



The Importance of Outdoor Recreation: Health, Economy and Nature

Paddy Harrop



What is the value of outdoor recreation?

Economy?

**Engagement
with
woodland?**

**Health
Benefits?**

UK Outdoor Recreation Values

£22bn

Economic
Contribution
1m jobs

34m

People visit woodland
748M visits

£6–8bn

Health Value
£5bn NHS savings

What is the ORN

UK & Ireland-wide network of organisations in outdoor recreation

Founded as Countryside Recreation Network (1968), evolved into the ORN as it expanded

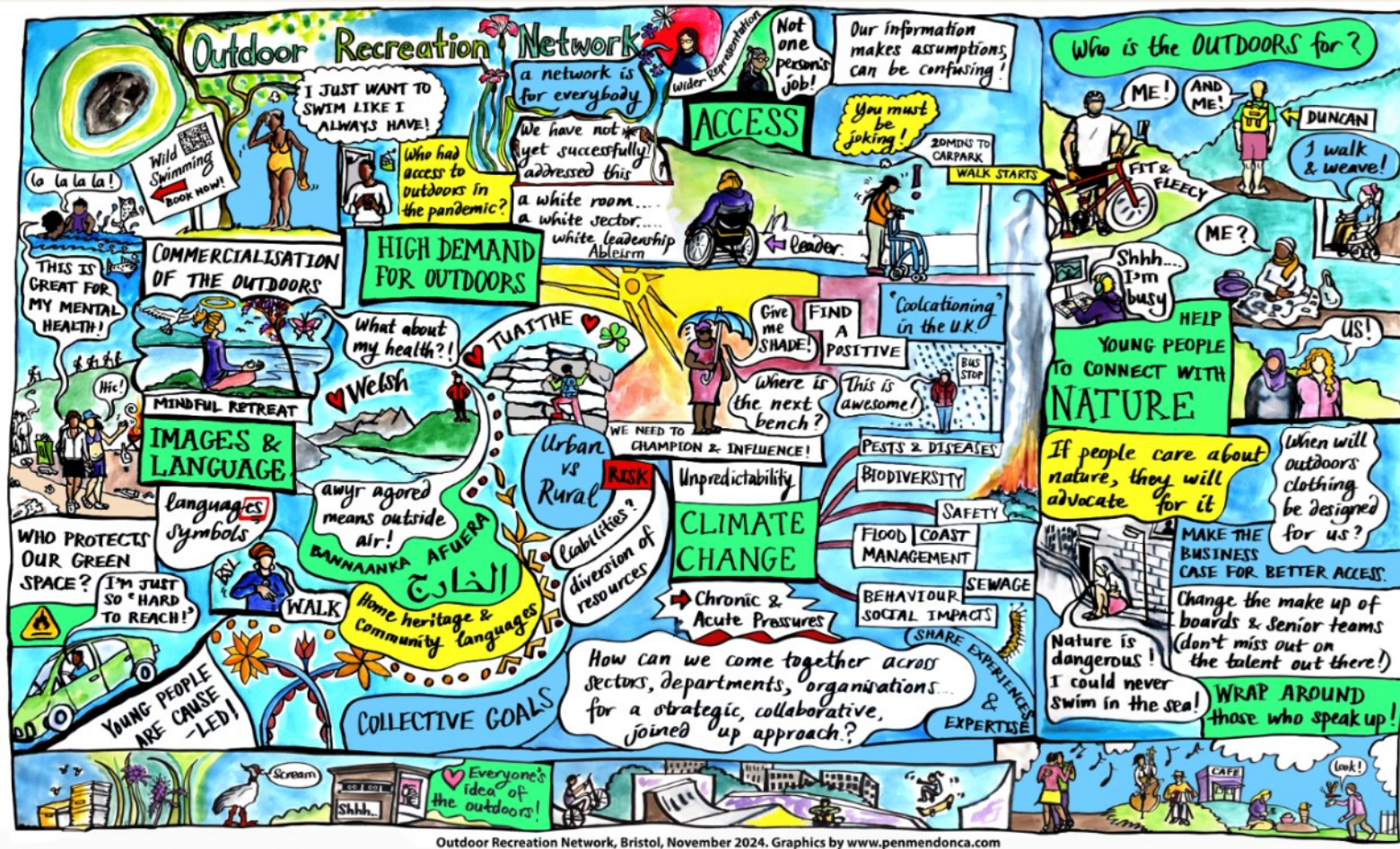
Vision: *"People from all backgrounds can responsibly enjoy and engage with the outdoors"*

