

**FINDING MY FEET - FINDING A TERRITORY**

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## **Introduction**

At the earlier stages of my research into children's use of outdoor space I was keen to get some potential projects off the ground. I wanted my fieldwork reflect the position I was taking up with respect to the desire to make a difference to the lives of some particular people in a particular place. This would involve a research process that required relationships with collaborators, their carers, and others. In the beginning of un-sponsored research by PhD students, there can be so much freedom on offer that one is really 'spoilt for choice' yet connected to no one. I was unfamiliar with the locality; I had little local knowledge about where I might find suitable partners for the kind of participatory locally based research that I wanted to try out. For me, engaging in collaborative research with children as well as adults was important. A suitable project would also have to deal with issues that were relevant to the lives of the participants in the research. I wanted to use participatory methods in my research that would make a difference to those *with whom* I was doing the research: this was the embodied, partial, and positioned stance I was building from a theoretical way in my philosophy and methodology readings and I was keen to take up a similar position in my 'fieldwork'. I spent some time looking around for those that could help me find suitable fieldwork opportunities for the general issues I was dealing with in my reading: children's sense of place, children's access to outdoor public space, children's experiences of participating in making changes to their locales. One initial partner turned out to be a local ranger service who were keen to get children's views on a local country park before considering their participation in a re-interpretation of the area. This appendix describes the fieldwork I conducted that feeds into the later research into school grounds and public play parks. It could easily have been a third research project with the same weight as the research I conducted on school grounds and play parks, but due to pressures of time and energy, it did not go to 'full completion'. The findings, intuitive and scanty as they are, provide a useful way into looking at the issues of children's access to local places, their familiarity with a specific locale, their acquisition of local knowledge, and the context for children's potential role as participants in changing local environments.

While *Children's Participation in Changing School Grounds and Public Play Areas in Scotland* was the final title for the research, the earlier general focus for my thesis was 'Children's Sense of Place'. As with many doctoral research projects that work in an open-

ended participatory way, the substantive issues in one's research often emerge only later in the study. Often, doctoral students write their texts with hindsight only, giving the impression that their thinking was perfectly clear throughout their time doing research. I include this piece of research here for a number of reasons. Firstly, the methods I used here were useful in piloting the use of photographs in guiding interviews with children and in getting them participating in research generally. The other reason for this appendix's inclusion is that it narrates a process of discovery that is central to participatory forms of research. This section of the story was a significant part of how the research as a whole unfolded. It shows how I generated methodologies that were useful later; how making partnerships with local agencies was a potential way forward; how my thinking was sharpened for the work that followed. In a way it is a broad sweep of work that could be described as a cycle within my own action research journey.

## **Background**

The strategy I took up with respect to children's 'sense of place' was to seek out local, easily accessible places that would provide a territory of investigation for the inquiry; a local place that was in the process of being changed with children's participation would be an interesting place to begin to unpack the issues I in which I was interested. One possible place that seemed to have potential was a local country park, commonly known as 'The Dam', which had a Ranger supported service. There were also two local schools which had populations of children who presumably frequented the place on occasions. It seemed to me that the potential of the space for children's exploration and discovery was great and that there may be possibilities for involving the children through the schools or the Ranger service in affecting changes to the site. I rang up the ranger service and got in touch with one of the rangers (Ms E. Palmer) who was in the process of getting some ideas together for an interpretation of the park. We felt we could collaborate and find out about the children's use of the place before venturing into any other project involving the children in a more in-depth way. The results of this work are presented here.

## **The Ranger Service**

It is worth noting that the significance of the fact that the park is managed and maintained by a ranger service. They monitor visits by locals and generally keep an eye on things. They also have a responsibility for the education of a visiting public. In a way they have the dual role of enhancing wildlife interests and the public's access and education. As such they are the gatekeepers and 'setters of the tone' in an area that can be regarded as held in common by a public. Thomashow (1995) writes about 'the commons' as a word that is a favourite among many environmentalists. Some talk of the tragedy of the commons and the loss of shared ownership. Thomashow notes that any 'commons' has four dimensions to it: the ecological, the political, the psychological, and the ethical. Public common places where children can play, socialise or be alone, without fear of harassment or surveillance, are slowly disappearing as we urbanise at a faster and faster rate. The Ranger service has the difficult job of managing aspects of all of these dimensions of the use of common land in the country park. By enabling people to find places for meeting each other within natural settings, they can provide a valuable link in connecting people to each other and to their natural environment all of which feeds into the generation of community-based cultural identity (see Talen, 1999). They have the responsibility of planning change for the area and

for enhancing the opportunities for a diversity of wildlife. Monitor access and keep motorcyclists off walking and cycling paths. Their work in no small way affects how and by whom the park gets used. Their presence is bound to have effects in the environmental education of the local children and in engendering a sense of security among local parents in letting their children wander around the area either alone or with their peers. The location and management of this country park is mirrored around the country in the many ranger maintained country parks in Scotland. The impact of these places on local communities is only scantily recorded and acknowledged. The idea that there was ever a simple uncontested territory available to communities called 'the commons' is unlikely. It is more likely that the practices of environmental, cultural and heritage organisations as 'wings of the state' may be at work in sites such as country parks where a fundamental symbolic struggle is continually waged over how local identity and concepts of what is 'home' are constructed. To find the voice of local children in this contest was the general drive behind this inquiry.

### **The Locality**

The locality bordering the park comprised of many ex-mining villages with a many of the housing schemes being local authority maintained. There were small bings in the park - remnants from the mining days and the 'lake' was a man-made reservoir which supported fish and bird life; there was a network of paths and tracks in place for the use of walkers, cyclists and so on. 'The Dam' was really the product of both a specific ecological and social history. Seen in this way, the park could provide a setting for social action but we can also say it was already of product of such action. In some ways it was historically an 'adult space' designed by adults for adults' needs, particularly the need for the mining of coal and later for the need for clean water. Overlaid on this was the reclamation of a past by the present day needs for recreation. That the children did not know what the bings were indicated a new generational gap in understanding the landscape; this was a gap in understanding that the ranger service was keen to fill.

When it came to the local schools they were largely similar: two suburban schools of approximately the same size. One of the schools I was interested in was very close indeed to the park, the other one was some 2km more distant and across a busy road. There were some small differences in the populations of children attending the two schools in terms of socio-economic class but I have no statistical data to support this. Suffice to say that the

school nearer the park was supported with a smaller pupil-teacher ratio.

