

Statistical bulletin

Tourism and outdoor leisure accounts, natural capital, UK: 2021

In this bulletin we put into practice new methods for estimating the value of tourism and outdoor leisure in the UK.

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1 . Main points

- Nature contributed an estimated £12 billion to tourism and outdoor leisure within the UK in 2019.
- The number of outdoor-related activities participated in across the UK rose from 1.2 billion to 1.5 billion between 2011 and 2016.
- Outdoor-related activities in urban settings accounted for over 60% of all nature-based spending in 2019 within Great Britain.
- Between 2011 and 2019, 8% of all estimated tourism and outdoor leisure spending in Great Britain was driven primarily by nature.

2 . Understanding tourism

The natural environment is host to many tourism and outdoor leisure trips across the UK. Woodlands provide a natural setting for long walks, while coastal beaches attract sunbathers and swimmers.

Existing tourism surveys already capture information on the numbers of tourist trips that people take, the amount they spend and the types of activities they do. We present methods adapting existing survey data to estimate the value of trips including activities which rely on the outdoors, as part of the UK natural capital accounts. The aim of this is to determine the monetary contribution of nature and the natural environment to tourism and outdoor leisure. As part of the natural capital accounts the values we include differ from those in the traditional tourism satellite accounts. For more details please read the body of this report or its [methods](#).

This bulletin explores the estimated annual value and asset value of tourism and outdoor leisure trips across Great Britain, as well as the number of outdoor-related activities participated in during those trips. In our findings we measure the monetary value of tourism and outdoor leisure by looking at the expenditure on outdoor activities enabled or enhanced by nature. We also measure the physical flow of tourism and outdoor leisure by counting the number of outdoor-related activities completed within Great Britain, including long walks, playing golf and visiting parks and gardens.

3 . Tourism and outdoor leisure

Most of this bulletin examines detailed estimates of nature's contribution to tourism and outdoor leisure within Great Britain. [Section 5](#), however, features summarised UK estimates of annual value and physical flow.

Figure 1 shows the annual estimated value for the contribution of the natural environment to tourism and outdoor leisure, with the highest value in Great Britain in 2019 at £12 billion (in 2019 prices). In 2011, Great Britain tourism was valued at £11 billion, which had increased 6% by 2019. This increase was driven by a 30% growth in expenditure between 2011 and 2019 for England. However, both Scotland and Wales saw reductions in the amount spent over the same period, of 55% and 37% respectively.

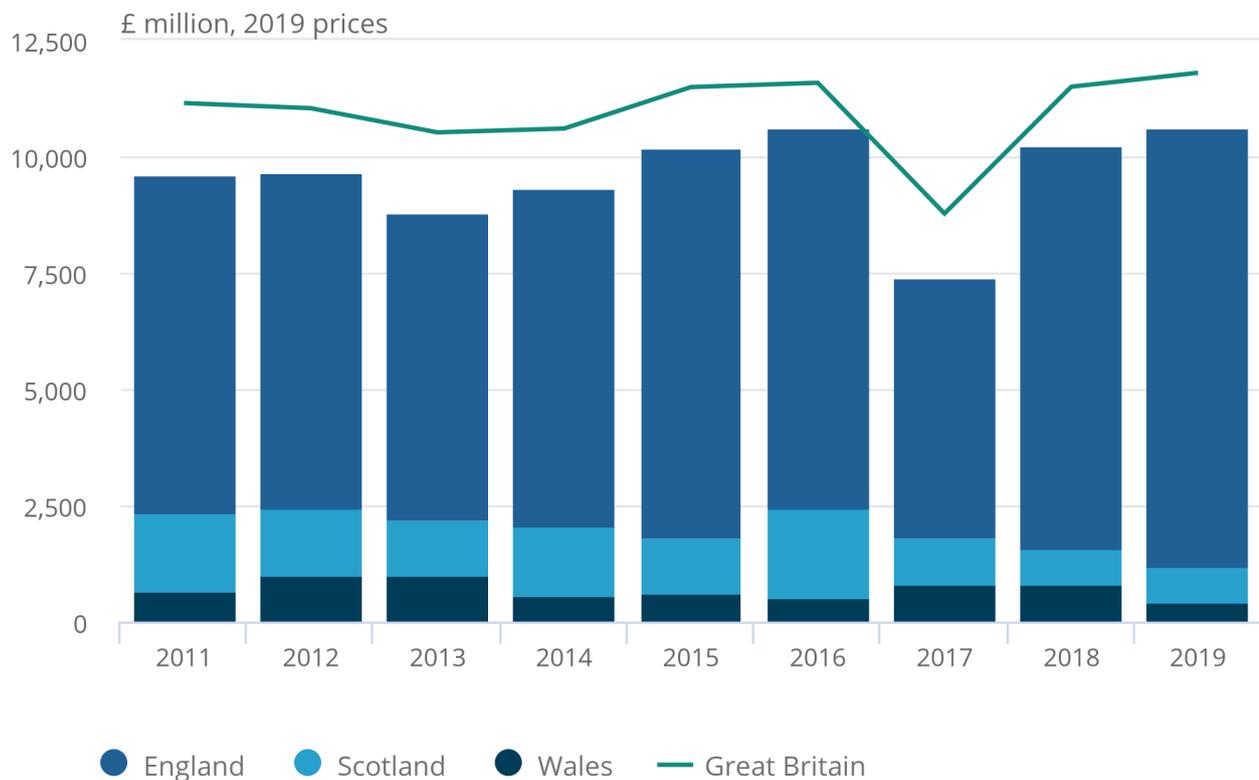
On average, the natural environment contributes 8% of the total estimated expenditure on all tourism and outdoor leisure related activities within Great Britain.

Figure 1: Nature’s contribution to tourism and outdoor leisure was largest in 2019, valued at £12 billion

Annual contribution of the natural environment to tourism and outdoor leisure, £ million (2019 prices), Great Britain, 2011 to 2019

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Annual contribution of the natural environment to tourism and outdoor leisure, £ million (2019 prices), Great Britain, 2011 to 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics, Great Britain Tourism Survey and Great Britain Day Visits Survey

Notes:

1. Some data couldn't be apportioned to England, Scotland or Wales, leading to it being included only within estimates of Great Britain. This explains why the sum of England, Scotland and Wales are less than Great Britain.