Mission: *"Support members to collaborate, share research, facilitate information exchanges, and champion inclusive and sustainable good practice"*



Outdoor Recreation Network

Action Plan



Outdoor Recreation Network, Bristol, November 2024. Graphics by www.penmendonca.com

- Improving access
- Enhancing Health & Wellbeing
- Managing Impacts of Climate Change
- Protecting Nature & Responsible Access
- Maximising Impact with Limited Resources



Nature

24 species
reintroductions
12,000 ha wild
areas
19% open habitats



Forestry

1.2 million m³
timber
3,000ha land
acquired
1,700ha new
climate resilient
woodland



People

300 million visits
970,000 volunteer
hours
140,000 members



3. Forests for all

Being connected to nature is fundamental for a healthy, resilient society. Time spent in the natural world restores us, reduces stress and strengthens our sense of belonging.

Forests offer us a cultural shared space like no other; a way of connecting to story, our heritage, arts, learning, physical activity and wellbeing. When people see themselves as part of nature, rather than separate from it, they are far more likely to protect it, use it and support it. Yet that connection is weakening, at precisely the moment we need it most.





Opportunities for outdoor recreation over the next decade

Green and Blue Infrastructure

Investment in green and blue infrastructure enhances connections between urban and rural areas, promoting active travel and nature access.

Nature-Based Health Interventions

Growing momentum in nature-based health programs fosters partnerships among land managers, health services, and communities.

Inclusion and Accessibility

Addressing barriers like cost, transport, and cultural perceptions increases participation from under-represented groups in outdoor recreation.

Digital Technology and Education

Advances in digital data help understand visitor behavior and improve experiences, while education builds awareness of landscape protection.

Manchester Green and Blue Strategy

Figure 5
Objective 1: Existing GI - Headline Actions

Action 1:
River valleys and canals : continue to invest in the river valleys and canals to provide attractive settings for residential communities, leisure and recreation, health, and biodiversity benefits

Action 2:
Enhance existing parks to maximise their potential in making Manchester a world class city

Action 3:
Enhance existing and introduce new green infrastructure within large estates and land holdings e.g. registered housing providers, cemeteries, universities and hospitals.

Action 4:
Schools and colleges: enhance school grounds for environmental education and biodiversity

Action 5:
Trees and woodlands: effective and appropriate tree and woodland management and planting



The following section of the Strategy uses plans to illustrate assets and opportunities, at city and regional scale. The plans are used for spatial illustration purposes only, they do not show every asset, park or open space. The strategy needs to be flexible and adapt over time so the intention is to indicate where principles may be appropriate for action based on the identified assets and needs of an area, rather than to identify specific interventions, or provide site specific advice.

Action 6:
Community greening and food growing: delivery of community-led and focussed green infrastructure projects

Action 7:
Gardens: protect and enhance private gardens as important areas of green space.

Action 8:
Sites of Biological Importance (SBIs): increase the number of SBIs in active management to conserve, protect and enhance biodiversity

Action 9:
Local Nature Reserves: increase the coverage of LNRs in line with national guidance to 1 ha of LNR per 1,000 residents

Action 10:
Health and wellbeing: deliver green infrastructure projects with a particular focus on improving health and wellbeing

Challenges and Risks

Environmental Impacts

Changing climate and extreme weather threaten landscapes and habitats, increasing stress on natural environments and recreation infrastructure.

