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Nature recovery and people in prison

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Abstract

This paper examines the opportunity for nature recovery in prison systems in England and Wales. It identifies that this is an environment requiring a place-sensitive approach, with challenges relating to the activity that may be undertaken towards nature recovery amidst a population with multiple healthcare issues. Through the presentation of a case study of a programme (Greener on the Outside for Prisons), the paper explores how these challenges can be managed, and provision made for nature and people to recover together. The case study discusses how prisoners and staff connect with nature, enabling partnerships with health, environmental and ecological organisations to develop initiatives that benefit both the prison landscape and those who live and work within it. This initiative provides learning opportunities beyond the gate, providing the prospect of integration with other policy approaches in other settings.

Keywords: Health promotion, ecology, wellbeing, nature-connection, prison, prisoners, justice

Introduction

This paper examines the opportunity for nature recovery within the prison system. It explores nature-based activity in prisons and the potential for the prison estate to develop its greenspace. It demonstrates how both nature and people can recover through a healthcare approach that provides for nature connection, presenting a case study that utilises this approach. This case study, the Greener on the Outside for Prisons (GOOP) programme shows policy makers how prison systems and resources can connect prisoners and staff with nature, enabling partnerships with environmental and ecological organisations to develop initiatives that benefit both the prison landscape and those who live and work within it.

That the UK is 'one of the most nature-depleted countries on Earth'¹ has impact far beyond 'nature for nature's sake'. Spending time in nature has value for human wellbeing.^{2,3,4} Our air, food, and water, all derive from natural capital.⁵ The World Health Organisation's (WHO) 'One Health' approach recognises the interconnectedness of the health of people, animals, and the environment.⁶ The Biophilia hypothesis⁷ further suggests that people have an affinity with nature, and that humans are bound to other forms of life and seek connections with it. Access to green space has been shown to improve mental health, particularly among disadvantaged groups.⁸ Social prescribing of activity towards better health, a key component of the NHS' Long Term Plan,⁹ includes a 'green' element with recommendations that people connect with initiatives such as conservation volunteering and community gardening.

Contemporary approaches to health promotion include a focus on 'settings' that are understood as a 'place or social context in which people engage in daily activities in which environmental, organizational and personal factors interact to affect health and wellbeing'.¹⁰ Such 'settings' have a vital role in enabling access to defined populations¹¹ and in this model of health-related settings, health professionals partner with stakeholders to promote better health via institutions such as schools,¹² universities,¹³ hospitals¹⁴ and workplaces.¹⁵ Prisons are settings that provide a place of employment for one set of people and a home for another. Policy statements have outlined a desire to adopt this settings-based promotion of health in prisons in England and Wales but there has been a noticeable failure to put this into practice¹⁶. Meanwhile, nature activity in prisons has not been designed to provide for rehabilitative, therapeutic or behavioural outcomes, being seen more as an employment opportunity for prisoners.¹⁷ If a new approach to nature engagement in prisons can be allied to health promotion and planning, then nature recovery could have ecological benefits as well as being a significant policy lever towards improving prisoners' health, reducing the costs arising from their ill health, and providing them with meaningful activity in the natural environment.

There are multiple actors involved in the decisions that impact on the natural environment, with potentially competing interests, values, and priorities across different settings. Many of the actions that could aid nature recovery are the responsibility of devolved governments. Where you live is highly significant and 'place-sensitivity' has been identified as a key component of environmental sustainability and generating recovery responses to nature's decline.¹⁸ This approach notes that places are diverse, and that people are central to both the determining factors and intended outcomes of policy decisions. The difficulties faced by some people in accessing nature are acknowledged alongside the need for relationships and partnerships that are central to creating equity of opportunity and inclusivity in activity. Accordingly, there are synergies between a settings approach that seeks to influence health in the places in which people live, work and play, and a place-sensitive approach to nature recovery. This is especially relevant when the focus is health improvement through nature connection. Work undertaken in prisons offers valuable learning to other policy approaches, notably the NHS' long term plan for green social prescribing.