Figure 2 shows the estimated number of outdoor-related activities completed within Great Britain annually, which peaked in 2016 with approximately 1.5 billion activities completed. The number of outdoor-related activities participated in annually has increased by 30% between 2011 and 2016, up from 1.1 billion. In 2019, 1.4 billion activities were completed, a slight reduction since 2016. Multiple outdoor-related activities are often undertaken on a single trip, meaning the total number of trips taken within Great Britain are less than the values within Figure 2.

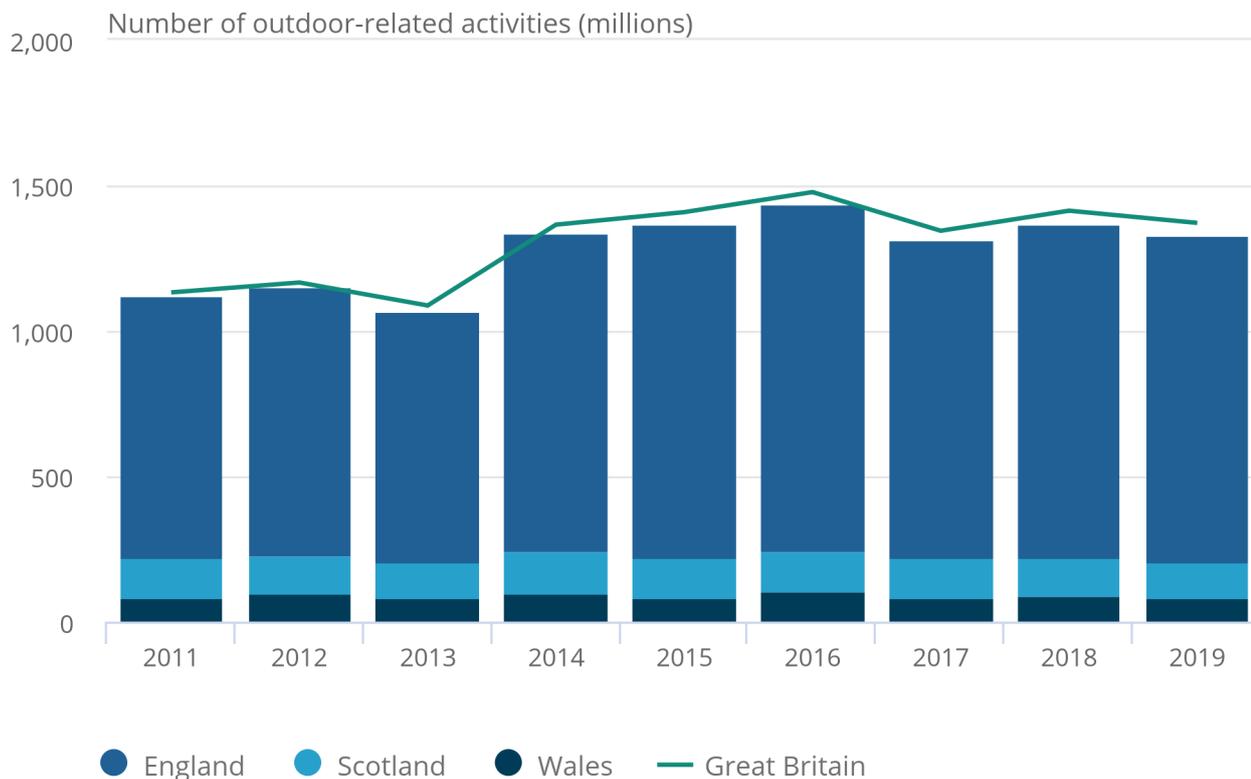
Overseas visitors on average accounted for 1.2% of the total number of outdoor-related activities participated in, and 10% of nature’s total monetary contribution to tourism and outdoor leisure, within Great Britain.

Figure 2: The number of outdoor-related activities completed across Great Britain increased by 30% between 2011 and 2016

Flow of tourism and outdoor leisure, total number of outdoor-related activities completed, Great Britain, 2011 to 2019

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Source: Office for National Statistics, Great Britain Tourism Survey and Great Britain Day Visits Survey

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The amount spent per activity completed across Great Britain was highest in 2011, valued at £9.85. This has since decreased by 13% to £8.60 in 2019, because of the number of activities participated in increasing faster than expenditure. Across the entire data time series, average expenditure per activity was valued at £8.45 for Great Britain as a whole, £7.26 for England, £9.56 for Scotland and £7.89 for Wales. However, because of a decline in expenditure for Scotland and Wales, England had the highest expenditure per activity in 2019 of the three countries, valued at £8.40.

Habitats

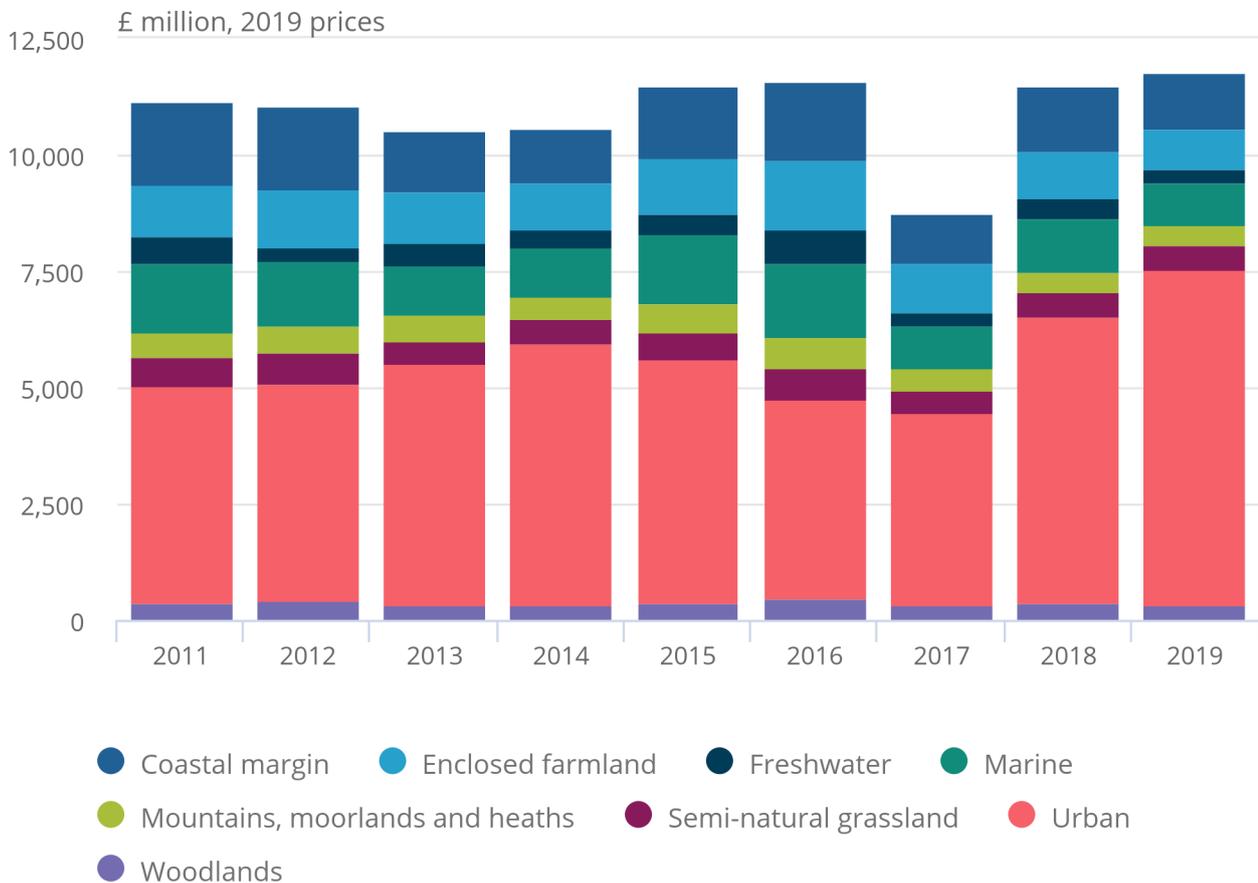
The majority of the amount spent and number of activities completed during tourism and outdoor leisure visits within Great Britain took place in an urban setting. Figure 3 shows the increase in expenditure within urban locations, which has risen by 56% from £4.6 billion in 2011 to a high of £7.3 billion in 2019. Within the same period, all other habitats have seen expenditure fall, despite an increase in the total amount being spent.

