

Centre News

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Centre Director's Report - January 2004

Achievements & Adventures, Cuts & Cornerstones

The new year is traditionally a time to look back at past achievements and to outline the way forward for the coming year.

The Woodland Education Centre has now been running for 18 years. During that time, tens of thousands of people, both children and adults have visited the Centre. As society inevitably becomes more detached from the natural world, the Centre provides an essential window on our British countryside and wildlife.

Interestingly, many youngsters who visited the Centre in the early days are now grown up with families of their own. These children now follow in their parents' footsteps, visiting the Centre to explore the natural world and be inspired with wonder.

There is no overestimating the importance of capturing children's enthusiasm and fascination early on. By doing so, whole new avenues of exploration and opportunity are opened up for their adulthood. To quote Jacques Cousteau, "From small observations grow the seeds of great adventures". In the process a new generation is also motivated to provide careful stewardship of our countryside.



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As the years have rolled past, the Centre has been improved with new facilities and habitats. A log cabin, designed to accommodate disabled, as well as able-bodied users, has been constructed. Safe, all ability pond dipping areas have been provided. Valuable aquatic habitats, including the lake, wetland, marsh and ponds have been restored or created, together with wildflower rides, woodland glades and walks, hedges and heathland.

A network of many miles of interconnecting pathways, which allow public appreciation of all these natural marvels, has been constructed and maintained.

During these years, the Internet has also arrived. The Trust was quick to see its potential for education and accordingly developed a vast website. The website caters for all ages from children to adults and is part of Britain's National Grid for Learning.

The information and resources now available on the website would fill many books. Unlike these traditional paper-based media, the new digital media allow extensive use of colour images and video to illustrate information, increase interest and improve understanding.

All of this development, both at the Centre and on the website, has required a huge amount of input. If the value of volunteer input, partnerships and funding over the past 18 years is totted up, one arrives at the staggering figure of over one million pounds!

The annual funding which the Trust receives from the Forestry Commission and East Devon District Council (EDDC), provides the foundation which makes all of this happen. These annual grants are used as seed funding to attract grants from other sources. (Many grant-giving organisations stipulate that an applicant must find a percentage of the grant which is applied for in cash, from other sources).

In this way, small sums of money can be used to attract much larger amounts. For example, EDDC's £3,000 a year grant provided the 10% partnership funding required to unlock a £30,000 annual grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund between 2000 and 2003. Three thousand became £30,000. The latest grant from EDDC has provided the necessary partnership funding for the Education Officer's salary for the next year, the bulk of which has been donated by the Ernest Cook Trust.

Unfortunately, against this background of successful provision of facilities and resources, the Trust, along with most other organisations, is now battling against constant cuts in funding. Throughout the commercial and public sectors, organisations are being asked to do more, with less in the budget.

Fundraising has become increasingly frustrating, as a large number of grant schemes seem to be specifically designed to exclude as many applicants as possible.

Many conservation grant schemes exclude habitat management and/or habitat restoration or creation. Quite how one is meant to conserve the countryside without doing any of these things, it is difficult to see. For good measure, many also refuse to include staff time or contractors' wages. While volunteers are highly valued sources of labour, with the best will in the world, they are not psychic and require someone to direct their efforts. A large undertaking such as the Centre, simply cannot be run solely on volunteer labour.

However, the motto of the Trust has become "We will succeed despite them, if not because of them!"

January saw the annual pilgrimage to BETTS, the British Education and Technology Show, which is held every year in the vast Exhibition Centre in Olympia, London. The show provides an invaluable opportunity to view the latest developments in technology first hand, as well as giving valuable insights into where the emphasis lies in education and ICT.

ICT companies and suppliers of every size offered a staggering range of computer hardware, software and associated peripherals to the Education sector. Over 500 companies and organisations had displays, including Microsoft, the Department for Education and Skills, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), BBC, the British Museum, Times Educational Supplement, Oxford University Press, Dell, Toshiba, Samsung and Sony, to name but a few.

Seminars on a variety of education topics are also organised throughout the event. The combined message of the seminars attended was clear. ICT is to become a cornerstone of education.

The Government's stated position is outlined in the document 'Towards a Unified e-Learning Strategy'. In it, Charles Clarke, the Secretary of State for Education, says that "E-learning has the potential to revolutionise the way in which we teach and how we teach. This is about embedding and exploiting technologies in everything we do, and getting ICT embedded across the curriculum for all subjects."

OFSTED (the UK schools' inspectorate) has also stated that every single subject must have an element of ICT.

From the Trust's point of view, this emphasis means that we must make good use of ICT, in addition to providing the essential outdoor practical activities. However, it is important to develop a seamless integration of ICT with fieldwork visits. It is evident that many approaches get bogged down in technicalities. Technology should not get in the way. ICT is merely a tool to educate and inform more efficiently, although there is no denying that it can also engage students, as well as making subjects easier to understand.



Problems at Blay's Tip landfill site continue.

Above the Centre, **Blay's Tip** continues to be a source of major concern. Since 1999, there have been a number of incidents which have had serious consequences for the Centre. Recently the site of the tip was repaired because a large area adjacent to the stream had washed out again. The repair failed within three weeks.

In addition to this, unstable greensand is on the move and the stream continues to erode. These problems have occurred despite continuous warnings to the Environment Agency, who are responsible for the monitoring and inspection of the tip. The Trust is currently having an investigative study and report prepared, with a view to making a formal complaint about the situation. Until there is a proper solution, the Centre's aquatic habitats continue to be at risk.

Despite all the distractions, practical conservation work at the Centre continues apace. Work in the Wetland has now finished, in time for the arrival of the amphibian spawning season. The wetland hide has also been refurbished. A whole range of other tasks must be completed as schools and community groups are already booking for the new fieldwork season.



The essential 'behind the scenes' practical work continues.