. The second part is a description of the site's current status. For that to be achieved a questionnaire was developed, in order to gather information about usability and visitation, and visitors perception of the site's natural value.

All in all the project tries to set guidelines for any future plan that will try to enhance the site's usefulness for the local community and the urban population in general, based on a series of variables that could be drawn from the results, and would be worthy of consideration, prior to any act.

## **Site Description**

The site is part of Corstorphine Hill Local Nature Reserve. Corstorphine Hill is a natural green space of 67.3 ha part of the Edinburgh's Green Belt Zone, and graded as Grade 1 Green Belt, meaning of the highest quality (Edinburgh Green Belt Boundary Study, 1999). The case study site is approximately 5 ha, located east of the Edinburgh's Zoo and BUPA hospital, and forms the south part of Corstorphine Hill reserve, as well as the reserve's south access point. Currently there are three access points to the site, two located at the south part along Corstorphine Road, and the other at the north part which connects the site to the main Corstorphine Hill reserve via a path.

## **Methodology**

Several drawbacks and misbeliefs were encountered during the scoping of the survey, mostly by visitors, so a set of statements about the nature of the site was conducted, in which the research would focus.

- The site is part of a significant local nature reserve so it should be dealt and enhanced as such.
- The site is a natural green space and should be dealt and enhanced as such.
- The site should directly benefit the local community and the stakeholders involved.
- The site should promote and act as a nature appreciation, nature education ground.
- The site's visitation will increase only if someone looks up to it.
- The site's security will be strengthened only if visitation increases and the local community 'adopts' it.
- The site's natural environment will be conserved and enhanced to become more appealing only if a committed party understands the functions that the site can successfully fulfill or could fulfill for the local natural environment.
- Urban ecotourism could be an option, due to the site's proximity to the Edinburgh's Zoo, and as part of a significant Local Nature Reserve.

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<sup>1</sup> as defined by the Toronto Green Tourism Association (Joppe & Dodds, 2001) 'travel and exploration within and around an urban area that offers visitors enjoyment and appreciation of the city's natural areas and cultural resources, while inspiring physically active, intellectually stimulating and socially interactive experiences; promotes the city's long-term ecological health by promoting walking, cycling, public transportation; promotes sustainable local economic and community development and vitality; celebrates local heritage and the arts; is accessible and equitable to all' (Blackstone Corporation, 1996)

The site has been shadowed for many years by the main Corstorphine Hill reserve. It is used by some members of the nearby community, mostly as a jogging or dog walking ground, rather than a local nature reserve. For those who visit the reserve the site is just an entrance from the south, and they quickly pass through it, to reach Corstorphine Hill. Consequently, although the site is part of the reserve, its not accounted as such, but rather as a means to reach the main area of the reserve, or as just another green space.

From these first impressions and the initial field study the research was focused in visitor's perception. A questionnaire was then constructed, based on four simple questions:

- Who are the visitors, and where do they come from?
- What activities do they undertake during their visit?
- How natural is the site for them, and how interested are in its wildlife?
- What range of developments/ enhancements they would like to see at the site, if any?

The survey took place during the summer months of July and August, specifically, the last two weeks of July and the first week of August. Another complementary run of the questionnaire was made at the second week of September. The visits regarding the survey were equally divided into morning and evening visits. There were 62 visitors interviewed and the data derived , were converted at percentages of a hundred.

## Results

The results of the questionnaire are comparable with other studies seeking information from green space and urban woodland visitors like the English Nature study (Handley,2003), the DTLR (Department for Transport Local Government and the Regions, Dunnett, 2002) and the URGE (Urban Green Environment, Cole & Caserio, 2001).

From the data gathered at the personal information section of the survey, it is able to highlight a basic visitor's profile. The majority 56.4% of the visitors in the survey are male, between 30-50 years old (41.9%) working full time (53.2%), and coming from the nearby to the site residential areas (29 out of 41 willing to share their post code). Walking is the most preferable way to access the site, which also denotes that the majority of users are from nearby areas (a popular result among relevant studies, URGE, English Nature). The proximity of the site to the Edinburgh's Zoo and the access points to the main Corstorphine Hill nature reserve, didn't attract a significant amount of visitors from areas further away, or even tourists. There was a percentage, approximately 14% of total visitors that came from further to the site locations.

