

Centre News

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Centre Director's Report - January 2006

Looking Forward to 2006

With the new year come new opportunities. The Trust kicked off 2006 with an annual pilgrimage to BETT 2006, the British Educational Technology Show in Olympia. With education playing such a major role in the Trust's activities, it is essential to keep abreast of developments in the formal education sector. The show presents a valuable opportunity to view all the latest offerings in educational software and hardware and always throws up ideas for alternative uses of new technology (usually intended for quite other purposes).

There was the usual mind-numbing collection of hundreds of small stands selling educational software and of excitable sales people wearing angel microphone sets and extolling the virtues of their particular systems to anyone who would listen. All this entertainment aside, what this year's show did allow in particular, was the opportunity to handle a variety of new computer models which might fit the bill for a project which the Trust is working on.

This new project involves the development of an innovative new electronic guide system for the Centre. Amongst other benefits, the system will enable the Trust to continue to offer and expand its high quality education to schools at greatly reduced staff costs. Subject to funding, the Trust hopes to reopen the Centre for education in the spring.



Youngsters finding out about adaptations at the Centre.

The Trust is currently putting together a grant application to the Rural Enterprise Scheme for funding to develop the electronic guides for the Centre. The electronic guide project forms one element of the Trust's business plans for the future. These include implementing cost reductions where possible, redirecting staff labour and generating new sources of income.

Since the last newsletter, Devon County Council has awarded the Trust a one-off grant of £11,000 towards immediate core costs and is contributing help in kind with planning. OELink, the Centre's community support group, has of course raised £16,000 in the recent appeal. These two sources of funding together have ensured that the Trust is able to continue working for the future of the Centre.



Selected conifer removal will increase sunlight reaching verges.

Over the past six months, the Trust's entire efforts have been concentrated on fund raising and a number of grant applications are now pending. These include an application to the SITA Trust for a grant of approximately £23,000. This is for conservation work to promote biodiversity at the Centre over the coming year. This will include continued rhododendron removal, creation of a new Devon hedgebank and selective felling of conifers to improve the amount of light reaching trackside verges and rides. The height and position of certain conifers means that they cast heavy shade on the verges. To avoid detrimental effects on the invertebrates and butterflies, a few rows of conifers will be removed adjacent to the track. This will encourage the retention of these wonderful strips of wildflower meadow buzzing with life.



Colwell Wood Landfill Site poised for disaster!

Note the six foot deep fault on the right and the folded slope on the left indicating that the ground has flowed.

Regular readers of these pages will recall that the Colwell Wood Landfill Site upstream of the Centre has been causing serious problems at the Centre for more than 5 years. Unfortunately, the spectre of the landfill site has once more reared its ugly head and in early January, the Trust was informed by the Environment Agency (EA) that the landfill site had suffered another major slippage towards the stream. This has all but blocked the stream bed.

The landfill site is now severely compromised. If the area which has slipped dams the stream completely, the consequences are likely to be severe. There is every indication that this is going to happen. The stream which was at one time 4 metres wide, has now been reduced to less than a metre by the landslip.

An eminent geologist has forecast that there is a strong chance that the stream will become blocked and that water will build up behind, before ultimately bursting through. The consequences are predicted to range from 'severe to disastrous'. In essence, there is a mini Boscastle in the making, with the Centre's downstream aquatic habitats in the front line.

This is not a totally unexpected event. The Trust told the EA that this situation would occur and had commissioned an expert report which unequivocally identified this and other serious problems with the landfill site. Despite this, the EA decided to use its time honoured process of monitoring until an incident occurs. This situation has been repeated time and

again over the last 5 years. The scenario is as follows: the Trust identifies problems and writes to the EA. The EA either ignores the letter or chooses to monitor, instead of requiring the landfill site operator to take action. There appears to be a significant identity crisis within the EA. Senior management maintains the EA is not there to protect the environment, while at the same time employing 'Environment Protection Officers'!

The problems of the landfill site have significantly impacted upon the Centre, not only by filling up ponds with debris but also with the vast amount of time that has had to be made available to deal with this matter. This has affected not only Trust staff, but also other people who have given vast amounts of their time to go through the relevant legislation and determine the EA's obligations, as well as sifting through all the correspondence. This has required the necessary eye for detail to realise when fundamental and crucial information had been omitted by the EA. Should the situation continue to deteriorate, the Trust would welcome a public enquiry into the management and control of the landfill site.

In the early days, it would have been a simple and relatively cheap matter to sort the problem out. Now, it is difficult to see how it can be resolved without vast cost. What is certain is that it must be resolved because it poses a severe if not disastrous threat to downstream waters and not just to the Centre's aquatic habitats. There are no winners here.