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Walk with me. We're in the woods, surrounded by tall veteran oak trees. It's dusk, and the pink sky is piercing through the canopy. This morning it rained, so that vivid earthy aroma fills the air. Petrichor is the name of this smell.

We're walking in Epping Forest. You and I are strolling along the path. There's no one else around.

Now imagine for a second that I've left. You're on your own. How do you feel? Do you feel entirely at ease? Your senses alive to the smells and textures around you? Do you feel nervous? Are you looking over your shoulder? Or perhaps like me, you're feeling a combination of these things?

As much as I love being in nature, I don't always feel safe. It's an unfortunate reality that although nature should be for everyone, many people feel excluded for lots of different reasons.

Let's take what it might feel like to walk in the world as a woman. In the UK, researchers at Leeds University found that four out of five women report feeling unsafe walking alone in a park. That's compared to two out of five men.

Even on a very local level, recent polling by Waltham Forest Council and The Epping Forest Heritage Trust showed that women visit Epping Forest less than men.

I know this sounds a bit depressing. But just because that's the reality of how many of us experience the world, doesn't mean we should stand for it.

This is a podcast that doesn't shy away from the barriers that some people might face in accessing nature.

**Amira**: You got comments like, oh, yeah, but the nature is free. No one's stopping you. But you know, actually lets stop because you're not in our shoes. You try and be in our shoes and then say what you're saying.

We'll also talk about the opportunities to connect with nature, and in particular, with Epping Forest. You’ll meet the people who are tackling exclusion head-on so that more of us can enjoy all that Epping Forest has to offer.

You don't have to be anything other than yourself here. Nature's not looking like staring at you, figuring you out. You haven't got to keep a wall up or pretend that you are someone that you're not.

In this podcast I’m teaming up with the Essex Cultural Diversity Project, whose mission is to energise diversity in arts and heritage, and with the Epping Forest Heritage Trust. We want more people to feel as though they truly belong in nature. To feel at home here and to care for the forest as much as it cares for us.

I'm Talia Randall, and you're listening to Voices of Epping Forest.

Episode 1. Looking over your shoulder.

Epping Forest covers 6,000 acres of land that stretches across London and Essex. Since 1878 the City of London Corporation have been the conservators of Epping Forest.

This place is home to thousands of ancient trees. These are some of the oldest living plants in Europe. Beyond the woodlands, this place is home to grasslands, heaths, bogs, ponds, marshes. Two thirds of Epping Forest is a site of special scientific interest and a special area of conservation. The wildlife here is rich and precious.

All of this biodiversity needs care and upkeep and there are regular conservation days that you can get involved in to support the forest. But some people who really want to be involved sometimes face hurdles when it comes to joining in.

This is why Epping Forest Heritage Trust have set up volunteer conservation days specifically aimed at women, trans and non-binary people. I want to find out more about this.

So I think everyone grab a lopper, a saw.

It's the first warm day of spring and although it's sunny with a bright blue sky, it's still very muddy and quite windy.

So I've got my trusty walking boots on and as well as my microphone, I'm carrying a pair of loppers, basically giant scissors used for cutting trees. There are about 15 of us here today, and we've signed up to help the habitat of Epping Forest. It's all under the guidance of Robin.

Hello, um, my name's Robin, and I work for Epping Forest Heritage Trust as one of the conservation officers. And my position was actually given by the City Bridge Foundation to come together and get more people involved with the forest essentially, so that's what I'm kind of doing, and I love it. So, yeah, I've got the best job in the world.

Awesome, no one come for Robin's job, yeah? So tell me what we're doing here today, practically, like from a conservation perspective.

Um, at the moment here, we're on a grassland. This area is important, um, because of the grasses. So we need to extend this grassland, keep it going for a longer amount of time. All these grasses feed other species around here. And what's great is the jays and the birds are coming and planting up this grassland, which we love, that's great, in other parts of the forest. In England it's great, but the grassland's important.

