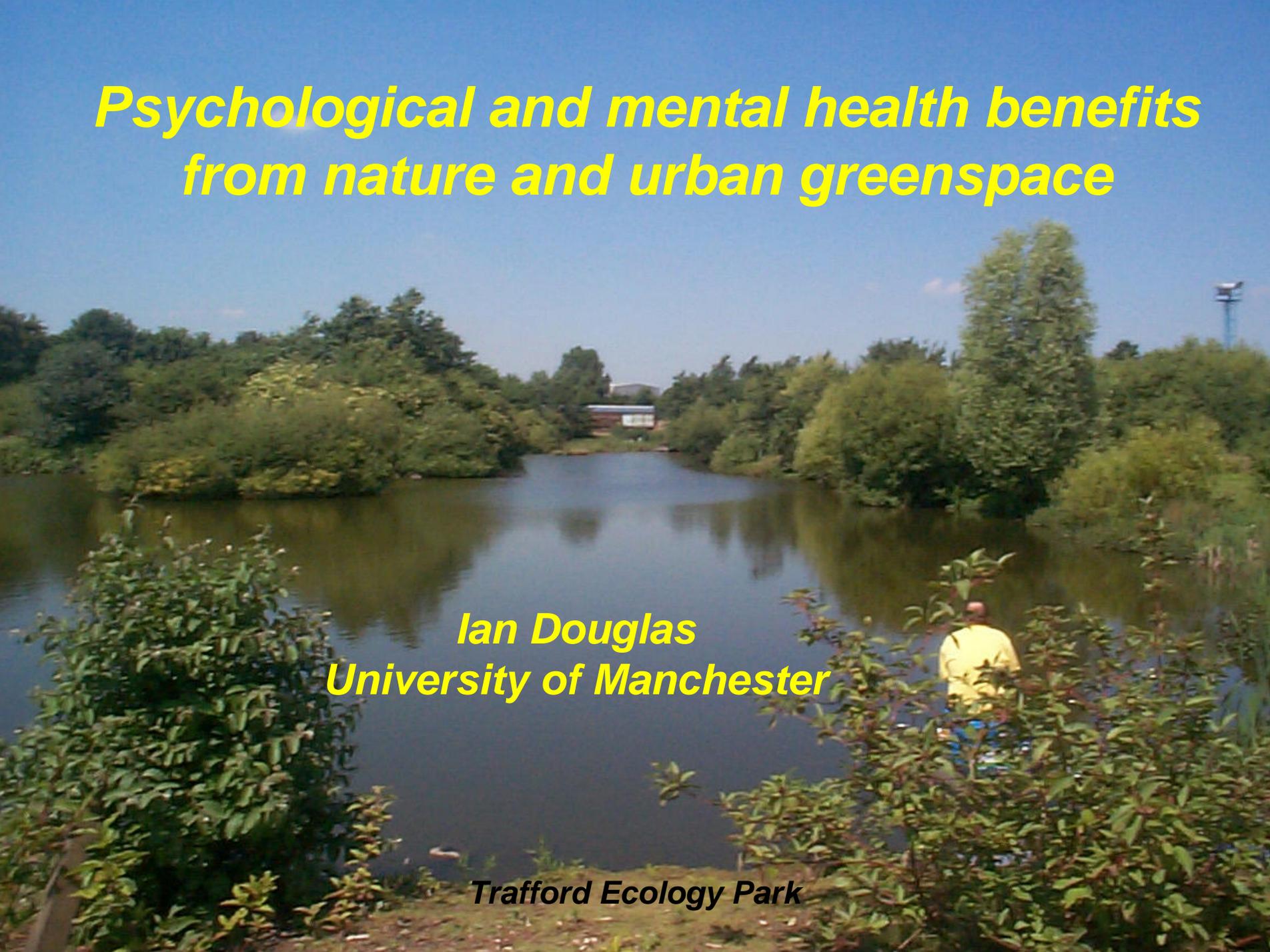


# *Psychological and mental health benefits from nature and urban greenspace*

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# Definitions

- Environment in the context of greenspaces may be taken as the biophysical surroundings of individuals, families and communities. These surroundings affect the human psyche through their direct sensory impacts.
- Mental health may be taken in its broadest sense of mental well-being or “peace of mind”.

