

Onward and upward - TOGETHER

THE MIX OF PEOPLE ON OUR HILLS DOES NOT REFLECT THE POPULATION AT LARGE. BUT IF YOU THINK THAT'S A SHAME, DON'T BE DOWNHEARTED. DON CURRIE FINDS GROUNDS FOR OPTIMISM



AS A KEEN hillwalker who happens to be white, I've often wondered why everybody else I see on the slopes and summits seems to be white, too. That's not generally the case as I wander around urban streets, whether in Scotland or elsewhere – and the diversity of our cities is one of the best things about them. So why are the mountains so mono-racial?

It's an interesting question, and it spawns all sorts of other questions, one of them being: "Does it matter?" After all, no one should feel obliged to do something they don't feel like doing. I've never ridden a motorbike. I will doubtless go to the grave having never done so – and I won't regret it for a moment. It's just not for me, even though for many people it's life's principal pleasure. So if some people don't feel inclined to explore the countryside on foot, is that in any sense a problem?

"WE GO OUT INTO THE HILLS AND WE TALK. I TRY TO SHAKE HANDS WITH PEOPLE AND BREAK THAT BARRIER" – Pammy Johal

Well, maybe it's not, and maybe it is. I once spent a whole day on the summit of Ben Lomond with a photographer doing a feature for the National Trust for Scotland magazine. Our plan was to speak to every single person reaching the top that day and find out where they had come from and why they were there. We didn't quite manage it – at times the pesky blighters were arriving in such numbers that we missed a few.

The resulting gallery of headshots was phenomenally undiverse. There was one Asian boy from Renfrewshire with a school party, two Dutch friends whose family roots were in Indonesia, and several hundred white people. Within the latter there was much economic variation – some were expensively clad executives, but others were unemployed or working in low-paid jobs, so finance did not seem to be a factor here.

Some, no doubt, take the view that hillwalking's not for everybody. People who don't go hillwalking will be enjoying something else instead – end of story. Others, myself included, can't help feeling it's a shame if the exhilaration, the companionship, the astonishing views and the health benefits of outdoor activity are being shared by only one section of the population.

There are signs, though, that the outdoor mix is slowly changing. The outdoor organisation Backbone held an Outdoor Festival for All at Blair Atholl in autumn last year, funded by the Cairngorms National Park and Forestry Commission Scotland. It invited members of black and minority ethnic groups all over the country to attend. It was hoped 100 people might come – in fact more than 300 showed up, from all of Scotland's main cities as well as Perthshire and the Highlands. Groups included the Scottish Arabic Women's Association, the Nepalese Himalayan Association of Scotland and Nari Kallyan Shangho, a welfare organisation for South Asian women and their families in Edinburgh.

Elsbeth Grant, the National Park's education and inclusion officer, said: "We were delighted with the success of the festival. The number of people who attended, along with the 200 on waiting lists, exceeded our expectations of the demand from under-represented groups to visit the Cairngorms National Park. It was great to see so many people who have never had access to the National Park before being able to enjoy the landscape and try out new activities. The feedback from participants was really positive, that they would like to return to explore the National Park and its woodlands further."

Romena Huq, of Forestry Commission Scotland, was equally pleased with the way the event went. She said: "We really enjoyed this event in a wonderful woodland setting. It's great to bring together people from different backgrounds to explore and enjoy the woods."

"It's not necessarily financial barriers keeping people away. If someone doesn't introduce you to it you might think you won't fit in, or won't be welcome. You might not realise you can wear your traditional dress – you don't have to wear lycra cycling shorts to ride a bike." **D**



PHOTOGRAPH: ANGUS FINDLAY, BACKBONE

DTo get these messages across, Forestry Commission Scotland has had a stall at faith events and festivals such as the Glasgow and Edinburgh Melas.

Confidence

The event, which included walks, climbing, cycle rides and much more, was organised by Pammy Johal, who runs Backbone from her home at Lochluichart, in Ross-shire. Its motto is “celebrating diversity through adventure journeys” and Pammy has been considering the question of outdoor diversity for years.

Born and raised in Coventry, where her Indian parents had settled, she left home to do a degree in recreational studies at Ilkley, West Yorkshire, where one of her lecturers was the late, great climber Pete Livesey. So began a lifetime of outdoor activity and efforts to share its satisfactions.

Having thought long and hard about the under-representation of ethnic minority members on the hillsides and cycle paths, she has concluded that racism is not to blame.

“It’s actually dead simple. There’s a lack of confidence about driving in the countryside or about asking for directions, a fear of getting lost. People think ‘I don’t

know how to read a map’. It’s all to do with knowledge and confidence. I work with asylum seekers and refugees in Glasgow and Edinburgh, and they don’t even know that their local regional parks exist.

“Also, the environment and nature is not on the agenda of some of the communities I work with. Their agenda is employment, to get their kids an education and put food on the table. Once we show them how easy it is to access the countryside, the mountains, the coast and regional parks and national parks, they go ‘wow’. And they change their behaviour. I know families that have completely changed their outlook on life. Being out and walking, biking, camping is now almost their number one priority – doing family things together.”

Unsettling

Even though members of ethnic minorities may not encounter hostility in the hills, they do sometimes attract stares – which can be unsettling. Pammy recalls a day in the Lake District: “I took a group of ethnic minority women up on to Conistone Old Man. We got to the top, and it was a gorgeous day.

