

# RDP013 – ‘Where the Wild Things Are’ project

## Pilot activity – Local Wildlife Sites as a venue for educational delivery

### Introduction

Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) are privately owned sites and selection as such does not create any public access rights. However, as with any other privately owned site, landowners can choose to offer permissive access.

The LWS system relies on working with landowners; LWS are not selected without permission from the landowner and appropriate management is ultimately at the discretion of the landowner/manager. A good relationship and regular engagement are therefore necessary for the system to work. This means that LWS offer a unique opportunity for ‘enhanced’ access for individuals and a range of groups.

The Where the Wild Things Are project sought to investigate and test different forms of ‘enhanced’ access to LWS. Connecting people with their local sites was a key element of this project from the start; as far as we know, this is not an area which has been actively investigated before, although there may be ad-hoc examples. This particular pilot sought to test whether LWS could be used as sites for the delivery of educational work.

The Wildlife Trusts believe that a close connection to the natural world should be at the heart of education and learning. Everyone should have the chance to learn about wildlife and the value of nature.<sup>1</sup> And yet, just 10% of schoolchildren now have access to outdoor learning.<sup>2</sup> Children’s wellbeing increases after they spend time connecting with nature.<sup>1</sup> Plus, as our children are our future, connecting them with nature is vital for the future of wildlife and wild places.

### Actions undertaken

During the Where the Wild Things Are project, nearly 200 existing and potential LWS were surveyed across Powys. Whilst engaging with the landowners before, during and after these surveys, we sought opportunities to work with landowners on enhanced access arrangements. In August 2018, one landowner on a site near Commins Coch, expressed an interest in bringing groups to her site.

RCR is an area of low-lying wetland beside a river, a mixture of marshy grassland with willow and birch trees/scrub. Once more open wetland habitat, insufficient grazing has led to an increase in tree cover since 1998. Although the current landowner has grazing animals, she is struggling to remove sufficient trees and scrub on her own; left unchecked, the area will become wet woodland, reducing the value for wildlife, by excluding some of the uncommon plant species. The existing scrub and trees are also drying out the wetland, reducing the area of marshy grassland and preventing the grazing animals accessing certain areas.



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*RCR wetland site, August 2018*

During our visit, we discussed ideal management techniques with the owner, as well as possible solutions to the difficulties they were having. One avenue which was discussed was putting a call out to the local community to see if we could find a small group of volunteers interested in tackling the scrub to help wildlife and benefit their health. This aspect was ultimately not formally developed as part of this project. As the owner was also keen to use the site for education, we starting working with them to develop this aspect further. We hoped to facilitate a relationship between the site owner and one or more local educational establishments, for the mutual benefit of all involved, as well as the site.

Although our initial thoughts had considered college students as an ideal group, as they could use the site to learn practical habitat management techniques, the nearest to the site was Coleg Powys in Newtown, approximately 20 miles away and our attempts to create this link ultimately failed. We then considered local schools and contacted four in Machynlleth, 8 miles to the west. We were unable to make contact with any of these establishments.

We had better success with Machynlleth Scout group. Having already delivered outreach sessions with this group as part of another project, we had already developed a relationship with them. The scout leader was interested in making use of RCR for group activities. However, it has proved difficult to organise a meeting at a time to suit everybody and this will not be resolved before the end of the project.

### **Conclusion**

Having initially identified a suitable site and owner in which to test this pilot activity quite easily, it has proven much harder to link them with one or more educational establishments. Communication has proven to be the main barrier, with the majority remaining unresponsive to our communication attempts. Even where we had a warm contact who was broadly positive, it was very difficult to communicate with the individual. By working with a neighbour of our site owner, who had a child in the scout group, we were able to move things forward, but by then had run out of time to arrange a meeting. We are broadly optimistic that, given more time, a link could have been made.

As we were unable to make contact with either the college or local schools, we are unable to be certain as to why they were unwilling to engage with the project. Other projects have more broadly defined the barriers to outdoor education: *“Evidence commissioned to inform the Natural Connections Demonstration Project identified that the fundamental challenges to learning outside the classroom in the natural environment (LINE) in schools were local and revolved around a lack of teacher confidence in teaching outside and fragmentation of LINE service provision. These underpinned the more traditionally cited challenges of curriculum pressures, concern about risks and cost.”*<sup>3</sup> This Natural Connections Demonstration Project found strong evidence that *“a distributed model of independent brokerage can unlock latent demand and support schools to overcome local barriers to LINE, to adopt and embed low-cost LINE practice across the*



*curriculum, and to deliver a range of positive outcomes for teachers and pupils.*"<sup>3</sup> So, in the absence of an existing relationship, it would seem that strategic, independent brokerage is important, enhanced through whole school cultural shifts.

Given further funding, we would seek to develop the use of RCR by educational establishments further. First completing the work started to link the local scout group and then investigating other options. By working with other organisations, individuals or government, as appropriate, we would seek opportunities to build relationships and overcome the perceived barriers.

### **Further information**

1. Sheldrake, R., Amos, R. & Reiss, M. J. (2019). Children and Nature: A research evaluation for The Wildlife Trusts. Institute of Education, UCL. <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/Children%20and%20Nature%20-%20UCL%20and%20The%20Wildlife%20Trusts%20Full%20Report.pdf>
2. DEFRA (2016). 8-Point Plan for England's National Parks. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/509916/national-parks-8-point-plan-for-england-2016-to-2020.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/509916/national-parks-8-point-plan-for-england-2016-to-2020.pdf)
3. Waite, S., Passy, R., Gilchrist, M., Hunt, A. & Blackwell, I. (2016). Natural Connections Demonstration Project, 2012-2016: Final Report. Natural England Commissioned Reports, Number 215. <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/6636651036540928>

Report written 19<sup>th</sup> March 2020 by Tammy Stretton



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