

AONB UNIT & PARTNER REPORTS

Purpose

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

FOR INFORMATION

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

- a) Lower Wye Catchments Natural Flood Management & Green Infrastructure Project
- b) Wentwood to Wyre Endangered Landscapes Programme
- c) AONB Farming Awards
- d) AONB visits by Welsh Government and DEFRA staff
- e) Ross Riverside
- f) Youth Rangers – recent activities & what some former Youth Rangers are doing now.
- g) AONB Volunteers

a) Lower Wye Catchments Natural Flood Management (NFM) and Green Infrastructure (GI) Project

Farm management advice

Wye & Usk Foundation (WUF) have completed ten farm advice visits across the Angidy catchment. Confidential plans are being written for farmers and shared with the AONB Unit. Grant funded capital work has been signed up, balancing prioritising need with the pilot project focus of trying to demonstrate a variety of land management interventions. Work is set to include riparian fencing, farm yard infrastructure (to separate clean/dirty water), cross contour hedgerows and woodland linkage, fencing to assist rotational grazing, wet meadow advice and management, leaky ditch barriers and maize under-sowing trial opportunities.

Farmers have also been supported through the online application process to Glastir small grants where appropriate options have been identified through the scheme, and where this fits with the farmer's ongoing business needs.

MCC access project research, development and GI strategy

Atkins consultancy are finalising their report with water management proposals for Chapel Hill Road/Limekiln Brook. This follows their modelling and investigation into surface water run-off and culvert blocking due to the rapid response of the catchment (water source, pathway, impact). The Limekiln Brook is proving to be a very complex study, with considerable ground water flows and springs. The catchment is also in a young state which presents a high erosion potential; the steep gradient of the small valley provides the brook

with considerable energy contributing to the hydraulic erosion of Chapel Hill Lane and sediment movement to the culvert pinch point in Tintern.

A brief is to be drawn up for Atkins to carry out a walkover study of four unclassified county roads to establish causes of the significant degradation to these routes and suggest potential solutions.

Best practice/info sharing events

The NFM & GI Project has held or contributed to ten events since October; most recently this has included a farming advice evening in partnership with Farming Connect and The Wye & Usk Foundation at Trelleck, attended by 20 farmers. The main feedback was regarding future funding and the need for financial support to implement environmental and green infrastructure improvements while not impacting on the business.

We have also worked with volunteer groups and held guided walks promoting the project and natural flood management opportunities.

Arrangements are commencing for a seminar in the autumn involving local NFM project officers and other experts including Pickering Slow Flow project staff.

Pilot NFM work

At Ty Mawr with Gwent Wildlife Trust we are aiming to establish a local demonstration site with the installation of leaky dams.

Watercourse consents are being prepared. From information gathering on other NFM visits and projects, leaky dam consents (risk, liability & maintenance) are always contentious, with the consensus that these come down to local decision making due to lack of any national framework.

Discussions regarding opportunities in Natural Resources Wales (NRW) landholdings are ongoing. Liaison is required between NRW (contractors and site managers), MCC flood risk officers (ordinary watercourse consent) and how to meet ongoing maintenance requirements.

Invasive weed mapping and control

Locations of Japanese knotweed (JK) are being recorded and mapped throughout the project area; permissions to spray are being agreed with private landowners and pursued for NRW managed land. There is significant JK through the Angidy catchment and there are further areas to survey. The Wye & Usk Foundation will carry out spraying operations in September, proved to be the most effective time of year, once landowner permissions have been secured.

American Skunk cabbage (ASC) has been identified in the Whitebrook catchment. This is a terrestrial, semi-aquatic perennial plant native to western North America and is one of a growing number of species being recognised as a threat at a national level. ASC can grow to 1.5m in height and has large leathery leaves which dominate native vegetation. At a private site in Whitebrook ASC been found forming a dense colony. The AONB Unit are currently investigating the most effective method of control.

We will be working with AONB volunteers and NRW on a Himalayan Balsam (HB) pulling event within Colonels Park, Whitebrook in July. The North volunteer group are keen to control HB within Manor Wood but in order to lead the task AONB staff/volunteer group leaders require additional First Aid (+F) qualification to satisfy NRW permission requirements for working on their land. Sporadic records of HB are being gathered from site visits and the public throughout the project area. A coordinated long-term approach - such as working with NRW in July to eradicate from a specific site - is required for effective control rather than reactive, ad hoc 'pulling' across random sites.

