

The Health and Wellbeing Impacts of Volunteering with The Wildlife Trusts

- Dr Mike Rogerson, Dr Jo Barton, Dr Rachel Bragg, and Professor Jules Pretty -
School of Sport, Rehabilitation and Exercise Sciences / School of Biological Sciences, University of Essex

ABSTRACT

This study analysed data relating to the participation of 139 people in Wildlife Trusts' nature conservation volunteering programmes between February 2016 and February 2017. The wellbeing of the majority of participants improved after six weeks, and this was most marked in those with low mental wellbeing at the start and those who were new to volunteering.

BACKGROUND

In 2015 the University of Essex produced an independent literature review of published research¹. This drew together the increasing body of evidence and research that concluded that: "Overall there is a large body of evidence to suggest that contact with a wide range of natural environments can provide multiple benefits for health and wellbeing."

The following year the University of Essex completed an assessment of Wildlife Trust projects and programmes, and their contribution to the health and wellbeing of people². It concluded that The Wildlife Trusts provide significant and important contributions to both the promotion of good public health and to Green Care in the UK (Green Care refers to the nature-based activities run by The Wildlife Trusts being used to treat illnesses or as part of a programme of therapy).

The purpose of this study³ was to carry out an independent, academic evaluation of the health and wellbeing benefits of taking part in activities run by individual Wildlife Trusts, with two linked aims:

- To measure direct physical health and mental wellbeing effects on participants.
- To develop and pilot a methodology to gather both longitudinal and UK-wide data in the future.

METHODOLOGY

139 participants (82% male; 16% female; 2% preferred not to say) ranging in ages from 18 to 76 took part in a variety of nature conservation activities and completed questionnaires at baseline, 6 weeks, and 12 weeks on their mental and physical health (including Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale), health and environment related behaviours and feelings, perceptions and thoughts about project participation. Participants were either referred by health and social providers, joined specifically to help improve low levels of mental health, or took part for other personal reasons. The majority of participants were involved in Wildlife Trust activities on a weekly basis.

RESULTS

The methodology piloted proved to be robust and can be replicated and scaled up to gather both longitudinal and UK-wide data. The results showed that nature conservation volunteering improved wellbeing with the percentage of participants reporting low wellbeing scores declining from 39% at baseline to 19% at 12 weeks. Improvements were most marked in participants with low wellbeing at the start, where 95% reported an improvement in 6 weeks (Figure 1), and in participants who were new to volunteering with The Wildlife Trusts (Figure 2). Furthermore, levels of nature-relatedness increased significantly with 58% of participants reporting an improvement, and those new to volunteering reporting a greater improvement than existing attendees (11% vs. 5% increase in score).

