

Nature Nurtures: Wild Walks Pilot

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Foreword

Natural England commission a range of reports from external contractors to provide evidence and advice to assist us in delivering our duties. The views in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of Natural England.

This report was commissioned by Natural England to build knowledge and understanding to inform future initiatives and improve equitable access to greenspace and recreational opportunities for girls and young women. London Wildlife Trust was commissioned by Natural England to understand the barriers that prevent girls and young women from Black, Asian, ethnic minoritised groups in accessing and engaging with urban nature. This final report presents the outcomes and evaluation of the project and uses it to share key insights and lessons learned for future delivery to better support equity on access to greenspace.

Executive summary

Greenspace access, engagement and nature connection are all key factors that support physical and mental health and wellbeing. Although this is widely understood, groups of people still face significant barriers to accessing greenspaces, including those from ethnic minoritised backgrounds. Nature connection and time spent engaging with the greenspaces drop significantly in early adolescence. Young women are less physically active than their male counterparts and are at particularly high risk of poor mental wellbeing, and face significantly higher safety fears accessing the outdoors compared to men.

Nature Nurtures: Wild Walks is a partnership pilot project between London Wildlife Trust and Black Girls Hike that delivered nature engagement and wellbeing-centred activities across Walthamstow Wetlands Nature Reserve. The initiative focussed specifically on young women from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic backgrounds (aged 16-25), who are currently underrepresented in the environmental and outdoors sectors.

Key aims of the pilot project were to support young women to:

- Overcome negative perceptions of who wild spaces are for
- Gain the confidence to get physically active in a way that is outward facing i.e., not associated with body image
- Foster a deeper sense of place and belonging
- Be active in and for their local natural environment
- Become ready for pathway opportunities into the conservation sector
- Develop a love of nature that will support stronger mental health in the future
- Become familiar with a new local nature reserve in London
- Understand the benefits that nature connectedness can bring for mental wellbeing
- Be empowered to independently visit nature reserves with friends & family
- Become aware of the work of Black Girls Hike, London Wildlife Trust, and London nature reserves

The pilot scheme, supported through Natural England seed-corn funding, enabled strong partnerships to be developed between London Wildlife Trust and Black Girls Hike. The sessions positively supported the young women's wellbeing, and engagement with nature, promoted social opportunities for young women to find like-minded groups they can relate to, and encouraged diversity and equity in the environmental sector. The pilot demonstrated the benefits for young women from ethnic minoritised backgrounds and enabled the wider Nature Nurtures programme to gain additional funding and be offered across London.

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Introduction

It is widely recognised that access and engagement with nature is important to support mental and physical health and wellbeing (Stafford et al., 2021). Yet, national evidence from Natural England's Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE) survey and the People and Nature survey, demonstrates that greenspaces within urban areas are not accessed equally (Rishbeth et al., 2022). The inequality is further compounded with 40% of people from ethnic minoritised backgrounds found to live in areas that are regarded as the most nature-deprived areas (Friends of the Earth, 2022).

Although Greater London has been named a National Park City, and is one of the greenest cities within Europe, with 40% of the city having accessible greenspace; some boroughs of London occupy the ten worst authorities in England for access to greenspace (Friends of the Earth, 2022). Nationally 12% of people have no access to a private or shared greenspace, however, this rises to 21% in London. On average, these private or shared greenspaces in London are over 25% smaller than the rest of Britain (Office for National Statistics, 2020). These statistics demonstrate the need to ensure the existing greenspaces that are currently available should be encouraged to be accessible to all, particularly those who may not have adequate greenspace on their doorstep.

Although physical access to greenspace is a barrier, physical inactivity and personal safety also limit engagement with nature (Kumar, 2021; Moore et al., 2022). Only 25% of people (ages 16 and over) are regarded as being physically active, and ethnic minoritised groups were also identified to be more physically inactive than average (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2019). In addition to inactivity being prominent in young people, there is the largest gender gap in physical activity between 16 and 25 years of age between young men and women. Specifically, 17% fewer women than men at 16 years old, and 26.3% fewer women than men at 25 years old (Sport England, 2022). The gender gap also continues with women's safety fears significantly greater than men (Office for National Statistics, 2021); emphasising the need to promote physical activity in young women and support women to feel safe and included outdoors.

Young people have also been identified to be prone to a disconnection to nature. Nature connection has been found to significantly reduce in teenage years (Hughes et al., 2019); further emphasising the need to ensure equality and equity to access public greenspace to support health and wellbeing of residents. Supporting young people from minoritised backgrounds engaging in the natural environment can also address the inequality within the environmental job sector. The Policy Exchange identified that only 3.1% of UK environment professionals identify as minorities (Norrie, 2017), demonstrating the lack of diversity in nature-based jobs.

Due to these various barriers to engaging with the natural environment, 'Nature Nurtures' is a project that has been developed by London Wildlife Trust. Nature Nurtures aims to help overcome the hurdles that prevent girls and young women, particularly those from minoritised groups and disadvantaged backgrounds, from accessing the mental and

physical health benefits that connection with nature (wildlife and wild spaces) can bring and contribute to achieving equity across the environmental sector.

What is ‘Wild Walks’?

With support from Natural England (NE) seed-corn funding, ‘Wild Walks’ provided an opportunity to bring together London Wildlife Trust and Black Girls Hike UK C.I.C. in partnership to deliver wellbeing-centred activities on urban nature reserves. The initiative focussed specifically on young women from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic backgrounds (aged 16-25), who are currently underrepresented in the environmental and outdoors sectors.

Between November 2021- February 2022, 46 young women joined four guided nature walks at London Wildlife Trust’s Walthamstow Wetlands nature reserve in north-east London. In addition, the young women took part in guided meditation activities out on the nature reserve and received mentoring from the Black Girls Hike team, tackling topics such as representation, identity, and safety in the outdoors.

Aim of ‘Wild Walks’

Through Wild Walks, the aim was to support young women to:

- Overcome negative perceptions of who wild spaces are for
- Gain the confidence to get physically active in a way that is outward facing i.e., not associated with body image
- Foster a deeper sense of place and belonging
- Be active in and for their local natural environment
- Become ready for pathway opportunities into the conservation sector
- Develop a love of nature that will support stronger mental health in the future
- Become familiar with a new local nature reserve in London
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- Become aware of the work of Black Girls Hike, London Wildlife Trust, and London nature reserves

Project Development & Delivery

The recruitment, delivery and evaluation methods were developed through co-design between London Wildlife Trust, Black Girls Hike and Natural England. An open recruitment process was utilised via London Wildlife Trust and Black Girls Hike channels and further shared via Natural England and partner organisations social media channels. During registration for the Wild Walks sessions, the young women completed questions (following informed consent) about their current use of green spaces and their confidence levels in exploring the outdoors. Each session was delivered over five hours by London Wildlife Trust and Black Girls Hike with an aim of engaging with 50 participants over four sessions. Due to Covid-19 impacts, the recruitment and delivery of the sessions were flexible to ensure the current Covid-19 guidance/ measures were followed. London Wildlife Trust asked surveys to be completed on tablets/ smart phones before and after the sessions following informed consent. These surveys aimed to explore the participants wellbeing over the two weeks prior to the session. The survey questions were based on World Health Organisation (WHO) wellbeing index and asked about their confidence, use, and awareness of greenspaces. After the session, the participants were also asked about their experience through feedback questions.

Wild Walks Outline

Welcome and Instructions

The sessions commenced with introductions to London Wildlife Trust, the Black Girls Hike team (including walk leaders) and Walthamstow Wetlands. The young women then introduced themselves, where they travelled from and their favourite place to walk.

Ice breaker

Participants were given a flowerpot with soil and two pieces of wildflower seed paper and were asked to write down one worry and one affirmation or hope for the future. They then buried their worry and put the affirmations into a sharing bowl, going around the room, picking out each other's pieces of paper, reading them aloud. The hopes were then buried. The idea is that by taking time to work on our worries as well as nurturing others' hopes we can flourish as individuals and as communities. The icebreaker aimed to introduce the group to one another ahead of the next discussion and walk.

'5 Ways to Wellbeing' Discussion

The '5 Ways to Wellbeing' were discussed, including how they have been found to support mental health and wellbeing, and how participants could practice these. The group was given a chance to share what they do in their lives that surround these themes of connecting, being active, learning, and giving back. This offered the group the chance to connect and get inspiration from others' experiences.

Guided Walk

Using the framework of the 5 Ways to Wellbeing, the group went on guided walk of Walthamstow Wetlands, engaging with biodiversity through bird spotting and plant species identification (using identification guides and binoculars), as well as discussing the history of the nature reserve. Midway through the walk, the group took part in three mindfulness activities which involved breath work, using the senses, and guided mediation. These activities highlighted how outdoor spaces in local nature reserves and parks can be a free resource locally to support wellbeing. Lunch was provided for the group, and participants had time to reflect on the morning's activities and connect in a relaxed setting.



