Ageing And the outdoors: Denying inevitability or perceiving an opportunity – which is the Outdoor Sector’s approach?

by Mark Hickman, Colin Beard and Allison Inkster

An ageing population

Did you know that there are currently over 10 million people in the UK over the age of 65 and that this number is predicted to rise to 19 million by 2050? That means that over one in four people will be over 65 by mid-century. Inasmuch as we can predict anything – a degree of caution should always be exercised where predictions about future trends are concerned - these facts are really interesting. What’s more this trend seems to be happening across the globe. So why is this, and what does it mean for us as outdoor practitioners?

Why an ageing population?

After World War Two, the UK saw exceptionally high birth rates, especially in what came to be known as the ‘baby boomer’ years of 1946-1964. Adding to this was better access to health care, rising levels of education and employment, and a period of political stability following over three decades of uncertainty across Europe.

There was also a revolution in employment patterns that drove changes in family structures and employment patterns. These basic trends, witnessed across the globe, meant that in 2013 the worldwide number of older adults stood at some 841 million: a four-fold increase on the 202 million in 1950 and just under half the two billion predicted by 2050.
Why does an ageing population matter to the outdoor sector?

The outdoor sector in the United Kingdom remains buoyant, diverse and continues to experience growth. A wider range of people than ever before can access it but are we prepared for significant change over the next three decades as the declining birth rate and an ageing population comes into effect? This is going to have a significant impact on our sector and the way we work, what remains unclear at this time is the extent!

So, let’s consider how our outdoor workforce might alter.

A high proportion of young people, aged 18-24, are currently employed in the outdoors. Furthermore there are significant seasonal variations in demand for outdoor staff. A marked decline in the younger population would reduce the employment pool of younger workers. This will require innovative strategies to be applied to recruitment, retention and training and development.

The skills that older adults from outside the outdoor industry already have could be embraced. Many outdoor practitioners aged over 65 have retrained and/or consolidated existing outdoor experience and now work across all age ranges. Some bring in ‘imported’ entire skills sets that are important, even fundamental to the outdoors.

Then there’s the way we work!

Experiences, activities and seasonal variations

An ageing population potentially means the outdoor sector is likely to experience a shift in the demand for experiences and activities. Currently in the UK the outdoor sector tends towards an increase in demand in the spring and summer, followed by an autumnal decline and then often a quiet winter. However, in the tourism sector the experience of an ageing population suggests that with increased leisure time available for the older adult, demand for activities is more constant and sustained across the year – this means thinking ahead and being proactive, not playing catch up once the inevitable has happened.

One European review of the outdoor sector (EQFOA, 2006) suggests that anyone looking in from the ‘outside’ could find it difficult to see the potential to work with partners and other agencies dedicated to promoting active ageing at local and national levels. For example, look at Age UK, the country’s largest charity dedicated to helping people make the most of growing older. It has an extensive national network of programmes in health and wellbeing, travel and lifestyle, and work and learning that the outdoors could support, offer specialist advice and assistance to, or develop partnerships with.

And that’s just one organisation: then think of the NHS…local councils...

As time moves on it will become increasingly important that voluntary, commercial and professional organisations cooperate to encourage older adults to participate more widely in what the outdoor sector has to offer. In what ways could our specialist skills be put to use in this context?

The ‘Silver Economy’

If the ethics of responding to an ageing population doesn’t convince us to act and extend outdoor opportunities to all, perhaps economics and politics will. We all work in commercially driven environments and even education needs to pay the bills! The ‘silver economy’ is a term used by the Financial Times to describe the spending power of today’s over 65s (Financial Times, 2014): the ‘silver pound’ refers to their disposable income. Many leisure providers already compete for this (or the silver Euro, Dollar or Yuan considering the global market for leisure provision) but does the outdoor sector take this competition seriously? With the ageing population forecast to increase until mid-century this demographic is predicted as a major economic driver for at least the next thirty years.

What are we doing at local and national levels to prepare for and exploit these opportunities?

Conclusion

We suggest that the Outdoor Sector is at a crossroad with the signpost offering routes to ‘Threat’ or ‘Opportunity’ depending upon the perspective taken. Considering that the global demographic points to an ageing population and that the Outdoor Sector in the UK is well established, versatile and flexible we strongly believe that the position is one of great opportunity. However, this will require proactivity and strategic thinking of a cooperative and unified nature.

Is the Outdoor Sector capable of meeting this challenge?

We’re setting up a discussion group on active ageing and the outdoors and want to hear about innovative projects you’re already involved with which address the issues talked about here. Your stories and input will be used towards a second article on ways that older adults perceive the outdoors as a place for remaining physically active. For example, research already shows that older adult climbers are motivated to take part in other forms of exercise in order to stay fit to climb. A third article is also planned, this one on ways that older adults use their outdoor activities to challenge what they see as outdated notions of ageing and to contribute to what’s been called ‘generativity’ (McAdams, St.Aubin & Logan, 1993) or providing a legacy for those who follow. Interestingly, evidence so far points to that legacy being in which ‘older’ adults refuse to act their age!

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References


- Financial Times. (2014). Baby boomers power new age of spending- Consumer groups are waking up to the potential of today’s over 65s. Available at www.ft.com/indepth/silver-economy


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