So what we're doing is taking away some of these younger species that are starting to encroach out. Um, And open up the grassland, essentially. So that's what everyone's doing here today. We're kind of taking down young oak, a few young hawthorns, and creating habitat piles.

So these piles, uh, are really great. They kind of have a lot of space and a lot of invertebrates and snakes will come and kind of slither up, lay on the branch, and heat up for the day, then they'll slither off for the rest of the day. So, you come back here in a few years time, this place will look really different, and I think that's another thing to take away from coming to a session, like, don't think it's just you come to do one session, come back, come see what your work's done.

And also just hearing you talk like, I'm up round these ways quite a lot, and like, You were pointing out an anthill and I was like, I walk past those mounds all the time and I didn't know that's what that was and you were like, snakes, and I'm like, oh, snakes in Epping, woo! So, from that perspective, that's really exciting. As well as the kind of practical conservation management side of things that we're doing, there's also another element to today because it's for a specific group or groups of people. Can you tell me a bit about that and why that is important?

Yeah, so this is a women's or non-binary LGBTQ queer safe space. Um, and we've purposely designed that because, one of it was because it was a target group that we know. Number one, don't feel as comfortable coming into the forest. And number two, um, so then you don't see them. So we're like, right, how do we possibly create a space where they want to get involved? So we just were like, well, we'll just do a session.

We'll just run a session exactly for that. Um, and that's what we've been doing. And we've had loads of people interested. It's been really popular.

Specifically from, like, something personal for me, I've had a lot of conservation sessions. They're quite male dominated, retired guys, pretty hardy, have probably done something similar or like this. And although they're great and I love those spaces for those people, sometimes you don't feel very comfortable in them. And I'm quite a small little woman, um, and sometimes, you know, you kind of get a bit babied, I guess.

Because that's Stereotype prevails. I think sometimes I know that I can internalise it and actually, people who engage with nature, who do conservation, or who just go for a casual walk. It's all different types of people.

Exactly, yeah. I wanted this space to be like, Right, any, you know, we're all bloody tough here. We can all get on and, and do something. And I think it's great everyone comes out covered in mud with scratches. Us being here today. We've had loads of people already coming up and asking us what we're doing, cause we've been seen in a space that they haven't seen us before. Yeah. So badda bing, badda boom. Yeah.

I think let's end it there on a badda bing, badda boom.

I really felt Robin's point about being babied, as she put it. I've experienced that too. And I think she's right to point out that certain groups visit the forest less. We know that from the research. So I want to catch up with some of the people who've signed up to volunteer. What motivated them to join today? Has being in this particular group made a difference?

Um, Lucy, what is it that brought you here today?

Um, I'm actually registered for this volunteers event. Uh, it's to celebrate the International Women's Month. I would love to, like, do something with all those, like, sisters. And, you know, get to know each other. Like, spend time in the nature. And this is, like, the kind of environment that I like its very friendly, like we have like a mutual goal and like do something good for the society, which is very nice.

Yeah. There's something really kind of relaxing and nourishing and being in that kind of environment. I was also thinking about things like maybe barriers that women might face in accessing nature and I was reading the other day that um, statistics show that Women are much more scared of walking alone in a park than men are, or that women kind of walk in nature and engage with nature less. Like, what do you think about those statistics?

Um, I definitely agree. Because personally I also feel like, um, I don't have, I don't have much opportunity to spend time in nature. Because, like, Yeah, I don't feel safe when I walk alone and also like in the strange areas. We always taught to be careful and like, uh, walk in a busy like area.

You have other people look out for you? Stuff like that. And I just feel it's not like, it's not entirely ideal kind of world for women, to be honest. And plus I love nature. I think it's like amazing for stress relief and all like the positive hormones that you need for your body and your mental health.

Totally, I hear that. And like, last question before I let you go, because I'm cutting into your work time. Um, what would you say to maybe, um, another woman or girl who is maybe interested in getting involved in nature or thinking about coming to an event like this in Epping Forest? What would you say to her?