Figure 1: Young women on a guided walk for bird watching along the wetlands

Representation in the outdoors

The team from Black Girls Hike then lead a discussion surrounding relationships with nature and representation in the outdoors. The team shared their hiking journey, some of the barriers they had faced, and how they overcame them. The group then split into smaller groups and the team lead facilitated discussions focussed on three questions:

- 1) Who is nature for?
- 2) Representation in nature - do you see anyone like you?
- 3) What does nature mean to you?

This session gave the young women a chance to share their lived experiences as well as receive mentoring from a group of inspiring female role models.

Session close

The session was then closed by participants completing feedback forms and by signposting the participants to resources (including mental health guidance), directories for information on other groups, and environmental opportunities.

Findings

Delivery & Attendance

A total of 46 young women between the ages of 16-25 attended one of four Wild Walks sessions delivered on London Wildlife Trust's Walthamstow Wetlands nature reserve. The sessions were delivered between November 2021 and February 2022:

- 28th November 2021 involved 14 participants
- 5th December 2021 involved 15 participants
- 30th January 2022 involved 9 participants
- 26th February 2022 involved 8 participants

As displayed in Figure 2a and Figure 2b, 44 participants came from 17 different boroughs across Greater London and only two participants came from outside Greater London. The London borough of Newham had the highest number of participants (7 participants) attending the sessions. Camden, Lambeth, and Westminster had 5 participants from each borough, and 4 participants attended from both Hackney and Waltham Forest borough, where Walthamstow Wetlands is located (see red circle on Figure 2b).

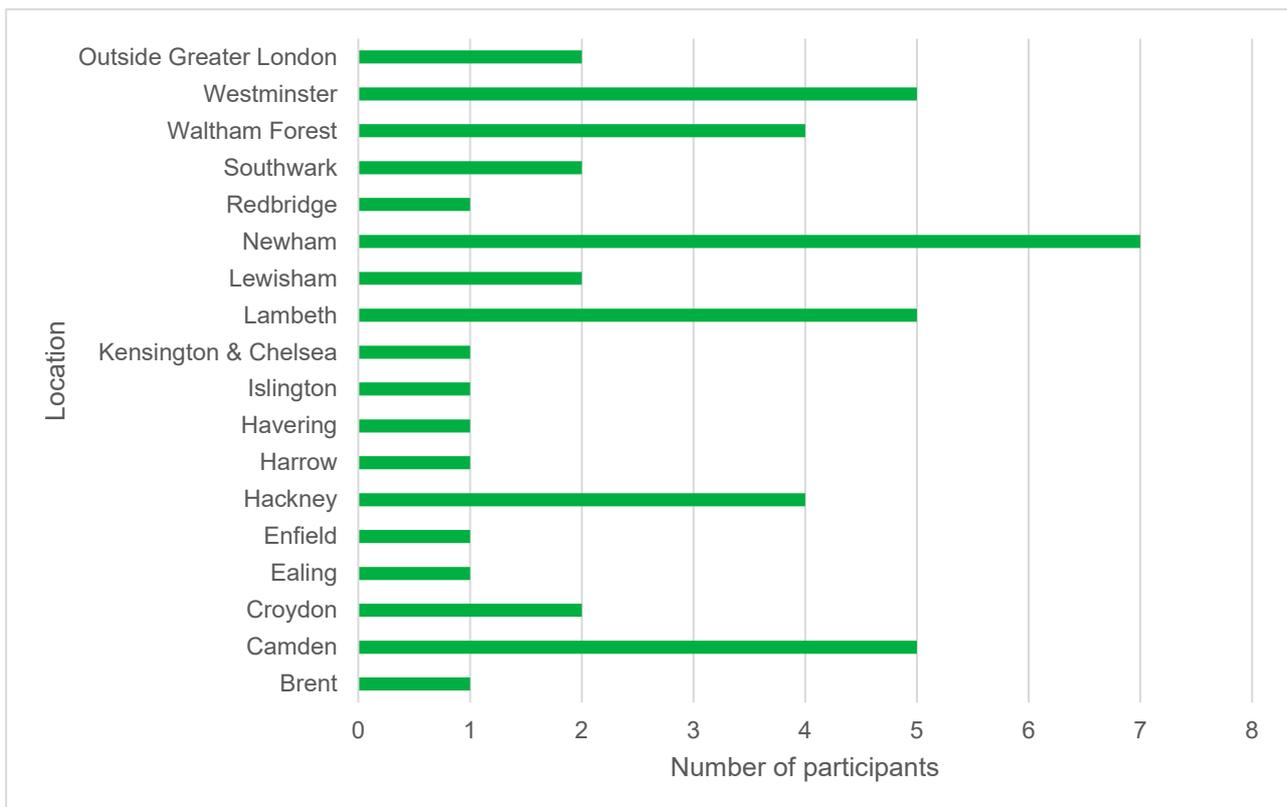


Figure 2a: Number of participants from outside Greater London and individual boroughs inside Greater London (n= 46)

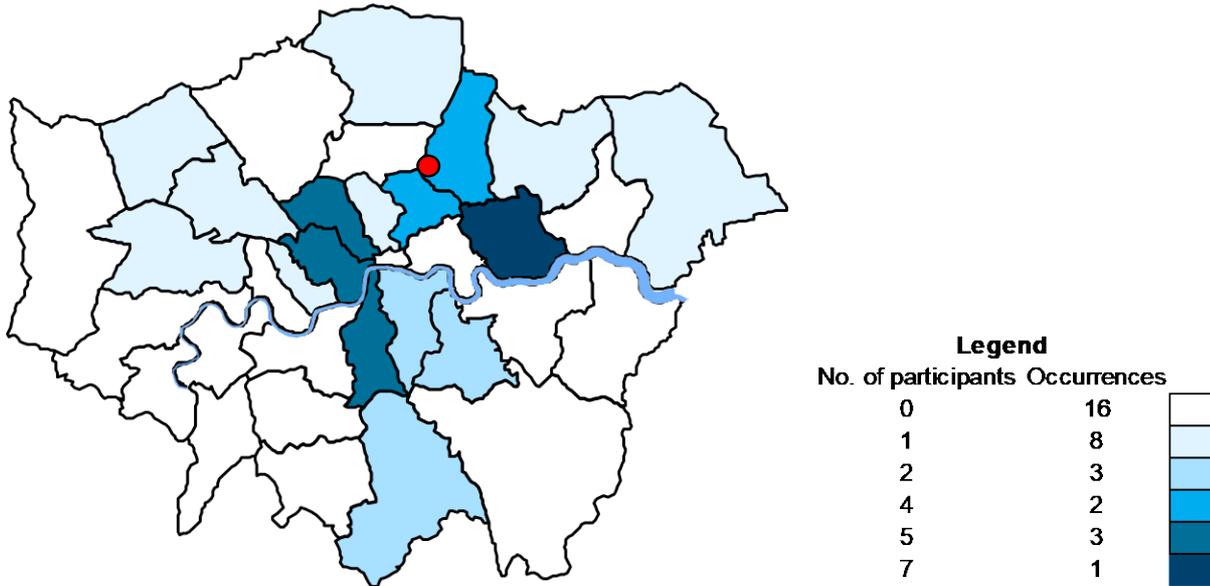


Figure 2b: Visual representation of the number of participants for each London borough (n= 44) that travelled to Walthamstow Wetlands to participate. The red circle provides a general location of where Walthamstow Wetlands would be on the map. Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database rights.

Participants primarily identified as Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African (57%) likely due to the involvement of Black Girls Hike; while 28% identified as Asian or Asian British; 11% identified as mixed or multiple ethnic heritage; 2% identified as Latino and 2% identified as Middle Eastern (Figure 3). Most young women (54%) who attended were between the ages of 23-25 years old, 31% were 20-22 years old, while only 15% were in their teenage years of 16-19 years old (see Figure 4).

