

AONB UNIT & PARTNER REPORTS

Purpose

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

FOR INFORMATION

Below are update reports on the following AONB Unit & partner initiatives: -

- a. AONB Partnership Seminar - 16th March 2023
- b. Cleddon Bog SSSI & NRW Peatland funding
- c. AONB Species Action Plans
- d. Lower Wye Nature Networks Partnership Project
- e. Integrated Recreational Access Strategy - Monmouthshire.
- f. Wye Valley Villages signage (Monmouthshire) & Delivery Group
- g. Wye Valley River Festival

a. Wye Valley AONB Partnership Seminar - 16th March 2023

The AONB Partnership Seminar will be on Thursday 16th March 2023 from 10am-3pm at Goodrich Village Hall. The title is 'Enhancing water catchment through innovative land management'. The objective is to attract a wide audience of politicians, officers, farmers and landowners that can influence the development of policies and practices to conserve and enhance water resources in our outstanding landscape. There will be talks from experts in soil and land management, agroforestry and Natural Flood Management by

Niels Corfield—Regenerative Agriculture Consultant

Stephen Briggs—Abacus Agriculture, Nuffield Scholar

Chris Uttley—Stroud Valleys Natural Flood Management Officer

followed by a Q&A panel discussion. Refreshments and lunch provided. The event has been supported by the Environment Agency.

b. Cleddon Bog & NRW Peatland funding

The AONB Unit secured £16K from Natural Resources Wales (NRW) in 2022/3 for habitat restoration work at Cleddon Bog SSSI, the 15ha lowland peatland Common near Trellech. Large areas of the Bog have become overgrown with birch, willow and purple moor grass which is diminishing the biodiversity and threatening to dry the bog out. This leads to carbon and other gas emissions. Preparation work got underway in Autumn 2022 following liaison with the Commoners and the securing of permissions and contractors to carry out vegetation management work plus awareness raising of the project through social media. The year culminated in a highly successful community-based work party, led by Nature Conservation Services and the AONB team, with ¼ acre of birch and willow cleared in just two days.



NRW have offered further funding to continue the restoration work up until March 2025 and we are working with partners to commence a conservation grazing pilot this March. The Brockweir-based Grazing Management Ltd., will be bringing four Belted Galloway cows with NoFence collars onto the Bog for conservation grazing. These will be checked daily by a team of local residents who have been trained and become certified Livestock Checkers. The cattle will graze the Bog for one month, then it's up onto the NRW Forestry Estate at Beacon Hill for the summer and then back to the Bog through to November; connecting two important sites within the same small sub-catchment of the Wye. We'll be monitoring the impact of the grazing using drone footage and aerial photos to inform the following years' management regime.

c. **AONB Species Action Plans (SAP)**

The Noble Chafer SAP is currently in its review phase, and has gone out to Peoples Trust for Endangered Species (PTES), our project partner, for review. Once PTES have given their feedback, the SAP will be translated into Welsh and published in a downloadable format on the AONB website. Funded through the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme (FiPL), 13 habitat boxes are being installed this month across 6 orchard sites in Herefordshire, as well as the planting of 20 damson and plum trees. A Traditional Orchard Management training event took place last month, hosted by the Colwall Orchard Group, which was met with much enthusiasm from the participants. A second event will be held in June focusing on Traditional Orchard wildlife. FiPL funding has also secured enough noble chafer pheromone to run the lure trapping survey for another two years in the English part of the AONB. Plans are in place to use Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP) funding to mirror these efforts in the Welsh part of the AONB, to include habitat box installation and pheromone surveying.

The Hedgehog SAP is nearly completed and will be presented to the JAC at the next meeting. We are continuing to support Dylan Allman, our Wye Valley AONB 'Hedgehog Hero', with his Be Hedgehog Aware campaign. The AONB Unit is the supporting organisation for his recent project with GAVO, where he has been awarded a 'Cash 4 U Youth Led' grant to deliver presentations to community groups and continue raising awareness of the plight of hedgehogs. Plans for this Spring (after the hibernation period) include further engagement with schools and local communities (talks, sessions with children, camera trap loans), mammal footprint surveys as citizen science/engagement tool. We will continue to promote conservation action for hedgehogs through AONB projects and grant funding, particularly focusing on opportunities for hedgerow creation &/or restoration or field margin buffers through the FiPL, Lower Wye Valley

Nature Networks project, SDF Landscape & Biodiversity Enhancement Grants and Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP).