Um, I would say to her, like, Just to enjoy it, prepare yourself with all the new things that you may need to like, encounters, and also like, um, try to talk more with like, the women that participated in the event, because like, you know, you're probably going to find another friends who enjoy like, the natures like you, and you can even go to the walk together, which is cool.

Totally, it's that point about sisterhood that you said, isn't it?

Yeah, sisterhood.

I've left Lucy to carry on sawing away at a young oak. The wind is picking up a bit. But I just want to go and chat to a group who are properly hacking away at a spindly-looking hawthorn.

Looks like you found your flow.

Yeah, definitely. And, uh, it's just so satisfying. Yeah. That once you get into it, you're just like, yeah, right.

I'm doing it, I'm in the zone.

Exactly, yeah.

And it's quite nice to be using tools. Do you know what I mean? Like, they seem a bit, sort of, daunting, but, um, as soon as you know what to do with it, it's quite empowering.

Yeah, definitely. Yeah. They can also seem a lot more dangerous than they really are. Obviously, you have to be careful, but like it, they can seem really frightening and actually, it's quite logical how you use them, if you're shown how.

Sarah has named her loppers

What's the name?

Cindy Lopper.

Stop everything.

I really enjoyed chatting with the volunteers. The worries we were talking about often come from past experiences, so it was lovely to see a solution to some of these problems in action. But when we talk about gendered barriers to getting out in the forest, I think it's also crucial to consider other intersecting identities.

A 2019 study by the Campaign to Protect Rural England found that people of colour make up fewer than 1 percent of visitors to national parks. So I thought I'd find out more about one of the many grassroots initiatives that have been set up to help more people feel like they truly belong in the outdoors.

I’m Amira, uh, probably mostly known as Amira the Wanderlust.

A few years ago, Amira Patel set up Wanderlust Women, an adventure group for Muslim women. Amira is seriously outdoorsy.

We've travelled around the world, we've climbed mountains, we've done some crazy expeditions, and the community is growing every single day.

Amira told me what it was like to bring Wanderlust Women to Epping Forest

So we had a really, really lovely day in Epping Forest. Um, it was my first time there. There is a large, um, community of Muslims and, uh, people from different ethnic minorities around that area.

The women over there, a lot of them, like I said, they don't have the opportunities to come to certain events because of the transport. And, um, a lot of them are just, you know, to even step out of their hometown, a lot of different, different barriers. Sometimes you don't want to go to something because you feel a bit nervous, but being around that space where you're with women, where, you know, you can stop and pray and, you know, you're sort of aligning a lot of things.

We had a lot of women that were new and their first time, um, You know, and a lot of women that didn't even know that that was so close to them. Um, and then we had a few women from there who actually joined us on a few expeditions after that because they felt the community was like, really, really, like they just loved it.

It's just that first initial step, you know, I know to some it's like, oh, yeah, you got comments like, oh, yeah, but the nature is free. No one's stopping you. But you know, actually lets stop because you're not in our shoes. You try and be in our shoes and then say what you're saying.

I love what you're saying about praying together because that can feel, I would imagine, if you're on your own, quite scary potentially. And to be in a community with others where that's just kind of, by the by, this is what we do together. That must be a really joyful experience.

To me now, it's like I'm proud of who I am and I'll, you know, I'm not nervous anymore. Because at the start, I was always aware of what people think, but so many women, they were like, Oh, we would, you know, stop our prayers and we wouldn't do it. But now, They're like, Oh my gosh, you've opened this door for us, but we can just pray outside and it feels so free and like amazing for them.

Can you tell me a little bit about the motivation to start Wanderlust Women?

So it wasn't really like one of those things where you plan out in life. It was very random. I went through a divorce and then a few years later, whilst I was on my journey of self discovery and healing, um, I ended up climbing a mountain.

It was one of the things I wanted to do, um, to, you know, just people have like things to do when they go through like horrible things in life. And I was like, I was going to go climb a mountain. And, um, yeah, it was life-changing for me. And as I started to post more on social media about my adventures and the things that I were doing, it was, you know, people, especially from my community, they're like, I wish we could come with you. I wish we could do that.