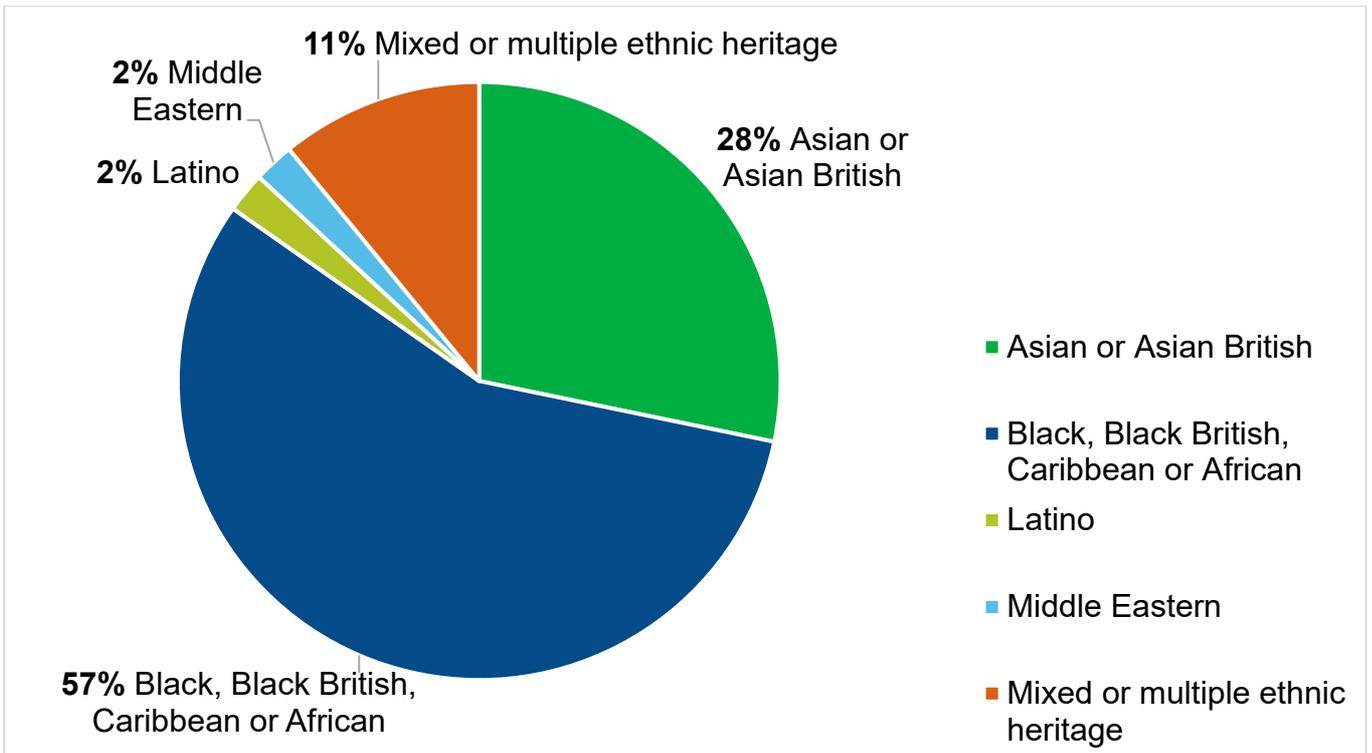


Figure 3: Ethnicity of young women that attended the Wild Walks sessions (n= 46)

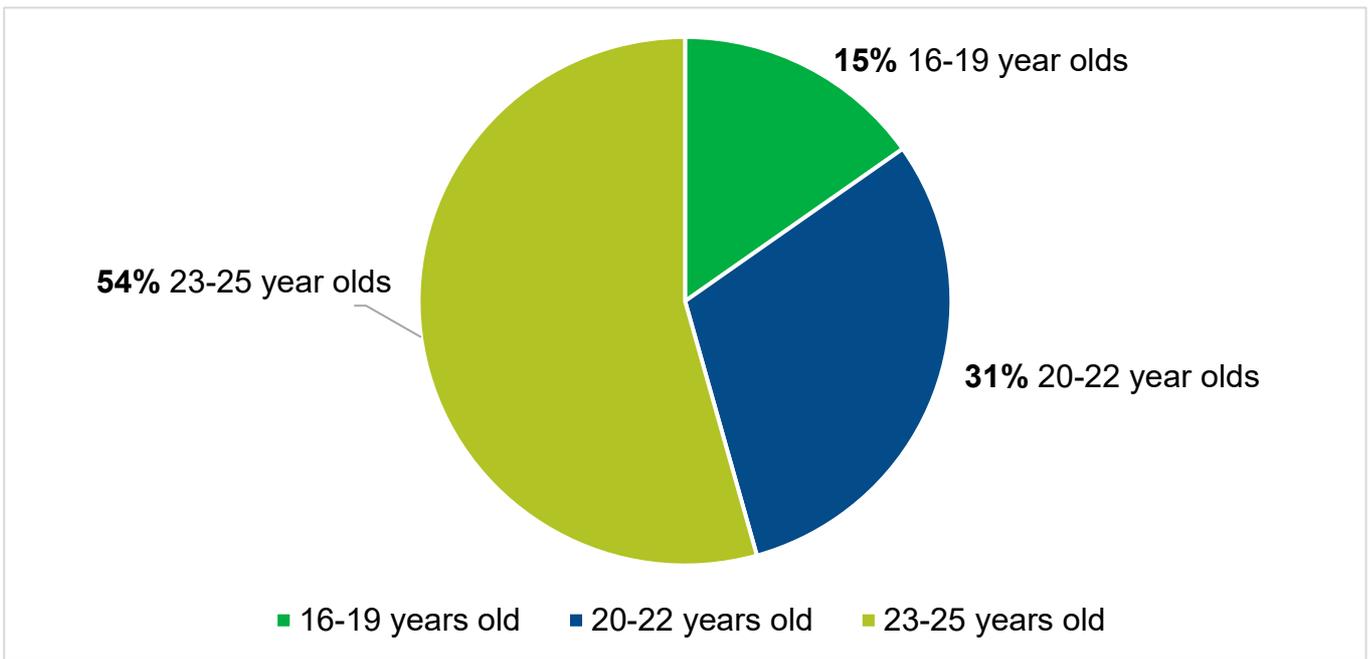


Figure 4: Ages of young women that attended the Wild Walks sessions (n= 46)

Young Women’s Experience of Wild Walks

After the session, a total of 37 (out of 46) young women completed the feedback form. Overall, positive feedback was received from those that completed the form. 100% of attendees enjoyed the session; 100% would recommend the session to other young women; 91% reported that the session met their expectations and 100% reported feeling welcomed and included in the session.

Most young women (21 participants) stated that the reason they wanted to get involved was to ‘enjoy nature and the outdoors’, followed by 15 participants wanting to ‘meet other like-minded people’ (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Motivations of young women that attended the Wild Walks sessions (note: participants could select more than one option)

Young women shared their enjoyment and desire to have further opportunities, as well as interest in returning to the nature reserve:

“It would be amazing if it was longer or even if we could join weekend retreats.”

“A great session. I will definitely be coming back. Do a session every season.”

“Really enjoyed today and exploring the wetlands”

The young women also shared how they were inspired and stimulated connecting with nature, people they relate to, and their past interests:

“Thank you for a great session. It was great connecting with young black women in nature.”

“It was amazing. Honestly one of the best days in a while! Thank you so much”

“I’ve realised that nature is a way of getting back in touch with the child I was”

“Today has been a rediscovery for me. Learning to care about the world, but also enjoying it on a personal level”

The young women also shared their sense of typically feeling excluded from nature environments, unawareness of those with common interest with people who they identify with, and how Wild Walks helped to address these barriers:

“I have always struggled to find likeminded people, who I can really get along with, to go on walks with (since my friends are not particularly interested in outdoor activities). Taking part in the Wild walk was the perfect way to meet other women who share similar struggles and obstacles in life, whilst enjoying nature.”

“I am not alone in thinking that there aren't enough people, particularly women of colour, engaging in wildlife activities. [From today I have found that] there are more people who look like me who are interested in nature.”

“I feel like it’s harder if you’re not white to feel like you belong. People stare at you, and you feel like you’re not welcome.”

The young women also shared what they felt would make it easier for them to use their local greenspaces. Safety, lack of awareness of local greenspaces, and the need for organised groups/ sessions which provide the opportunity to meet like-minded individuals were highlighted:

“If there was a social group of young people (like this) who could get in touch with each other and experts.”

“Having a group like this, showing me around, so then I can go out and use them on my own”

“Knowing security procedures or facilities/ people to contact if anything happens”

“More advertising and knowledge of local green spaces - I came across the session from a Twitter Ad.”

“Knowledge of groups/ guides I could join so it doesn’t feel intimidating when exploring new spaces.”

“I think [changing] other visitors perception of me in local green spaces. Sometimes, it’s their looks, view or perceptions of black women/people that make the outdoors unwelcoming”

Use of green space and confidence in exploring the outdoors

The pre-session information outlined that the young women had confidence exploring their local green spaces with 88% saying they 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with 'I feel confident exploring the outdoors or my local greenspace'. However, after the session this increased to 92% saying they felt 'more confident' than before the sessions (Figure 6). The participants had an existing connection to nature with 43% strongly agreeing they 'felt part of nature', however, this increased to 78% after the session (Figure 7).

