

Centre News

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Centre Director's Report - January 2003

A Year of Achievement



Pupils from a wide range of schools enjoyed a visit to the Centre

Undoubtedly 2002 was a year of achievement. The Trust successfully expanded its activities in both education and conservation.

The Heritage Lottery funded project, 'Discover the Countryside' entered its third and final year. The project is also supported by the Forestry Commission and the District Council. The funding pays for the Trust's Education Officer, Dr Barbara Corker, as well as for the seasonal employment of Alan Crofts, the Countryside Ranger. The project will finish in April 2003.

The project has transformed the delivery of education at the Centre. As a result, more schools and colleges than ever have been able to visit. These visits have extended over a much greater part of the year. Whilst most of the schools and colleges come from the immediate locality, there were also more visits from further afield, with schools from Plymouth and Essex 'Discovering the Countryside' at the Centre.

Not only were there more schools and colleges, but a much wider range of adult and community groups also visited. These varied from youth groups to naturalists' societies and professional bodies such as the Institute of Biology and the Royal Forestry Society. The groups also included some, such as the Later Life Forum, whose traditional interests do not usually encompass the natural environment.

Thus the fieldwork season has been greatly extended and people from all walks of life have visited the Centre. Their ages ranged from 4 to over 90!

There has never been a greater need for practical fieldwork visits. In our modern society, the majority of young people do not have meaningful contact with the



countryside. This is hardly surprising if one accepts the recently quoted statistic that 90% of the British population now live in urban communities. It is very evident that many local pupils fall into this category.

For example, at one time blackberrying in the autumn was a traditional family occupation. This is no longer so and consequently, it is no wonder that pupils can no longer recognise common plants such as brambles or oak trees.

Whilst it is not necessary for pupils to be able to identify large numbers of species, an understanding of the common species and principles of the natural world is essential. Without it, our future decision makers and society will be severely disadvantaged.

The Centre therefore provides an important opportunity for pupils to gain that essential information and experience which only a short time ago was regarded as common knowledge.

The educational achievements of the year have not been restricted to practical visits. An enormous amount of time and effort has also been put into delivering the Trust's educational work through Information Technology. All visiting schools and colleges were given a CD packed with information about their own visit, as well as all of the information which is on the Trust's website.

The website is now an unparalleled resource with over 60,000 keywords and topics. It provides information specifically targeted at primary, secondary and tertiary education. There are also many examples of habitat restoration projects, information about wildlife, as well as surveys and a number of image libraries.

The website is being added to every week. Recent additions have included a pictorial guide to 38 species of trees found in Britain, an extensive introduction to British woodlands and their management as well as an image gallery of the Offwell Valley. The section on biological sampling has been significantly enlarged and the number of interactive puzzle pages, which are suitable for all ages, has been increased.

The website is accessed by people from all over the world and in 2002, the number of hits exceeded 2.5 million! On average people from over 60 countries visit the website every week. Known British users outside the county of Devon include educational institutions from Lancashire and Leeds to Liverpool and London.

Our world-wide audience takes in such disparate organisations as the Middle East University, the Galilee Technology Centre and the Defence Information Systems Agency, Washington, USA. Hopefully the visits are not linked!

The internet enables other organisations to provide links on their websites directly to specific pages on the Trust's website. Many universities, colleges and schools in Britain have done this. In the USA, information from the website is an approved resource for students in many states. Some universities are even incorporating information from the website into their own courses.

Other British organisations linking to our website include English Nature, Scottish Wildlife Trust, as well as the Forestry Commission. The BBC have also provided a number of links, including one from its high profile website which features David Attenborough's 'Life of Mammals' series.

In 2002, the value of the Trust's educational work through IT was further acknowledged. The Trust won the Education and Awareness category of the prestigious annual, DEBI Environmental Awards. The ceremony took place at county hall and the awards were presented by the C.E.O. of the Meteorological Office.



The Devon Environmental Business Initiative (DEBI) awards

Much of the website is based on the practical conservation work which is carried out at the Centre. The past year has seen the completion of a number of conservation projects at the Centre. The most important was undoubtedly the Northern Study Area Wetlands Project.

This project was funded through the Local Heritage Initiative (LHI), which is run by the Countryside Agency with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Nationwide Building Society. Other contributors to the project included Pennons and Offwell Environment Link (OEL).

The project carried out the restoration of an area of wet woodland. This type of habitat is identified as a target for action in both the Devon Biodiversity Action Plan and in the Environment Agency's 'Local Environment Agency Plan' (LEAP) for the Axe and Lim rivers. The project included ecological surveys, two of which were carried out by volunteers from OEL.

A key part of this project was the diversion of storm water around Dragonfly Pond, which is one of the main aquatic study areas at the Centre. At the same time, the Centre's northern-most pond, Monument Pond, was desilted.

Of course, no year is complete without its downside. At the moment, Monument Pond is full again. This situation should not have happened.

For some time, the Trust has been aware of potential problems relating to an old landfill site which is about quarter of a mile upstream from the Centre. These concerns have been raised in letters, meetings, telephone calls and emails with the Government's Environment Agency (EA).

The EA are involved because they have a duty to "regulate the management of waste, to prevent pollution of the environment or detriment to local amenities". They are also charged with "providing guidance on best practice for riverbank management".

Despite the clear warnings over the years from the Trust and from other parties, the bank of the landfill site has washed out and Monument Pond has been filled with silt and other debris. In addition, a large section adjacent to the washed out area has also subsided. It is estimated that this contains about 15,000 tonnes of material.

There are also a number of other issues regarding work which has been carried out by the landfill site operator in the stream and in the locality of the landfill site. Unquestionably, the future of the Centre's aquatic habitats lies in a satisfactory solution to these problems.



Flood damage to the stream bank of the landfill site