# The assertions

- “There is convincing evidence of the positive benefits to be gained from both active and passive involvement with natural areas in towns and cities”.
- “Access to good quality green space provides an effective, population-wide strategy for the promotion of good health, wellbeing and quality of life”
- (Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, 2007, *The Urban Environment*, TSO).

# The doubts

- The actual evidence for mental health benefits from urban greenspace may be less clear than these assertions imply.

# The Scientific Evidence

*Students near The Cliff, Salford*

# The Scientific Evidence

- Four kinds:
- the outcomes of experiments in which subjects have been tested in contrasting situations;
- the findings of studies that used photographs and videos of natural environments to test people's reactions;
- the results of attitudinal surveys, both quantitative and qualitative, in which people are asked about their preferences and experiences;
- the use of national or regional health data sets.

# Outcomes of experiments

- mere visibility of nature may have powerful preventative and curative effects on people's health;
- converging evidence from different types of measures that natural settings contribute to positive outcomes;
- but the outcomes stem from both the *positive influence* of natural vegetation and attractive landscapes and the *negative effects* of windowless rooms and the urban settings;
- greenspaces around homes greatly improve children's cognitive functioning.

# Tests using slides and videos

- visual exposure to nature through slides or videos may improve subjects' moods
- exposure to natural scenes reduces stress
- some school students (mainly from rural and suburban homes) had negative perceptions of wild green spaces and activities involving contact with nature, and, to some degree, also had higher preferences for indoor environments and activities.

# Attitudinal surveys

- in the East Midlands, getting away from stress was associated with relaxation and nature - seeing it, being in natural places and learning about it;
- however, there can be associations between getting exercise and becoming de-stressed, as well as just being in a natural area;
- much to suggest that natural, or wild, areas are unattractive and induce negative reactions on the part of many people;
- behavioural surveys conducted among adult visitors in urban natural areas sample a self-selected group likely to have positive attitudes to wildlife.

# National or regional data sets

- a population based community survey of England, Wales and Scotland in which psychiatric morbidity was assessed using the General Health Questionnaire found an association was found between urban residence and the prevalence of psychiatric morbidity which persisted after adjustment for various confounding factors;

# Implications of the Scientific Evidence



*Saltwells Wood, West Midlands*

# Implications of the scientific evidence

- clear evidence that among many sectors of society there are positive benefits for mental health and well-being to be gained from both active and passive involvement with natural areas in towns and cities;
- for many the greatest value of urban woodlands and natural vegetation is as an escape or refuge away from urban life and probably human (urban) activity;
- some people have negative perceptions of areas of natural vegetation;
- both people and nature are complex. What works in one situation may not work in another, either for cultural and social reasons, or for ecological, biogeochemical or climatic reasons.

# Conclusions

- The scientific evidence is strong enough to make the case for the inclusion of areas of natural vegetation in planning the expansion of existing towns and creating new urban settlements;
- public participation in the planning and management of such areas, will enhance their value and will help to reduce vandalism and other forms of misuse;
- the experimental, survey and quantitative scientific evidence is based on relatively few studies from a narrow range of countries;
- need to examine how different social groups in similar sized urban areas in different regions or countries enjoy, use and react to urban nature.

A photograph of an urban woodland. The scene is filled with tall, mature trees with dense green foliage. In the foreground, there are large, vibrant purple flowers, likely azaleas, in full bloom. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day, with sunlight filtering through the leaves. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and natural.

**The End**

***Urban woodland, Ashton-upon-Mersey, Trafford***