Taking the dog for a walk in the site was one of the most popular activities, which is also apparent by the presence of dogs mess at the trails. Jogging and exercise in general are also very common activities. Walking for pleasure though is the most popular, and one can assume that at the specific question of the questionnaire, the answer 'walking' included also the users who take the dog for a walk, thus considering that activity walking for pleasure as well. *Relax* (56.4%) and *observe nature* (40.3%), were also suspected to be connected to one another, as most of the users who answered that they visit the site to relax also included observing nature, most likely as a means to calm down and ' get away from it all'.

Coming to the site with the dog is thus expected, as is with a member of the family, mostly by couples

enjoying a walk. The company of friends was equally popular as visiting the site alone, the latter being mostly selected by those who uses the site to exercise.

The frequency of visits varies from several times a week (from everyday (6.4%) to at least twice (12.9%) and 3-4 times (19.35) per week), to once (22.5%) or twice (35.4%) a month. The data are quite comparable with those from the OPENspace Research Centre (OPENspace Research Centre, 2003), for Corstorphine Hill, although in our survey more weekly visits and less monthly visits were noted (probably because the OPENspace survey was focused at the main part of the Corstorphine Hill LNR). Those more frequently using the site appear to be the ones that take the dog for a walk, and those that exercise. The infrequent users are those who prefer the site as a place to go for a walk, or just hang out with friends.

Security at the site is of concern to a number of visitors in the survey, as it is obvious from the results, with 45.1% having felt insecure at some point. A 35.4% stated ‘not really’, which although implies that they don’t feel threatened during a visit at the site, it denotes that they are not absolutely comfortable and probably more aware than usual. A 6.4% stated that security is an issue during every visit at the site, while a 12.9% opposed to that. Security has been identified as variable that can affect visitation, and even exclude certain social groups, like elderly, woman and children (Cole & Caserio, 2001; Handley, 2003; Dunnett, 2002; Thompson, 2002; English Nature, 2001; Durwin & McDonald, 1997), and it might be affecting the site also. From the visitors profile it is obvious that certain social groups, those more affected by security issues, are under presented at the site. Signs of vandalism have been noted, with the most serious case so far, a fire set in early September which burned nearly half an acre .

One of the objectives of this research was to see whether nature appreciation could be the base for an effort to make the site more appealing and more attractive to visitors. One first step to research this, was to find out how natural the site is in people minds. From the relevant question included in the questionnaire, the site’s environment feels quite natural (Fig.1, Fig.2), in fact most answers fell in the area between natural and very natural. This alone is quite significant, because of the fact that, like a member of a local conservation group set it in the right context, ‘this is no ancient woodland’. Indeed the site has no significant natural features, something to stand out, on the contrary the presence of sycamores and the relatively large areas of grass, degrades its natural identity.

