



Scottish Natural Heritage
All of nature for all of Scotland

Health And Natural Heritage Case Studies

Fleet Valley National Scenic Area Volunteers



Location Gatehouse of Fleet, Dumfries and Galloway

Summary The special character of the Fleet Valley landscape has inspired a group of volunteers, mainly retired local people, to become actively involved in physical conservation projects ranging from establishing wild flower meadows, surveying, monitoring and control of Japanese knotweed to moth trapping and bird mapping.

Health benefits

- Physical health benefits from practical conservation work
- Increased confidence and self-esteem
- Mental health benefits from socialising opportunities

Keys to success and learning points

- Health of participants was not included within the formal aims or outputs of this project but has proved a valuable secondary benefit.
- Many of the volunteers have moved to the area relatively recently and have enjoyed the opportunity which involvement in conservation work has provided to meet other local residents.
- Encouraging volunteers to suggest projects which they would like to undertake and regularly reviewing progress helps develop mutual respect and volunteer ownership as well as maintaining interest and commitment.
- Several volunteers have gone on to become walks leaders on the “Paths to Health” project, further extending the health benefits to a wider range of people.
- Practical involvement of local people in management of their landscape has developed confidence and a sense of ownership which in turn enables the community to take more responsibility for decision making relating to their own environment.
- A regular commitment to interesting structured volunteer work can help people with mental health conditions rebuild self-esteem, self-confidence and independence.
- Providing transport and co-ordinating the practicalities is important to remove potential obstacles to involvement.
- Involving community mental health nurses and support staff in practical work helps reinforce good relationships and inspires involvement and commitment.

More about the project

In 2004, a community ranger was appointed to raise awareness and understanding of the Fleet Valley as one of Dumfries and Galloway's three National Scenic Areas (NSAs), and to encourage active involvement of local people in delivery of the management strategy developed through community consultation to protect and enhance the area's special scenic qualities. Inspired by a public talk in the community centre, presentations to various community groups and a 10-week series of drop-in sessions, a countryside volunteer team was established. Training has been provided for volunteers in dry stone dyking, tree planting, bird and bird-call identification, field boundary surveying, common bird census techniques, butterfly and moth recording, and identification of sea shells and trees, which has helped develop necessary skills for practical conservation tasks. Weekly sessions every Tuesday morning frequently also include tree planting, rhododendron bashing, footpath maintenance and litter picking. All the volunteers contribute ideas as to what they would like to do, which are integrated into the programme set out by the community ranger. Between March 2005 and August 2007, the volunteers contributed over 2,000 hours of their time, clearly demonstrating a local pride and desire to be actively involved in promoting and safeguarding their local area, and by default providing an opportunity for everyone involved to increase physical fitness as well as enjoying the social benefits of working together. Ongoing publicity through the local press and community council helps spread the word about how people can help improve their local environment and attract new volunteers.

The NSA has also provided the inspiration for a programme of guided walks and cycle rides led by the community ranger, which have encouraged physical exercise with direct health benefits. Between 2005 and 2007, some 315 people attended 44 different walks and events, of whom 55% were local and the remainder visitors to the region.

Initial funding for the ranger's post came from Scottish Natural Heritage, National Trust for Scotland and Leader+. Further funding from SNH, Dumfries and Galloway Council and Heritage Lottery Fund as part of the Sulwath Connections Landscape Project has enabled the ranger's post to be continued and expanded to include all three NSAs within the region.



In Stewartry NSA, links between National Trust for Scotland and Bob Shields, Employment Adviser for National Schizophrenic Fellowship (NSF) have led to development of weekly volunteering sessions. On average 20 individuals are involved in tasks such as beach cleaning, brushing and footpath work up to three days per week. As well as the direct physical and mental health benefits, work with the NSA has played an important part in re-establishing self-confidence, self-esteem and social skills of many of the individuals involved, and in opening doors to a new life. For some, the NSA has provided a stepping stone to college. Others have gone on to find paid employment using the skills they have acquired. As a result, the number of referrals from job centres, community mental health services, prison service and other agencies working with people suffering from stress, depression or other mental health conditions is increasing. The potential health benefits are limited only by necessary staff and resources to recognise, develop and manage appropriate volunteer opportunities.

"Being a volunteer with the Fleet Valley NSA gives me a sense of achievement. It keeps the place tidy for ourselves and visitors and it's good for us to hear how much people appreciate what we do."

Ron Foster, Gatehouse Community Councillor

Further information

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