

Exploring the Social Perceptions of Eastern Kentucky University's Green Spaces and Natural Areas

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Introduction

A green space is a natural area that is surrounded by development with the intention to provide recreational use and conservation for wildlife. Some of EKU's natural areas include Taylor Fork Ecological Area, Maywoods Environmental and Educational Laboratory, and Lilley Cornett Woods Appalachian Ecological Research Station.

This study explored the different perceptions and valuations of the environment between the users, managers, and maintainers of EKU's green spaces to understand how it impacts their different management practices, their uses of space, their perception of each space, and their valuation of each space. The study had two research goals:

- To explore the different perceptions of the participants.
- To document the common barriers to accessibility and classify these barriers based on gender, socioeconomic status, education, and race.

Methods

The research participants were asked to participate in a semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews addressed participants' experiences with EKUs green spaces and the environment in general. Open-ended questions were presented according to a predetermined interview guide. This study was approved by Eastern Kentucky University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Interviews were conducted with eight individuals representing perspectives from faculty, staff, and student workers. The study population was limited to those directly associated with EKU's green spaces. Future research should explore perceptions of communities that live in proximity to these natural areas. With the

participants' consent, interviews were recorded using a hand-held digital audio recorder and then transcribed into text for coding.

Results

Eastern Kentucky University's (EKU) green spaces and natural areas are valued and appreciated by many but are inaccessible for some. For example, Lilley Cornett Woods is approximately three hours away from EKU's campus. Transportation has shown to be a barrier to accessibility and engagement. Funding is also an issue faced by managers to install wheel-chair accessible trails and recreational facilities. The educational background stuck out among the participants. Almost all of them were academics and those of whom had the most access to these natural areas.

Faculty and staff saw these natural areas as an opportunity for recreation and to get out of the office. However, student workers used the outdoors as an opportunity for research and to gain more experience for their academic career.

Surprisingly, one participant hadn't gone to any of the natural areas, though they were aware of them. The participant mentioned the competitiveness of hiking as another barrier to enjoying these natural areas. Whereas another participant stated that competition was a part of human nature.

The mission statement is blanketed across these natural areas. However, each space has different limitations and restrictions. Maywoods is both an outdoor research laboratory and recreational space.





Figure 1. Lake Edmiston at Maywoods

Lilley Cornett Woods has been said to be a “living museum” with set hours and guided tours. Whereas Taylor Fork is an early successional forest with open access.

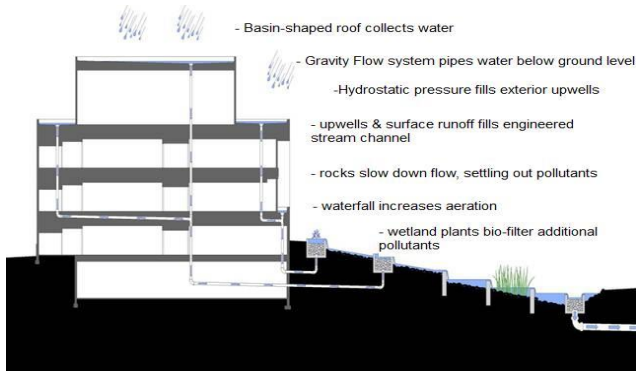


Figure 2. New Science Building Stormwater System

The campus has seen some changes over the years with the introduction of stormwater ponds, American Chestnut trees, and apple orchards. However, the campus community is not always aware of these green spaces.



Figure 3. EKU Sustainability Map

Participants discussed adapting to the times and using social media towards community outreach. Or even the traditional word of mouth approach to garner support.

Conclusions

The most effective ways to engage people with the environment is through education, community buy-in, and recreation. The community members must be empowered to support and promote sustainability which varies for each location. Lilley Cornett Woods is far more isolated and rural; however, the community is steadily becoming interested in exploring the area. In comparison, Maywoods is in a rural setting but closer to EKU’s campus. Taylor Fork is nearby, semi-accessible and is commonly visited by students and faculty.

Environmental education starts with youth and cycles into adulthood. Lesson plans should be fun, exciting, and most importantly, impactful. Young people are the future and will create change with the right tools. Lastly, recreational uses of these natural areas not only supports the well-being of the community but provides an opportunity for collaboration.

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