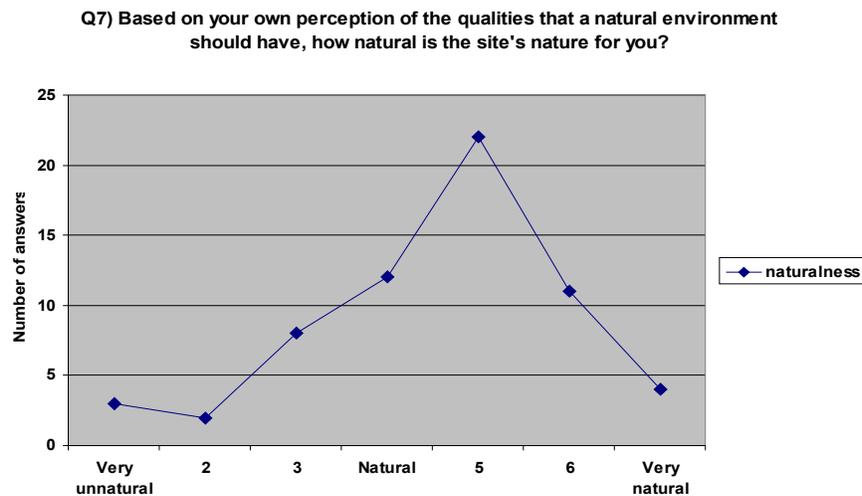


Fig. 1 Perceived naturalness of case study site

Position	Q8) Please place the following qualities, in order of importance, that best matches your criteria of the qualities of a natural environment. (no 1 being the most important)	Mark: Highest achievable=62 Lowest achievable=496
1.	• Area with trees/grass	177.1
2.	• Landscape undisturbed by man	183.2
3.	• Isolation from urban scenery/life	221.1
4.	• No buildings around	239.1
5.	• Clean air	283.4
6.	• Few people	372
7.	• Wild animals	380.8
8.	• Size of the area	389.7

Fig. 2 Qualities of a natural environment according to visitors

The emotional context of a visit to the site was also of interest, as the emotional gains from the experience can be able to give a direction about the importance of the place to the community, and the balances that have to be kept if any alterations are to be made to it (Fig.3).

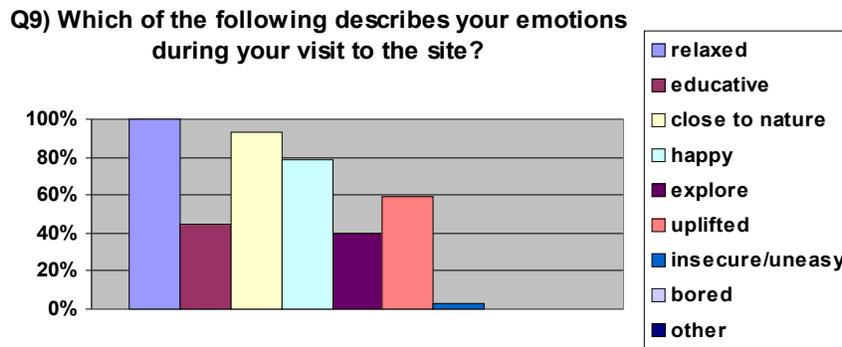


Fig. 3 Emotions generated from a visit to the case study site

One important question in the survey was to find out if people visit the site only to observe wildlife (Fig.4). Although 40.3% in a different question answered that among other activities they also visit the site for observing nature, with this particular one that percentage could be refined and an estimate of the level of interest for nature appreciation, could be measured. More than half of the visitors (54.8%) who undertook the survey answered that they have never visited the site solely for observing its wildlife. This can alternatively be interpreted as, if a development takes place and wildlife observation becomes easier and more interactive, a percentage of those people might also visit to observe nature, as only a 12.9% was not interested at all. On the other hand a 25.8% had at some point visited the site to observe wildlife, and 6.4% did that in every visit. These results are quite significant as it could mean that nearly half of the visitors will at some point be interested in nature appreciation at the site.

