

Centre News

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Centre Director's Report - March 2006

Open for Business

Good news! The Centre has recently reopened to educational groups. This is thanks to massive support from OELink and the public, as well as a contribution from Devon County Council. While the Centre has remained open throughout for walkers and recreational users, it had to be closed to educational groups at the end of July 2005. This was unfortunately necessary in order to enable the Trust's limited staff to concentrate solely on fund raising.

Following the announcement of the Centre's reopening, the telephone was buzzing with schools ringing up to book their preferred day for a visit. Trust staff have also recently been kept busy with several speaking engagements to a variety of local community groups. This is just one of the many ways in which the Trust is able to reach out to people in all walks of life, encouraging them to access and enjoy the countryside.



Prototype hand-held electronic guide for countryside users

The Trust has been working for several months on another project which has the potential to have a major impact on encouraging people to get out and about and appreciate their native wildlife. This is the 'Electronic Countryside Guides' project. Since the last newsletter when the project was first mentioned, the Trust has successfully completed a 'proof of

concept' project which has demonstrated the feasibility of the planned electronic guide system. This has built upon a huge amount of exceedingly complex development work.

The guides will be hand-held, portable computers which will act as personal electronic guides. The guides will know where the user is and will automatically provide directions, routes and a wide variety of relevant information, ranging from local points of interest to countryside and wildlife information. The guides will also be interactive and users will be able to easily select information based on their own personal interests. Information presented may include maps, images, video and audio, as well as text.

The project is now at the stage where although the Trust knows that the system will work, it requires the production of information content specific to the Woodland Education Centre. This situation can be compared to having developed the television set, but only having a test card to look at. One would soon get bored and say "Yes, but what else can I look at?" Just as producing television programmes is costly and time-consuming, so too is the production of the information content for the electronic guides. It is an enormous task which will require a great deal of time and highly skilled effort.

Accessing funding for such an advanced concept is likely to be difficult. However, the Trust has submitted an application to the Rural Enterprise Scheme (Defra) for funding to produce functioning electronic guides for the Centre. These will be up and running and available for public hire by the end of the year, subject to a positive grant outcome. The RES project will incorporate the production of two different types of electronic guides, one with content aimed specifically at educational groups and the other for families and recreational users of the Centre.

The intention is to involve local businesses such as the Village Shop, as venues for hiring the devices. This should generate a 'Win-Win' situation where the electronic guides will not only benefit users of the Centre and provide income for the Trust, but will also generate income for other businesses and help to boost the local economy.

This winter has been exceptionally busy for the Trust. In addition to the electronic guides, the Trust has also been working on the interpretation and publication of survey data from the Heathland Restoration Project on the Trust's website. This has been funded by a grant from the Lottery's 'Awards for All' programme.

The Heathland Restoration Project is restoring an area at the Centre to lowland heath, using a variety of different management methods. This experiment has been running for over 10 years now and has generated a vast amount of ecological survey data. This is potentially of great value to other land managers restoring heathland. It also provides a wonderful practical example for students and people with a general interest in the countryside. The 'Awards for All' grant is allowing the accumulated data to be made publicly available via the Trust's website for maximum public access and benefit.



Environmental students on the Heathland Restoration Project.

The Heathland Restoration Project provides a good example of how the Trust's educational work is based firmly upon the conservation and wildlife value of the Centre. The great variety of restored habitats at the Centre offer an unparalleled resource for education. While the habitats can all be found locally elsewhere, it is rare to have such a range of habitats in such close proximity, each separated from the other by only a few minutes walk.

Twenty years on, it is hard to remember that the Centre was once just a rhododendron jungle, containing very little wildlife. It may also be hard to appreciate how much work goes into maintaining and improving the habitats. Much of the work has to take place during the quiescent winter period or behind the scenes, disguising the amount of input needed. The conservation and wildlife value of the Centre rests upon this crucial, on-going management. Sadly, many grant-giving organisations appear to have little

appreciation of this fact. Indeed, the Chairman of one funding panel maintained that the essential practical work included in a particular grant application did not need to be carried out. It is an attitude which is all too prevalent and is compounded by the determination of government agencies and councils to employ 'managers' rather than countryside professionals.

This mind set is summed up by a job advertisement for a team leader which was placed some years ago by English Nature (the UK government organisation responsible for nature conservation). The advert listed a raft of administration and managerial skills which were required to carry out the job, but concluded with the comment that a knowledge of or understanding of the countryside was not essential! This only underlines the urgent need for the promotion of basic environmental literacy for all through educational activities such as those carried out by the Trust.

Moving on to a different but no less important issue, Colwell Wood Landfill Site continues to be a matter of priority for the Trust. The landfill site, which is adjacent to the Offwell Brook and a few hundred yards upstream from the Centre, has a long history of causing problems in the Centre's downstream aquatic habitats, dating back to 1999. In the last newsletter it was reported that a new landslip had recently occurred at the landfill site, giving great cause for concern.

There is positive news to report, in that the Trust has been informed that the landfill site owner has appointed consultants to attempt to remedy the problem. The Trust has also received a letter from the Environment Agency's Environment Manager (East) which gives grounds for hoping that the Environment Agency (EA) are finally to properly shoulder their duties with regard to the regulation, inspection and supervision of the landfill site. The letter is a welcome confirmation of the duties of the EA.

To end on another positive note, winter seems to have relaxed its extended grip at last and the amphibians are once more spawning at the Centre. The toads have finally emerged to mate in the Centre's aquatic habitats, much later than usual due to the exceptionally late cold weather. Good quantities of frog spawn have also survived the freezing temperatures in the wetland and ponds, ensuring that another year's worth of youngsters will be delighted by the wriggling tadpoles in their pond dipping trays. Last year was a bumper year for frog tadpoles, with incredible numbers inhabiting Dragonfly Pond. It is always interesting to see how the numbers fluctuate and the populations rise and fall year on year.