Figure 3: The amount spent in urban areas has generally increased since 2011

Annual contribution of the natural environment to tourism and outdoor leisure, £ million (2019 prices), Great Britain, 2011 to 2019

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Annual contribution of the natural environment to tourism and outdoor leisure, £ million (2019 prices), Great Britain, 2011 to 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics, Great Britain Tourism Survey and Great Britain Day Visits Survey

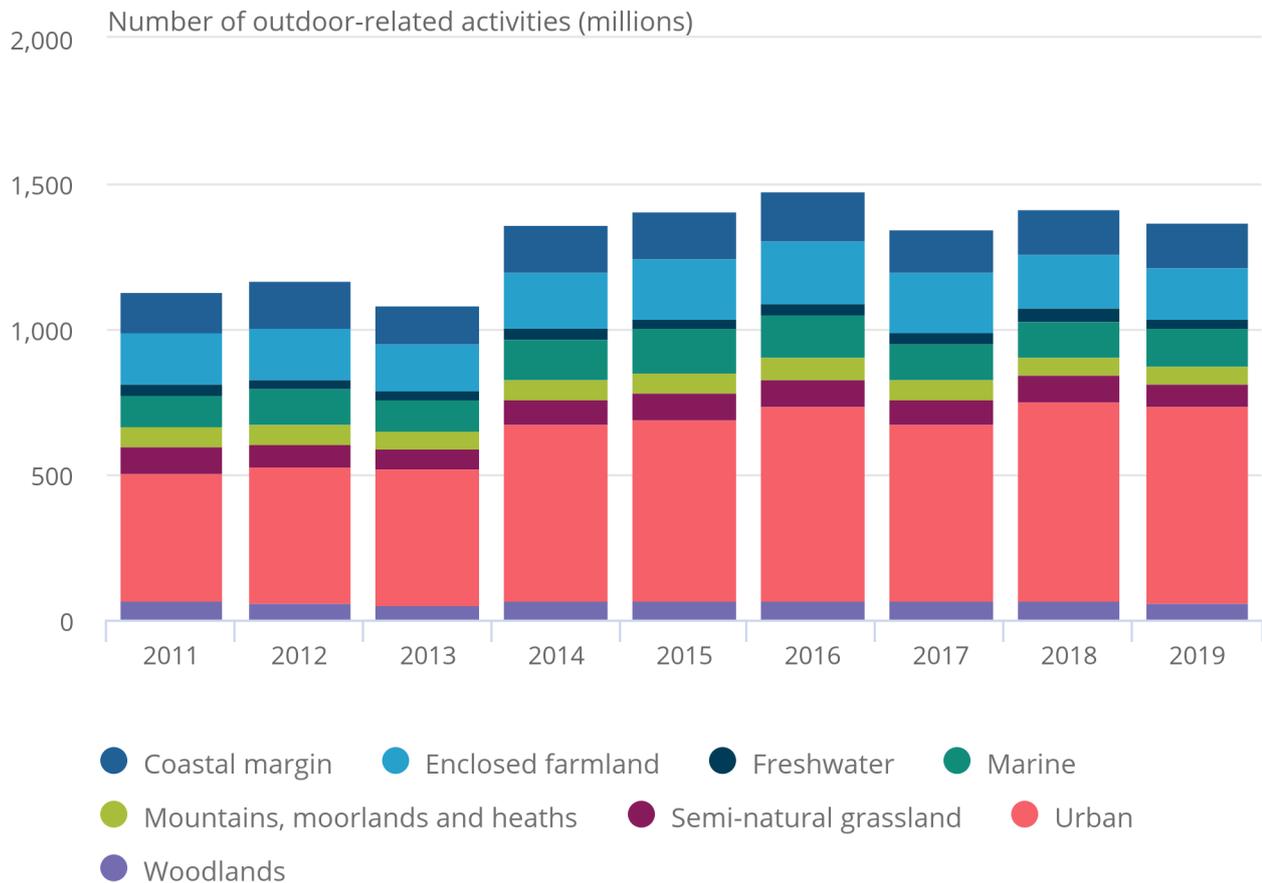
A similar story can be seen within the number of outdoor-related activities being completed. Figure 4 shows a rise in activities being completed in an urban setting, from 0.44 billion in 2011 to 0.68 billion in 2019. However, unlike expenditure, the number of activities being completed in other habitats remains similar between the same period. All habitats, except for marine and urban habitats, saw a peak in activities being completed in 2016, coinciding with the peak in the total number of outdoor-related activities participated in across Great Britain.