### **Children's Local 'Green Space' - setting the scene**

In consultation with one of the local rangers we decided first to try to find out how often the children visited the site, where their 'haunts' were, and if there were differences in the population of users of the site in terms of gender and attendance at school. To do this I began by discussing things with Ms Palmer. We visited the park and took photographs of the 'key places' that the children were known to use regularly. Later, I visited the two local schools and tried to find out about the frequency of the children's visits, the average length of time they spent there, and with whom the children went. Some of the work involved interviewing a small number of children who were regular users of the park. Other work involved visiting each of six classes (primary 2 to primary 7) in each school - twelve classes in all. these visits provided me with larger statistical evidence about their use of the park. I also used an easily recognisable photograph of the site to assess how well they seemed to know the place at all. This is the first piece of the research I will discuss.

## **‘Photograph Recognition’**

### *Method*

As part of my visits to the classrooms in two schools which are close to the country park, I was keen to discover how familiar the children were with the place. To get a sample of this aspect of their local knowledge (their ‘familiarity’) I decided to try to use a larger photograph of the local country park in a photo-recognition exercise that I devised myself. I selected a photograph showing a ‘general view’ of the Gartmorn Dam site which would be the view seen by visitors entering by the main entrance. It was selected in consultation with others as the photograph was considered ‘easiest to recognise’ by anyone who had been there unless they had always entered by another route and never ventured across the main entrance where the rangers had a visitor centre. My idea was to present the photograph (almost A4 size in colour) to the classes I visited without first telling them anything about why I was there; they would then be asked to jot down the name of the place on a piece of paper if they recognised it. The teacher and I were on hand to help with any spellings ‘in secret’ but mostly we encouraged them to write down the name of the place in whatever way they could - deciphering handwriting could come later. Alternatively, the children with uncertainties could whisper in my ear what they thought the place was called. I assured them that it was not a test and that I expected a few people to not recognise the place for whatever reason. The teachers had not told the children anything about the reason for my visit in advance so the test could be done without any promptings. While children in the lower classes may have had difficulty remembering the place I felt sure enough from a trial run with some volunteer children that the procedure could work. I checked out whether those not recognising the photograph were actually the ones who did not regularly visit the place. This turned out to be the case for most participants. I ran the ‘test’ in one class from each level (from Primary 2, ages approx. 6, to Primary 7, ages approx. 11). This would potentially give me an opportunity to see any chronological changes in their recognition skills which in turn could possibly indicate their increasing local knowledge of the place. I also recorded the gender differences in the responses and noted if the children had moved house recently into the area or were resident at more than the expected distance from the school.

Plate A.1 (over) This was the photograph used in the photograph recognition exercise.

*replace with  
image  
of lake*

### *Rationale*

The thinking behind doing this kind of research was to assess the children's local knowledge as indicated by their skills at recognising a place from a photograph. This connection, however, is not a necessary one. Younger children especially may have a broad local knowledge of an area but fail to recognise a place from a single photograph because of the angle at which the shot was taken, the perspective given which may be an adult's viewpoint, or the abilities of younger children to recognise a place from photographs which may be outside of their cultural experience or beyond their developmental skill level. Other factors could interfere with the 'test's' validity if the children were to whisper to each other or look in on other's work. Previous research using photographs has been done in environmental psychology to assess people's general appreciation of places but I could find no record of research of this kind having been done in this specific way in school settings with the methods I employed. It serves as a quick and easy way of getting some useful starter information for those wanting to find out about a group of children's local knowledge. With increased sophistication, the methods described here could be used to map out even very young children's local range while still attending to gender, age or cultural differences.

A variety of factors have been shown to effect children's home range behaviour. Family culture, the age and gender of the child, the presence of brothers or sisters, parents' ability to 'keep an eye', and the kind of territory found in the locality have all been shown to effect children's range behaviour. Studies have shown that girls' independent mobility is more restricted than that of boys (Perez & Hart, 1980; Tindal, 1971) and that girls would spend increasing amounts of time inside as they got older (Moore, 1986). As a result of these studies, I expected to find differences in the children's ability to recognise the place according to their age and their gender.

### *Key Concepts*

Matthews (1992) best summarises a whole field of research that has looked at the cognitive side of children's competence at route finding, mapping and knowing their locality in a traditionally topological sense. By focusing on the desire to describe the development of children's competence cognitively, these studies may miss the rich source of local knowledge that children have when they are allowed to describe it in their own terms free of

adults' desires to categorise it developmentally in line with Piagetian or other developmental schemae. The underlying rhetoric is that we need to find (adult) developmental reasons why children's free access to larger outdoor environments is a 'good thing' and that it helps children to grow up in some way. As adults we seem more prepared to discover what other beneficial effects access to natural environments can have as recent studies in environmental psychology have attempted to show. I have argued elsewhere in this appendix and others for reasons why children's access to outdoor environments of different kinds is important. It is not the purpose of this research to support this argument directly though here is material that does so. My main inquiry here is to discover the extent of this population's local range behaviour using simple innovative methodologies. In doing so I found that I had discovered that some of the contemporary findings in more urbanised English studies had quite different things to say about the 'state of childhood today'.

### *Home Range*

The concept of 'home range' is traced historically by Gaster (1995). He shows up how different studies have wrongly claimed to be studying home range when their predominant concern may have been perception or cognition when no necessary connection between the concepts exists. I wish to be careful not to make similar tempting but unfounded claims. Stea (1970) is best cited as the foundation for a claim that *movement through an environment is a precondition for environmental learning*. Home range is a precondition for perception and cognition, not the other way round. In this study perception and recognition of a photograph *may reflect* home range extension but there is every chance that problems with children's perceptive abilities (especially at a younger age) may 'interfere' with assertions about the extent of their home range. This fact would problematise my findings if the photograph I used was *not* being well recognised by so many children; as it stands we can more assuredly say that the level of recognition of the photograph is evidence of substantial level of familiarity with a locale when set alongside other findings from the interviews and statistical evidence from the levels of frequency of visits made by the same child populations.