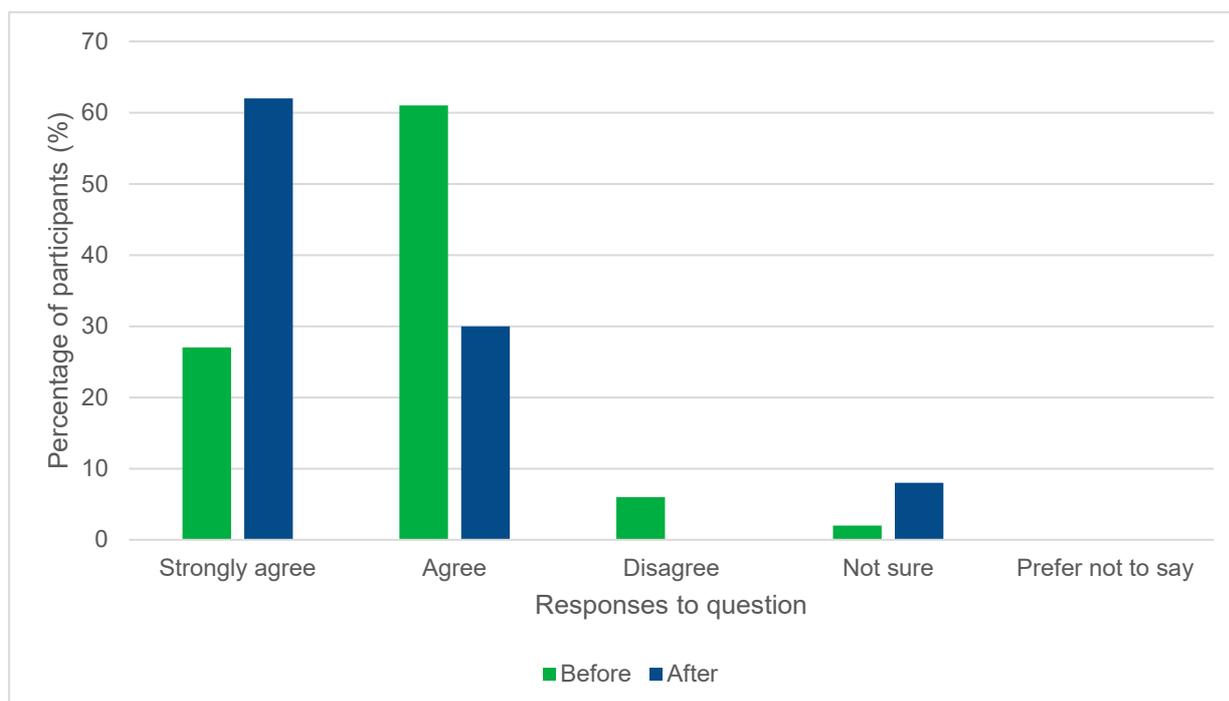


Figure 6: Responses to 'I feel confident exploring the outdoors or my local greenspace' before (n=46) the session and 'I feel more confident exploring the outdoors or my local greenspace' after (n=37) the session

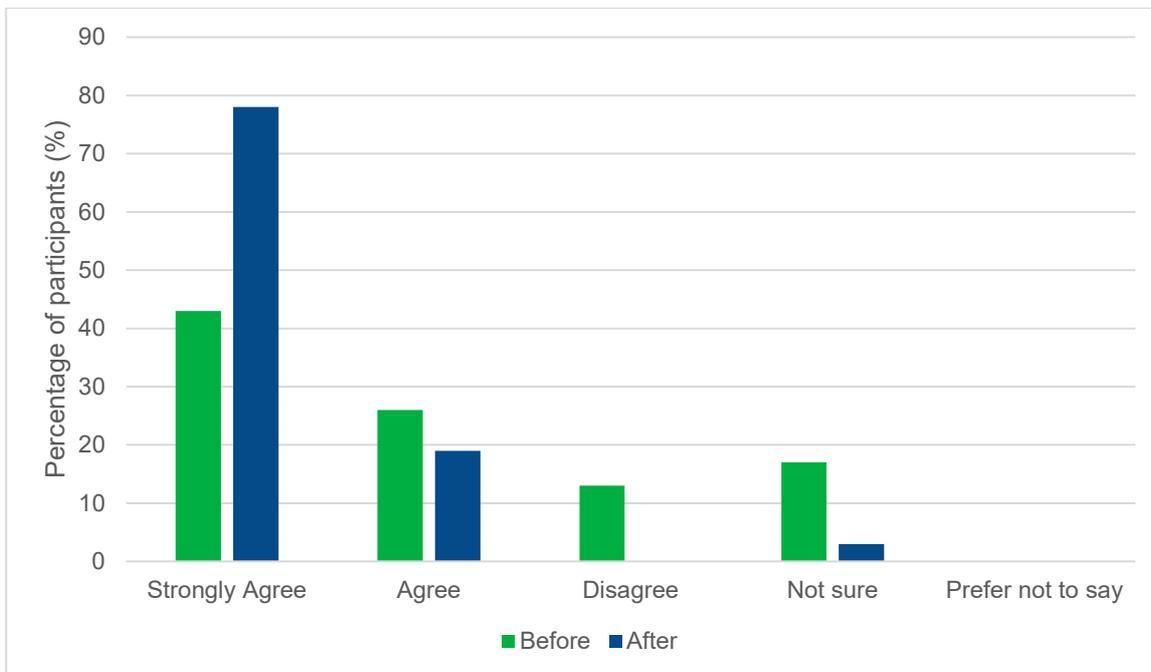


Figure 7: Responses to 'I feel part of nature' before (n=46) the session and 'After today, I feel part of nature' after (n=37) the session

Additionally, prior to the session 38% said they like to use greenspace to benefit their physical health and wellbeing and 35% said they visit greenspace 'very often' in their local area (Table 1). After the session 73% they 'strongly agree' that they are more confident to use greenspace to benefit their health and wellbeing and more likely to use greenspace to benefit their health and wellbeing (Table 2).

Table 1: Use of greenspace before taking part in 'Wild Walks' (n=46)

Response	I like to use greenspace to benefit my physical health and wellbeing	How often do you visit green spaces in your local area?
Most of the time	2%	0%
Very often	38%	35%
Sometimes	40%	39%
Not often	19%	24%
Not at all	0%	2%
Prefer not to say	1%	0%

Table 2: Use of greenspace after taking part in 'Wild Walks' (n=37)

Responses	I am more likely to use greenspace to benefit my physical health and wellbeing after today	I am more likely to visit my local greenspaces after today
Strongly agree	73%	73%
Agree	27%	22%
Disagree	0%	0%
Not sure	0%	5%
Prefer not to say	0%	0%

The majority (56%) of young women surveyed had not previously taken action to protect or get involved with their local green space. However, after the session 78% said they were 'more likely to take action/ get involved with [their] local greenspace' (Table 3).

Table 3: Conservation involvement for local greenspace before (n=46) and after (n=37)

Responses	Before Wild Walks: Have you previously taken action to protect/ get involved in your local green spaces?	After Wild Walks: I am more likely to take action /get involved with my local green space after today
Yes	34%	78%
No	56%	3%
Not sure	9%	19%
Prefer not to say	1%	0%

Wellbeing and self-reflection

Before the session the young women had good overall wellbeing, with most participants answering that 'more than half', 'most' or 'all of their time' they felt cheerful (Figure 8), calm, relaxed (Figure 10), interest-filled daily lives (Figure 16), and have high confidence, and self-esteem (Figure 18). There were mixed responses on how active, vigorous (Figure 12), fresh, and rested (Figure 14) the participants felt, with the majority saying they felt over the last two weeks active, vigorous, fresh, and rested 'some of the time', 'less than half the time' and 'at no time' (Figure 8). However, after the sessions over 80% of participants shared that they 'strongly agree' or 'agree' they felt cheerful (Figure 9), calm and relaxed (Figure 11), active, vigorous (Figure 13), refreshed (Figure 15), found something new that interests them (Figure 17), and had improved confidence and self-esteem (Figure 19).

