

Green and Pleasant Land for All

Richard Solly and Judy Ling Wong OBE

The percentage of black and other minority ethnic people living in the British countryside is very much lower than the percentage living in urban areas. There has been a widespread assumption that black people and others from minority ethnic communities in Britain are not interested in the countryside, even that they do not belong there. It was to challenge such assumptions that the Black Environment Network (BEN) and the government's Countryside Agency undertook a joint project which led to the publication last year of *Capturing Richness*. *Capturing Richness* is an inspiring account of BEN's mission to improve access to the British countryside by urban-based minority ethnic communities.

BEN saw countryside visits not simply as something nice for people to do, but as something which had the potential to produce many positive social and cultural outcomes. One of these is the creation of links between urban community groups and all sorts of other organisations, which increases social cohesion. BEN is very grateful to the Countryside Agency for understanding this: other funding agencies had seen countryside visits in a simplistic manner, overlooking their profound psychological significance for many people. For its part, the Countryside Agency had been asked by DEFRA (Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) to review the diversity of visitors to the countryside in the hope of finding ways to increase access.

The Preface to *Capturing Richness* explains that the provision of opportunities for visits to the countryside is 'a key to the fulfilment of the socio-cultural and environmental agenda'. It states that the 44 most deprived areas in England contain four times the number of people from minority ethnic communities that other areas contain. People from minority ethnic communities experience more health problems than other sectors of the community. The experiences described in the report suggest that access to the countryside has a huge positive impact on people's quality of life. 'The countryside has unleashed an unexpected richness of cultural association, shared knowledge and experiences for individuals and community groups and, indeed, for society as a whole.'

2•One of BEN's initiatives was the Mosaic Project, a partnership with the Council for National Parks. Its aim was to enable black and minority ethnic people to visit National Parks and take advantage of all they have to offer. As part of the Mosaic Project, BEN took a group of thirty elderly Chinese women from the Wai Yin Community Centre in Manchester to the Yorkshire Dales National Park. They made the journey in two mini buses and arrived at the Youth Hostel where they had arranged to stay overnight. The women practiced Tai Chi in the grounds and invited the warden and guides of the hostel to join them. The Chinese women explained that people practising Tai Chi is a common early morning sight in the parks of Chinese cities. Tai Chi is an expression of feeling at one with nature, so to be able to do it together in such an unspoilt setting was a very satisfying experience for them. They also said that Tai Chi was not possible in an inner city park in this country, because they felt conspicuous and were afraid that people would stare and disturb them.

A group of twenty Pakistani women and their children from Swansea were taken to Craig-y-nos Country Park in the Brecon Beacons. The mountains and cascading streams reminded the women of their own upbringing in rural areas and they began talking about their relatives who still live there. Before the trip, most of the women had been completely urban bound since their arrival in Britain. They were surprised and delighted to discover that open countryside lay just half an hour from their houses. The children did not know how to relate to the countryside to start with, but once they had begun to feel at ease they were equally pleased to be there and talked about it a lot afterwards.

Poor health is one of the concerns which BEN has tried to address. BEN learnt that many black and minority ethnic people in Cardiff were concerned that their children did not get enough exercise

because of the lack of green space. BEN arranged for these young people to visit Storey Arms Outdoor Education Centre outside the city so that they could see what countryside looked like. Three groups of about twenty young people took part, from the Samaj Community Centre, the Yemeni association in Butetown and the Riverside warehouse Youth Group. The young people explored a mountain gorge and tried caving, abseiling and climbing. They enjoyed themselves so much that further trips were arranged. The young people told their friends that the countryside was very beautiful, not far away, and a lot of fun.

A group of refugees and asylum seekers in Glasgow felt so inspired by the trips that BEN had arranged for them that they wanted to give something back. They were introduced to various conservation activities and decided they would like to plant trees, so they got involved in a reforestation project on the banks of Loch Lomond. People planted trees for relatives who had been killed or left behind. In this way they created a memorial for their loved ones and a living woodland landscape to be enjoyed by others for generations to come.

Capturing Richness is available on the Countryside Agency's website www.countryside.gov.uk

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