

Benefits from participation in outdoor sports

An international study has compiled significant evidence of the benefits of outdoor sports.

By Helen Lawless

Initial findings from the EU-funded **Benefits of Outdoor Sports for Society (BOSS)** project were presented at an outdoor recreation conference held at Tollymore Outdoor Centre last October. The innovative and collaborative BOSS project is an initiative of the European Network of Outdoor Sports; Mike McClure from Sport NI is part of the project team.

An international search for relevant research over the 15 years from 2002-2017 revealed 17,560 studies. After screening by the project partners, 133 studies were selected for data extraction. A majority (56%) of the studies selected were from the last five years.

The key findings from the studies are that outdoor sports:

- effectively combine the positive outcomes of physical activity and being in nature;

- significantly improve mental health and well-being, and there are a wide range of physical health benefits for individuals;
- are effective for intra and interpersonal development, and contribute to other social benefits, such as fostering active citizenship and crime reduction, and improving social inclusion;
- connect people with nature and improve environmental education and awareness;
- provide a broad range of sport and recreational activities and opportunities that both engage and provide benefits to people of all ages, social or economic background and ability;
- have few limitations to participation and are great for providing life-long and age-appropriate physical activity.

For the purpose of the project, outdoor sports were defined as activities:

- that are normally carried out with a (strong) relation to nature and the landscape, and the core aim of which is to deal with natural elements rather than with an object;
- where the natural setting is perceived by users as, at most, only minimally modified by human beings;*
- that are perceived as (at least minimally) physically demanding;
- that are based on man or natural element power and are not motorised during the sport itself;
- that may use some form of tool (for example a surfboard, bicycle, skis, etc) or just involve the human body;
- that may include activities that have their roots in natural places but use artificial structures designed to replicate the natural environment ■

* Does not have to be wild, just perceived as natural.

FIND OUT MORE: For more on the BOSS project see outdoorsportsbenefits.eu.

Mental health and wellbeing

- General mental health status
- Quality of life and overall wellbeing
- Combatting mental illnesses and diseases
- Positive affective states
- Reducing negative affective states
- Control and coping
- Self-development
- Positive experiences
- Active and happy ageing

Active citizenship

- Community benefits
- Integration and inclusion
- Volunteering
- Bonding capital

Benefits



Physical health

- General physical health and related factors
- Combatting diseases like stroke, heart attack and cancer
- Low injury rates and extended life expectancy
- Healthy ageing
- Subjective health perception
- Sun exposure effects

Additional benefits

- Lifetime physical activity
- Accessibility
- Cognitive functioning
- Other multiple effects

Education & life-long learning

- (Intra) personal development
- Interpersonal development
- Educational motivation and achievements
- Cognitive aspects to improve learning
- Environmental awareness and behaviour

Crime reduction & anti-social behaviour

- Increase of pro-social behaviour
- Prevention and reduction of crime

