

Centre News

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Centre Director's Report - March 2007

"A Brighter Future"

Offwell Woodland & Wildlife Trust



The Lake Enhancement Project has provided new areas for public access.

The Centre's recent good fortunes continue with the completion of new public access areas alongside the Lake Classroom, the Trust's negotiation of a new 20 year lease, further grants, as well as the development of new and exciting activities for the forthcoming fieldwork season.

The Lake Enhancement Project, which was funded by the East Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Sustainable Development Fund and Offwell Environment Link, has now been completed. The sterile and invasive rhododendron has been removed on either side of the classroom and the cleared areas have been landscaped and fenced. New seating has also been provided in the area adjacent to the lake. This will provide a much needed sitting out area for use by schools and groups, as well as by casual visitors. As spring advances, natural regeneration will soon green up the bared ground, although of course any rhododendron seedlings will be removed.

The Forestry Commission, which owns the land, has agreed to grant the Trust a 20 year lease to occupy the Centre. A formal lease has become essential in order to secure grants from larger funders, including the various lottery funds. The need for a lease has necessitated the appointment of solicitors on both sides to draw up the terms and conditions.

The Trust has been exceedingly fortunate in securing the pro bono (free to charity) services of a large London law firm called 'Paul Hastings', to help with drafting the lease. 'Paul Hastings', which has offices world-wide, is a very public spirited firm which

encourages its attorneys to develop effective, long lasting relationships with community organizations in all the countries where the firm operates.

The Trust hopes to be able to show its great appreciation for such tangible community spirit by hosting a company visit to the Centre in due course. Although the pro bono work contributed by 'Paul Hastings' means that the Trust's legal costs will be covered, it is not an enterprise entirely without cost, as the Trust has to fund the Forestry Commission's legal fees. However, once a lease is in place, the Trust confidently expects to be able to announce the release of a third party grant of nearly £48,000.

The Trust has also recently received a grant of £2,500 from Devon County Council for work to improve the Centre for the community. The grant was secured for the Trust by Barry Nicholson, who is our local County Councillor. The Trust is very grateful for his commitment to ensuring the grant was forthcoming despite his having to deal with serious health problems. In addition to this, the Trust can now draw down the over £10,000 remaining in the OELink Appeal Fund, so that financially things are definitely looking brighter.

The next time you visit the Centre, you may notice that one of the really big Beech trees at the top of Beech Walk has been cut down. Although unfortunate, this was necessary because the tree was suffering from a serious fungal disease, going by the unpronounceable name of *Kretzschmeria deusta*, also perhaps more memorably known as 'Brittle Cinder'.

It is so called because the mature fruiting body of the fungus does indeed resemble badly burnt pancakes or very brittle charcoal. The fruiting bodies are usually produced low down on the trunk or buttress roots of the tree. They initially form flat whitish/grey layers, which become black and smoothly lumpy like tarmac as they mature and spores are formed inside. A hard, brittle crust forms which collapses if you press it.

The fungus parasitizes a variety of deciduous and coniferous trees and is common on Beech. It attacks the heart wood in the centre of the tree, digesting away the interior structural material, while leaving the exterior wood hard and betraying no outward evidence of the soft rot hidden inside.

Such a decay pattern makes the tree liable to sudden catastrophic failure with little or no warning, unless one has been sharp-eyed enough to spot the unobtrusive, tell-tale fruiting bodies. The tree was adjacent to the main entrance track into the Centre so it was necessary to fell it for public safety reasons. This task was carried out by the Forestry Commission.



The rotten interior of the felled Beech tree.

Although the demise of such a large, stately tree is a loss from our point of view, it is of course simply part of the natural cycle of life. Indeed, one organism's death provides untold opportunity for others to survive as a result. While the tree may have ceased to provide an upright, living habitat for a variety of creatures, it will now instead provide a habitat for several years for some of the over 1,700 invertebrate species in Britain which spend all or part of their life cycle in dead and decaying wood.

Promoting an understanding of how decay takes place and its importance for the continuance of life on earth, forms a major part of the new Woodland Discovery Trail at the Centre, which is currently being finalised in time for the spring fieldwork season. Although the trail is primarily aimed at school users, it can also be used by families and other groups.

The Woodland Discovery Trail has been developed on the hand-held computers known as Q3 Rangers, which have been described in previous newsletters. The trail is a half mile, circular woodland walk within the Centre. It incorporates a series of activities along the way which allow people to explore the life and living processes in woodlands. The Q3 Rangers will guide people along the trail, as well as providing them with all the resources necessary to carry out the activities.



Q3 Rangers can display large images of very small creatures.

The Q3 Rangers have some very distinct advantages. They can store (and never forget) a vast range of quality-controlled information and display it in a variety of formats at exactly the right place and time. For example, any number of large images of very small creatures (such as the Pill Millipede above) can be called up by the user to aid with identification. Video clips and historical images can be shown, while at the tap of a button, you can play sounds such as specific bird songs, which even the most musical among us might find it hard to imitate!

The new trail forms part of the Trust's commitment to helping people learn about sustainability. Instilling an understanding of the key processes which underwrite life on earth provides the vital foundation necessary to engage people in issues such as Sustainability and Biodiversity. Devon County Council has recently launched their plan entitled '*Changing our Futures Learning for Sustainability in Devon*', with copies being sent to all schools in Devon. One of the aims of the plan is for all Devon children to have opportunities for first hand, outdoor environmental learning, which fits well with the ideals of the Centre.

Errata

Those of you with an eagle, legal eye will have noticed that in the last newsletter, reference was made to Dr Rosalind Wilson, retiring as a Trustee. Of course, Trustees can only resign their position!