### *What is Home Range?*

Hart (1979) is given the credit generally for working with the complexity and richness of the home range concept giving it slants of 'free range' when children needed no permission to

wander off to these places and 'range with permission' for other sets of places. Hart also places home range as an indicator of children's experience of place; place experience could then be even more complex a concept than home range. He showed how children build their home ranges into increasingly broader expanses as they got older (especially around the age of ten) and had observations to evidence this. Hence the child got positioned as an agent of exploration and discovery. Since then others have shown how children negotiate and expand their rights to roam with their carers as they claim greater ability to look after themselves. At the same time, children's home ranges are seen to be under pressure of extinction from adults' fears for their children's safety (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997), increasing traffic, and planning policies (Gaster, 1993). New research calls for further evidence to show how child populations differ in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, and environmental location to bring out differences in an otherwise homogeneous group of 'children'. Mercer (1976) has shown that working class children are likely to be less supervised than their middle class counterparts while Valentine and McKendrick (1997) show that middle class children are more likely to have institutionalise experiences of play. This class based difference alone could be the single most influential factor determining how broad and free ranging the mobility of this population of children was. In this light of the contemporary notion that children's access to outdoor spaces like 'the Dam' is being eroded, the study's findings become all the more interesting.

### Findings

My results show that the photo-recognition exercise does indicate that age impacts on how well recognised a photograph of a particular local outdoor place is. The most obvious conclusion one might draw is that children's familiarity with their locality increases with age. While this is by no means the only interpretation of the finding, such an interpretation is in line with current thinking about children's home range development and the effects of age.

Fig A.1. (below) shows the total percentages of children for the two schools for the consecutive classes (primary 2 - 7 respectively) according to how they recognised the photograph. By primary seven (age about eleven), children are almost all able to recognise the place whereas only about 35% of primary ones (aged about 6) recognise the same photograph.

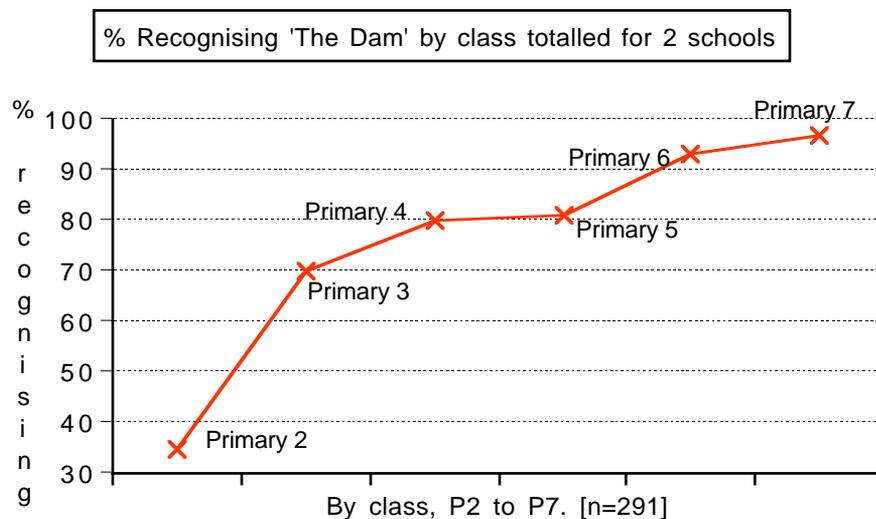
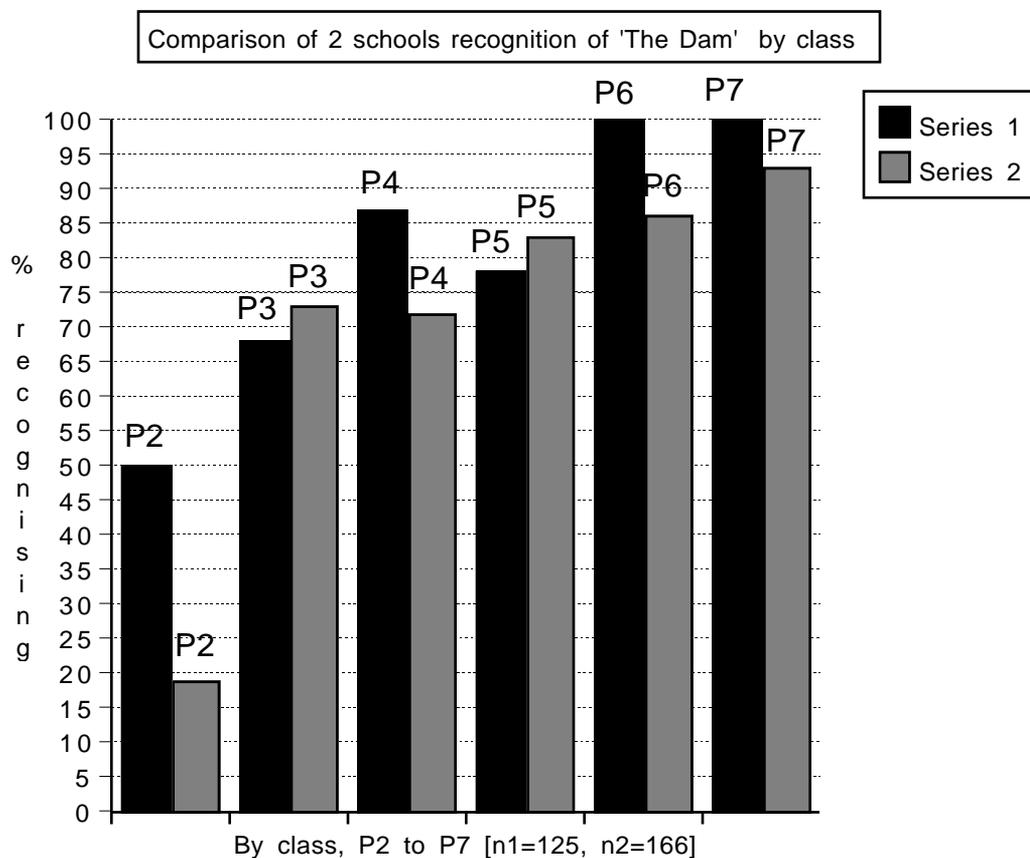


Fig A.1. In this line graph we can see the increase in children's ability to recognise a photograph of a local outdoor place (in this case a country parkland) as they get older.