And it was very like, not normal for them to see a woman that's covered up wearing a veil or, you know, a headscarf doing these sort of things and that idea popped up and I was like, okay, let's just make a page and see what happens and then it's just Yeah, I've never looked back since.

I love your inclination to when you're going through something really difficult to go climb a mountain, like I think I would be like, I think I might just like hide

Yeah, I am definitely a duvet type rather than a mountain type. Anyway, I love Amira's story about the Epping Forest walk, particularly the moment of praying together. I'm not religious, but I want this place. A place that is really special to me, to hold lots of different things for different people.

Whether that's prayer, or revelry with your friends, or silent reflection, or walking your dog, running around playing with the kids, nature has got to be for everyone, right? But as we know, some of these things feel easier for some people than others.

Like in normal life, you know that there's discrimination, and I think it's more that thing where if you don't see it, you don't think you can be it. When I went out, I was just me doing my thing, not realising what impact it's going to make. And then, obviously, you go out and then you start to see, oh, wait a minute, like, I'm going to have to go out and no one looks like me and people are going to say anything and I'm a bit like nervous and going to new places where it's very white British and they've never seen someone wearing a veil and you see all the discrimination and negativity in the media and you just, you know, you don't want to, you know, you have that sort of thing inside you where you're just like, Oh yeah, you know, will someone say something to me with a look at me and all these different things.

And then, if we're looking from a community point of view, a lot of the ethnic minorities and a lot of people who have, um, you know, our grandparents, our parents that came to the UK, they settled in inner city areas, although many of them were from the countryside and the mountains, but they were brought here and had to work.

They were, you know, you know, they were brought here as immigrants to work and their focus wasn't to do anything else but just to survive and look after the family. So, The things that they used to do, like farming and walking and being in mountains, they left that behind. So it's not something that's not normal, it's just something that's been lost amongst the, the way. And we've got to look at it from a perspective of, okay, why is it like that? Instead of like, oh, Why is it like that?

The way that you just said those exact same words with a different tone at the end is exactly it, right? Because so much of it is about attitude and how to connect with people from all sorts of different places to make everyone feel as though they really truly belong in nature. Because we do. Right?

Yeah, yeah, for sure we do

I know we've not got much time left, so I want to ask you, and we've talked a bit about this already, but I want to ask you a bit about the solutions that you see that are going to help more people from more backgrounds, particularly Muslim women, feel like they truly belong in the outdoors.

The grassroots communities that have been made to ensure that there are these spaces, if we're in 2024 and we've had to do that to increase the percentage of people coming into the outdoors, people from our generation have put together a community for different types of people, whether it's faith or background or size or whatever it is, then surely, there's still so much that needs doing because we're in 2024 and we're still doing that.

But on a broader scale, if we're looking at people on the table, people on the, at the top, like, you know, it's still the same. It's still the same type of people. So if we're not getting people who are making these changes, be up there with them, the change, it's still going to be the same.

I think that's really important, what you're saying about how there has, in my opinion, been like a real, um, surge in lots of grassroots groups, especially since lockdown, trying to connect more people from different backgrounds to nature, whether that's yourself or Black Girls Hike, or there's loads, there's loads of things happening. But if that grassroots thing suddenly stops, hopefully it won't.

Then what?.

Exactly. Cause it's very easy to get burnt out. People are doing this. Some people are doing it as their full-time jobs, but most people are doing it as like an additional voluntary thing.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

If, if that change doesn't happen in like the whole ecosystem, top down, bottom up, whatever, then it's precarious, you know?

Yeah, exactly. And then what are people gonna do?

And on that, I know I've just asked you about like, what do you think the solutions are? But do you ever get like frustrated with that question? Because you've, there's a thing of like, Well, I'm doing some solutions here, and maybe you could be doing some solutions over there.

Yeah, yeah.It's like, stop asking me the same question and just go do something, like, you've got, like, not you.

No, yeah, I totally hear what you're saying.

