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A breath of fresh air

Attracting black and minority ethnic (BME) groups to visit Britain's national parks remains a challenge. To help tackle this, a new phase of *Mosaic*, a £1.5 million three-year project, has been launched. I caught up with distinguished architect and town planner Narendra Bajaria, the Chair and only BME member, of a total 30, of the Authority of Britain's first national park, the Peak District, to find out more.

An objective of *Mosaic*, piloted by four national parks, is to recruit, train and to retain volunteers from BME groups to raise awareness of national parks in their own areas. The second phase, which ended last year, attracted 217 volunteers, or community champions, across England and Wales. Of these, 80 have been retained. The target for this third phase is at least another 200 community champions in 20 cities across England.

The community champions will also work towards another objective, to better meet the needs of under-represented communities and to dissolve any barriers or perceptions that may deter people from visiting. Their action plan includes organising national park visits, feedback forums, cultural events in national parks, urban recruitment, mentoring and work shadowing opportunities. Mr



Narendra Bajaria, Chairman of Peak District National Park Authority

Bajaria is particularly keen to reach young BME groups and made reference to an educational scheme, the John Muir Award, which aims to encourage awareness and responsibility for the natural environment in a spirit of fun and adventure. The scheme (www.johnmuiraward.org) has three levels and is open to all.

One man behind this project is 69-year-old Mr

Bajaria whose line of work is "relatively rare" among BME communities. I asked him why fewer BME people get involved. "Low level of awareness, low income, difficulty of accessibility by public transport and cultural background."

When asked if he would encourage people to get involved. "Yes, most definitely". He explained: "It is so important in shaping communities, creating a sense of place and gives opportunities to be more creative and innovative." So, how did he get involved? He rolled back the years. In 1964, on completing a five-year degree in Architecture in Mumbai, he came to Leeds to study a post-graduate diploma in Town Planning. Since, he has not looked back. Among his key achievements have been the planning and regeneration of Sheffield city centre in the late 70's, early Eighties which involved the creation of 1,800 jobs and investment worth

£200 million. Though now retired, Mr Bajaria remains very active. Aside from his keen interest in architecture and the natural environment, he enjoys walking in the countryside and sports, particularly cricket, tennis and badminton. "I like to travel around the world," he says, "whenever an opportunity occurs." In addition, he chairs the Board of the South Yorkshire Housing Association and that of Yorkshire ArtSpace, as well as being deputy chair of the English National Park Authorities Association.

Mr Bajaria, a Hindu, born in Zanzibar, an Indian Ocean island in Tanzania, is married to Maria, who is from Austria. The couple, who live in Sheffield, have three children. Their two daughters, Anya and Kathrin, live and work in Switzerland and their son, Andre, works in London for a law firm as a project manager. Last year, Mr Bajaria and his family visited Zanzibar, where in 1913 his father had emigrated to - from India. "The stone town area is a World Heritage site now. It was amazing how little has changed in Zanzibar except there are too many tourist shops."

Council leader opens new branch – and more

Punjab National Bank has opened its fourth UK branch in Birmingham. The inauguration of the new branch in Soho Road, Handsworth, last Friday was attended by the bank's chairman Dr KC Chakrabarty, branch manager Rajesh Yaduvanshi, Consul General of India Mrs Jordana Pavel, MEP Neena Gill and many other local dignitaries. The ribbon-cutting ceremony was led by the leader of Birmingham City Council, Mike Whitby. Beaming with a smile for the photographers, Mr Whitby, pictured, said: "The new office demonstrates the closeness the city of Birmingham has with India and our reputation as a vibrant and diverse international city."