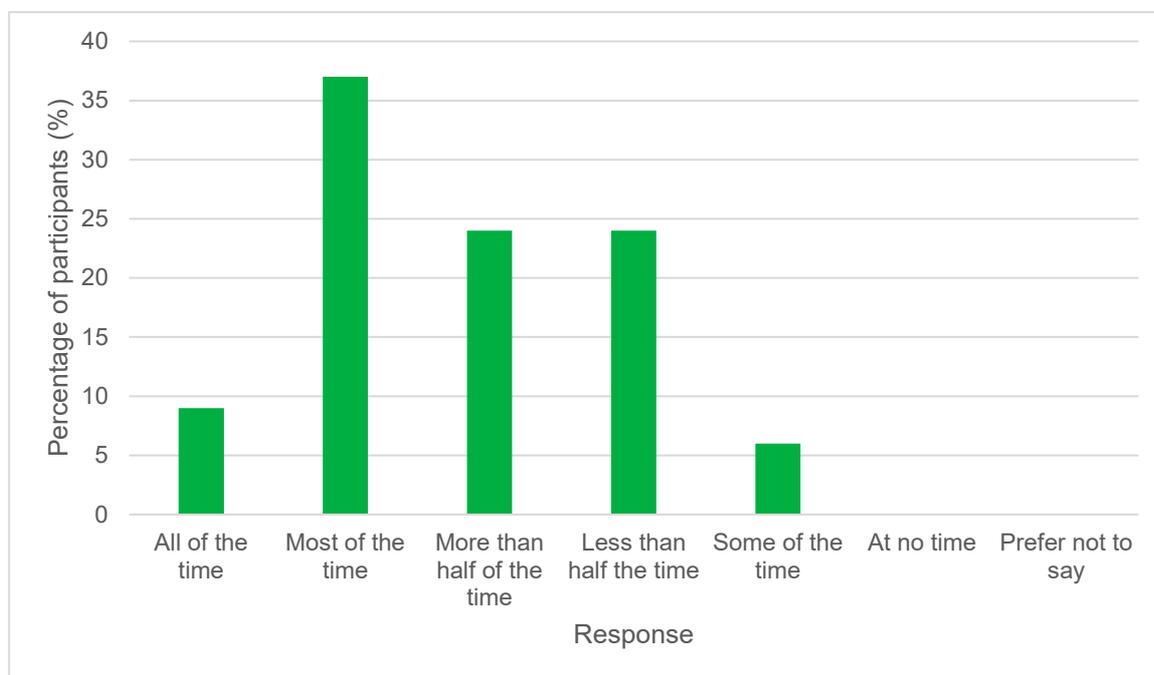


Figure 8: Responses to 'In the last two weeks, I have felt cheerful and in good spirits' before the session (n=46)

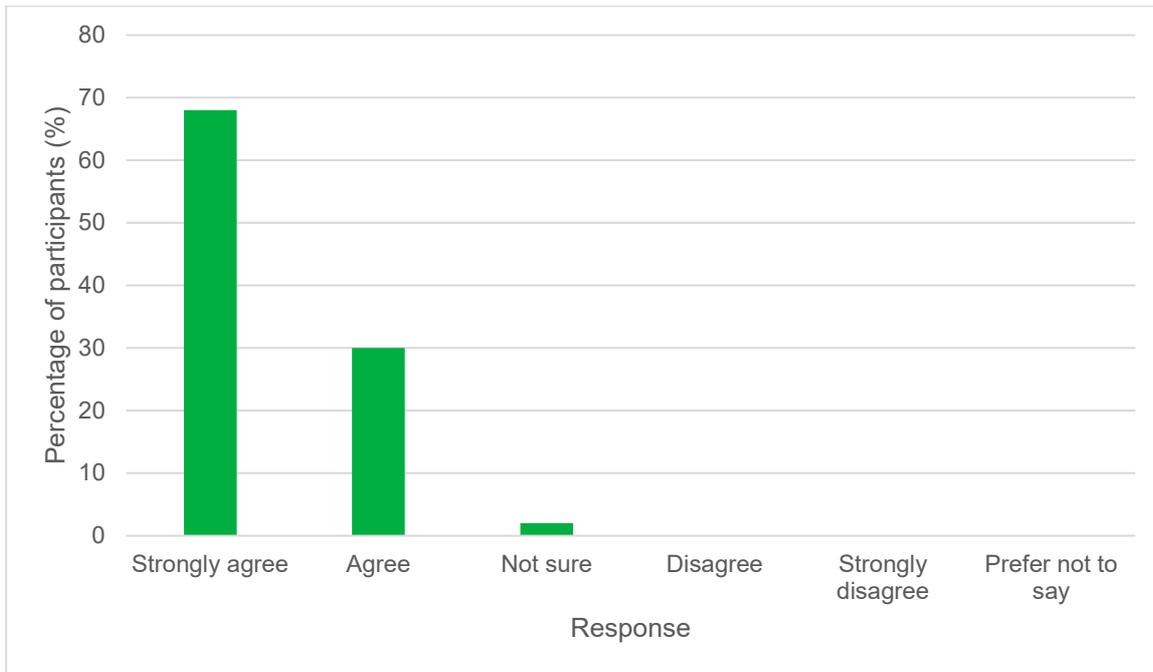


Figure 9: Responses to 'I feel cheerful and in good spirits' after the session (n=37)

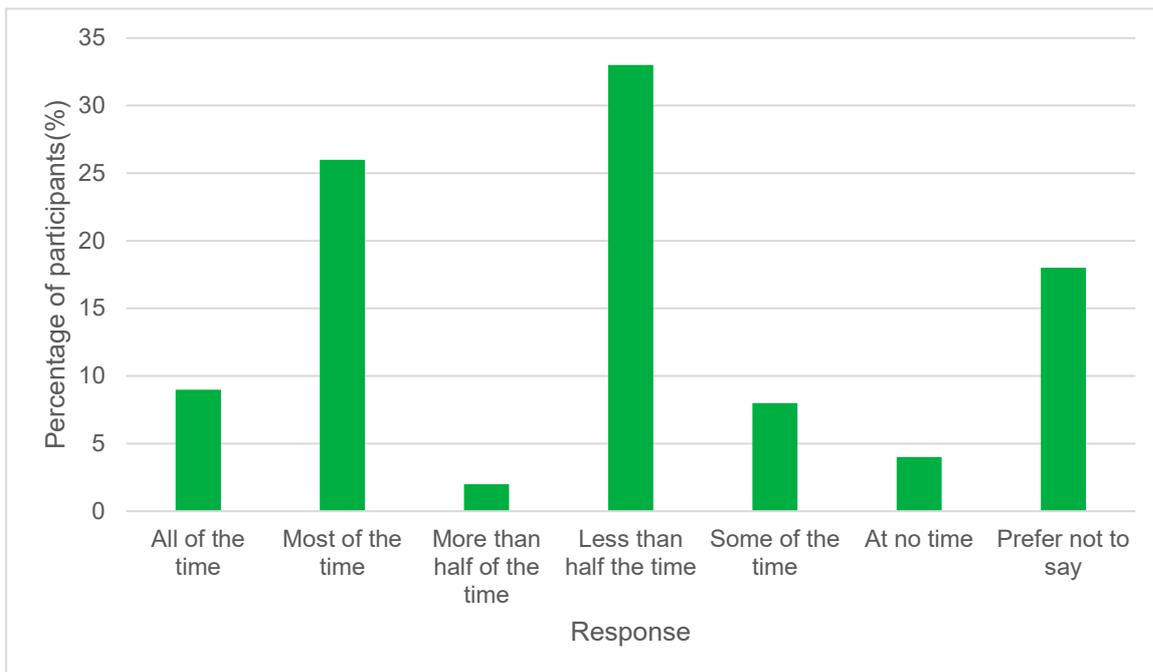


Figure 10: Responses to 'In the last two weeks, I have felt calm and relaxed' before the session (n=46)

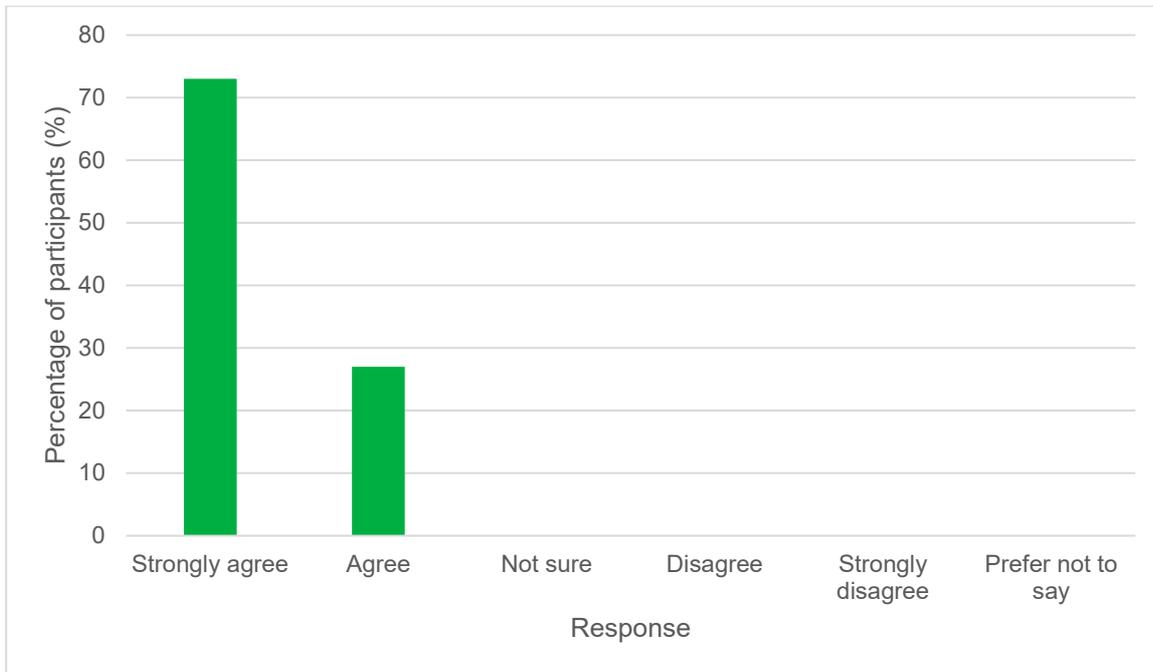


Figure 11: Responses to 'I feel calm and relaxed' after the session (n=37)