The Lower Wye Valley Catchments Natural Flood Management & Green Infrastructure Project is funded by Natural Resources Wales and the Wye Valley AONB Partnership.

b) Wentwood to Wyre Endangered Landscapes Programme

Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust have been leading on a Project Innovation Grant application to the Endangered Landscapes Programme for the planning and development of a large scale, multifunctional, sustainable forested landscape from Wentwood to the Wyre Forest and encompassing the Wye Valley AONB. The application, submitted in mid May, was for US\$100,000 (about £75,000) for an 18month development phase to work up a subsequent Project Implementation Grant, which can be up to US\$5M (about £4M) and have a maximum duration of five years.

A core area of 385km² includes Wentwood, the lower Wye Valley and the Forest of Dean, and has 43% woodland cover. The rough extent of the wider vision area, to be confirmed during the development phase is around 1600km² (with 24% woodland cover) extending from the Forest of Dean to the Wyre Forest. The aim is to restore, enhance and reconnect habitats and natural processes across this extensive forested landscape. The project will provide a unique opportunity to experiment and develop a blueprint for the economically sustainable restoration of forest ecosystems, whilst ensuring long term resilience by developing an inclusive and innovative cross-border partnership, landscape vision and economic model.

The Wye Valley AONB Unit was one of the partners that helped Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust with scoping proposals for the application. Not surprisingly for such a large landscape-scale initiative a wide range of individuals and organisations have been involved including Forestry England, Forest Research, Natural England, Natural Resources Wales, Gwent Wildlife Trust, the Woodland Trust, Ecosulis and various local authorities. The Project Innovation Grant application will be assessed in July. Success with a Project Innovation Grant is no guarantee of securing a Project Implementation Grant. But should the grant be awarded the development phase will engage with private landowners and woodland managers, contractors, volunteers, local conservation, community and recreation groups, and other interested organisations.

The Endangered Landscapes Programme is managed by the Cambridge Conservation Initiative and is funded by Arcadia, a charitable fund of Peter Baldwin and Lisbet Rausing. <http://www.endangeredlandscapes.org/>

c) AONB Farming Awards

The Wye Valley AONB Farming Awards are running for the 12th year in 2019. The Award is for anyone managing land in or adjacent to the AONB that makes an outstanding contribution to conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the landscape. Three entries were shortlisted; Monmouthshire Meadows Group, Gadr Farm, Cwmcarnvan and Berry Hill Community Orchard. Each was initially visited by the AONB Development Officer and then on 14th June by the judging panel. This consisted of Andrew Blake (AONB Manager), David Price (NFW Wales & JAC), Mike Williams (Wye & Usk Foundation) and Martin Rowberry

(Coppett Hill Common Trust & 2017 winners). This years' winner will be announced at the Monmouthshire Show on July 6th, receiving the Farming Awards' Trophy and a £400 cheque. Runners-up receive a certificate and a cheque.

d) AONB visits by Welsh Government and DEFRA staff

The AONB Unit has hosted separate visits from members of both DEFRA's Landscape Policy team and Welsh Government's Landscape & Outdoor Recreation team. Both groups were able to meet some of the AONB Unit staff and visited a range of sites and projects in the AONB. There was particular interest from both teams on the perceptions of the Review of Designated Landscapes in both England and Wales and how the AONB Partnership operates cross-border.

e) Ross Riverside

The Development Officer has been working closely with Ross-on-Wye Town Council and the Herefordshire Meadows Group to secure funding for the restoration of approximately 0.6 hectares of amenity grassland to a more traditional floodplain meadow habitat. Following grass cutting and removal, and harrowing, seed is to be harvested from a similar floodplain meadow site and spread in July. The results will be monitored in Spring 2020.

f) Youth Rangers

Recent activity of the 5th cohort of Youth Rangers includes the following:

In February the Youth Rangers explored the geological heritage of the Forest of Dean. Visiting the stone works at Cannop Ponds and the mine at Hopewell Colliery, providing an insight into current and past mineral wealth of the area and how this land use shape has shaped landscape and communities.