The focus of this paper is prisons in England and Wales. However, the barriers to nature recovery within prisons are not unique and have parallels in other places where there may be restrictions and inequalities in access. There are also obvious implications for policy development in Northern Ireland and Scotland's prisons, alongside other justice and closed settings and contexts. It is not sufficient to simply direct someone in need to a nature-based scheme, people need to be referred to activity that is appropriate, accessible and structured, with planned outcomes and measurable benefits. The same can be applied to access to greenspace for a range of populations and places. That certain populations are not officially in confinement does not mean that they are not confined by their circumstances.

Nature and people in prison

There are currently 123 prisons in England and Wales; 108 of them managed by His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) (G4S manage four, Serco five, and Sodexo six). There are 17 prisons in Scotland (16 HMPPS, Sodexo manages one), and three in Northern Ireland (all HMPPS). The Ministry of Justice is one of Government's largest landowners, with access to over 1500 rural and urban holdings, and freehold on around 4,000ha of land in England and Wales.¹⁹ Utilising this estate and engaging the population of those living and working within it in a programme of nature recovery would have a significant impact on the environmental state of the land.

In November 2024, the prisoner population of England and Wales was 86,038.²⁰ This is projected to increase by more than a fifth by March 2029, with 105,200²¹ people being incarcerated (upper estimate). People in prison typically experience poorer health than others in society, with multiple complex health and social care needs, including mental ill-health and substance use issues, low levels of literacy, and disengagement with services, living (temporarily for most) in an environment that can be marked by isolation, loneliness, boredom and violence.²² Healthcare in prisons in England and Wales has been described as "continually in crisis", requiring solutions that embrace "evidence informed action across multiple sectors".²³

The Ministry of Justice acknowledges that it has a responsibility for nature recovery within its settings, recognising that it must ensure greater efforts to promote nature and environmental sustainability.²⁴ This has value beyond nature recovery within prisons. Prisons that have a greater ratio of their land hosting natural vegetation have been identified as experiencing lower levels of self-harm and violence, both between prisoners and toward staff.²⁵ This work was based on comparing publicly available data from prisons with aerial mapping of greenspace. Prisons that do not have existing natural vegetation (for example inner city prisons) can also gain from nature-connected activities. A conservation and nature-based project conducted in a UK prison identified health and wellbeing benefits for participants that included increased trust, a connection with nature, the raising of environmental consciousness, and post-release thinking.²⁶ This project was run via the Greener on the Outside for Prisons (GOOP) programme, a nature-based health intervention that uses the existing resources, structures, and processes of the prison to develop and embed activity for prisoners and staff rather than a course or workshop subject to external financing or restricted timescales. This 'whole prison' approach (Figure 1) is important within a setting as it accounts for the environmental, organisational and personal factors that impact change and acknowledges the shared responsibility in attaining outcomes.²⁷ In identifying the resources of the prison, its status (for example whether it is rural or urban, high security or open), the challenges it faces, the ways it operates, and the demographics and needs of its prisoners, GOOP employs an approach that is transferable to other settings and compatible with understandings of place-sensitivity in policy making. Through this, nature recovery can be adopted as a deliverable, with beneficial impacts for the health of participants and the ecology of the prison.

Figure 1 – A ‘Whole Prison’ Approach to Health, the ‘Settings’ Framework for GOOP (adapted from²⁷)

Initiatives such as GOOP offer therapeutic respite from wing-based living in prison, providing improved environments that can contribute to coping mechanisms, and a much-needed landscape change for both prisoners and staff.²⁸ Positive examples of this exist outside the UK, and analysis²⁹ suggests that improving the health of people in prison can contribute to achieving 15 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),³⁰ including Climate Action and Life on Land. In the United States for example, the Sustainability in Prisons Project (SPP), an initiative founded by the Washington State Department of Corrections and Evergreen State College, ‘empower[s] sustainable change by bringing nature, science, and environmental education’ to all their state prisons.³¹ The approach employed by SPP of helping nature and people recover together is exemplified by their in-prison efforts to raise 60,000 endangered butterfly larvae and support 82 students in confinement, helping them earn 746 college credits over the last 12 months.