And it's like, all the resources are there. Like, why, why have suddenly everyone from the communities that are doing such great things for the community. Why are they being tokenised?

Why suddenly are they the person that everyone needs to speak to? Why are suddenly they the ones that everyone needs to, Yes, there's a part of it where the information and the research would help, but surely there's a lot more that they can be doing instead of just, you know what, let's just have a, you know, let's talk to this person.

And then, no, that's not your diversity box ticked off. If you really, if you want, like, if people want real action, it's like actually listen and then do something about it as well. Not just sit there with information.

What was a moment for you on the Wanderlust Women journey, where you were like, yes, this is it, this is working, I made the right decision.

There's been a few moments. So one of the moments was when we were in the Amazon jungle and we were trekking and I was like, whoa, are we actually here? And the guy was like, you're probably like the first Muslim group of women to come here. Um, and I was like, that was a proper pinch-me moment.

There was a time when we were in Tajikistan hiking and I had to like literally be like, oh my gosh I'm actually here and like in the middle of nowhere in like Tajikistan and we're hiking these mountains. You know something that you dream about I remember I was sort of like sat there like crying for ages because I was like, I'm actually here. Just a girl from Bolton that climbed one mountain and now I'm here.

Sounds amazing. Sounds like when's the memoir coming as well.

Okay, after chatting with Amira, maybe I am tempted to become a mountain type. If there's one thing I'll take from our chat, it's the idea of shared problem solving. Developing access to the outdoors involves everyone. It's an ongoing process.

With that in mind, there's still one more group I'd like you to meet.

And there are over fourteen hundred species of fungi. Are there any fungi enthusiasts over here?

In 2022, data published in the Walking and Cycling Index indicated that LGBTQ+ people feel less safe when out and about in their neighbourhoods than their cisgender and heterosexual peers. That probably doesn't surprise you. It's another reminder that broader issues of safety and discrimination don't just go away when we’re out walking. So the question is, what can we do about it?

To help me answer this I spent a day with Epping Forest Pride. On a truly gorgeous afternoon in April, I joined them for Wild and Proud, a guided walk through Epping Forest. Noreen, from the Epping Forest Heritage Trust, shares some trivia about the forest to start the hike.

How many ancient trees do you think are in the forest? Around 5,000? Okay, who thinks 10,000? Yeah, I think 20,000. 20, 000? Okay, whoever said around like 20, 000, you're probably No, no, no! I didn't say you won. I said you are like probably the closest because it's 55,000! Wow. So there are 55,000 ancient trees in this forest.

I'm running around with my microphone. Hoping to chat with some folk about why they chose to spend their day stomping around in the woods.

: So I'm Abbi, they/them. I am an environmental educator based in Epping Forest, we’re just about to get run over by mountain bikes. Live action, live from the scene here. I'm here as an out and proud queer individual, trans non-binary person, excited to build a community here. I've only been living here for two years. You might tell by my accent I'm from Yorkshire.

I spent my whole childhood in the forest, out in nature. So my kind of driving force in my role is to bring that passion to kids that don't get to experience it in their everyday lives. So, and at the minute, I'm really enthused about inclusivity in the outdoors, um, especially as a queer individual. I think spaces that are usually predominantly seen as for a certain type of person from a certain background, you think in the countryside, the old white man, it's kind of breaking that stigma, bringing that access for everyone so that everyone can feel the benefits that nature has to offer.

What brought you here specifically to this group today? What was it about this event that you were like, that's how I want to spend my Sunday?

So, as I said, I've been living here for about two years, but I have really struggled with making friends outside of my workplace. Um, so when I found out that this group existed a few months ago, I had to hop on it straight away.

Um, I feel like I've spent enough time in my room, wallowing, having no friends. I feel like having that community here in such a local space where I don't have to travel to inner city London, um, and I can share my passion for nature. While making new friends. I mean, it's perfect really. Being part of a large group of queer people, queer adjacent allies, it's just nice to have that community when sometimes it feels like you're all on your own. But in reality, once you start looking, we're everywhere. The queers are coming, we love it.