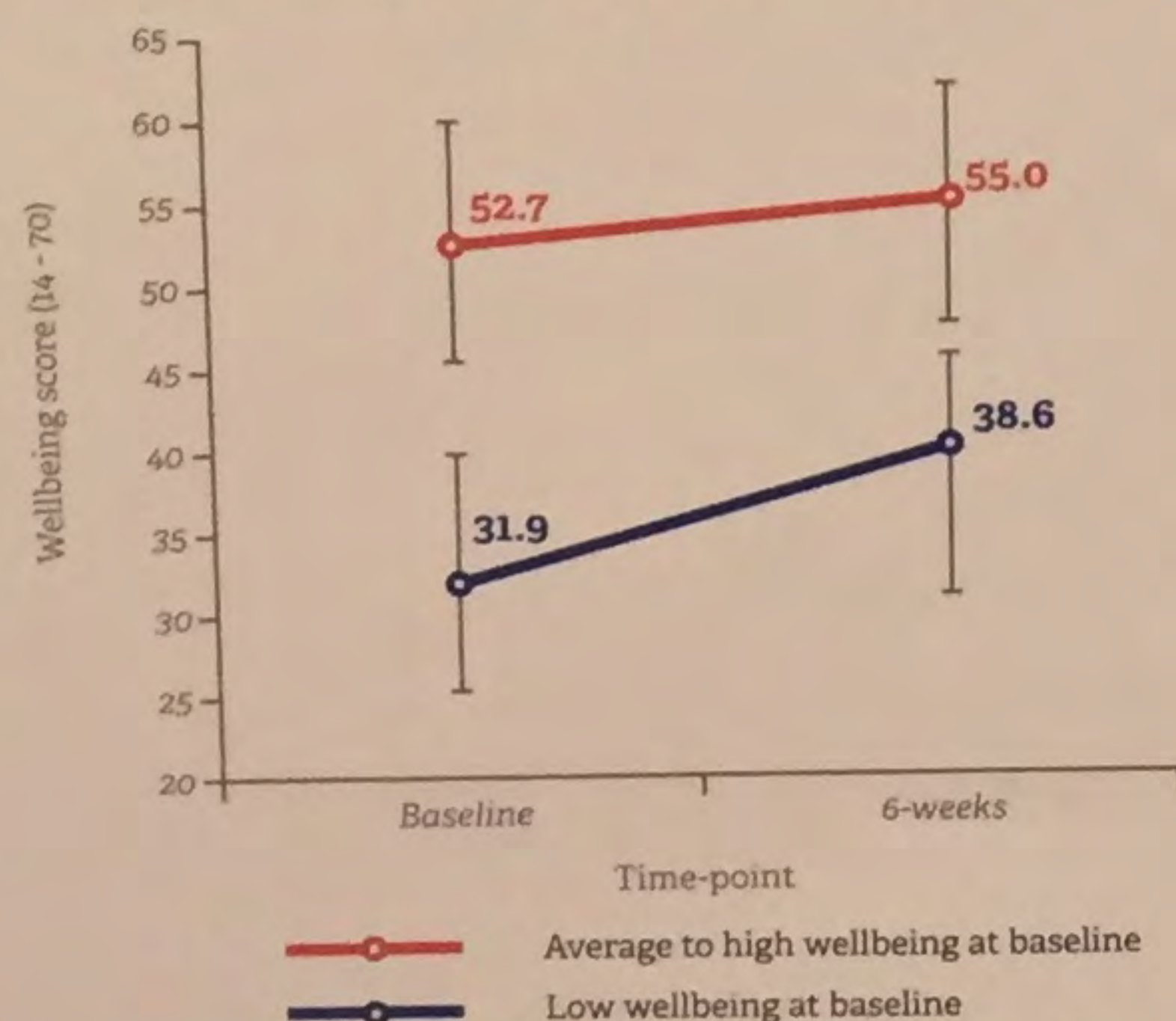
Key findings

- Participants with low wellbeing at the start reported an improvement in 6 weeks.
- The mental wellbeing of 69% of participants had improved after 6 weeks. On average there was a statistically significant improvement of 8.1% above baseline scores.

Impacts on health

- The mental wellbeing of participants improved to a statistically significant extent over the 6-week period.
- Improvements were greatest for people new to volunteering with The Wildlife Trusts and those who had low levels of wellbeing at the start.
- Participants reported significantly enhanced feelings of positivity, increased general health and pro-environmental behaviour, higher levels of physical activity and more contact with greenspace.

Figure 1. Mean (\pm 1 SD) baseline and 6-week wellbeing scores by wellbeing scores at baseline classification



Low and 'average to high' categories informed by Health Survey for England, Health Survey for England, 2015. Wellbeing score measured by Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale.

Figure 2. Mean (\pm 1 SD) baseline and 6-week wellbeing scores by attendance classification

