

Centre News

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Centre Director's Report - January 2005



The Old and The New

January is traditionally a time to review the previous year and to plan for the coming year. Looking back, the Trust achieved a great deal in 2004, in the provision of education locally, nationally and internationally, as well as in the continuing maintenance and upkeep of the Centre.

Countryside education continued to be promoted through the 'Discover the Countryside' project, which the Trust has been running since early in 2000. In 2004, the project was supported by The Ernest Cook Trust, East Devon District Council and the Forestry Commission. During the year, the project impacted upon thousands of people of all ages and from all walks of life through practical fieldwork visits, as well as upon millions of people through the internet.

Outdoor activities were provided for school and college groups throughout the fieldwork season. Demand for the Trust's science and geography curriculum-based activities was greater than available time and groups unfortunately had to be turned away. To avoid disappointment, a number of schools have already booked return visits for 2005, following successful outings in 2004.



Practical visits capture the imagination.

Adult and other local community groups also visited in the evenings and at weekends. Individuals and families were involved through Countryside Activity Days in holiday periods, as well as special interest clubs such as the Young Rangers' Club and the Offwell Moth Group. Trust staff were certainly kept well occupied.

The Moth Group was an entirely new venture, run in conjunction with the Centre's support group, Offwell Environment Link (OEL). Informal, social meetings were held once a month from April through to October, successfully drawing in a number of new people.

Two local moth experts, Andy Swash and Mike Hounsome, kindly lent a hand on occasion, while Brian Sutton, an OEL member, enthusiastically took on the task of organizing the Group initially. Unfortunately, he had to drop out for personal reasons but the Trust kept the group running until the end of the main 'Mothing' season, when another OEL member, Neil Croton, agreed to take on the task. Meetings will start again in the Spring.

Staff also went out to give illustrated talks and presentations to a wide variety of groups. The majority of the talks were local, but the Education Officer Dr Barbara Corker, was also invited to give a lecture at an 'A' Level College in Hackney, London.

This was a real eye-opener and provided a number of invaluable insights into some of the needs and problems of today's educators. The college was multicultural indeed, with the most amazingly polyglot student fraternity. Security was tight and when commented upon, the hosting teacher complained that it was not tight enough and that they had had several stabbings!

Apart from such social problems, one of the biggest problems educators face is the difficulty of arranging any kind of practical outdoor fieldwork. In many cases this is not even required within the curriculum. It is difficult to understand how anyone can gain any meaningful knowledge of a subject without practical experience.

This is why Field Study Centres such as Offwell are so important, but unfortunately are all too few and far between. With each passing year it is increasingly evident just how little impact the natural world and the countryside of Britain has upon the young people of today. This applies not only to those from inner cities, but also to those in rural areas.

The number of people that the Centre can accommodate is limited by physical constraints. However, large numbers of people can be reached through the Trust's website. In 2004, the number of hits on the website reached record levels, with over one million hits a month logged in term-time. This is no accident and is the result of accurate factual content, continual updating and the regular addition of new material.

New material added in 2004 included general wildlife information such as the monthly Centre Bird Lists contributed by Rosemary Tilbury, as well as new sections devoted to moths, ecological sampling and the Young Rangers' Club. Each of these new sections is the equivalent of a website in its own right. Indeed, the parent website acts as the umbrella for over 50 different websites.



Young Rangers' Club activities are now on the website.

The importance of the website as a means of reaching out to people in East Devon and beyond cannot be overstressed. People from all over the world email queries and comments every week. This often leads to interesting exchanges. One such written dialogue has been going on for the past few weeks with an Asian gentleman from Bradford. His questions based on aquarium life have sparked all sorts of fascinating lines of questioning about freshwater invertebrates. The interest and enthusiasm for knowledge sparked on both sides is a very gratifying outcome.

All of this educational activity has the Woodland Education Centre as its foundation. Without the Centre, none of the practical activities would be possible. It is a full time job just ensuring that paths remain open and passable for walkers, let alone carrying out all the regular management tasks needed to maintain the range of habitats at the Centre. This task falls to Mike Manvill, the Trust's

Leading Hand. Although he does an admirable job with the help of one or two committed volunteers, it is a continuous struggle and requires at least two full-time conservation staff to keep on top of all the work.



Trees posing a danger to the Lake dam wall will be removed.

A variety of different tasks is always coming up. The latest is the need to remove trees from the dam wall by the Lake. Many of these are leaning at alarming angles and are approaching the stage where high winds may bring them down. If this happens, then the root bases being wrenched out of the dam wall would cause breaches of the wall, with subsequent draining of the lake. This would be enormously costly to repair, so the trees are to be removed before this can happen. The Forestry Commission, who own the site, are taking responsibility for this and a contractor will soon be removing the trees. This will have added benefits for wildlife in the lake, as more light will reach the water, encouraging plant growth and hence the invertebrates which feed on them.

This is a very positive step to kick off the new year's activities. The Trust has many ideas and new projects on the drawing board and will be actively pursuing the funding necessary to make them happen. In the coming year, the combination of practical knowledge and innovative use of new technology will continue to make the Trust 'the little charity, with the long reach'.



The Badger Webcam has attracted thousands of hits.