Figure 4: The number of outdoor-related activities completed in urban areas has been increasingly steadily across the data time series

Flow of tourism and outdoor leisure, total number of outdoor-related activities completed, Great Britain, 2011 to 2019

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Flow of tourism and outdoor leisure, total number of outdoor-related activities completed, Great Britain, 2011 to 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics, Great Britain Tourism Survey and Great Britain Day Visits Survey

Although the share of all outdoor-related activities undertaken in urban areas has been increasing steadily, from 39% in 2011, to 45% in 2016 and finally 49% in 2019, urban ecosystem-related expenditure has seen a different relative growth pattern, falling from 42% in 2011 to 37% in 2016, then quickly climbing to 61% in 2019. Because of these increases, the amount spent per activity completed in urban areas across Great Britain rose to its highest value of £10.71 in 2019. Enclosed farmland had the smallest value in the same year, £5.05.

Prior to 2019, other habitats have had a higher amount spent per activity completed value. On average, between 2011 and 2019, the amount spent per activity completed in freshwater habitats was £12.54, marine £9.56, and coastal margin £9.36. Urban habitats also had similar figures, an average value of £9.10 between 2011 and 2019.

Given that the recent increase in urban expenditure has occurred solely within 2018 and 2019, more years of data will be required to determine whether the rise in urban expenditure is an ongoing trend.

Outdoor-related activities

These estimates of the natural environment's contribution to tourism and outdoor leisure are based on the number of, and amount spent on, outdoor-related activities participated in on trips within Great Britain. From the Great Britain Tourism Survey and Great Britain Day Visits Survey, 19 different activities were selected to determine nature's contribution to tourism and outdoor leisure, including long walks, playing golf and visiting parks and gardens.

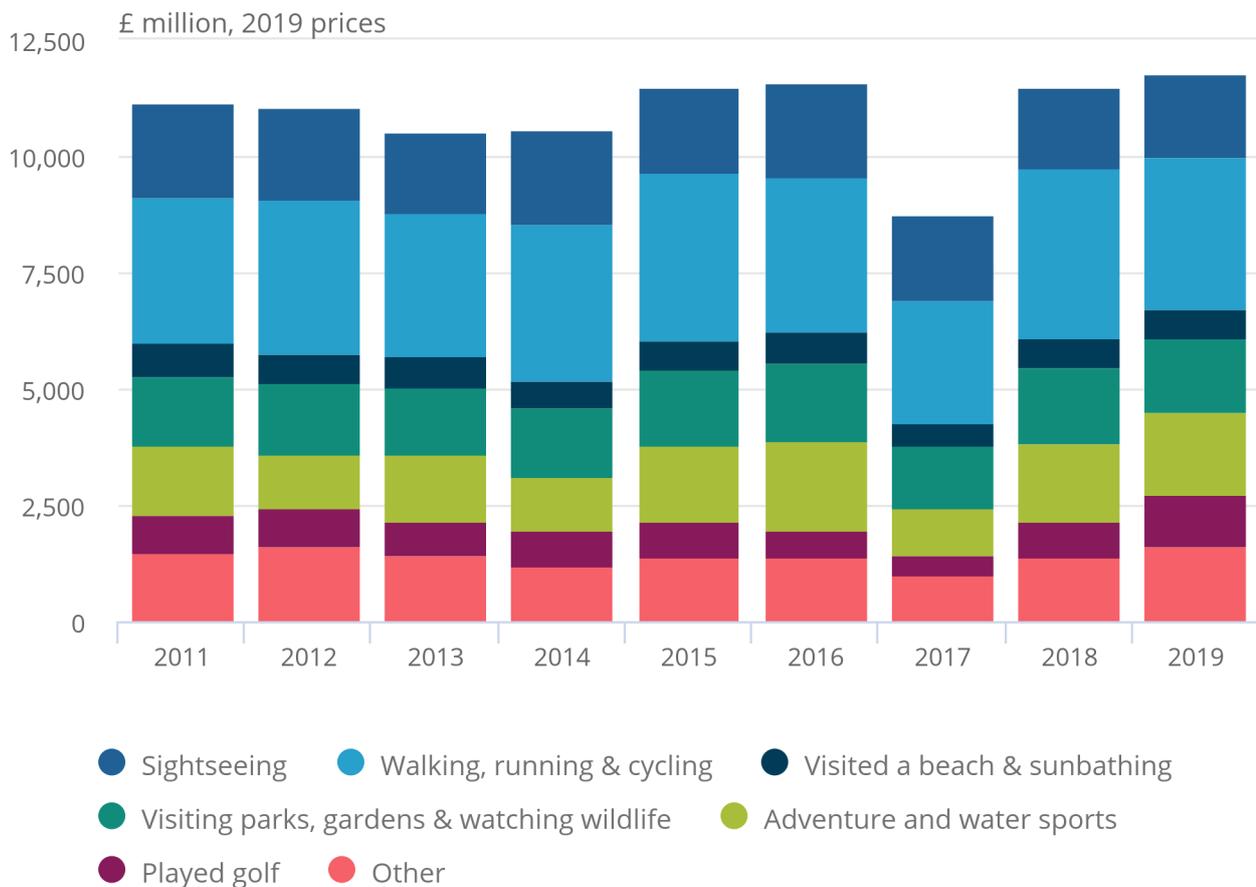
An aggregated form of the amount spent on these activities can be seen within Figure 5. The largest share of expenditure, approximately 30% of the total amount between 2011 and 2019, took place whilst walking, running and cycling. At its peak this was valued at £3.6 billion in 2018 (in 2019 prices). Within the same year, a further £1.7 billion was spent on sightseeing; and £1.6 billion on watching wildlife and visiting parks and gardens.

Figure 5: About 30% of the total amount spent on outdoor-related activities within Great Britain involved walking, running and cycling

Annual contribution of the natural environment to tourism and outdoor leisure, £ million (2019 prices), Great Britain, 2011 to 2019

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Annual contribution of the natural environment to tourism and outdoor leisure, £ million (2019 prices), Great Britain, 2011 to 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics, Great Britain Tourism Survey and Great Britain Day Visits Survey

Between 2011 and 2019, the amount spent on golfing activities grew by 40%, from £0.8 billion to £1.1 billion, in 2019 prices. Adventure and water sports spending also increased from £1.5 billion to £1.8 billion. Of these seven activity categories, sightseeing, and visited a beach and sunbathing, saw reductions in value between 2011 and 2019, from £2.0 billion to £1.8 billion, and £0.71 billion to £0.67 billion respectively.

