Walking is a cultural and social activity, as well as a way of getting around. Researchers at the University of Aberdeen have studied the importance of walking, by closely observing how and why people walk in their everyday lives, and walking with them to monitor their experiences. They found that, for many, walking is central to their sense of place and their social life. It represents a particular way of experiencing and learning about their environment. Walking can also shape urban and rural landscapes, as shown by the history of Aberdeen’s streets and the current politics of Scottish land reform.

Key Findings

Walking as a source of social life and culture

- Human social and cultural life has long been disconnected from our bodies in western thought and science. This study shows that important aspects of culture, such as our sense of place and interaction with others, are not just in our heads, but intimately connected with the real physical activity of walking.

- The study describes three types of social experience that are intrinsic to walking. Sensing the environment, creating routes and talking to one another all happen in a distinctive way whilst walking.

- The chance to perceive and interact with the environment on a walk, using all your senses, is important to people. The weather, the light and the quality of the ground are enjoyable and memorable.

- Many people use walking as a time to escape from the pressures of other parts of their life and reflect. Their reverie is enhanced by the physical, sensory experience.

- The mishaps that can happen on walks – slips, trips or losing the way – fascinate people and are the source of many stories. The skill of walking is in avoiding these mishaps by sensing and learning the environment.

- Walkers create particular routes around the town or countryside, which have significance to them. These routes are important in defining the place.

- Walking, especially in the countryside, is valued as a sociable activity, where relaxed conversations can happen. The regular rhythm of walking, when shared with other people, eases the interaction.

The politics of walking
• Aberdeen’s main street, Union Street, was used as a case study on the history and politics of urban walking. When it was built in the early nineteenth century, it restructured the city into higher and lower layers.

• Now it is an increasingly busy place for consumption, entertainment and travel. These functions can conflict and the street may be pedestrianised.

• Scottish walkers were granted new access rights in February 2005. Those with a strong interest in the landscape are redefining it in response, for example by creating new path networks. Research is on-going, in Aberdeenshire and Orkney, into how the new access rights will change landscapes and people’s interest in them.

About the Study

The research was carried out by Professor Tim Ingold and Dr Jo Lee, at the Department of Anthropology, University of Aberdeen. The researcher observed people on walks and interviewed them about walks. Subjects were gathered through wide publicity. Many of the interviews took place during walks. All kinds of walking were covered, including dog-walking, hill-walking, farmers checking livestock and commuting. Twelve subjects wrote walking diaries, describing all their walks in a seven day period. A small number of policy-makers were interviewed about urban and rural walking, and the Aberdeen City Archives were used to investigate the history of its streets.

Key Words

Walking, culture, social life, pedestrians, access, routes, environment, rhythm.