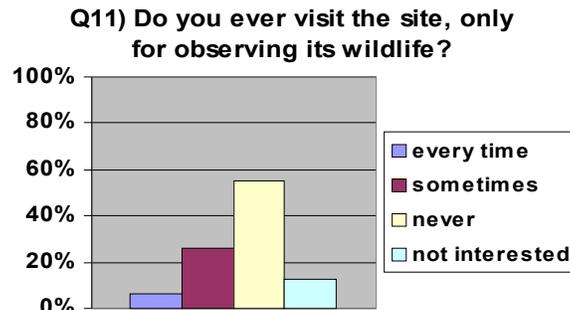


Fig. 4 Observing wildlife

A big part of the survey was about any future developments at the site. Set of developments were included where an opinion from the users was asked. A general feeling that derives from the results is that visitors don't want to see any dramatic changes made to the site. Any proposal that could alter the site's character was strongly rejected, like *more cleared space*, a *children's play area*, or a *mountain biking area*. Even visitor facilities were opposed, presumably because it could potentially generate larger amounts of visitors. The most favorable developments were those that could enhance the current status of the site, like reconstruction and maintenance of the current trails, developments that would favor the attraction of more wildlife, like a pond and new plantings, and frequent maintenance. Most other activities that implied nature appreciation, like leaflets explaining the nature of the site, activities with nature as a theme, activities regarding the conservation of the flora and fauna, didn't score that well. Although the majority of visitors in the survey were in favor of most of the above, there was a significant percentage opposing and another big percentage that didn't mind. It should be noted that developments with nature as a theme generated many responses of the 'don't mind' category. The latter is also true for any proposed activities that diversified the site from just a walking ground.

An interesting question from the set is, the creation of wildlife interpretive tours (Fig.5), which although fell in the range of responses mentioned above (43.5% yes, 35.4% no, 20.9% don't mind), it is interesting to mention that the majority are in favor. Such tours already exist in Corstorphine hill local nature reserve, organized at periods by Friends of Corstorphine Hill conservation group.

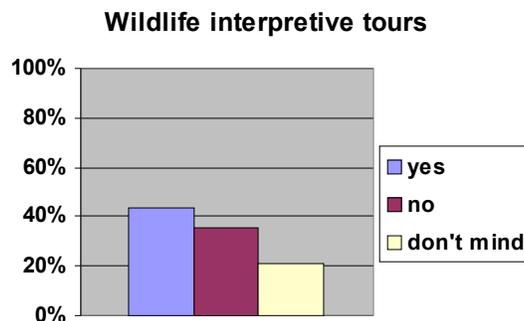


Fig. 5 Wildlife interpretive tours

Community involvement in the proposed developments was included in the survey in combination with a question in the development proposals, regarding activities helping the maintenance of the site. The majority of visitors in the survey stated that it would be at least important for the local community to be involved, with another significant number falling in the range between important and very important. As for the activities helping the maintenance of the site, which could be important if the site is to be embraced by the local community (DTLR, 2001; Durwin & McDonald, 1997) 43.5% answered in favor, with 27.4% opposed and 29% didn't mind.

## Conclusion

During the course of this research and following the results of the questionnaire some things became clearer. The site although part of a significant LNR, is not considered as such, and acts more as a walking ground, a dog walking ground to be exact, or as a place to relax and 'get away from it all' as one visitor noted. The south area of Corstorphine hill, is a place somehow separate from the rest of the reserve. Up until now and according to the survey, the roles that it served for the community has been rather different, and certainly not compatible within the context of being an entry point to a nature

reserve. The differences in usage of a greenspace and a local nature reserve, should be apparent, although in this particular area it's not. Except from the immediate interaction with nature, the site hasn't added anything more in terms of nature appreciation and education, in the reserve's area. Users like the site as it is, they don't want to see many changes made to it, nor something that will dramatically alter the site's character, of being a natural environment able to calm you down. No kids, was something that was frequently mentioned, and the attitude was the same to anything that could distract the peacefulness that the site can offer. On its ability to maintain viable wildlife populations, a key component for nature appreciation and education, that's something that wasn't investigated so it cannot be argued here. It should also be noted that the research was done during the summer, thus its almost certain that different patterns, in terms of visitation and usability, will exist for the rest seasons.

On the other hand the site has indeed some features suitable for some developments in the nature education and appreciation path. First of all the site is rather easily accessible. The nature in the site is not wild, thus easy to interact with, and also easily identifiable. According to the survey the site looks quite natural and is perceived as such for the majority of visitors. Finally and most importantly a visit to the site generates all those feelings expected and pursued from a visit to a natural place.

The site has the potential of becoming more useful to the community, and serve in an educational manner, while keeping the balances, without losing any of its current appealing characteristics, most notably, a place free from the tyranny of function.

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