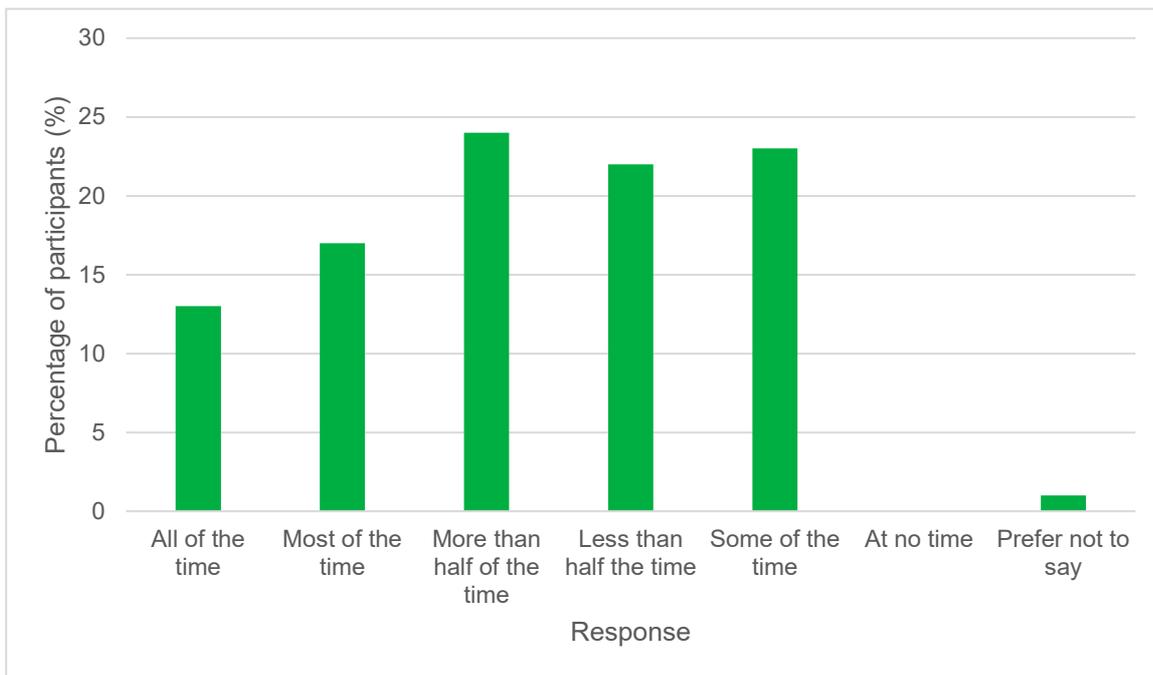


Figure 12: Responses to 'In the last two weeks, I have felt active and vigorous' before the session (n=46)

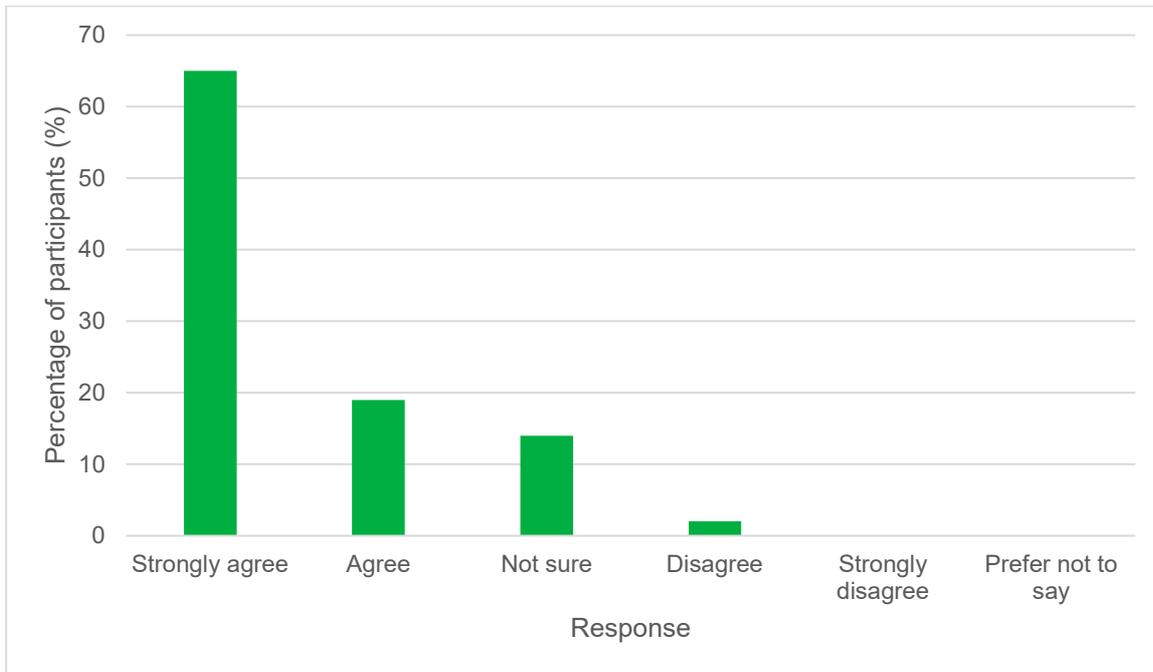


Figure 13: Responses to 'I feel active and vigorous after the session (n=37)

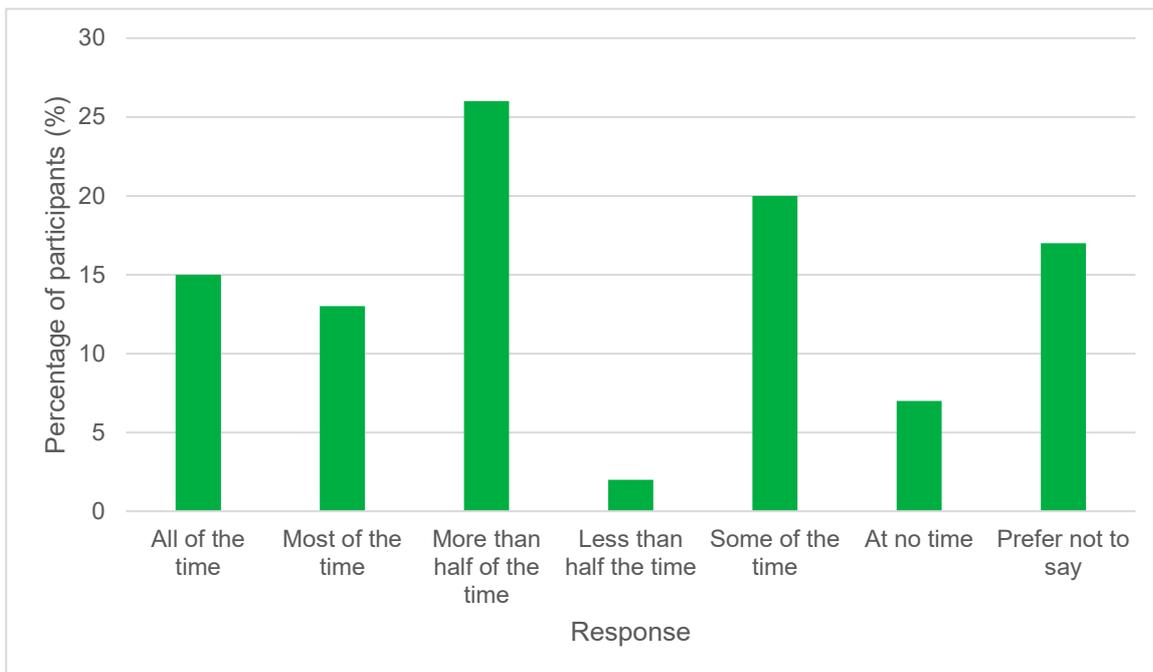


Figure 14: Responses to 'In the last two weeks, I have woken up feeling fresh and rested' before the session (n=46)