Fig A.2. shows that there are differences in the recognition abilities found in children in the two local schools. There is a stronger ‘recognition ability’ by children in the school that are living closer to the site. This was an expected result considering the children’s houses are in a catchment area that borders the country park more directly. This difference between schools further indicates a potential for using photograph recognition to mirror other ways of assessing home range behaviour. The totalled percentages for ‘recognition abilities’ for the two schools demonstrates this difference:

**SCHOOL 1** (most local) Total % recognising photo: **81%**

**SCHOOL 2** (more distant) Total % recognising photo: **72%**



**Series 1** is the most local school; **series 2** is approx. 2km further away from the park.

Fig A.2. This bar chart shows how age effects recognition of a local country parkland commonly known as ‘The Dam’. The differences between the two schools are not that significant and can possibly be accounted for by their respective distances from ‘The Dam’. Most significant is that 50% of the children in primary 2 class in the school nearest the park had such a good recognition of the area compared with a school only 2km away but located across a busy road. The Primary 4s in School 1 (series 1) recognised the place with a score above their Primary 4 peers from the other school. This was probably due to their having been on a trip there in the recent past.

### *Gender Differences?*

No substantial difference was found between the ability of boys and girls to recognise the photo: boys overall recognition percentage for both schools was 76% while girls was slightly higher at 78%. One may have expected that girls would have been less well able to recognise the photograph because they have been shown to have reduced 'home ranges' when compared to boys. However, I did find gender differences in the results taken from the question about going alone to the park which was in line with earlier findings about children's 'home range' (see Fig A.3., below). My presumption here is that this research tool is able to say something significant about children's home range which of course rests on the presumption that photograph recognition can be used at all to reflect children's range behaviour. A few possible explanations for the lack of gender differences in the results for the photo-recognition exercise could be given; the misgivings could be applied to the interpretations above as well. I suggest four below. Further research would be needed to demonstrate the accuracy of the method and the validity of my findings and analyses. This could be achieved by cross tabulating other sources of home range results from other sources with a photo-recognition test of the sort I describe above or by the use of many more photographs in research of this kind in conjunction with other data on home range behaviour to further refine the method.

### *Reasons for the Lack of Gender Differences*

1. The photograph was too easily recognised by any child who got 'out and about' *at all* and different photos of more inaccessible or remote places may be more useful in showing up gender differences in the types of place being accessed by the boys and girls that may have been present in the sample.
2. There was no significant difference in the experiences of boys and girls in their ability to extend their home range into the park because it was culturally acceptable for both genders in this working class area to access this local outdoor space. The families had a tradition of letting their children out and about on their own as well as late into the night in some cases; we heard of one woman who allows her six and five year olds out without adult supervision up until nine or ten at night in the summer.
3. Gender differences may have been less obvious among the population surveyed because of the geography of the area: road calming measures were in place and the park was close by with a ranger service on hand.
4. The girls may have recognised this particular photograph well because they were

accustomed to going there to feed ducks and swans; this was a favourite pastime of many of the female respondents in the classroom surveys.

*Comment*

While there are misgivings about the use of photographs to reflect accurately children's home ranges or even their 'familiarity' with an area, there are many reasons why my piloting of the method may serve as a useful innovation as a method for looking at children's experience of local or even more distant places or for studying other related issues. As a tool for research I have found it to be consistent with at least some of the findings of other studies about home range that have used different methods (e.g. mapping, drawing). For our purposes in this research it serves to validate the idea that children can be shown to have a rich understanding and knowledge of local outdoor places and secondly, that this understanding may be affected by a variety of factors: culture, age, adult's attitudes, availability of local green space, bicycle ownership and so on in the same way as children's home range is affected by variables. This leads us to the further questions of *how often* children access these places, whether there are differences in how boys and girls access the place, and whether children go alone to parks or not. These questions needed answering in the context of *this particular park* for the purposes of our study. We also wondered about whether there were carers or parents who enabled or restricted their access. We wondered what other specifics of the children's local environmental knowledge we could find out, and whether there are ways of encouraging the access we or the children regard as desirable.

## Frequency of Visit

I wanted to find out if children did regularly visit the park (commonly known as ‘The Dam’). I went about finding this out by asking the children to self-select’ a category from three categories of frequency:

- **Once a Week** (or more often in the last six months)
- **Once a Month** (or more often but not ‘once a week’ over the last six months)
- **Less Often** (than the above but more often than ‘Rarely or Never’)
- **Rarely or Never** (less than two visits a year)

The children provided me with this information by standing in appropriate corners in the classroom which designated these distinct frequencies of visit. We checked out their selections by discussing the categories in advance and discussing their selected positions after the children had chosen them. This seemed to work well and allowed me to get large numbers of children surveyed in a day. I did this in both schools and recorded the numbers of boys and girls selecting categories as well.

### *Findings*

Fig. A.3. shows the results for this question for the total population (n=301).

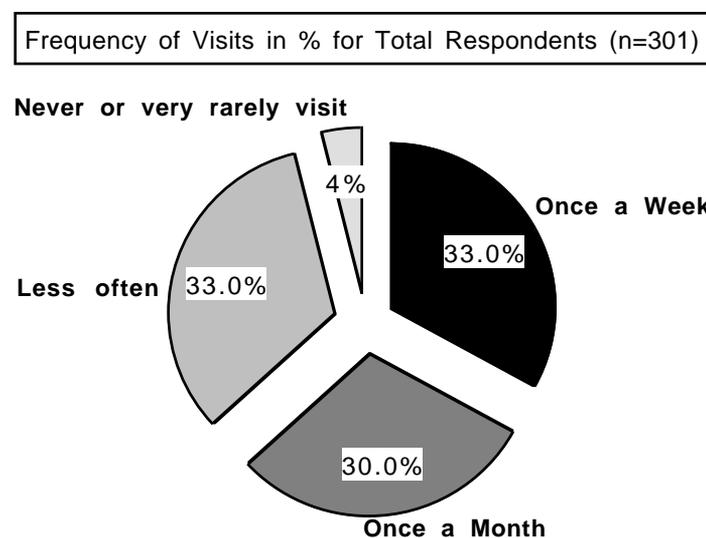


Fig. A.3. This Pie chart shows the percentages of children who claimed to visit ‘The Dam’ according to four choices of frequency.