In March two hedges were planted by the young people. One at Clearwell as part of the Natural England led, Gloucestershire Batscape project and another at the community initiative at Scarr Bandstand, to improve the habitat for wildlife on this newly restored site.



April's focus was on the veteran trees of the Wye Valley. They explored the landscape from St. Briavels to Bigsweir and through Hudnalls Wood in the company of Andrew Hoaen an archaeologist with an interest in veteran trees. The Youth Rangers helped Andrew add to his knowledge and records of locally significant trees. The group also toured St. Briavels Castle on their return learning about its past importance and its current use.



In May the focus was on navigation and outdoor skills; camp cooking & establishment of safe shelter. A navigation challenge was undertaken taking the group from Bracelands near Christchurch to a meeting point on the River Wye near Ye Olde Ferrie Inn, Symonds Yat West. Here a wild swimming instructor met the group and led a swimming experience in the river on a very cold May Saturday!

All Youth Ranger visits and activities are part-funded by the Foresters' Forest Landscape Partnership scheme supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Where are they now?

Here is an update on a selection of graduated / former Youth Rangers:



Helen - Cohort 2

Helen is now volunteering with the Brecon Beacons and Monmouthshire National Trust team, working primarily with Ranger Abbi Knight across several National Trust sites including the Sugar Loaf, the Skirrid and the Begwns. Here she's helping remove a series of worn out steps on the Skirrid near Abergavenny.



Todd Clarke - Cohort 1

Running his own business, charcoal coppicing

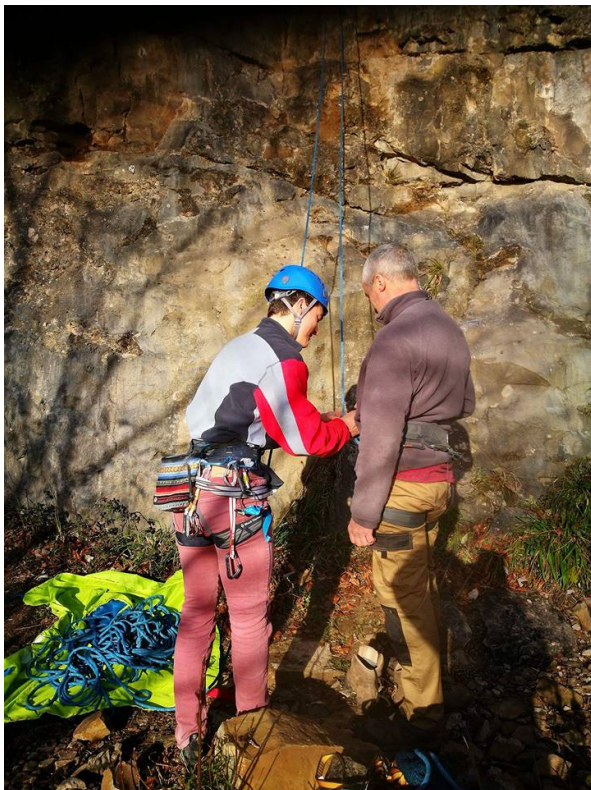
<https://resilientwoodlands.co.uk/who-we-are/>



Seb Hagget - Cohort 1

Trainee Reserves Officer with the
Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust

<https://nrconservation.wordpress.com/2019/05/21/the-wildlife-trust-and-me/?fbclid=IwAR0T3OVjwVWuLjTBZIYpQ3XpFRRCBnuqCrSxh5tiT6xX4LNhb9Dnu4rbHBA>



Max Eckert - Cohort 1

Certification Officer at the Soil Association

<https://www.soilassociation.org/staff-bios/max-eckert/>

g) AONB Volunteers: January – May 2019

The Wye Valley AONB volunteers have concentrated much of their efforts in the early part of the year working for Natural England at the Highbury Woods National Nature Reserve. The group removed a large number of plastic netting enclosures that had provided protection for establishing coppice. Thirteen enclosure, in the region of 4 acres, have been cleared of redundant netting and two more remain for work to continue in the autumn. In addition, the group rebuilt a stone wall at the entrance to the reserve and helped hang a traditionally oak gate. The group were treated to a celebratory BBQ by the Natural England Team.



Works have also continued at Staunton Meend where 10 meters of drystone wall have been re-instated.

