

AONB UNIT & PARTNER REPORTS

Purpose

To advise members of activity of the Wye Valley AONB Unit and various partners.

FOR INFORMATION

Below are brief update reports on the following AONB Unit and partners' initiatives: -

- a. Covid-19 impacts - on AONB and AONB Unit
- b. AONB 50th Anniversary 2021 & Gilpin2020+1
- c. Lower Wye Catchments projects - Natural Flood Management and INNS in Monmouthshire & Valley Brook, Gloucestershire
- d. Restoring Our Amazing River (ROAR) Water Environment Grant (WEG) project
- e. Riparian Trees project with Herefordshire Wildlife Trust
- f. Youth Rangers

a. Covid-19 impacts - on AONB and AONB Unit

Through the summer and early autumn the Wye Valley and Forest of Dean have continued to be popular destinations for visitors. As the national lockdown eased people took full advantage of the outdoor activities the area has to offer. The recreational use of many countryside and riverside sites has been fairly high. The Environment Agency sample survey of canoeing on the Wye in August showed that numbers of vessels on the water were not significantly different to previous years. However there was a noticeable increase in the use of paddleboards. In the woodlands there has been an increase in mountain bike use including the building of unauthorised tracks and trails. Through liaison with local authority colleagues and fellow AONB & National Park staff and other stakeholders, it seems that in general terms impacts on the Wye Valley landscape are similar to elsewhere in England and Wales. Covid-19 has highlighted the importance of locally accessible greenspace and the value of our National Landscapes as special places for local food production, recreation, and in supporting the nation's health and wellbeing.

AONB staff have continued to predominantly work from home. All AONB staff have been able to progress with a range of projects and tasks identified and risk assessed to be safe and compliant with government guidance. The AONB Office continues to receive enquiries from people seeking advice about visiting the Wye Valley for the first time. However with the AONB straddling the England Wales border, and with different Coronavirus guidance and restrictions in each country, the provision of advice can get complicated.

b. AONB 50th Anniversary 2021 & Gilpin2020+1

The development of a programme of activities and celebrations for the Wye Valley AONB's 50th Anniversary has been confounded by the on-going movement and escalation of the Coronavirus Pandemic in England and Wales. The appropriateness of activities is constantly being evaluated. However this makes it very difficult to plan a suitable and definitive programme. But there are a number of initiatives in the pipeline.

Similarly the postponement of the Gilpin2020 programme remains in abeyance. There is still local and national interest in the story of Rev William Gilpin's trip down the Wye 250 year ago. It is just not clear how to promote and celebrate this anniversary most effectively in the Wye Valley.

c. Lower Wye Catchments projects - Natural Flood Management and INNS in Monmouthshire & Valley Brook, Gloucestershire

The Environment Agency have provided resources to roll out of the initiative in the Valley Brook catchment – the tributary flowing through Coleford and Newland to Redbrook. This follows the format developed last year in Angidy catchment. The Wye & Usk Foundation Catchment Advisor, Rebecca (Bex) Meredith, seconded to the AONB Unit, is leading on providing 6 farms in the Valley Brook catchment with tailored advice and bespoke Farm Plans. Each farm visit and subsequent Farm Plan identifies opportunities to improve soil and water management and Natural Flood Management (NFM) interventions. There is also some modest grant to match-fund appropriate capital work. Funding is currently on for this financial year, so there is a tight window to ensure landowners and land managers take part and install measures promptly.

Work continues, building on last year's project, to evaluate some small-scale remedial work on of selected sections of degraded green lanes / Unclassified County Roads (UCRs) around Tintern and Whitebrook. It is hoped some pilot work can be progressed this winter.

Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS)

This year, with funding secured from both Welsh Government and Environment Agency, INNS control work has been increased and scaled-up: for Japanese Knotweed; from 60 sites last year to 120, and for American Skunk Cabbage; from 1 site to 14 sites. This work covered 15 communities across 4 sub-catchments in the Lower Wye Valley, including the Valley Brook in Gloucestershire. The spaying treatment is carried out by the Wye & Usk Foundation, whose team have been working on the eradication of Japanese Knotweed and Giant Hogweed throughout the Wye Catchment for many years. INNS control work in the Lower Wye Catchments was preceded at the start of September by a social media campaign, letters through doors and email updates, which has been very well received. There has been close liaison with Monmouthshire County Council (MCC) and Natural Resources Wales (NRW), who both undertake some INNS control on their own landholding. NRW have currently granted consent for the AONB Unit to work with contractors and volunteers on INNS control in the public forest estate up until the end of September 2021.