On the top there were lots of people, but every face

Previous pages, from left: Tharan and Simmy Bains on a day hike with Backbone at Beinn Eighe in Torridon; Pammy Johal and Lina Patel teaching climbing in the Yorkshire Dales; Asma Kassim with women on a Backbone outdoor leadership course near Cobleland in the Trossachs. These pages: scenes from the Outdoor Festival for All at Blair Atholl and, top right, Zara Mohammed and fellow cyclists in Victoria Park, Glasgow



“ALL I THOUGHT ABOUT WAS WORK, BUT WHEN I BEGAN TO EXPLORE THE OUTDOORS I REALISED THAT THERE WAS A LOT MORE THAT YOU CAN DO”

— Bongayi Patti

turned to look at us. They were quite strong women that I was with, but the feeling of being looked at was so powerful that one of the women just wanted to run away. It’s nobody’s fault, and we had a great conversation about it because it wasn’t a racist thing, it was just people hadn’t seen anything like it so they were curious. So what we do at Backbone is we go out into the hills and we talk. In that situation I try to shake hands with people and break that barrier.

“We are in the process of getting more people trained to lead groups in the outdoors, and that’s what is needed because a lot of members of ethnic minorities are

shy of going out with someone who does not look like them. We may look different to other people we see in the countryside, but they say ‘hi’, we say ‘hi’, and there is no problem at all.”

Another time, she took a party from Glasgow to Clyde Muirshiel regional park. It



included an African asylum seeker who had been in the city for 12 years and had never heard of this place that was just half an hour away by train (“four quid return, by the way”, Pammy points out). She says: “We walked up from the train station along the loch and met some local fishermen and soon there was this fantastic conversation going on about fishing in Africa and fishing right here. There was kind of a language barrier, but it wasn’t really a barrier and it was brilliant.”

I spoke to some women who have undergone outdoor leadership training with Backbone. Archana Goyal, from Delhi, who came to Edinburgh in 2010, says she was low on confidence and had little experience of the outdoors until she went for training in cycling and leadership. She has now successfully led a regular walking group and enjoys getting out into the countryside whenever she can.

She says: “I’ve been for a 22km walk, which would have been unthinkable before. In India we are very

sheltered. We plan our day around the weather. If it’s raining you don’t go out. If it’s too hot you wait until it’s cooler. Backbone taught me that you should just go out come what may, whatever the weather.

“I lacked knowledge of how to use expedition equipment and manage in the outdoors, but now I have a good grounding. For me the best part of it all has been seeing the nature of Scotland in the raw.”

She has now explored Conic Hill, beside Loch Lomond, Kintail, the Pentlands, the Lammermuirs, the East Lothian coast and the Cairngorms, all on foot, as well as enjoying cycling and canoeing.

Bongayi Patti, a nurse from Zimbabwe, also settled in Edinburgh and now leads walks and cycle rides after attending courses with Backbone. She says: “There has been a lot of interest. People join in for different reasons: for their health, for fun, to let their children meet together, or to see the beauty around them.

“I think a lot of people work, and when they aren’t working they feel they need to spend time at home. I was once in that situation, where all I thought about was work, but when I began to explore the outdoors I realised there was a lot more that you can do. Close **D**



“IN INDIA WE ARE VERY SHELTERED. IF IT’S RAINING YOU DON’T GO OUT”

— Archana Goyal



Main picture: Archana Goyal, who trained as an outdoor leader with Backbone; around the campfire at Blair Atholl

to Edinburgh there are some lovely walks in the Pentlands. Growing up in Zimbabwe, there was one bike between eight children – three boys and five girls. The boys were always on the bike so I never had a chance. Here it is easier.”

Zara Mohammed, born in Glasgow to parents who were themselves born in the UK in Pakistani families, perhaps faced less of a barrier in discovering the outdoors. She took part in the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award scheme, but still felt she had “no clue” about the outdoors until attending a women’s leadership course with Backbone. She says: “The ladies I met were from all over the place. We all realised that enjoying the outdoors is a great way to de-stress, and a way to see that there is more to life than you think. I started out on a whole other journey.”

She has now led groups on walks, and recalls one through the Carron Valley: “One girl in the group, it was her birthday and she said the walk had made it a really special day for her.”

So far Backbone has trained more than 100 people for their Level 3 Certificate in Basic Expedition Leadership, as Cycle Ride Leaders and for Outdoor First Aid qualifications. The more people that do the training, the more

they spread the word, and the harder it becomes to imagine a teenage girl facing the opposition from her family that Pammy did.

She says: “I could have lost my family because of my drive to be in the mountains and in the countryside. They kept saying ‘Indian girls aren’t supposed to do that, they’re supposed to get married. So no, you can’t do this and no, you can’t do that’. But I kept doing it and it meant so much disgrace for my family.”

Clearly, none of the parents – and future parents – who follow courses with Backbone, or enjoy events such as the Outdoor Festival for All, will be saying this kind of thing to their children. So perhaps the day is drawing nearer when the joy of the outdoors will be shared by all. ■

FIND OUT MORE

For more information about Backbone go to www.backbone.uk.net

To learn more about the Cairngorms National Park, see www.cairngorms.co.uk. The National Park has a forum advising on inclusion and equality – see bit.ly/SOinclud

For ideas on ways to enjoy Scotland’s woodlands, see scotland.forestry.gov.uk/activities