Increased Recreational Pressure

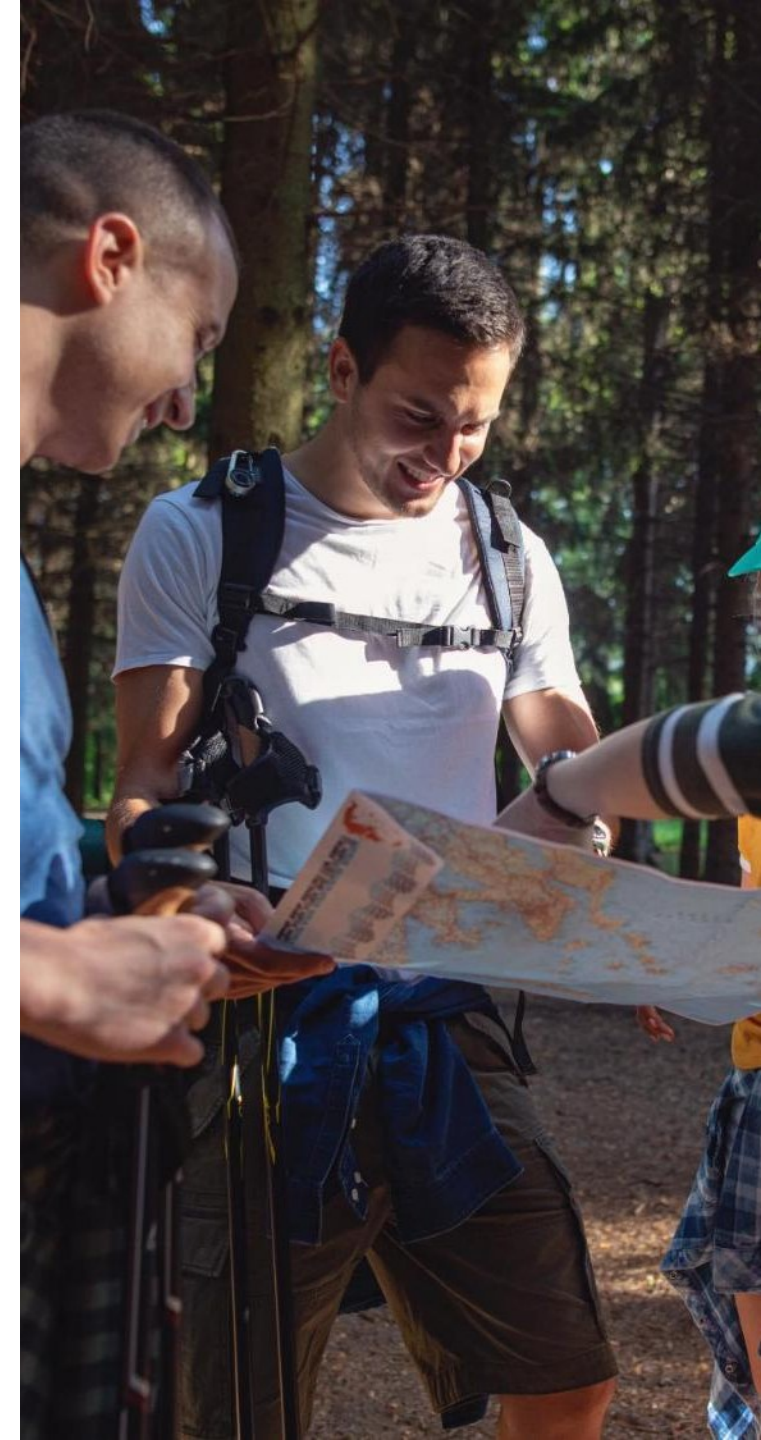
Rising visitor numbers can cause erosion, wildlife disturbance, congestion, and conflicts among user groups.