Bumblebee assemblage and Woodland butterfly assemblage SAPs will be a key focus of Nature Recovery work this Spring & Summer, utilising citizen science surveys to collect baseline data for the AONB, and establishing how we can better work with partners to promote these priority species.

d. Lower Wye Nature Networks Partnership Project

A project deadline extension has been received for the Lower Wye Valley Networks Project; the project will now finish at the end of September 2023. Whilst much work has taken place, this additional time will allow for an extra season of Invasive Non-Native Species treatment and further seasonally dependant habitat enhancement work on farms and both sites owned by project partners Gwent Wildlife Trust and the Woodland Trust.

As well as project management and administration, the Wye Valley AONB Team are delivering elements of this project on private land. Consultants The Environment Partnership have complete advice visits and plans on 10 farms, and the AONB team are now working with these farmers to deliver opportunities identified.

e. Integrated Recreational Access Strategy

For many years the AONB Unit has worked closely with Monmouthshire County Council (MCC) Highways and Countryside Access teams on the safety and accessibility of key access routes. We are acutely aware of the legal and moral obligation to safeguard these routes and the opportunities and impacts of their use on the wider network and local communities. This was further documented in the 2022 public consultation for the Wye Valley Villages Study.

Over the last 4 years some progress has been made to better understand the issues and explore potential solutions for some routes, but across the network these issues have generally remained unresolved due to their physical and legal complexity and the resulting resource requirements. Recent discussions between the AONB Unit and MCC Highways and Countryside Access have reaffirmed that a strategic approach is desirable, rather than cherry-picking routes that could prove difficult to justify versus other routes, and/or not actually be what the local communities and users want or need. This strategic approach has been agreed in principle by the Local Access Forum.

It was agreed that the AONB Unit, with its strong multi-sector stakeholder connections, is best placed to lead this new strategy, which will incorporate MCC's statutory requirements as the Public Rights of Way and Highways Authority, but also consider the effects of climate change, nature recovery, heritage, tourism and active travel agendas, and the context of the AONB Management Plan. The AONB Unit has secured funding from the Welsh Government (WG) Sustainable Landscapes, Sustainable Places (SLSP) programme to take this forward up to March 2025. We are currently developing the necessary project management processes and structures and producing a consultancy brief for the scoping and consultation processes.

f. Wye Valley Villages signage (Monmouthshire) & Delivery Group

The Wye Valley Villages Steering Group, consisting of representatives from Monmouthshire County Council (MCC), Wye Valley AONB Partnership and the four constituent Community Councils of St Arvans, Trellech United, Devauden and Tintern (now redefined as Wye Valley), has overseen the design and installation of the new village entrance signs. These have now been installed at all the 9 villages in the AONB in Monmouthshire; Devauden, Llanishen, Trellech, The Narth, Penallt, Catbrook, Llandogo, Tintern and St Arvans.

The preparation of new village gateway signage was taken from the Wye Valley Villages Action Plan as a 'quick win' initial project by the Steering Group. Funding was secured through the Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP) programme. A local and long established Monmouth company won the competitive contract to design and produce the signs. Following guidance by the Steering Group the signs incorporate the AONB logo and an image representing something of local relevance for each village. The Steering Group determined the wording about 'road users' while the inclusion of the village name and other text in Welsh is a legal requirement. The signs are made of powder coated metal.

There has been some local objection to the new signage. The signs are intended to help communicate the individual village's unique identity within a design framework that identifies their location in the Wye Valley AONB, replacing the very varied, and in places dilapidated, village gateway signage.

The Steering Group is now renamed as the Delivery Group and will move forward to address further actions and proposals arising out of the Wye Valley Villages Plan.

g. Wye Valley River Festival



It is with great sadness that we announce the death of Jon Beedell, one of the founding Artistic Directors of the Wye Valley River Festival. Jon will be fondly remembered by many for his commanding characterisations in all 5 of Wye Valley River Festivals – from Judge Hog to jazz trombonist in street parades. It was of course street theatre that had been Jon's stage since the 1980s. As a co-founder of Desperate Men he brought a dynamism and eccentricity to the Wye Valley River Festival that helped turn it into such a phenomena, helping the Festival win the National AONB Bowland Award in 2018. His ambition and drive, inspired by the landscape, led the numerous arts professionals to collaborate with the local people throughout the valley. He always entertained and challenged audiences, and co-creators, to change the way we look at ourselves and how we see things, how we relate to our environment, neighbourhoods and to each other. He has left an outstanding legacy of memories and connections in the Wye Valley.