Planned events around this project have been put on hold, namely a 'thank-you event' for Angidy farmers involved in the project last year. This would have been hugely beneficial in helping raise awareness of the project and inviting other local landowners from the wider

area. Proposals are being investigated on how best to engage with the farming community under Covid-19 restrictions, to build relations and making new contacts, to promote the value and ease of installing small-scale NFM interventions and highlight appropriate funding sources.

Other Green Infrastructure (GI) work also continues where possible. The Wordsworth Walk route has been surveyed and quotes are being pursued for a range of access enhancements at the Cleddon Falls and other features along the route. Quotes are also being obtained for a topographic survey of the 600m riverbank section of the Wye Valley Walk at Wyesham, between the Monmouthshire Showground and Beaufort Bridge. This will enable ground modelling and visualisations to be produced that will then inform the path and bank revetment work required.

d. Restoring Our Amazing River (ROAR) Water Environment Grant (WEG) project

The farm advice work, led by the Wye & Usk Foundation, working with Herefordshire Wildlife Trust and the Wye Valley AONB Unit and Herefordshire Rural Hub, has continued now the Catchment Advisors have returned from being furloughed. Ben Nott and Rebecca (Bex) Meredith cover the English part of the Wye Valley AONB and the adjacent Garren & Gamber catchment, and operate from the AONB Office in Monmouth while being integrated with the WUF Catchment Advisor team.

e. Riparian Trees project with Herefordshire Wildlife Trust

The Wye Valley AONB Unit, in partnership with Herefordshire Wildlife Trust, was successful in securing some modest funding for this financial year to support some Riparian tree management and advice work. The funding totals £19,500 and is targeted at the Wye Valley AONB in Herefordshire and lower Lugg.

The objectives of the project are:

- Undertake landowner engagement in the Wye Valley AONB with the production of five farm reports and recommendations for Riparian Tree Management measures.
- Deliver selected Riparian Tree Management measures in the Wye Valley AONB and along the River Lugg Special Area of Conservation (SAC). This will include work identified during farm visits and on three key sites along the Lugg SAC.
- Deliver an information sharing event in the Lugg / Wye Valley AONB area where best practice and Riparian Tree Management measures can be shared and promoted more widely.

Farm advice will be undertaken by the existing Wye and Usk Foundation (WUF) Catchment Advisors. The funding is only short-lived but the farm engagement and sharing good practice may lead to the development of further work in the future. That work may be funded by the landowner or through any subsequent funding scheme.

Riparian tree management capital work on farm will be part funded by the landowner. The rate of intervention will vary depending on the work to be carried out. Works are likely to include pollarding and coppicing along selected stretches of river bank. Riparian habitat management work may also be included, with interventions such as pleaching, bankside fencing and planting to stabilise riverbanks. Cumulatively, a minimum of 1km of riverbank

will be enhanced. Nature Recovery considerations may include retaining deadwood where possible for bats, invertebrates and otter holts.

Work on Herefordshire Wildlife Trust Reserves along the Lugg (outside the AONB) will be delivered by a known and trusted contractor, and will be used to deliver the best practice demonstration event for riparian owners. This will highlight the best way to manage riparian trees, as well as things to be aware of and look out for when considering management work. Any event will be delivered within Covid-19 restriction and guidelines at the time of delivery.

f. Youth Rangers

The Youth Rangers programme was suspended in March 2020 due to lockdown. In June activity was re-started on line, after discussion with the Foresters' Forest Landscape Partnership that now predominantly fund the programme. The Youth Rangers were set a series of nature tasks and navigation challenges to encourage them to explore the local countryside with their families. To facilitate this each Youth Ranger was provided with a set of nature survey equipment (see picture).



They were invited to engage with each other on WhatsApp and share pictures, comments etc. Some challenges proved more popular than others, and some Youth Rangers involved their whole family in the tasks. A total of 9 Youth Ranger, out of 15, regularly participated in the activities.

Sarah Sawyer, AONB Community Links Officer and leader of the Youth Rangers programme made a video to kick start each new activity and to assist in the navigation challenge. This was time consuming but ultimately rewarding and inspired action.

Youth Ranger Summer challenge 2020

Week Commencing

July 6th: Build a survival shelter, film/ photograph and share on WhatsApp

July 13th: Find and identify at least 6 wild flowers new to you. Share on WhatsApp

July 20th: Identify 6 new birds &/or bird song. Demonstrate what you did on WhatsApp
July 27th: Navigation challenge to mystery location (Fancy view & Shaden Tuft oak)
August 3rd: Hang a hammock. Creatively demonstrate what you did on WhatsApp
August 10th: Navigation challenge to find The Beavers of Lydbrook
August 17th: Pond dipping and kick sampling for invertebrates
August 24th: Identify at least 6 butterflies new to you to. Put up a hammock again. Share.
Final Challenge: Navigate to The Giant's Cave, Piercefield.