We found that a third of the children (some one hundred) visited the park very regularly indeed. This result blows apart the many assertions (Gaster, 1995, p40) that in urban or

suburban environments children's home range is almost non-existent these days. McKendrick and Valentine (1997) found that the most significant influence on children's independent play was parental anxieties and not facilities. Yet, at a time in Scotland when parental fears are likely to be as high as anywhere, we find that these children were accessing this site with high regularity. The results make a strong argument that there is a link between play provision and play patterns: that there was a locally accessible large and diverse environment on the doorstep of this population of children was making a difference to their play patterns. Alongside this general argument for the total population we can further argue that we could expect differences between the two schools. This expectation was confirmed: School 1 (nearest 'The Dam') had 39% 'Once-a-Weekers' with School 2 (further away) having 28% 'Once-a-Weekers'. There were gender differences to be found as well but this difference is best exposed by the statistics for 'Going Alone' to the park.

### Going Alone to the Park - Gender Differences

The children were asked to self-select if they had ever 'gone alone' to the park. This category was explained as meaning if they had travelled to the park without anyone else including all adults, teenagers or friends of any age, if the subsequently spent time there alone and then returned home alone as well.

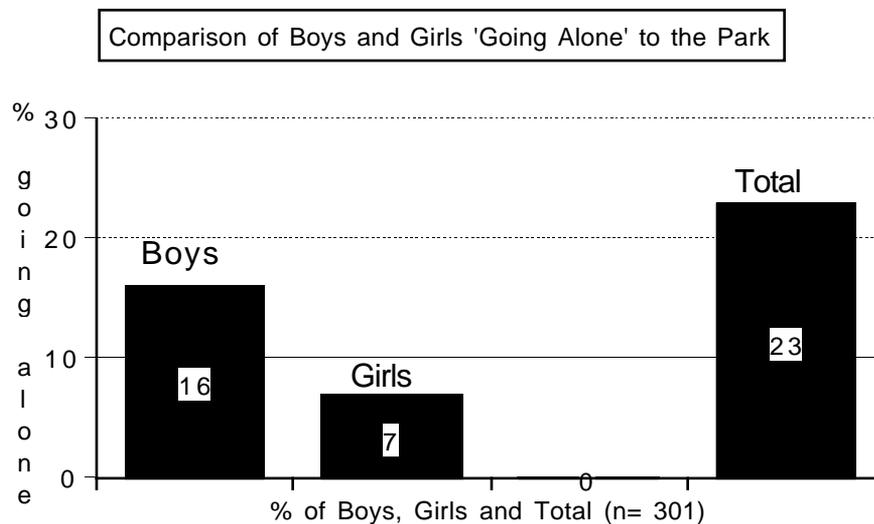


Fig. A.4. Percentages of boys and girls and a total % showing recent visits made to the park alone.

The table (fig. A.4., above) shows the gender differences in children's visits to the park alone. This data was derived from asking children if they went 'On their own' to the park

with any regularity. We can understand the evidence as showing not a frequency of visit made alone (though this would be interesting to find out) but rather in looking at whether they ever did this at all that we could discover differences *between the genders*.

Significantly, we can see that twice as many boys than girls were likely to have visited the park alone. Evidence from parents informal accounts and children's comments in the interviews reported below in my small sample showed that girls home range is somewhat more likely to be restricted by their own or parental fears inspired often by the influence of the media's reporting of events or by local folklore. A larger interview sample including parents and children of diverse ages and backgrounds would be needed to confirm these findings or to find out any differences in terms of class or cultural background. It is interesting to note that it is quite possible that the girls were overcoming the 'stranger danger' element by going out in groups and seemed to have made as many visits to the park as the boys but that they did different things while there. Other possible reasons why there is a difference is that boys just liked going out alone more than girls.

Next a comparison of the two schools using the statistics for this question will show the consistent difference we found between the two schools when it came to 'going alone' to the park (fig. A.5., below). This difference may be accounted for by parental fears for children 'not straying away too far from home', children's preference for not going too far from home, and by the presence of a busy road that cut off many of the children's homes from having a 'safer' journey to the park.

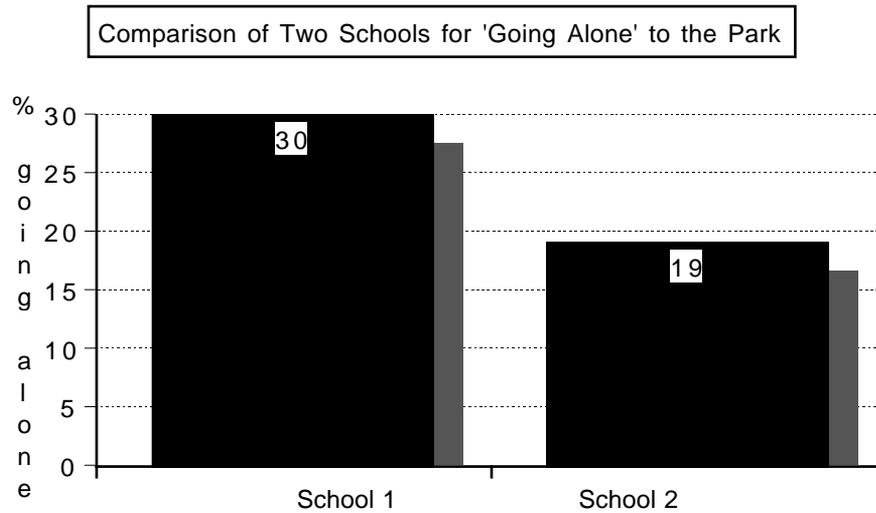


Fig. A.5. This table shows the difference between Schools 1 and 2 most likely accounted for by their nearness to the park although cultural differences could be a significant factor too.