His word "reputation" has set alarm bells ringing here in Birmingham as his leadership is challenged. This week it has emerged that former Lord Mayor Randal Brew is almost certain to stand against Mr Whitby for the leadership of both the



Conservative group and the council. Councillor Brew (Northfield) is believed to have the backing of between 15 and 20 of his colleagues – he needs 25 votes to be confirmed leader of Britain's biggest council. The rebellion reflects what backbenchers see as Mr Whitby's "arrogance" and failure to consult colleagues over key policy issues including proposals to establish a municipal bank and to lend Warwickshire County Cricket Club £20 million towards ground improvements at Edgbaston. Mr Whitby has in fact taken control. He has just bypassed completely the council's highly-paid director of public affairs

and communications, Canadian Queen of Spin Debra Davis, and approached veteran West Midlands journalist Andy Skinner for help. Mr Whitby has asked Skinner to produce a report into how the council's communication strategy could be improved. Mr Whitby, it seems, remains mystified at the ease with which the likes of Manchester and Liverpool manage to promote themselves on the world stage with publicity that is, usually, positive. Furthermore, the local press have added more salt to Mr Whitby's

wound by a double-page spread headlined: *Brum's queen of spin spent £1,000 in one day on council credit card*. That is Debra Davis. Ms Davis, 53, used the taxpayer-funded credit card to pay for fancy dinners, a five-star trip to her native Canada, and a string of "networking events" at exclusive city nightspots. Ms Davis, who has broken council rules, has defended her expenses describing them as "modest", adding that her work offered taxpayers "value for money". The sorry saga continues.

You must be joking

Border and Immigration Agency director Gail Adams is facing calls for an apology after telling 150 prominent civil servants at a top-level conference that Birmingham smelled of urine. "It was just a joke," said Mrs Adams, "a light-hearted ice-breaker," she said when challenged. The conference at Birmingham's Holiday Inn was arranged to discuss immigration and enforcement policies. Bet Mrs Adams is grateful to BIA's chief executive Lin Homer, pictured, her current boss and ex-colleague from Birmingham City Council for giving her the job. On merit of course.



News in Brief

Flying low

Teething problems a month into Akal Air's inaugural flight launch from Birmingham to Amritsar is not a good sign. But bosses at the airline are keeping their fingers crossed. It has already cut the number of flights to just one a week due to lack of demand, a VIP launch cancelled twice. What next?

Dyke ties the knot

After 27 years together, the former BBC director general Greg Dyke, pictured, and his partner, Sue Howes, have finally married. They kept their plans a secret from their three children, whom they asked to dress smartly before heading with them straight to their local register office.



Airport sheds 45 jobs

About 45 jobs are to go from Birmingham International Airport's 690-strong workforce as a consequence of the economic downturn. The airport's business development director, Peter Vella, pictured, a well-known business figure, recently left after almost 12 years to "pursue new business opportunities".



Ashley pleads not guilty

BBC presenter Ashley Blake, pictured, has denied affray and perverting the course of justice. Blake, 39, appeared at Birmingham Crown Court last Monday. His case was prompted following an alleged incident at a restaurant where a 17-year-old received serious facial injuries in January this year. Blake was granted unconditional bail and ordered to reappear for a trial at a date to be arranged.



Ex-Lord Mayor denies racist slur

Birmingham councillor Mahmood Hussain has been accused of telling Elaina Cohen she was not a suitable inner-city Labour Party candidate because she is "white and Jewish". Cllr Hussain, pictured, who served as Birmingham's first Asian Lord Mayor seven years ago, has denied her claim. Ms Cohen, ex-girlfriend and current assistant to Perry Barr MP Khalid Mahmood, wanted to stand in the East Handsworth and Lozells by-election. This seat is one of Labour's safest on Birmingham City Council and a party candidate can be almost certain of victory in the by-election on June 4.



Uddin's expenses galore

Over the past few weeks ethnic spin machine Media Moguls has been proactively churning out and pitching press releases on behalf of the Government Equalities Office to help raise further the profile of Baroness Uddin and her Women's Taskforce. Now that the Labour peer, pictured, has been nabbed in the net over her £100,000 parliamentary expenses, it'll be interesting to see what spin Media Moguls will put on forthcoming news releases, that's if any are dished out now.