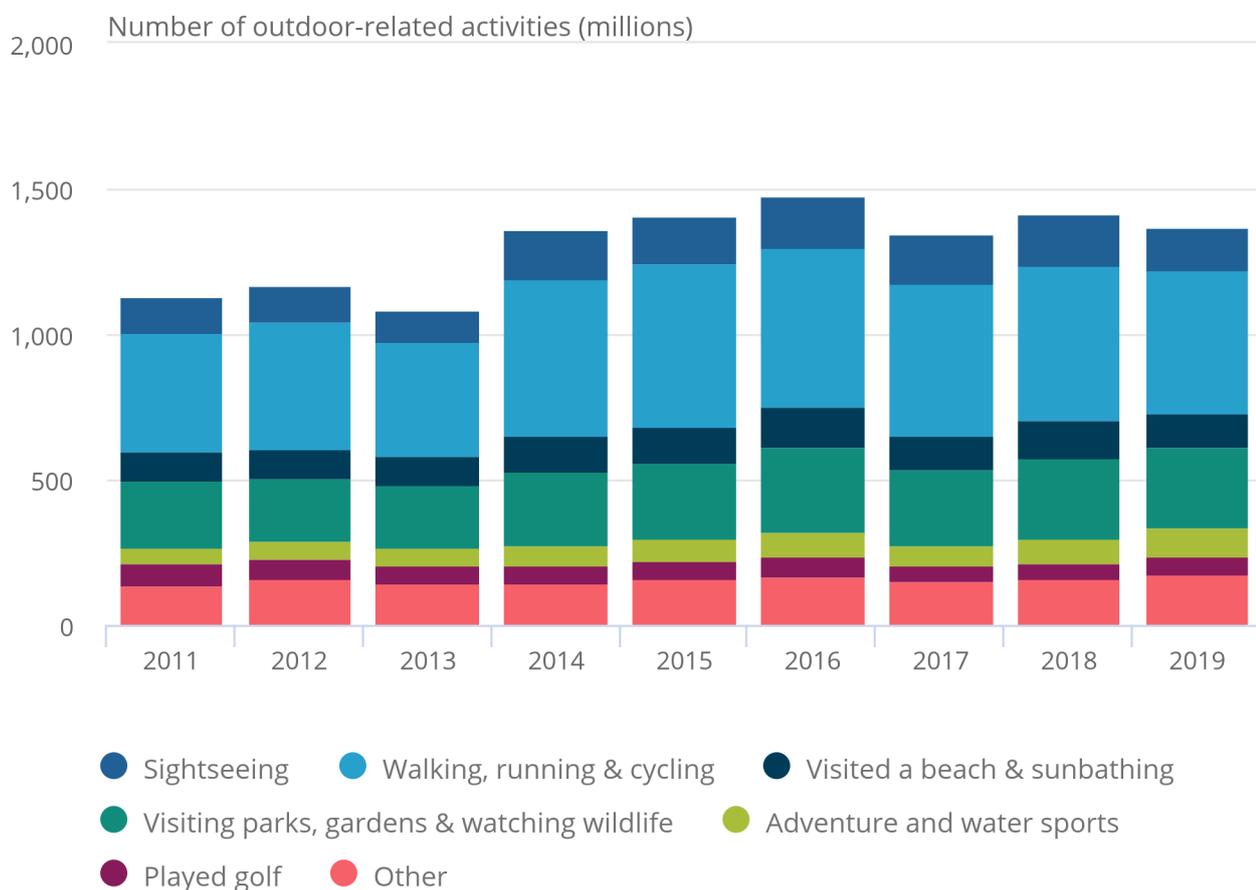
The picture for the number of times each activity was completed is similar, see Figure 6. In 2019, walking, running and cycling equated to 36% of the total outdoor-related activities completed in Great Britain. In the same year, a further 20% of all outdoor-related activities involved watching wildlife and visiting parks and gardens.

Figure 6: Adventure sports and water sports activities have increased by 75% across the data time series

Flow of tourism and outdoor leisure, total number of outdoor-related activities completed, Great Britain, 2011 to 2019

Figure 6: Adventure sports and water sports activities have increased by 75% across the data time series

Flow of tourism and outdoor leisure, total number of outdoor-related activities completed, Great Britain, 2011 to 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics, Great Britain Tourism Survey and Great Britain Day Visits Survey

The majority of these aggregated activity groups have seen increases in the number of activities participated in over time. Adventure and water sports have increased by 75%, from 57 million activities completed in 2011, to 100 million in 2019. Playing golf has fallen, however, down 23% from 79 million to 61 million.

Activities such as adventure and water sports, sightseeing, and playing golf represent a smaller proportion of the total number of activities completed and a larger portion of the total amount spent. It is perhaps no surprise that on average, between 2011 and 2019, these activities represent the highest values of amount spent per activity completed. Adventure and water sports had an average value of £20.19 per activity completed, whilst sightseeing was valued at £12.78 and playing golf £11.80. These values do not include money spent on purchasing equipment for long-term use, such as golf clubs, walking boots or bicycles.

Activities such as walking, running and cycling, as well as visiting parks and watching wildlife, represent a higher proportion of the total number of activities participated in and a lower proportion of the total amount spent. As a result, these activities had the lowest values of amount spent per activity completed, with walking, running and cycling having an average value of £6.73, and visiting parks and watching wildlife £6.10. Even though many of these activities can be completed with no direct additional cost, people spend money travelling to different parts of the UK with the intention of walking or cycling.

Types of expenditure

The amount spent during tourism and outdoor leisure trips can be broken down by specific expenditure items. These include various types of transport, eating and drinking out, special shopping, and tickets to different types of attractions or events. Money spent on items that enable visits to the natural environment contribute to the expenditure estimated within this bulletin. This includes transport and travel costs, entry tickets to visitor attractions, hiring equipment and a proportion of package holidays relevant to travel.