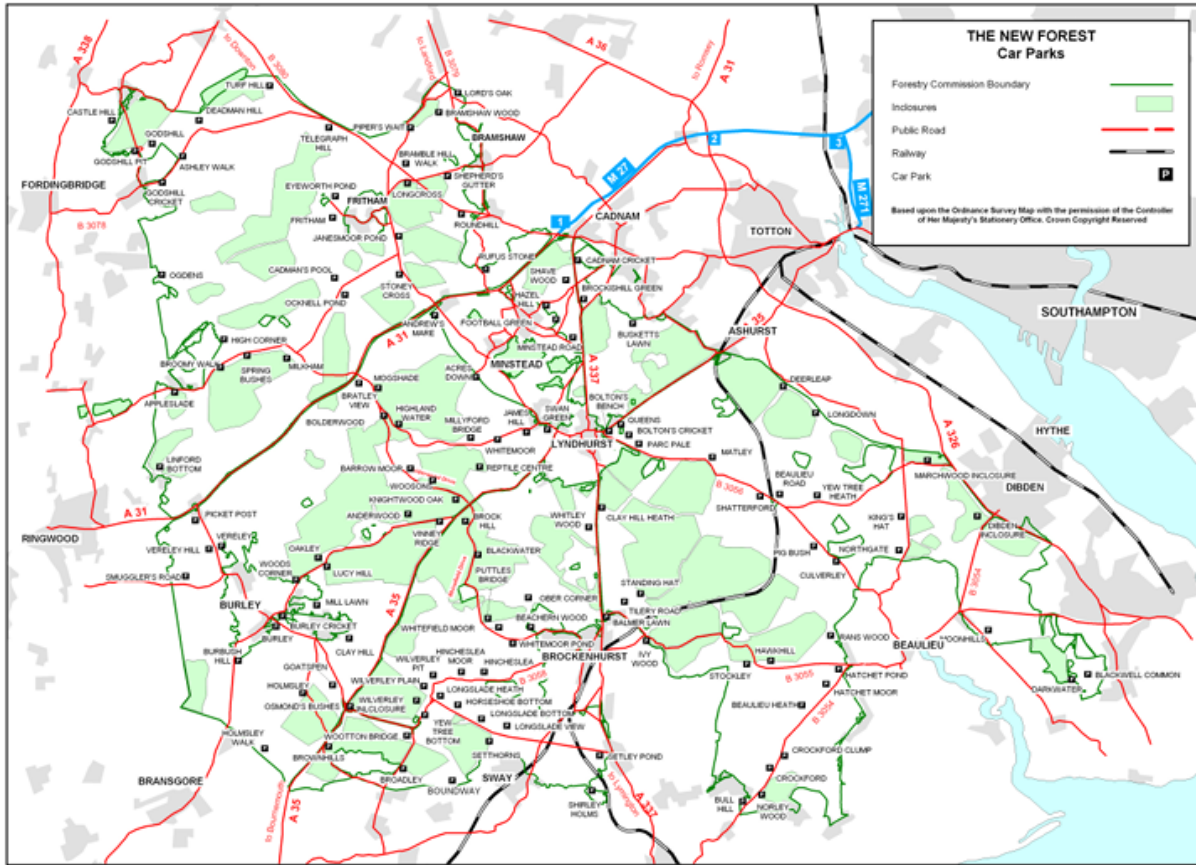
Funding and Maintenance Challenges

Budget constraints make it difficult to maintain infrastructure and adequate staff capacity effectively. Self financing will become increasingly important

Responsible Recreation

Engagement with nature aids protection But some visitors need a greater understanding of how they can help.