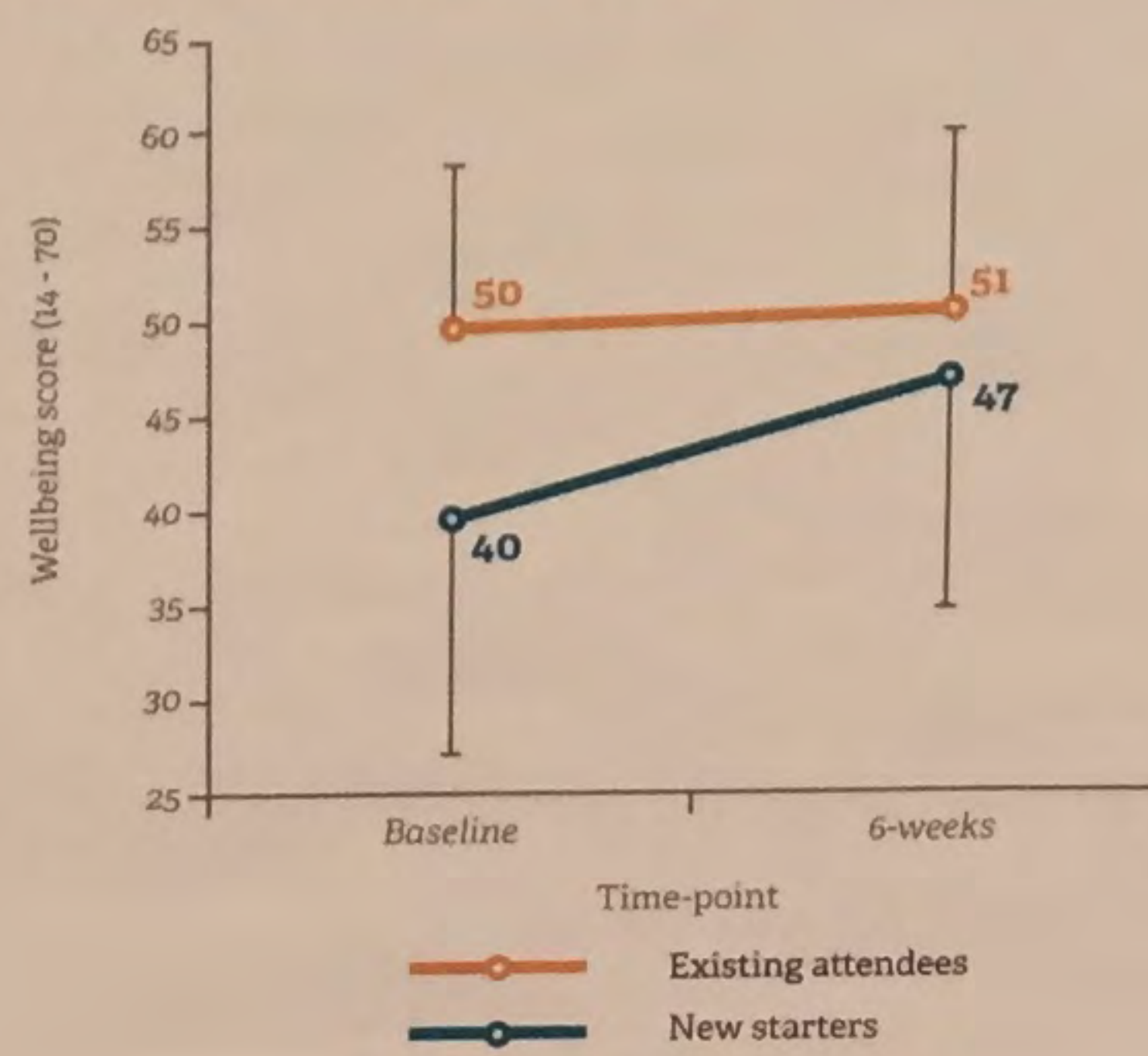
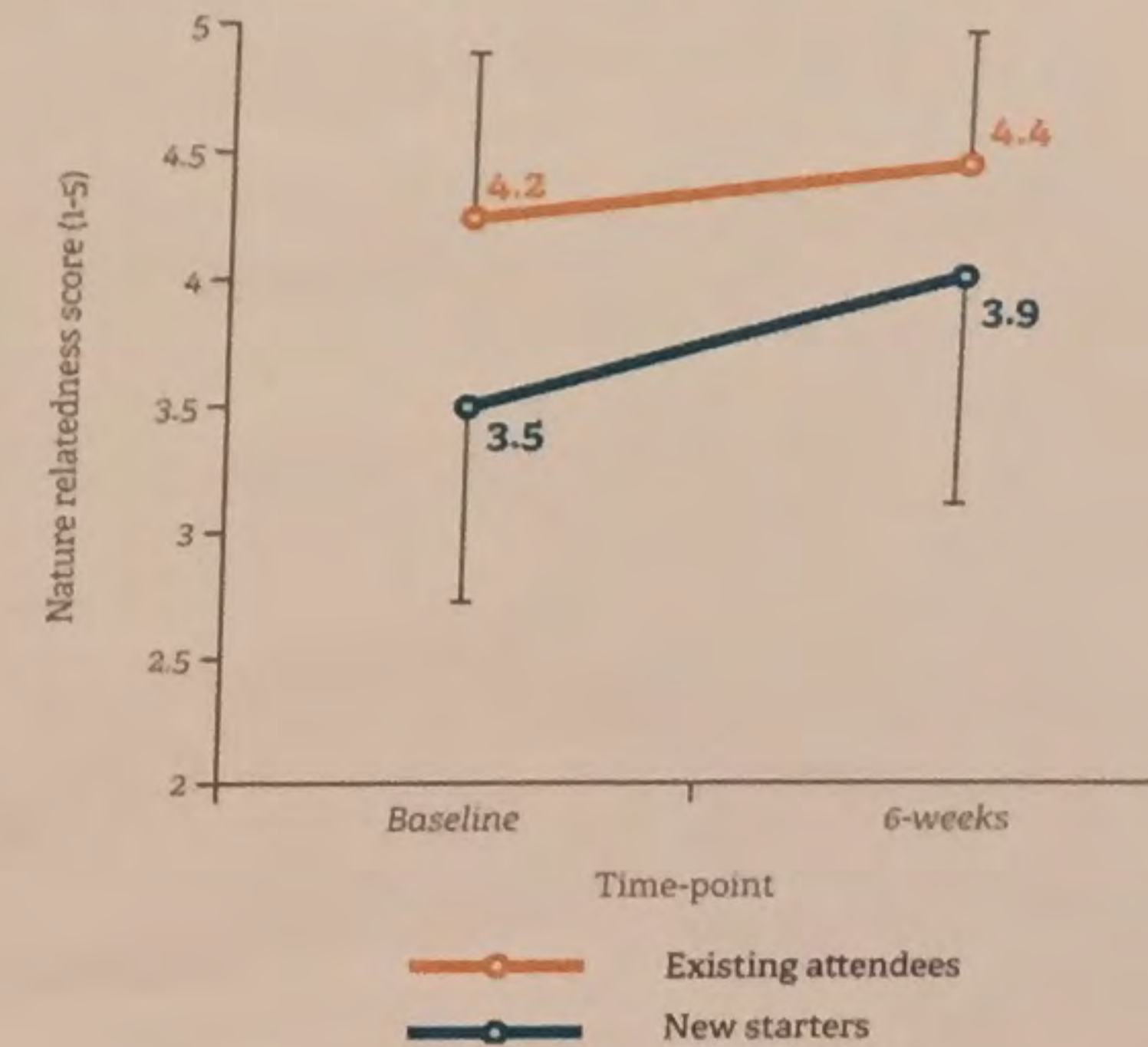


Figure 3. Mean (\pm 1 SD) baseline and 6-week nature relatedness scores by attendee classification



CONCLUSION

The Wildlife Trusts are successfully reaching people with poor mental health and the methodology piloted here can be replicated and scaled up. Volunteering on Wildlife Trust projects for at least 6 weeks resulted in statistically significant improvements in mental wellbeing. The greatest improvements were for people who had low wellbeing at the start or were new to volunteering with The Wildlife Trusts.

References

- ¹ Bragg, R., Wood, C., Barton, J. and Pretty, J. (2015). Wellbeing benefits from natural environments rich in wildlife.
- ² Wood, C., Rogerson, M., Bragg, R., Barton, J. and Pretty, J. (2016). The direct and indirect contribution made by The Wildlife Trusts to the health and wellbeing of local people.
- ³ Rogerson, M., Barton, J., Bragg, R., Pretty, J. (2017). The health and wellbeing impacts of volunteering with The Wildlife Trusts



University of Essex

Correspondence contact: Mike Rogerson, School of Biological Sciences, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester CO4 3SQ, mike.rogerson@essex.ac.uk