### Reasons for Visiting

Next we turn our attention to the possible *reasons why* the children visited the park. In classroom settings the children were asked to write their reasons for visiting the area on a piece of paper, writing the ‘most important reason for them’ down as a single answer. I used the phrase ‘most important’ as a way of encouraging the children to write the main reason for their visits. We discussed this ‘reason for visiting’ the park as being the activity (or thing) they would ‘miss the most’ if they could no longer do this, see this or experience this. As such it may not be the reason why they go there most often; it is, hopefully, the ‘most important’ reason for them. They were asked for only ‘one reason’. Fig. A.6. shows the breakdown of choices made ranking the reasons for visits according to popularity among respondents aged 5 - 11 and among a total number of 234 respondents. I have categorised the responses into:

- **Wildlife** (including any mentions of pond dipping, bird watching, fishing, frogs, toads, insects, seeing things of natural beauty)
- **Walking** (including walking with others and / or the dog)
- **Cycling** (including any mention of taking the bike for a ride etc)
- **Picnicing** (including any mentions of food, Barbecues etc)

Reasons Why Children Reported Going to the Park (n =234)

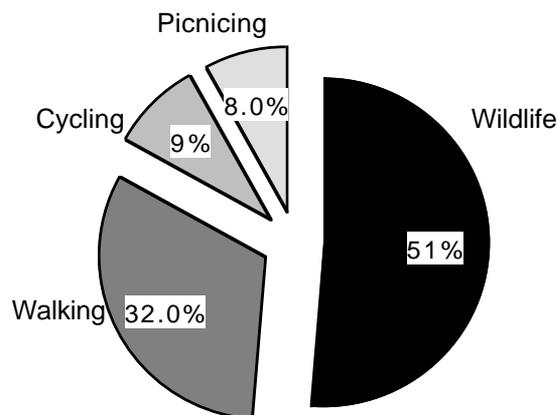


Fig. A.6. shows a breakdown of the most important reasons why children go to 'The Dam'. Reasons relating to 'Wildlife' were by far the most popular.

A further analysis of the Wildlife segment of the above pie chart shows what the children had in mind. Specifically: 22% of all boys in School 1 mentioned fishing as the most important reason for them while 20% of girls in the same category mentioned seeing birds and other animals (especially feeding the swans, cygnets, ducks and horses) as the reasons for their visits. We should also bear in mind that the children who visited the park for cycling, walking, dog walking, or picnicing may also have had wildlife interests in mind but considered their other choice as a priority. With this in mind we can consider the 'natural value' of 'the Dam' to be highly significant for this population in terms of the amount of time they spent there and their own mentions of reasons for their visits. Their local knowledge was further evidenced by their mentions of where the toads were to be found, which routeways were quickest. Often this knowledge was unavailable to the adults who accompanied them to the park; in these cases the children were the 'guides' for the trip. The regular informal trips the children were making was augmented by the trips made by the schools to the site on days out and by trips the children made to the ranger visitor centre for events and a wildlife club on Saturdays. The combination of regular informal learning with adult carers and educators, informal trips with other children, and formal trips to the site as part of their schooling made the place very significant indeed for the children's experience of the outdoors and their local 'sense of place'. The importance of the site for the children living most locally to 'The Dam' was further evidenced by the differences in statistics

shown in Fig. A.5.

### **Four Interviews**

Four children aged 10 (2 boys and 2 girls) were interviewed to check out in more detail what kind of local knowledge they had and to discuss issues arising from the statistical evidence in terms of gender and appreciation of the place. Children of this age were selected because they fall into the age bracket where children are likely to have recently extended their spatial range from home (Matthews, 1987). All four of the children interviewed came from School 2 (the school that was more distant from the park). They were selected for interview because they had a lot of experience of the place being visitors to the park at least 'once a week' and more often in the summer time. As a sample group for interview, they probably represented about one third of the child population for the area in its entirety all of whom regularly visited the site about once a week. Because they lived further away than their counterparts across the road, their experiences, if anything, are even more limited than the other children from this population of regular users; we could expect a more detailed understanding of the locale from the other children in the school case studies. I guided the interviews with a set of photographs which I took in collaboration with a local ranger which showed the places she felt the children would know well and may have stories to tell about. Sixteen photographs were used in all. I prompted the children to talk about the place by saying things like: 'Do you recognise this picture?' and 'Tell me about the place'. I give a commentary with quotations using pseudonyms for the four children from their interview transcripts hereunder.

#### *Comments*

Both girls and boys engaged in activities that would lead them to learn about their environment. The girls show that parental attitudes to their going out alone is perhaps the biggest influence on girls freedom to access outdoor spaces. The boys' responses show a preference for more active types of activities like boating, fishing and skimming stones. The girls were keen to be in a social group when out and about and were not as fond of activities that required large amounts of action. The environmental knowledge base of all four children is largely 'sound' but there are some absences and they are somewhat confused about some things like the rangers role. Aside from the opportunities for learning provided

by access to a diverse outdoor environment, we should bear in mind how such access can impact on other aspects of children's development and participation in their local culture.

John aged 10, mentions that he 'likes watching the birds and the fish' and that he 'found a dead duck once'. He knows where one can find 'loads of plants, feathers, frogs and beer cans and bottles'. He likes 'skimming stones' and lifting rocks to find what is underneath. He knows where the water in the reservoir goes and that it eventually ends up in his tap in his house. He sometimes goes with his Wellingtons and catches tadpoles; he likes to watch how big they get. He knows where the herons live. He knows that a swan's wing can break a man's arm. In the summer he goes there 2-3 times a week; he doesn't like being 'stuck in the house'. He phones his friends to get them together and goes across the road to meet with them before going to the 'Dam'. He has seen boys trying to hit the geese with stones and seen people throw rubbish into the water.

Melissa, aged 10, 'likes watchin' the way the waves go' on the reservoir. She thinks that the rangers clean out the water and out fish in it. She mentions that her 'little brother goes there with his friends when he is not feeling well. He likes being alone with his friends when he is not feeling that good'. She likes to 'run through the trees' but sometimes takes her bike. She knows that rabbits live there and knows a 'little blue bird with a stripe' that is in the wood. She goes under the bridge in the summer with her friends and play 'The Three Billy Goats'. She tells me [how when they play] that a troll lives under the bridge who comes out when the goats are trying to get across (see plate A.2. Over). The only days she doesn't go there in the summer is when she has karate or swimming. She likes to feed the horses in the country park with her friends. She remembers having a baby frog in her hand once. She thinks that the 'vandals' do the graffiti on the bird hide. Like Monica, she mentions a fear of strangers:

'My Mum won't let me talk to anybody: "*Never talk to anybody*" she says. you could be given a sweet that is poisonous or they might take you away ... they might make you change your name. My cousin - she talked to strangers and they took her away and they made her change her face so people wouldn't recognise her but they got her back. That's why I don't go to *The Dam* on my own. If I saw anyone I'd run away'. She did go up once with some other girls in the dark playing 'touch-tig' with torches.