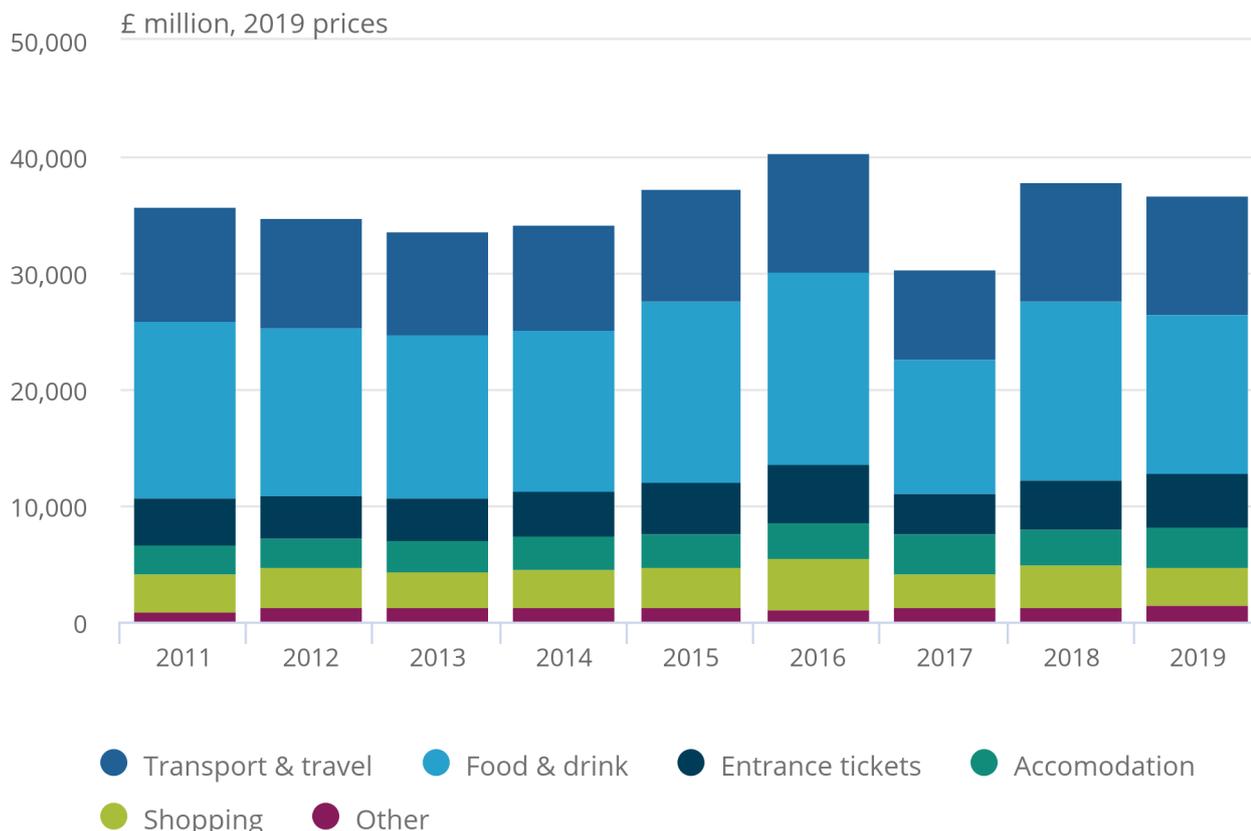
The 24 different expenditure items have been aggregated into categories within Figure 7, such as food and drink, transport, accommodation, and entrance tickets. Total expenditure peaked in 2016 valued at £40 billion (in 2019 prices), £16 billion of which was spent on food and drink, 40% of the total. A further £10 billion or 25% was spent on transport and travel costs.

Figure 7: About 40% of the total amount spent on outdoor-related activities in 2016 was on food and drink

Annual expenditure on outdoor-related tourism and outdoor leisure activities, £ million (2019 prices), Great Britain, 2011 to 2019

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Annual expenditure on outdoor-related tourism and outdoor leisure activities, £ million (2019 prices), Great Britain, 2011 to 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics, Great Britain Tourism Survey and Great Britain Day Visits Survey

Expenditure on accommodation has been increasing steadily between 2011 and 2019, despite a slight fall in 2018. The amount spent on accommodation was valued at £3.3 billion in 2019, up 33% from £2.5 billion in 2011. Transport and travel has also seen a similar rise between those two years, increasing 6% from £9.7 billion to £10.3 billion. Expenditure on food and drink has decreased from its peak in 2016, down 17% to £14 billion in 2019.

Across the data time series, transport and travel costs are the largest portion of nature’s monetary contribution to tourism and outdoor leisure, roughly 87% on average. A further 11% of nature’s contribution is attributed through the amount spent on entrance tickets to visitor attractions. However, many of the outdoor-related activities considered within the bulletin are unlikely to have associated entrance ticket costs. Expenditure is currently captured on a trip-by-trip basis, rather than an activity basis, meaning that this 11% figure is likely to be an overestimation of the amount spent on entrance tickets for outdoor-related activities. Further work will be needed to deal with this uncertainty.

4 . Asset valuation

The asset value of natural resources, such as woodlands and beaches, refers to all of the trips that we will get from them in the future, combined. Coastal regions provide a great setting for long walks, which we will benefit from as tourism and outdoor leisure in years to come.

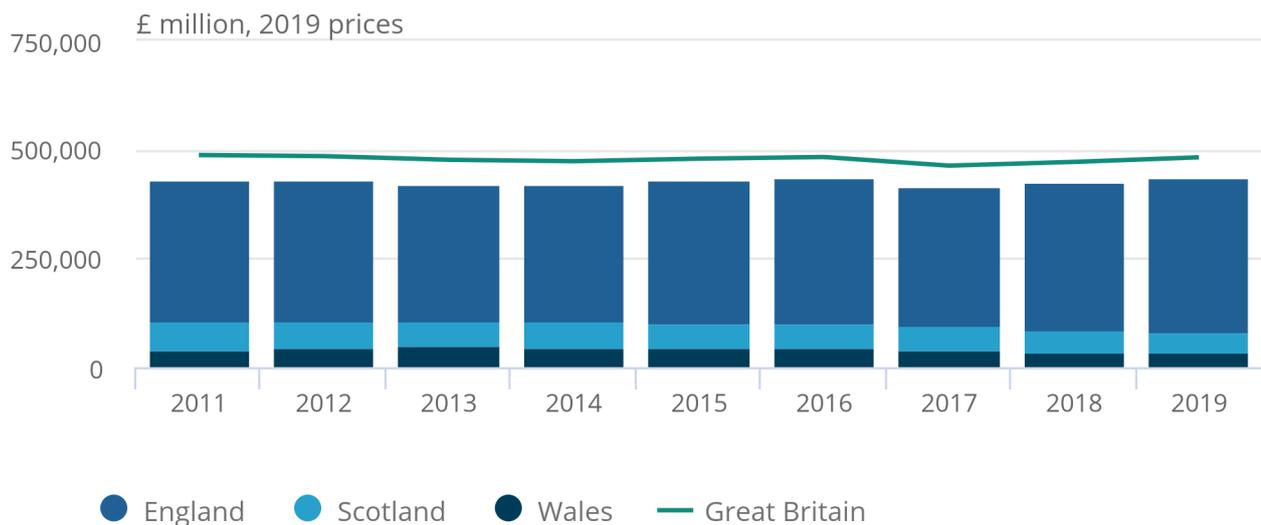
Figure 8 represents the natural capital asset value of tourism and outdoor leisure within Great Britain, which was valued at £490 billion in 2011. Since then it has continued to fluctuate, falling in 2017 to £460 billion before recovering to £480 billion in 2019. The asset value of England rose to an all-time high of £360 billion in 2019, whilst both Scotland and Wales fell to an all-time low in the same year, to £46 billion and £26 billion respectively.