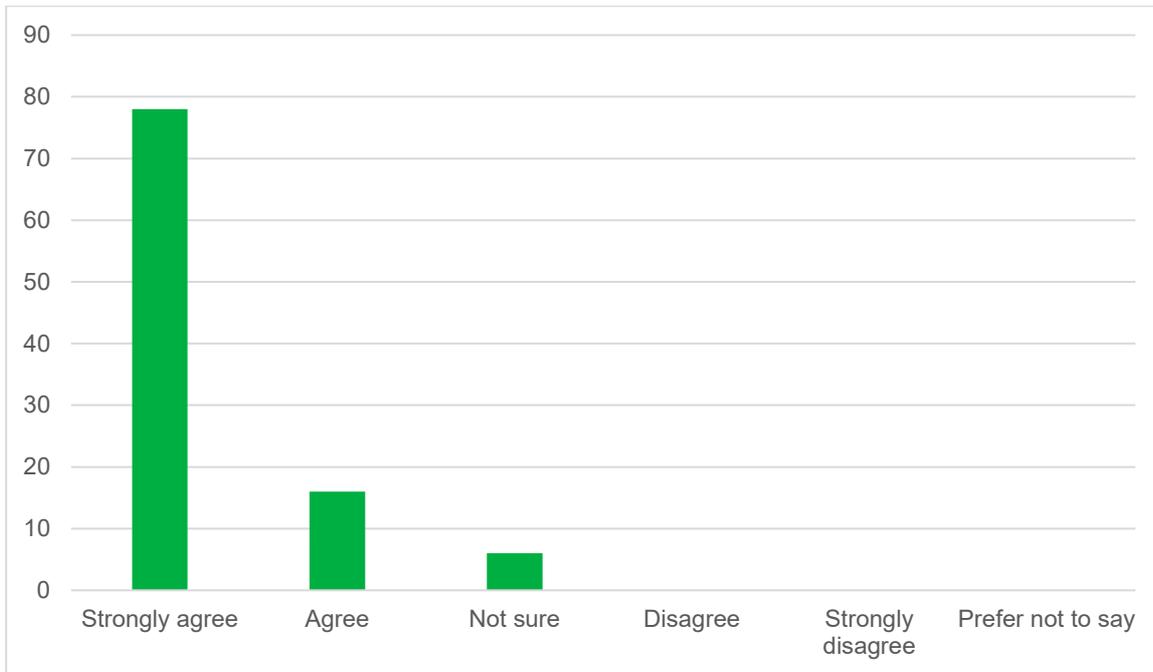


Figure 15: Responses to 'I feel refreshed' after the session (n=37)

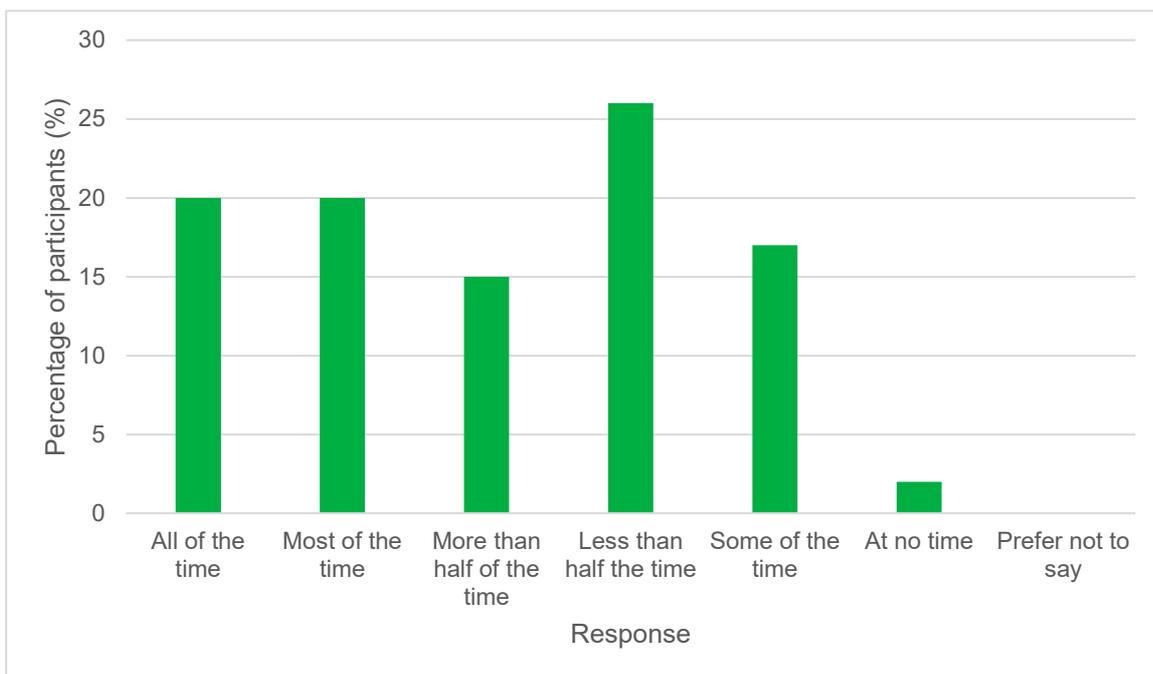


Figure 16: Responses to 'In the last two weeks, my daily life has been filled with things that interest me' before the session (n=46)

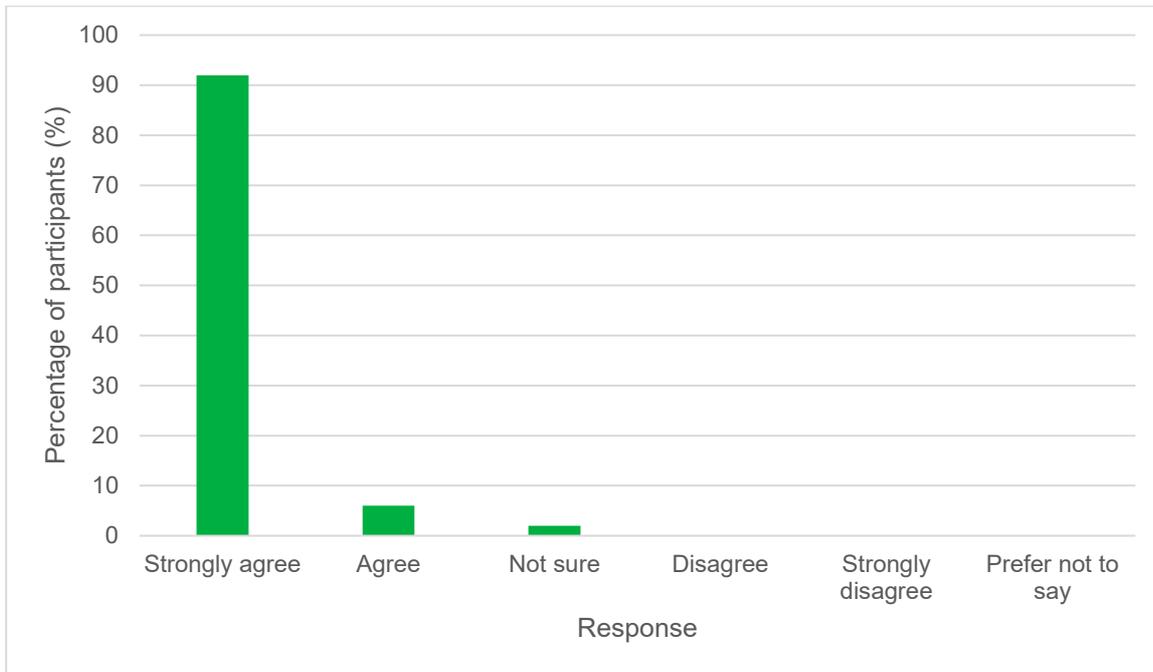


Figure 17: Responses to 'I learnt something new today that interests me' after the session (n=37)

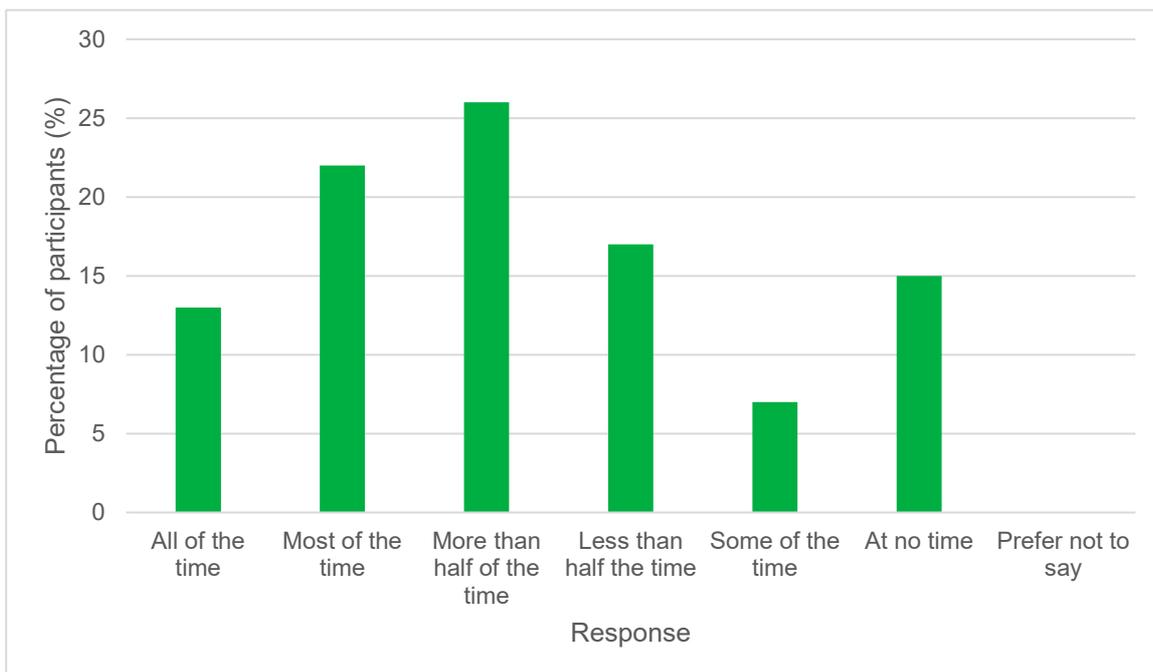


Figure 18: Responses to 'In the last two weeks, my overall confidence and self-esteem has been high' before the session (n=46)