Plate A.2. (Over) The place where 'Melissa' plays *Three Billy Goats*.

replacement

replace with

Plate: The Three Billy Goats Gruff  
and the Troll (photo)

Paul, aged 8, fishes in 'The Dam' with his Dad. He likes the Ranger centre and while he doesn't know a lot about their work thinks that they are there 'to take care of the Dam'. He remembers going to the Dam with his class once. He recognises almost all the places shown in the photo-set and points out where he likes to pick up sticks and throw them into the water. he notices the places where he likes to catch butterflies and play hide and seek. He sometimes goes into the bird hide and watches the birds with his big brother. He feels that there may be places in 'The Dam' where a badger 'might take a bite out of ye or a snake might bite ye'. He knows that the water is destined for drinking. He is able to name the moorhens as a species in the photograph.

Monica, aged 10, likes going to 'The Dam' to feed the ducks. She also likes the bird watching tower where she goes with her Dad who has binoculars and she likes feeding the horses. She is not able to say the word 'Rangers' but thinks that their job is to 'take care of 'The Dam' and make sure there's nothing wrong with the water. She likes the Ranger's centre and the big map on the wall. Her Dad goes fishing there and they have a Bar-B-Q once a year in the area designated for it. She sees squirrels sometimes. She remembers going pond dipping with her class once. She mentions that her mother is scared of her 'goin up to 'The Dam' on her own: 'She is 'scared in case I get kidnapped or somethin, like on the telly; like all the things that happen kids on the telly - she doesn't like me goin out on my own. She would go out if there was a teenager with her and she would 'like to run out of sight and then just come back but my Mum doesn't let me'. She thinks it would be safe to do this but her mother doesn't. She thinks that the park is for the animals as well as the people.

## **Discussion**

The consistency found in the results from the photo-recognition exercise, the statistics showing children's frequency of visits, and the results showing their reasons for going to this local green space, all shows that large numbers of these children were getting 'out and about' in their local environment regularly. There can be no doubt that the children's experiences were greatly effected by the availability of a local green space that had a diversity of species and habitats in it. Children living a mere five miles away had no doubt a different experience of childhood. Further reasons for the popularity of the place may be

augmented by any number of different factors: the lack of speedy traffic in the local housing scheme because of regular large speed ramps, the local parenting culture, or socio-economic or historical reasons but the main reason we can surmise for their experiences was that ‘The Dam’ was there! The locally available parkland greatly influenced the kind of childhood these children were experiencing. We will now take a closer look at the literature supporting the view that diverse outdoor environments can be beneficial to individuals and communities.

### *The Importance of Experiences in Outdoor Environments*

Authors have attempted to get an understanding of the importance of childhood experience by using a variety of methods with adults: cognitive mapping, personal autobiographies. Few have studied the experiences of children by conducting their research with the children themselves. Matthews (1992) has looked at children’s developmental understanding of place through mapping. Sobel (1993) has studied the role of ‘den and hut building’ in the outdoors as a significant aspect of child development. He uses a Jungian perspective of children’s informal experiences of the outdoors to claim an importance for the role these spaces play in children’s evolving sense of self. He also describes how adult’s memories can be important points of connection for the development of a sense of place. By negotiating a local environment, they must leave the security of the intimate ‘home’ and recreate a wider sense of self and home that includes more far flung places. Often these new ‘homes’ are made up of the raw materials of the natural world and their own vivid imaginations. The view here is that children can ‘bond’ with the Earth through their activities of place making in middle childhood. Other authors like Joseph Chilton Pearce (1977), Roger Hart (1979), Edith Cobb (1977) and Paul Shephard (1982) have also made claims that one’s personal identity is connected to local terrain exploration at a young age. Thomashow (1995) develops a concept of ‘ecological identity’ that has firm foundations in our memories of childhood’s special outdoor places. Orr (1992) shows how experience in the natural world is both an essential part of understanding the environment and is conducive to ‘good thinking’. To learn about things is to inhabit a place and dialogue with it. Outdoor experiences can develop kinship relationships with other species and an aesthetic appreciation of the land. Orr’s ecological literacy requires that one becomes familiar with a place through observation, study, open-mindedness, concern, and love. With a more community oriented attitude, Kemmis (1990) argues that concern for a place is the bedrock of a sound and stable community life. He recognises the importance of public places that allow a community to solve problems together. He argues that people will learn to live

together through political processes that address problems associated with places they hold in common. We can also consider Palmer and Suggate's research (1996) which shows the importance of early childhood experience outdoors for their role in encouraging concern among conservationists and environmental educators. Sobel (1990) and Chawla (1994), in the footsteps of Cobb (1959), have studied adults' memories of childhood special places and memories of nature to demonstrate their positive effects in later life and while a child. Some environmental psychologists (Parsons et al., 1998) have attempted to show that nature dominated, vernacular places are important for recovery from stress. Herzog et al. (1997) have attempted to show that ordinary 'natural settings' were seen as having the highest overall 'restorative effectiveness', with everyday urban settings as having the lowest effects. The arguments for encouraging children's access to outdoor places such as 'The Dam' come from many academic disciplines. Their arguments find their basis in a variety of disciplines and perspectives that support the same opinion. Hetherington's work (1998) on the social centrality of some places to group identity formation can be extended to take account of the ecological identity rhetoric of Sobel, Thomashow and others. I discuss the expansion of his 'bund' to encompass other species and local places in the development of a sense of togetherness in a place later in this volume (p?). An alternative reading of these children's experience would be to dismiss the centrality of the natural features of the site and to see its role as purely a functional place that served the needs of children to perform their identity positions through group activities like throwing stones, playing imaginary games, and hide and seek. 'The Dam' then comes to be a shrine for the culturally marginalised: children who happen to pick this site as the focus for their 'communitas' (Turner, 1969).