Activities do not have to be as specialist as butterfly larvae raising and there are many opportunities to engage prison populations in nature recovery. ‘Green’ prison programmes essentially ‘provide a form of eco-therapy to prisoners’.³² Typically, this may be through enrolment in a horticultural programme, growing plants for use in prison kitchens, undertaking landscaping in the grounds, or gardening in designated areas. The most accessible opportunity within a prison, particularly for those in poorer health, may be small-scale garden activity for which there is well-documented evidence of therapeutic benefits.³³ Within a prison setting this has shown in improvements in self-perception of mental health and wellbeing by participants, with increased sociability,³⁴ greater connection with the community, better interpersonal relationships,^{35,36} improved self-efficacy, with the development of skills that can help people find employment on release³⁷ thereby reducing the prospect of reoffending.³⁸ For prisoners beyond normal working age, and the prison population is rapidly ageing with a 243-percentage increase in people aged 60 years and over in prison in the last two decades,³⁹ appropriate physical activity can be provided through nature engagement, increasing inclusion and contribution to a better environment. Yet, the benefits of nature connection have yet to be fully realised in a prison setting.⁴⁰

Nature and the Ministry of Justice in England and Wales

The Ministry of Justice is aware of the potential across their estate, and their legal duty to enhance biodiversity. In 2024, they created a [Nature Recovery Plan](#)⁴¹ There are nine 'Nature Recovery Principles' in the Plan. Numbers one to eight relate to either landscapes and habitats (for example, 'Safeguard Protected Areas and Landscapes' and 'Increase tree planting and woodland') or integrating nature within decision-making (for example 'Value Natural Capital in Decisions'). These are principles that are typical in many environmental statements and no more challenging in prison surroundings than other settings. There is total control over the footprint of a prison, what is hosted in which areas, who has access, and when. If, for example, a pond is desired there will be much discussion over its location but ultimately installing a pond is achievable.

The Nature Recovery Plan's ninth principle commits to 'Promote connection with nature', identifying opportunities to engage the population with nature and use it to improve wellbeing. It is important that any such attempts to promote nature connection are measured and understood because the need for nature recovery is prompted by the disconnect from, and marginalisation of, the natural world in human decision-making over time. If a cycle of restoration, decline, and restoration is to be avoided it is through a greater awareness of, respect for, and commitment to, nature among people. The intent to deliver on principle nine exists in Ministry of Justice statements; 'For our staff, offenders, people on probation and visitors, we will provide access to quality green space and encourage connection with nature for health and wellbeing'.⁴² However, the Ministry of Justice acknowledge the complexity of the link between prison efforts to reduce reoffending and nature interventions.⁴³ The Ministry of Justice's function, through its executive agencies such as His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, is foremost to administer the criminal justice system: 'protecting the public from serious offenders, improving the safety and security of our prisons, reducing reoffending, strengthening the justice system and delivering swift access to justice'.⁴⁴ Engaging people in nature recovery must operate within this function and that can be challenging given the necessary restrictions on access to space and tools, as well as the need for oversight of activity. The Nature Recovery Plan has measurable outcomes, with a frequency of action and target of achievement, such as biodiversity units, orchards, and ponds. There is, however, no measure or target for principle nine, and the role of people in these nature recovery ambitions.

Notwithstanding that nature connection poses challenges within a confinement regime, prison farms and gardens have existed for two centuries, with opportunities for prisoners to engage in nature-based activities relating to horticulture, environmental management, and the care of animals. These vary across the prison estate, are determined locally through a range of providers, and can include growing produce for prison kitchens, gardening and landscaping, and studying for horticultural qualifications. What these initiatives often lack is the whole system approach to activity with few targeted outcomes beyond employing people while incarcerated. Prisoners move frequently around the prison estate, changing locations and categories of prison as they are remanded into custody, sentenced, and serve time. A prisoner taking part in nature-based activities in one prison may find those activities do not exist in another, or there is not opportunity to join the activity. The Nature Recovery Plan is currently (July 2025) being reviewed by the Ministry of Justice with consultations over how a revised version may approach the work. If prisons can utilise their existing systems and resources to provide some nature-based activity 'on prescription', with appropriate referral pathways, planned outcomes, and measured impacts this could have considerable benefits to both participants, prison staff, wider society, and the nature that contributes to better health.