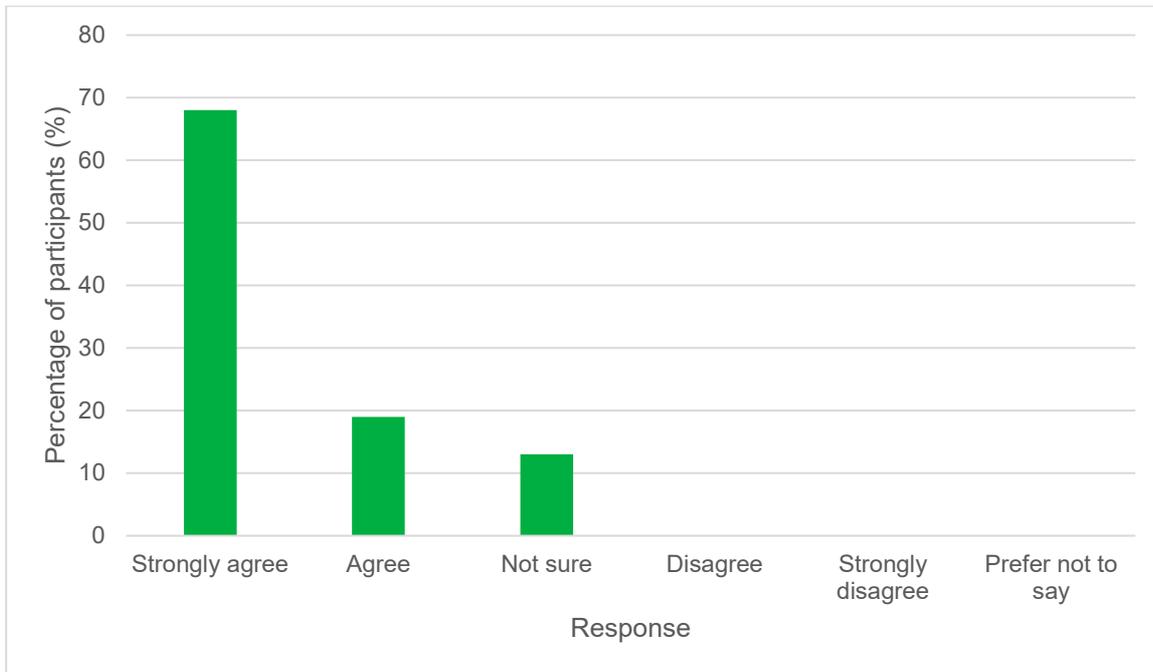


Figure 19: Responses to 'My overall confidence and self-esteem has improved after today's session' after the session (n=37)

Communication & marketing

London Wildlife Trust utilised paid advertisements via Facebook and Instagram, which were targeted to young women living in London resulting in 32,891 engagements and 126 Eventbrite sign-ups. Of those registered, 70 young women completed the registration form and pre-session survey; however, 24 young women were registered but did not come along on the day with half due to Covid-19/ illness.

Most young women who attended the sessions stated that they heard about the opportunity via social media channels with Instagram as the most common platform (Figure 20). However, word of mouth was the second most common method after Instagram that the young women had heard about the sessions.

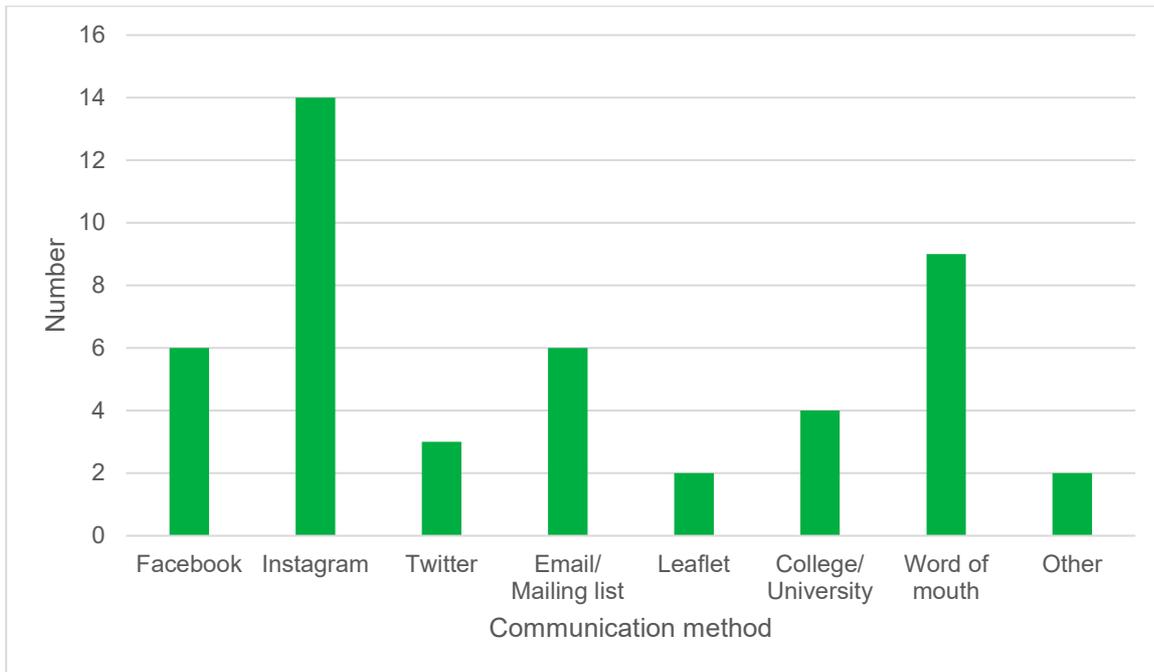


Figure 20: Communication methods that the participants heard about Wild Walks

Conclusion

The feedback from those who attended Wild Walks was overwhelmingly positive and demonstrates that the young women enjoyed the opportunity to connect with like-minded peers outdoors and fostering a sense of community. Many of the young women were interested in taking their existing interest in nature further by seeking more opportunities to explore local green spaces, take action to protect it, and continue to utilise their new social connections. Wild Walks provided a safe space to have important conversations about representation in nature and the outdoors, and many of the young women involved highlighted the importance of having representative female role models (particularly women of colour) to encourage more young women to feel more confident, safe, and included when exploring the outdoors.

Lessons learned

Positive outcomes

- Wild Walks provided the opportunity for London Wildlife Trust to work closely and build a new partnership with Black Girls Hike, and for all organisations to share knowledge, skills, and expertise.
- The sessions were targeted and designed to benefit young women of colour, both in terms of recruitment and the way the session was designed (e.g., building in the discussion and mentoring elements of the day).
- Wild Walks eased access barriers by being hosted at London Wildlife Trust's Walthamstow Wetlands nature reserve, which has easy transport connections, has a range of facilities (café, toilets, indoor and outdoor spaces) and provided outdoor clothing for participants.
- The Five Ways to Wellbeing element of the session supported participants due to the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Two of the young women who attended Wild Walks went on to apply for London Wildlife Trust's paid traineeship programme and commenced their traineeships in January 2022.
- The initial seed-corn funding from Natural England for the Wild Walks pilot enabled further funding to be secured from Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sports by demonstrating the benefits of Nature Nurtures. This resulted in £245,000 being awarded to expand the Nature Nurtures programme across London to support 600 young people from under-represented groups from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic heritage (London Wildlife Trust, 2022).

Areas to consider

- The social aspect, and the opportunity to meet other like-minded women they identify with was one of the main reasons for wanting to get involved. Some of the

young women fed back that they wanted more icebreaker and team building activities to get to know the group better.

- During the colder sessions, the discussion and mentoring section was carried out indoors. Integrating the outdoor walking elements with the discussion and mentoring element would be beneficial and may have been possible with smaller groups to enable everyone to communicate while keep warm by moving.
- Initially, participants were asked to complete a feedback form two weeks later to explore ongoing benefits of taking part in the programme; however, due to low response rate from the first walk, it was discontinued. Utilising a voucher to use at the café on a return visit to a London Wildlife Trust site may enable measuring longer term impacts with these incentives.

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