Figure 8: The asset value of the natural environment's contribution to GB tourism and outdoor leisure was valued at £490 billion in 2011

Tourism and outdoor leisure asset value, £ million (2019 prices), GB, 2011 to 2019

Figure 8: The asset value of the natural environment's contribution to GB tourism and outdoor leisure was valued at £490 billion in 2011

Tourism and outdoor leisure asset value, £ million (2019 prices), GB, 2011 to 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics, Great Britain Tourism Survey and Great Britain Day Visits Survey

Notes:

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5 . Tourism and outdoor leisure in the UK (including Northern Ireland)

We present the contribution of natural capital to tourism and outdoor leisure within Great Britain. Many of the natural capital accounts examine the contribution of natural capital within the UK.

We provide an initial estimate of the impact Northern Ireland could make to UK-wide expenditure and physical flow of tourism and outdoor leisure. This initial estimate relies on a limited amount of data for Northern Ireland and extrapolations from Great Britain data. As such, we present the total UK figure rather than a separate one for Northern Ireland since it is not as reliable an estimate for Northern Ireland as it is for other nations.

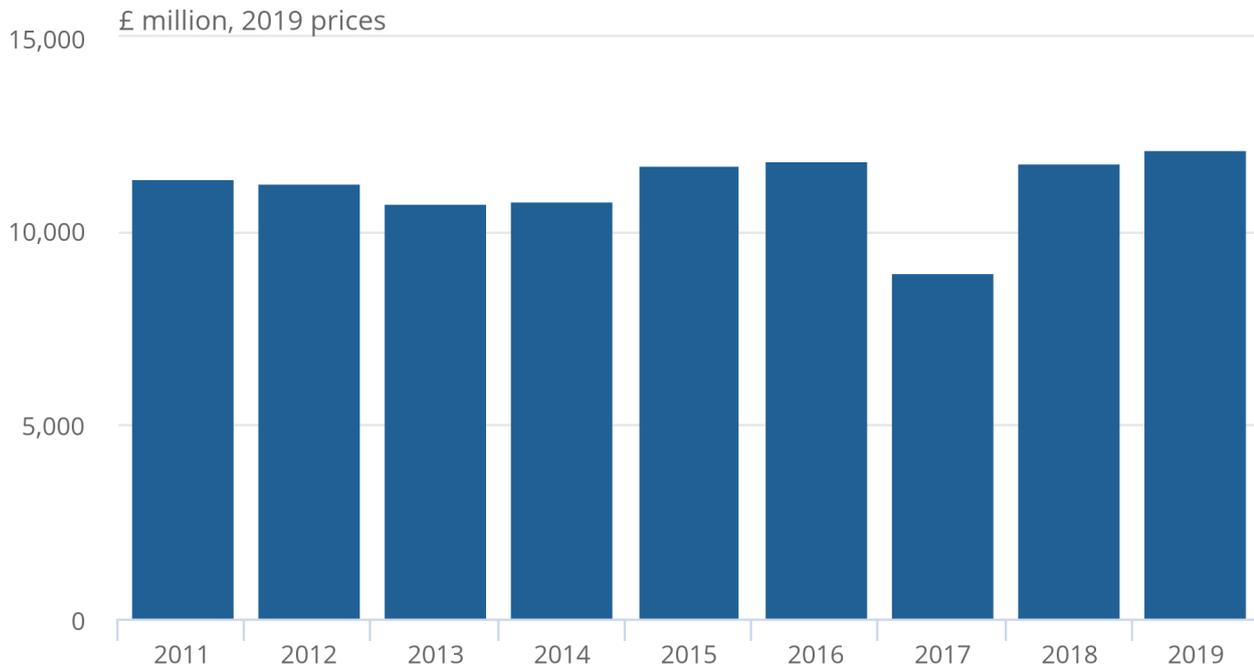
Figure 9 shows that the annual contribution of the natural environment to tourism and outdoor leisure within the UK was valued at £12 billion at its peak in 2019. This equates to a 3% addition to the Great Britain figure, with the expenditure in Northern Ireland valued at £300 million in the same year. Expenditure within Northern Ireland has also risen by 54% between 2011 and 2019, up from £200 million.

Figure 9: Nature’s contribution to UK tourism and outdoor leisure peaked in 2019, valued £12 billion

Annual contribution of the natural environment to tourism and outdoor leisure, £ million (2019 prices), UK (including initial NI estimates), 2011 to 2019

Figure 9: Nature’s contribution to UK tourism and outdoor leisure peaked in 2019, valued £12 billion

Annual contribution of the natural environment to tourism and outdoor leisure, £ million (2019 prices), UK (including initial NI estimates), 2011 to 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics, Great Britain Tourism Survey, Great Britain Day Visits Survey and Northern Ireland Domestic Tourism

