

## A place in the country

### Is Britain's countryside and rural heritage really for all?

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Most Britons will explore the beauty of Britain's countryside at some point in their lives. Yet the experience can be quite different for members of the UK's ethnic communities.

The first issue is a lack of sense of belonging. New immigrants often recognise little when they arrive in Britain - everything is different and it can be hard to adjust. Although many new arrivals have come from rural areas and love nature, they often find no outlet for that affinity. Not knowing where to go or how to get there, and without money to travel into the countryside, many people from ethnic communities end up stuck in cities.

The next generation then grows up in a home in which the countryside simply isn't part of family life. By the third or fourth generation, people from ethnic minorities may have climbed the economic ladder and want to participate in normal 'good life' activities. But they feel strange going into the 'new territory' of the countryside. They may sense a lack of hospitality, which is expressed in manyways, from body language to surprise to outright racism. And they notice the sheer absence of 'people like us'.

What's more, leaflets and brochures promoting the countryside rarely feature non-white faces. All this creates an eerie sense of being in the wrong place, sometimes so intense that it can override their ability to enjoy the countryside.

The Black Environment Network (BEN) aims to be a catalyst for change. From 1993 to 1996, we ran a Countryside Trips Awards Scheme for ethnic minorities, funded by the Countryside Commission. It demonstrated a real need for regular group visits and showed that mutual support can override isolated incidents of unpleasantness so people are left with positive memories.

For ethnic communities to regard visiting the countryside as part of their lives, countryside agencies (such as the National Trust, the Countryside Agency, county countryside services, tourist development agencies, and The Institute for Outdoor Learning) need to adopt a more inclusive strategy. This would fit with the present government's emphasis on social inclusion.

The first requirement is an organisational culture change - the awareness and acceptance that members of ethnic communities are legitimately here because of their role in British history.

This multicultural history is slowly finding expression. Recent issues of the National Trust's magazine have featured positive images of ethnic minorities. But places which attest to a multicultural heritage are still generally promoted and perceived as icons of white Britishness, even though so much of Britain's history is based on engaging with people from around the world - from the fact of the British Empire to world trade.

What, for instance, of the Chinese wallpaper gracing the rooms of Penrhyn Castle - or the fact that the Penrhyn family built their first fortune out of black slavery on the sugar plantations of the Caribbean? Or what about Britain's many fabulous gardens, with their plants gathered from around the world? If we are to give our multicultural society a solid foundation we need to understand that our various histories share indissoluble links.

In 1995, BEN worked with Northamptonshire Countryside Services, providing race awareness training for their countryside staff. This resulted in a collaboration in which ethnic groups were truly vocal. They worked together to produce an annual multicultural festival in a country park where cultural, social and environmental activities stood side by side. Such events can motivate members of ethnic communities to participate in the care and protection of the countryside.

BEN and the Council for National Parks are today leading the way to enable ethnic groups to visit the countryside through the National Parks Multicultural Initiative. This aims to equip staff in national parks across England and Wales with the awareness and skills to engage with ethnic groups. We have finally arrived at an age where, at last, social inclusion, human rights and equal opportunities are serious undertakings. Ethnic minorities should have

more than dreams. They should be able to say with pleasure that 'British heritage is about us - and the countryside belongs to us too!'

More organisations and agencies need to move beyond being gestural. We have finally arrived at an age where at last, social inclusion, human rights, and equal opportunities are serious undertakings. Now, ethnic minorities should not have to only dream. They should be able to believe and say with pleasure that "British heritage is about us and the countryside belongs to us too!"

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