But the Dam had a significance beyond the fact that it happened to be there. It was a richly diverse set of habitats too. With the assertion of many authors of the importance of firsthand experiences in the outdoors in childhood, we can say that these children were having environmental experiences that were potentially benefiting on many counts. They were potentially building up a strong positive attitude towards solving environmental problems. Some might even end up dedicating their careers to it. We can accept that there were many opportunities for environmental educators to build upon the formal and informal environmental experiences these children were having. We have also seen how there are many other reasons for supporting the notion that access to this kind of outdoor public

space is important politically, educationally, psychologically, and socially. Yet there are pressures on children's access to spaces such as this. Blakely (1994) found that parents felt their female children were more fearful of unknown people and had specific fears of kidnapping. My results supported this view. The role the media plays in increasing such fears has yet to be asserted. Other influences have transformed children's access to green spaces for informal play and socialisation. Such factors as increased traffic rendering streets increasingly dangerous for play (Ward 1979), the undoubted rise in fear of paedophilia, child abduction and murder (McNeish & Roberts 1995), and the effects of planners (Roberts et al 1995) have also been accused of changing the environment detrimentally for children. Others have noted the increase in commercial provision of indoor play areas and commercial centres for play (McKendrick et al. 1998). By comparison with commercial centres and public play areas, the country park comes out favourably. The public playground provides a smaller more bounded space for children's play when compared to the country park; in the absence of particular items of play equipment, children will be expected to create their own fun. We can consider the child's experience of place within the broader personal and community effects on the populations that regularly visit a country park such as this. We can also keep in mind the potential for the construction of a positive local identity out of a regular association in childhood with 'The Dam'.

### *Symbolic Effects*

In turning our attention to the symbolic effects of 'The Dam' on children, a few further simple findings can be listed in a similar way to Titman's findings (1994) for the effects of school grounds on children:

- 1. The country park, as an outdoor environment, is an important one to local children.** While there has been a decrease in children's independent mobility in larger towns and cities, this country park continues to provide the opportunities for children's freedom to roam. Some children, for a whole range of reasons, (e.g. age, gender, the nature of their home) may have a considerable lack of access to natural outdoor environments. With the decrease in family size, the advent of television and other technology in the home, the country park is a very important arena for play, exploration, learning, and social activity.
- 2. The country park conveys messages and meanings about the ownership of the space and the participation of locals in planning and decision making for change**

**in the area.** Drawing on place-identity and self-identity (Proshansky et al., 1995), we can acknowledge the influence of a physical setting within its cultural context. The appearance of the country park may be symbolic for children of the way adults (like the ranger service) valued them as locals. There were examples of how the ranger service's contribution to community ethos was displayed through their care for the natural world and the habitats the children so enjoyed.

**3. To some extent, children's attitudes and behaviour are determined by the design and management of country park.** Paths invite exploration, trees invite children to climb, bushes invite den building and hiding. From Titman's research the active involvement of children constantly emerged as a critical factor influencing their behaviour and also their attitude, not only in terms of the grounds, but in relation to themselves and the school as a whole (1994, p111). Further work on the interpretation of the site might need to bear this in mind.

#### *Local Findings*

A final comment on the distinctiveness of this locale in a Scottish context and in a UK context. The fact that at least some children were accessing the park regularly in an unsupervised way does seem to run against the much referenced Hillman et al. (1990) survey of children in an English UK sample where they found that 'drastic changes' were taking place in how children were travelling to school over the last twenty years. In 1971, 80 per cent of children aged seven and eight went to school without adult supervision. By 1990 only 9 per cent were doing so. In the Scottish context this 'drastic change' may not have happened 'yet' or may be prevented by other measures. I conducted a 'snapshot inquiry' (sample, n=24) into children's independent mobility using the same sample age as Hillman et al. in one of the schools I visited to test this out. My results show that *75% of children were still walking to school*. Indeed, 58% of them at age eight were walking to school *alone*, with only 25% travelling by car. This result shows that we need to be very careful when using 'National' survey results as a context for our local research. This seems especially true in this Scottish suburban context where geography, culture and history combine to make the 'field' very distinct indeed. Further research is very urgently needed to assert differences in the Scottish context with special attention being paid to locally distinct differences. Policy decisions about the cultures of childhood and family life we encourage by our planning and urban development plans make real differences to the lives of all

citizens. From the child's perspective, this research shows that what may be insignificant to an adult *may greatly* influence a child's lifestyle, their informal education and their access to the outdoors in safety: the presence of a busy road, the distance from a local green space (even the distance of some two kilometres), local cultures of parenting, and school day trips may all have a part to play in influencing a child's local knowledge, their home range, their appreciation of their environment, and their ability to be mobile in an independent way in their neighbourhood. While some of my comment amount not to 'findings' but are more 'intuitive discoveries' in the process of doing research. They point out where further research is needed to clarify things at a local level where locally distinct policies can be effectively adapted to greatest effect. I felt reassured that research into the public spaces of the school grounds and play parks was a worthwhile project as a result of my foray into the issues of public access into this local country park. While this segment of my research was not a central component of the thesis, it was an example of an action research project in collaboration with the local Clackmannan ranger service that did not get off the ground due to time constraints beyond the report documented here of the research we managed to complete. This appendix of the research has been made available to the ranger service who collaborated with me on this aspect of what turned out to be pilot work. Perhaps it can inform their future plans for a re-interpretation of the site and suggest ways of involving children in these plans. In the context of the larger text for the doctorate, this appendix serves its purpose to tell the story of how I made initial forays into 'the field' to pilot research tools, make local connections with some schools, and refine my ideas about the relevance and importance of locally accessible, outdoor, public spaces.

The gross absence from / presence in the appendix has been any evidence of collaborative participation between adults and children in changing the site we have called 'The Dam'. Participation has been present in the form of children being consulted but not informed about possible developments *by adults*. But children's participation in changing 'The Dam' has also been present by children's activities in, and frequency of visits to the site. In a way, they may have made their own of the place in a cultural practice that I have not underlined successfully as 'children's participation' in this appendix. This adultist view of participation drove me on to search for sites that were the setting for changes that were reportedly the result of children's agency within adult-controlled environments. In a convoluted way, children's participation will exist in this text in chapters that are mainly about adults' efforts

to change places when they have attempted to involve children. In this sense children's participation is conceptualised as valid only in adults' terms in adult-dominated space. It is perhaps conceived of as the presence of adult-like initiative on behalf of children who are otherwise seen as lacking agency or control. That this is one interpretation of the rest of the this text, it indicates a colonial desire on the part of adults (and this text) to get children speaking adults' language and get involved in adults' ways. Alternatively, we can look for signs that the adults in the cases offered move to reconfigure participation in change in more child-oriented ways, seeking to forge a 'common ground' located in a space that adults and children share responsibility for: perhaps we can find this space in some school grounds.

Plate A.3. (Over) The pond where the toads were to be found and where children sometimes made rafts.

replacement page  
The pond where the toads..  
raft