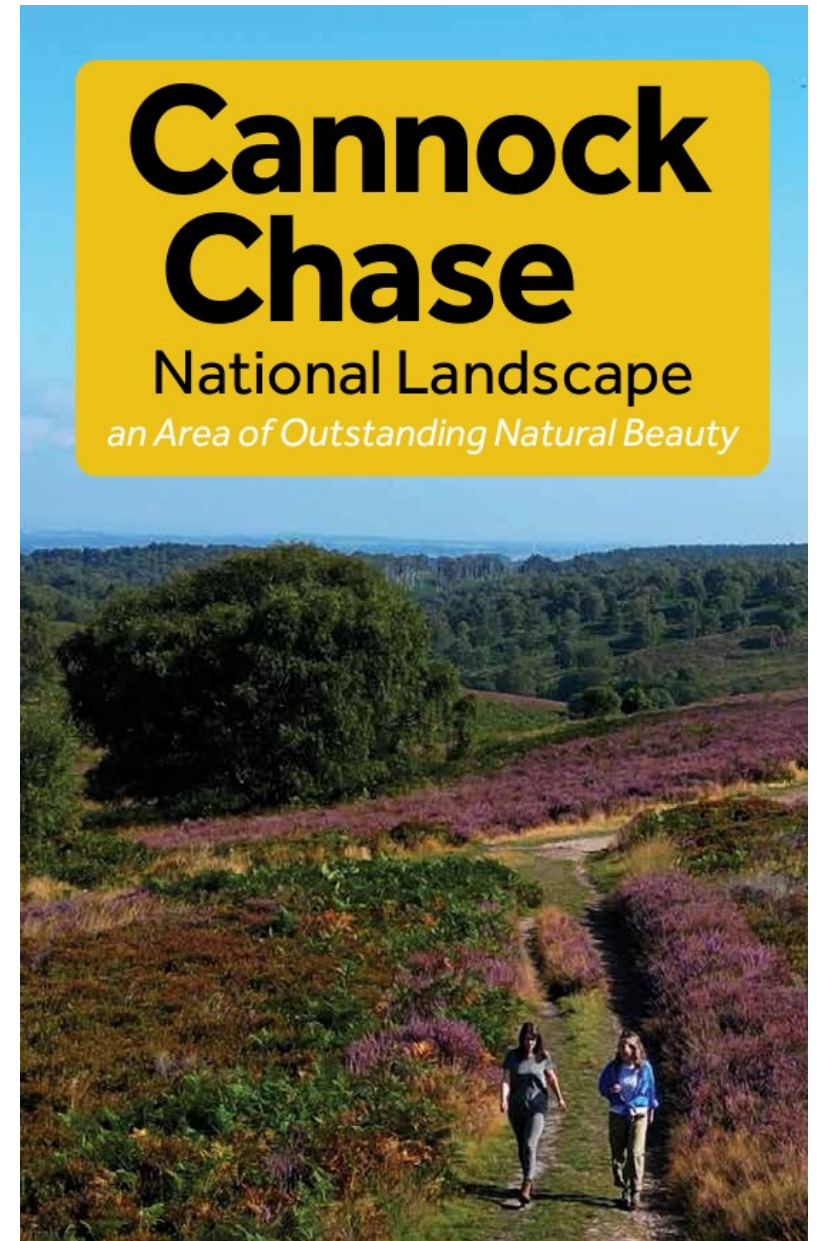
Supporting the New Forest

Our work includes planting thousands of trees, conserving wildlife, managing vegetation and restoring heathlands and rivers. We help millions of people enjoy the area by providing hundreds of miles of paths and cycle routes, 10 campsites and 129 car parks. Our rangers patrol the area every day of the year and help address anti-social behaviour.

We currently receive less than 20% of our core funding from the government with the rest having to be found from our own activities including things like timber sales and car parking charges. Parking charges help us to care for this special place.



Context	Relevance to Recreation	Strategic Implication
Proximity to major urban areas	High demand for access to nature	Need for robust visitor management
Public and charitable land ownership	Opportunities for coordinated planning	Landscape-scale recreation strategy
Designated habitats and species	Environmental sensitivity	Zoning and seasonal management
Visitor infrastructure	Supports high levels of use	Ongoing investment and maintenance



Why a strategic approach is needed and can deliver more benefits for people, nature and the economy

Outdoor Recreation Value

Outdoor recreation supports health, economic vitality, and environmental protection