Greener on the Outside for Prisons (GOOP)

The GOOP Programme was established in 2008. Co-ordinated by the Healthy & Sustainable Settings Unit (HSSU) at the University of Lancashire it was funded initially by The National Lottery as part of its Target: Wellbeing initiative. GOOP began operating across all public sector prisons in the North West of England with the participation of approximately 3500 prisoners in the first funded period. Re-commissioned and financially supported by HMPPS and NHS England, the programme is active in 26 prisons in England, having expanded to include prisons in the South West, North East, Yorkshire and Humber regions. Despite this financial commitment by government in acknowledgment of the considerable benefits the programme provides to prisoners, staff, and prisons, GOOP is yet to be promoted country-wide or included in national prisons policy.

People considered as able and likely to benefit from a GOOP intervention are referred to an activity that is both suitable for them and within the prison's capability, by prison staff with an understanding of the health value of nature. GOOP is both preventative and responsive. Taking a whole prison approach across prisoner identification, health, behaviour, and work ensures benefits across the wider system, not least of which are the positive outcomes for nature in the prison and beyond. Primarily there have been two streams of activity; the development, maintenance and support of greenspace within prisons, including gardens, ponds, raising of plants, shrubs, and trees, and indoor activities such as the making of bird and bat boxes; and conservation and landscaping activities in the local community undertaken by prisoners released on temporary licence.

GOOP initiatives are evaluated by the University of Lancashire through initially surveys (The Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Survey, The Nature Connection Index, and the Connectedness to Nature Scale) administered at two time points (start of GOOP activity and after 12 weeks on the programme). These are followed by semi-structured interviews and focus groups with prisoners and staff. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of these have shown improvements for people, nature, and the connection between people and nature. Results across multiple prisons identify that participating in a GOOP nature-based programme can lead to; wider engagement with the regime and introduce education, help reduce aggression among prisoners and improve the stability of the prison and enhance the prison environment for the benefit of those who live and work within it.⁴⁵ All initiatives are developed from existing resources in the prison system and through partnership working to best embed and sustain the activity. This contrasts with other nature-based activity such as a Master Gardener programme, where prisoners receive a defined start and end point for working towards a certificate through a specified number of hours of training, service, and examination.⁴⁶

GOOP Participants speak of the motivation involved in improving their natural surroundings, the sense of purpose it provides, the camaraderie it creates, empathy for their fellow participants in a caring space, and the ability to discuss issues that may not be raised in alternative settings.⁴⁷ The GOOP programme has been described as having introduced people to nature, empowering them with an ownership and stake in the fate of the natural world.⁴⁸ GOOP has contributed to healthier eating among participants and the development of skills relating to nature-based activities which has increased post-release employability in the sector.⁴⁹

Each GOOP participating prison is invited to contribute to a yearbook, showcasing their nature-based activities and changes they have made to their environment. The yearbook (which is distributed to other prisons with the aim of inspiring ideas and encouraging partnership working) gives examples of initiatives such as creating a sunken garden (Category C Adult Male Prison), growing trees for relocation to other government sites (Female Prison), raising 2,500 plants from seed to be distributed to local communities (Category B Adult Male), producing seed packs for schools (Category C Adult Male), creation of a living wall, insect houses, bird tables (Category B Adult Male), and numerous prisons establishing beehives. Many of the participating prisons use the programme as the base from which to enter Britain in Bloom regional competitions, and the Windlesham Trophy, an annual event run by The Royal Horticultural Society and HMPPS.