I love it. Hear that. Hear that. Um, there's so much I want to ask you, but we're on this big walk. I'm just going to hand the mic to you and say anything else you want to say?

Nature is queer. Nature is wonderful. Nature is weird. Nature belongs to everyone. So, get out there, get weird, stay weird, stay fun, stay queer, and enjoy everything that nature has to offer.

It looks like we're going to have a little picnic break, so I'm just going to have little chat with Steve. He actually used to be a volunteer ranger here. He loves fishing in the lakes in the forest and I want to know why he thinks that walks like this are important

It's just fantastic for mental health. Um, just being out in nature and the peace and quiet and even the smells of the forest and, and being with a nice group of people as well. It's um, yeah, it's something people need to do more if they're able to. Yeah, so just to be together and know that they've got somewhere safe and that a group like today can come out and feel comfortable.

No, it's just, it's just nice that they can come out and relax and just be themselves, feel the, they can feel comfortable. I mean, at the start of the walk, there was, um, somebody asked us whether we're a rambling group and I explained that we're an LGBT group and she was like, fantastic, enjoy your day.

I want to have a quick catch-up with Ren and Ro, who are the founders of Epping Forest Pride, I want to find out more about why they decided to create the group in the first place. But this isn't a sit down chat. This is an adventure chat….

What would be great would be to hear a little bit about why you decided to set up Epping Forest Pride in the first place.

Yeah, so I work in, uh, community mental health, um, and I was receiving referrals from our local mental health team and social prescribers. People who knew, knew me, knew about my, my, my gender, my identity, sexuality, um, and felt that it was most appropriate for, for them to sort of send me people who they thought I could best support with similar struggles and it was great, but I also wanted to look at how it can be sustainable on a on a kind of longer-term thing on a kind of peer to peer support level so creating a group seemed to be the most obvious answer. like if there's a need, fill that feel that need um and there's you're not going to be the only gay in the village yeah definitely um and clearly not by looking at the turnout so it's um it's Yeah, it just created that, it highlighted actually what was missing and gave an opportunity for us to create something special.

We love being in nature, we love being in the forest. it's so beautiful especially on days like this when you can just come out and take your mind off things and just be who you are in your own surroundings and just feel comfortable. Um, so for us to kind of include other people into that and people can then know that they can be out in nature and be who they are and how they want to be is, is perfect. And I think today's like perfect example of that, really.

You don't have to be anything other than yourself here. Nature's not looking like staring at you, figuring you out. You haven't got to keep a wall up or pretend that you are someone that you're not. Mm hmm. Just being able to, to arrive as, as, as I am in whatever form that might take. It could be drumming, it could be singing, it could be walking, it could be going for a run. Um, it could be talking to the birds, which I do get caught out doing that. It's quite cute, though, I don't mind people laughing at me talking to birds.

What kind of things, What do you say to them?

Well, I kind of like, do a little whistle. Yeah. Um, and then just tell them how pretty they are. Um, yeah, and quite often, ending with a whistle. Thank you for visiting me. And then off it goes.

I love that image of Ren just chatting with the birds. I really felt that point about feeling more comfortable in the forest, that's something I'm going to take from today.

Ren and Ro, and all the people I've met in this episode, have talked about the fact that you can't unpick societal issues from nature.

In the next episode, I’m going to be exploring that even more. I'll join a sensory walk along a wheelchair-accessible route in the forest.

And we've got of course the Sunflower Group. Yeah!

I'll think about neurodiverse experiences in nature, including my own experiences.

Because I'm autistic as well when I'm very stressed and I get sensory overwhelm really easily. And it's so nice to be in the forest because it's really quiet and there's not like lots of bright reflections.

It's so important, and I think that sensory experience is vital. Like, I have ADHD, which obviously is different, but like, I, It resonates what you're saying about the sensory overstimulation.

And I’ll be waking up at a frankly ridiculous hour to listen to the dawn chorus and the freaky bark of muntjac deer.

I’m Talia Randall and you’ve been listening to Voices of Epping Forest

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