

At first I thought it was odd, as we head into winter, that Parliament held a debate this week on outdoor activities, focussing on the economic and health benefits of walking and other perhaps more gentele recreational past times. Perhaps that is because I am not ashamed to say that I am a fair weather walker! I don't mind standing on the side of a football pitch shouting words of encouragement to my girls' team in the pouring rain or sub-zero temperatures, but the idea of going for a 5 mile rambler in the rain is not really my cup of tea. But then, as a fair skinned redhead, neither is hillwalking in plus 20 temperatures either.

However the debate, encouraged by a number of organisations representing over four million people and 550 groups with an interest in outdoor recreation, was about more than simply why walking is good for you. It covered many areas of policy that spreads across Government departments, such as planning, education and public transport.

In many respects it is a no brainer that outdoor recreation is something government, both central and local, should care about. Staycations are becoming incredibly popular, bringing an estimated £10bn into the economy from domestic visitors. Overseas visitors are coming ashore to experience the UK's Great Outdoors and walking tourism, not only supports nearly 250K jobs but generates a further £3bn of income.

Therefore making sure we protect our countryside, open up our coastal and river paths, providing a rural transport network and increasing opportunities for young people to engage in outdoor learning is essential to supporting this massively popular recreational past time. The outdoors is not just about sport and it is easy for those of us who are into competitive activity to forget about the simple pleasures of outdoor activities. So as I look for a local walking group to join one day perhaps the debate was actually not that odd at all!