GOOP has additionally enabled prisons to connect with organisations that promote, conserve, and educate around nature. This has been possible due to the established links and pathways to working that GOOP provides in what would otherwise be a challenging system for external agencies to navigate, with often highly localised protocols and considerations. Moreover, prison staff would likely not have the time to engage with, and approve, organisations to undertake such work in their prison. Even when initiatives come from the Ministry of Justice, such as the 'Pond in Every Prison' scheme (launched in 2020), it is valuable to have existing whole prison approaches to similar work so there is the referral of appropriate individuals to the project, a plan of how the project can facilitate outcomes, monitoring and evaluation to identify the impact of the work, and a continued relationship to ensure the new habitat and benefits gained are sustained. GOOP's capture of the healthcare and nature connection benefits of the initiatives created by HMPPS represent a collaboration that recognises the multiple actors and interests across the whole prison system.

Collaborating towards nature and health recovery in a GOOP participating prison

The collaborative approach to nature recovery, and healthcare improvement, can be seen in work undertaken in a GOOP participating category D adult male prison in England (name withheld in line with ethical requirements). The prison has approximately 80 men involved in nature-based activities at any one time. These activities span; the prison farm, gardens, release on temporary licence to work with a land-based charity, an in-prison ecological survey group, and regular efforts to improve the environment through for example the sowing of wildflower seeds and construction of nesting boxes. That this is a Category D 'open' prison is highly relevant to the transferability of such initiatives to other settings beyond the prison estate. Through connections within GOOP, the prison participated in a four-year National Lottery Heritage Funded project, 'Back on Our Map' (BOOM) led by the University of Cumbria,⁶⁰ to engage communities with their natural environment, restoring landscapes and reintroducing and reinforcing locally threatened or extinct native species. In partnership with a higher education institute, wildlife charities, and community groups, prisoners engaged in nature-based activities towards the project aims. For example, a nursery to grow native tree species was established within the prison grounds. These trees were replanted in communities outside of the prison, often by prisoners released on temporary licence, in areas identified for habitat restoration. Species identification and recording were simultaneously undertaken across the prison site. This led to the sighting of the endangered natterjack toad, a significant discovery of a new known location. Representatives of the John Muir Trust visited the prison to introduce their award scheme to participants working with BOOM and active in GOOP. The John Muir Award encourages people to connect with, enjoy, and care for wild places and 22 prisoners earned it through creative, arts-based nature activities, with the summative activity of hosting a community exhibition of their work.

The National Lottery Heritage Funded project was designed to engage communities with their local natural environments, prisons are members of communities but are perhaps not as readily considered to take part in such work, even if the organisers were able to navigate ethical and practical considerations. Introducing such activity to a secure and sensitive setting requires a lot of planning but also resolve and a desire to change outcomes for both participants and the natural environment. The BOOM project collaboration brought many benefits, from a population keen to undertake the physical labour of nature recovery to learning and the potential to continue such work 'through the gate'. Project staff brought expertise to activity; GOOP connections meant the work had an existing system to integrate with and could be started quickly with an interested group of people. The nature restoration outcomes of the project were clear with the re-establishment

of rare plants, introduction of new colonies of animals and butterflies, and the planting of 4600 Aspen trees.⁵¹ The project manager drew attention to the success of 'reaching out to those with limited outdoor experiences' through 'extensive involvement with men from (the prison)'.⁵² This involvement was evaluated and analysis of results revealed that the project had encouraged in prisoners a connection (and reconnection) with nature, a raising of environmental consciousness, and meaningful and valuable activity.⁵³

Learning from GOOP

The Ministry of Justice's Nature Recovery Plan is a highly positive initiative in the restoration of the natural environment and can have a significant impact on the ecological landscape of the prison estate. However, challenges lie in releasing a plan with targets and outcomes for nature, but not for the promotion of connection to nature that needs to engage a difficult to reach community with multiple wellbeing needs. While the species recovery ambitions of the Nature Recovery Plan can be relatively easily measured (for example trees planted, ponds created) measuring the engagement of people is a more challenging task, possibly explaining the absence of a target. The GOOP programme can be the means to bring together nature-based activities and the health benefits of nature connection, providing a whole system approach to both, with the planning and evaluation that makes successful nature restoration and positive health outcomes more likely. Only by considering the setting and people, and how they may interact with nature in places they can reach can there be a sustainable and effective model of engagement that benefits both the natural and human worlds.

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