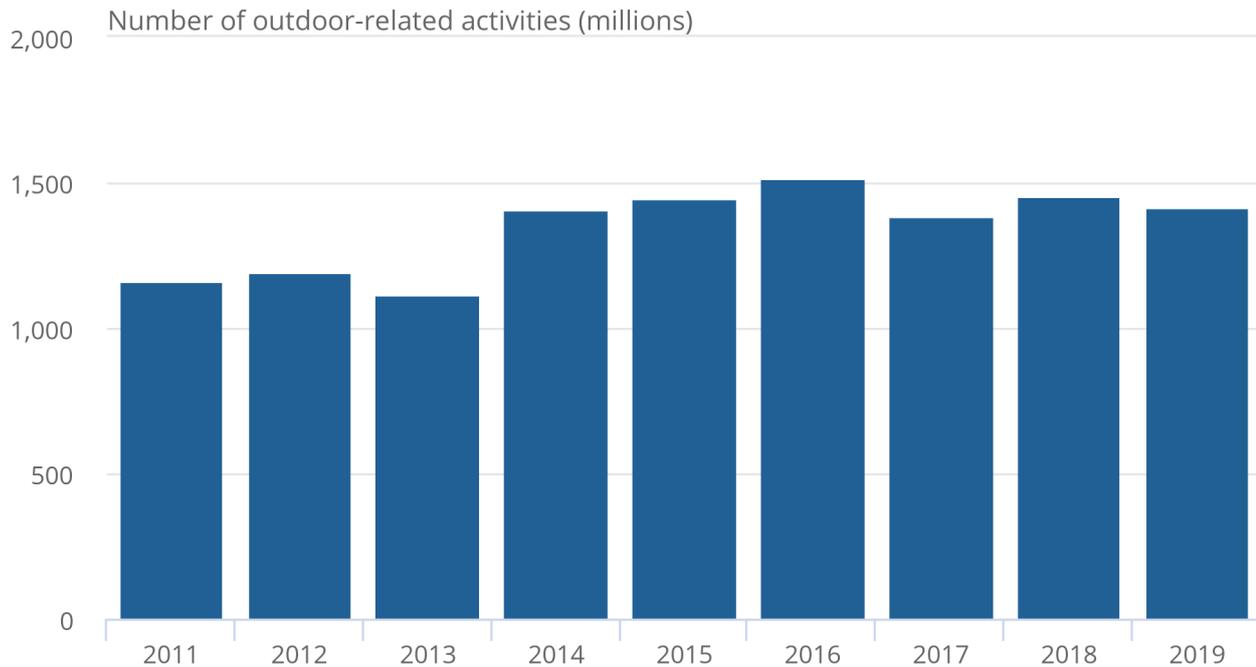
The physical flow of tourism and outdoor leisure within the UK also rose by 3% at its peak in 2016, with the inclusion of Northern Ireland, as seen within Figure 10. This was equivalent to an additional 40 million outdoor-related activities being completed annually. The number of activities participated in between 2011 and 2019 also increased within Northern Ireland, from 30 million to 40 million.

Figure 10: The number of outdoor-related activities completed across the UK peaked in 2016 at 1.5 billion

Flow of tourism and outdoor leisure, total number of outdoor-related activities completed, UK (including initial Northern Ireland estimates), 2011 to 2019

Figure 10: The number of outdoor-related activities completed across the UK peaked in 2016 at 1.5 billion

Flow of tourism and outdoor leisure, total number of outdoor-related activities completed, UK (including initial Northern Ireland estimates), 2011 to 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics, Great Britain Tourism Survey, Great Britain Day Visits Survey and Northern Ireland Domestic Tourism

6 . Tourism and outdoor leisure accounts, natural capital data

[Tourism UK natural capital](#)

Dataset | Released 28 April 2021

Physical (non-monetary) and monetary estimates of services provided by natural assets in the UK between 1998 and 2019

7 . Glossary

Asset

A natural asset is a resource that can generate goods or services to humans into the future. Asset valuation estimates the stream of services that are expected to be produced by the natural resource over a reasonably predictable time horizon.

Physical flow

The physical flow of a natural asset is the measure of its output in units appropriate to the good or service. This differs from the annual value and asset value, which measure the monetary value of a natural resource.

8 . Measuring the data

The Office for National Statistics is publishing more data and analysis than ever before. We are constantly reviewing our publications based on your feedback to make sure that we continue to meet the needs of our users. As a result, future editions of this publication may focus more strongly on headline indicators and main messages. Thank you for your continued support and we value your feedback.

The [initial research and methods](#) on which this work was based were produced by Economics For The Environment Consultancy Ltd (Eftec) for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).

[Eftec, SQW, CEH, ABPmer \(2019\). The ecosystem contribution to tourism and outdoor leisure. Report to Defra. September 2019.](#)

Further adaptations were made to the methods in the production of this release and they can be found in the [methods](#). The methodology used to develop these estimates remains under development; the estimates reported in this article are experimental and should be interpreted in this context. [Experimental Statistics](#) are those that are in the testing phase, are not yet fully developed and have not been submitted for assessment to the UK Statistics Authority. Experimental Statistics are published to involve customers and stakeholders in their development and as a means of building in quality at an early stage.

We have used a wide variety of sources for estimates of natural capital, which have been compiled in line with the guidelines recommended by the United Nations (UN) System of Environmental-Economic Accounting Central Framework and System of Environmental-Economic Accounting Experimental Ecosystem Accounting principles, which are in turn part of the wider framework of the system of national accounts.

As the UN guidance is currently still under development, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) published a summary of the [principles underlying the accounts](#).

We welcome discussion regarding any of the approaches presented via email at natural.capital.team@ons.gov.uk

9 . Strengths and limitations

This is the first publication of the wider tourism accounts, which will be subject to future changes to improve our statistics. For example, Northern Ireland has been excluded from most of this analysis. In the future, if it can be obtained, we will work towards including better data regarding Northern Ireland, helping us to determine the status of the natural environment's contribution to UK tourism and outdoor leisure.

In addition, data used to apportion the amount spent on different items, such as transport or food and drinks, are gathered for all trips rather than by individual activities. Some activities, such as visiting the beach, may see a large portion of the total expenditure spent on transport rather than food and drink, as the closest beach might be far away. Therefore, an assumption is made that people spend money on the same items regardless of the type of outdoor-related activity they are undertaking. Further data are required to determine the amount spent on different items at the activity level, allowing us to estimate more objective links between activities and nature.

Currently, survey data are used to determine the type of area in which activities are completed, which includes built-up, rural and coastal. Proportions are then used to breakdown these area types into specific habitats. These proportions are determined by the amount of area each habitat covers within Great Britain. An assumption is made that this is representative of the amount spent or number of activities completed in a specific habitat type.

Many tourism and outdoor leisure activities require additional items, such as equipment, to enable that activity to occur. For example, golf clubs would need to be rented or purchased to play golf. These items have an associated cost, which could also be attributable to the natural environment. The capital spend on items and equipment purchased for long-term use are currently not counted within these expenditure estimates. We hope to complete further work to accurately measure capital spend in a sustainable way and improve our expenditure estimates of tourism and outdoor leisure.

Please do get in touch with us to discuss any of this via natural.capital.team@ons.gov.uk.

Methodology Details of methodologies for tourism and outdoor leisure can be found in tourism natural capital accounts methodology guide, UK: 2021. Further details on the concepts and methodologies underlying the UK natural capital accounts can be found in Principles of natural capital accounting.

10 . Related links

[Tourism UK natural capital](#)

Dataset | Released 28 April 2021

Physical (non-monetary) and monetary estimates of services provided by natural assets in the UK between 1998 and 2019