Collaborative Management

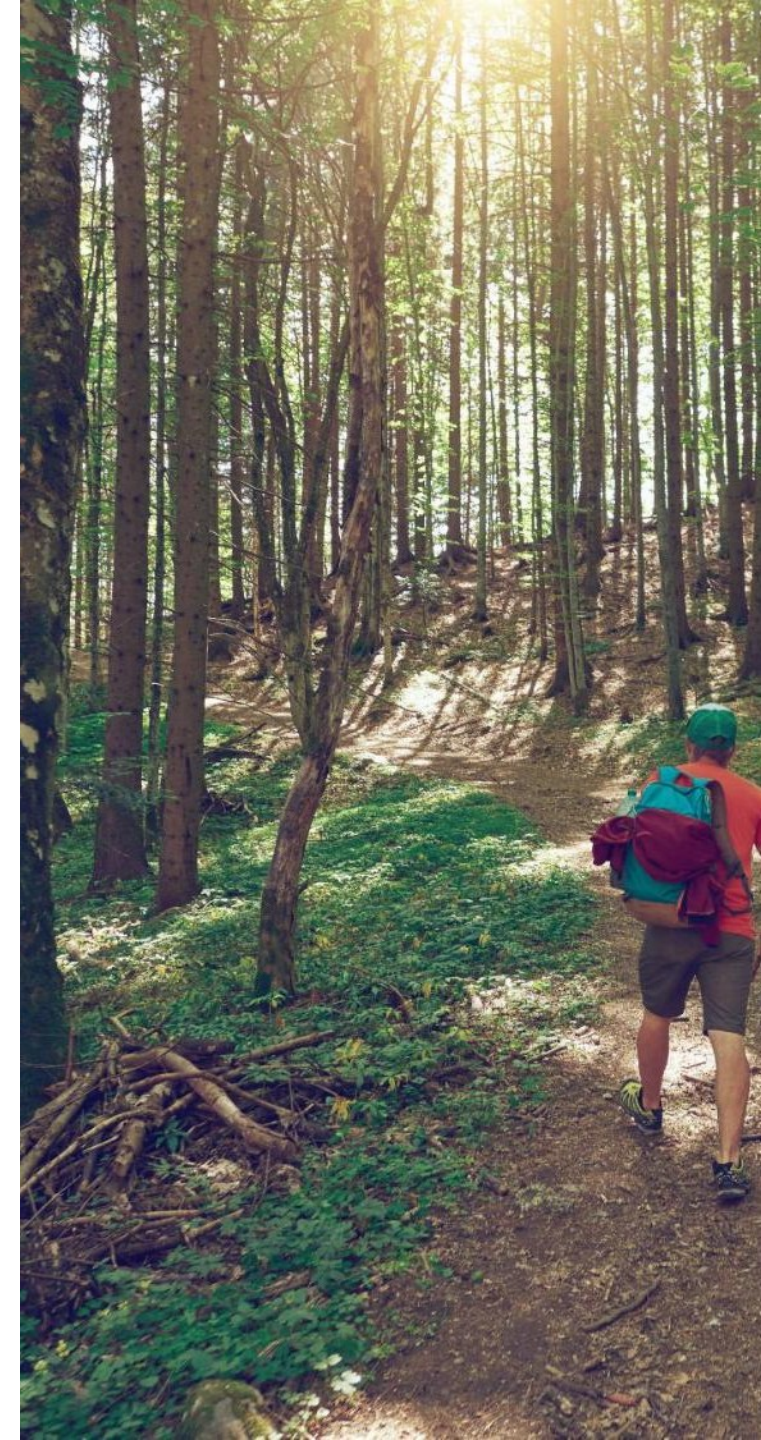
Collaborative approaches balance high visitor demand with environmental protection to sustain natural landscapes and help target recreation in the least sensitive places

Strategic Coordination

Public and charitable organisations provide strategic coordination for effective outdoor recreation planning and delivery.

Future Preparedness

Planning ahead and investing wisely ensures outdoor recreation can meet growing public demand sustainably and help protect and enhance the natural environment



Upcoming Events



Thursday - Thursday
30 - 30 April 2026

ORN webinar – From Vision to Delivery: Lessons from the Coast to Coast National Trail

10:30 am - 12:00 pm

Webinars



Tuesday - Tuesday
12 - 12 May 2026

1-Day Workshop on Wildfires: Managing Public Access within Statutory Frameworks

10:00 am - 4:00 pm

Smithills Hall, Smithills Dean Road, Bolton, BL1 7NP



Tuesday - Tuesday
16 - 16 June 2026

ARG Meeting: June session

12:30 pm - 1:30 pm

Online Academic Research Group Meeting



Tuesday - Tuesday
23 - 23 June 2026

ORN webinar: Inclusive Outdoor Recreation

11:00 am - 12:30 pm

Webinars



Tuesday - Tuesday
07 - 07 July 2026

ARG Meeting: July session

12:30 pm - 1:30 pm

Online Academic Research Group Meeting



Monday - Wednesday
28 - 30 September 2026

2-Day Masterclass on Responsible Recreation

2:00 pm - 5:00 pm

MOD Tidworth Garrison Theatre, Wiltshire (England)



Thursday - Thursday
15 - 15 October 2026

ORN webinar: Funding the Future

11:00 am - 12:30 pm

Webinars



Tuesday - Tuesday
17 - 17 November 2026

ARG Meeting: November session

12:30 pm - 1:30 pm

Online Academic Research Group Meeting

ORN 2-Day Masterclass

- 29–30 September
- Tidworth Garrison Theatre (Wiltshire)
- Theme: Responsible Recreation
- Booking information coming soon

For more info visit:

[outdoorrecreation.org.uk](https://www.outdoorrecreation.org.uk)



Questions/Discussion

