

The Derbyshire LNR Forum

Saturday 17th September 2005 at the Genesis Centre in Alfreton



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Background

The event was driven by English Nature's Peak District and Derbyshire Team, recognising the need to increase its support to Local Nature Reserves (LNRs). It was decided that a good starting point would be to bring together as many people as possible, from Derbyshire, who were involved with LNRs. In part this was to celebrate the richness and diversity of LNRs within the county. However, we also wanted to share information and instigate discussion on the status of the LNRs. As part of our application to fund the event we set out the following aims:

- To help ensure continued interest in LNR management, especially given that Wildspace! funding was ending.
- To encourage Local Authorities to actively manage high quality LNRs and to declare further LNRs in line with English Nature's Accessible Natural Green Space Targets, in particular One hectare of LNR per 1000 head of population.
- To enable LNR managers and supporters to meet for the first time in Derbyshire and to start to form a communication network.
- To help support and build the capacity of voluntary groups who support LNRs.
- To act as a catalyst for developing a County Strategy for LNRs.

Planning

While English Nature was able to fund and host the event, we were dependent on support from other conservation and community organisations as well as local authorities and 'Friends of' groups. While a number of organisations were to be involved with presenting the days the contribution of all delegates was deemed to be paramount to the event's success.

Initial ideas were gained through conversations with key people and visits to a number of reserves. Once we had established a core support for the Forum a questionnaire was prepared and posted to voluntary groups and local authority staff to determine wider support and to investigate topics of mutual interest. Given that the event was a first in Derbyshire a wide spectrum of topics were chosen for consideration. Returned questionnaires indicated a preference for small group work, and discussion. While the importance of getting all delegates together to share more general information was recognised, it was decided to devote most of the day to well presented and varied workshop sessions.

The Event

I would say the mood was one of cautious optimism (or even barely contained excitement) as we arrived and found a group from Pleasley Pitt busily constructing their display boards. For me it was a relief to finally see things swinging into action and within half an hour displays were up, projectors were ready, speakers were briefed and the rooms were filling with lively conversation. It was clear that those associated with LNRs were a very sociable bunch!

Main Group Session

Having assigned strict timekeepers, the main session started promptly at 10:00. Richard Leafe, the Regional Director of English Nature, hosted the session and set the scene for the day. In particular, he explained that the day had a number of aims (see background on page 1):

Next Steve Berry, English Nature's People and Wildlife Manager helped set the national scene by describing how LNRs had come into being, following the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act (1949). He explained that designation was initially slow, but had gained momentum in recent years partly due to Wildspace! funding. Steve was very enthused about the concept of reserves which served the needs of both people and wildlife. However, he admitted that they had not always been well supported and that this posed future challenges to improve designation, management, monitoring and support.

Debbie Court, The Biodiversity Co-ordinator for Lowland Derbyshire provided a more local flavour by focusing her presentation on Derbyshire. She started by introducing the background to Biodiversity Action Plans (BAPs) and described the situation in Derbyshire which is covered by 3 different BAPS covering Lowland Derbyshire, the National Forest and the Peak District National Park. She then provided a summary of all LNRs in Derbyshire – accompanied by cheers from the audience.

Having set the scene, the main session ended with refreshments and a quick rearrangement of furniture to prepare for the workshops.

Workshops

Using the results of the Event Questionnaire five workshops were planned. Each ran twice, once before and once after lunch. The eight workshop leaders had all been briefed to present varied, informative and flexible sessions covering key issues, with emphasis placed on group participation. We hoped that all delegates would take something from the workshop sessions which could be applied to their own situation following the event.

Workshop A (*Kieron Huston, Derbyshire Wildlife Trust*) Understanding the Distribution of Wildlife on your LNR

Transport was arranged to take delegates attending this workshop to nearby Pennytown Ponds LNR. While the ponds once formed part of a large parkland, they are now isolated within the heart of Cotes Park industrial estate where they now form a relatively tranquil refuge for wildlife. Despite repeated incidents of pollution from the surrounding industry, the site has maintained its ecological interest and popularity making it an excellent example of a Local Nature Reserve.

On site Kieron highlighted the range of habitats present and discussed ways to evaluate which habitats were most important and how to set management objectives. The importance of surveying your site to gather accurate and meaningful data was stressed. Potential pitfalls with survey methods were highlighted using dragonflies as an example. Though adult dragonflies are present there is currently no evidence that this group successfully breeds at the pond because no

surveys of exuviae's have been undertaken. A variety of birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians are known to use the ponds and surrounding habitats. Grass snake is known to be resident as a breeding species and may provide a good indicator species for the general health of the site. The ponds are surrounded by woodland (where the presence of Yellow Archangel, Dog's Mercury and Wood Anemone all indicated the *potential* existence of ancient woodland), wet woodland (a Lowland BAP priority habitat), hedgerows and species rich grassland. The group were able to see how these habitats were defined and managed and discussed the problems of effective negotiation and management for wildlife and local amenity.

Workshop B (Dan Abrahams, English Nature) Managing Wildlife Diversity on your LNR

Dan was able make use of neighbouring Alfreton Park, a potential local nature reserve, to guide delegates through the process of creating a management plan. Following a brief introduction, delegates were quickly out in the park collecting their own ideas. Under headings of:

- *Description of the site* – its general character, location, access, soils, geology, flora & fauna etc
- *Identification of priority Features* – nature conservation features, social/economic features
- *Vision & Management Objectives* – What do you want to achieve on this site?
- *Prescriptions/Action Plan* – Individual actions to achieve the objectives
- *Monitoring/Evaluation* – How are you going to monitor the effectiveness of the plan and amend the plan accordingly; record what management has taken place and when; how long it took; how many people involved?

The groups were asked to walk around the site and produce the “bare bones” of a management plan incorporating the above issues. The main purpose was to start thinking about how to put a management plan together rather than getting caught up in the detailed prescriptions for the site.

The groups produced startlingly similar results, and discovered that management plans need not be difficult, complex documents, but should be accessible working tools guiding the management of the site.

Workshop C (Marion Horton and Tim Brooks, Groundwork) Helping to Support your LNR

By working together and in smaller groups, and backed up by plenty of additional information, Marion and Tim were able to explore the subject of successful voluntary support groups. Initially delegates looked at why people volunteer to support an LNR. There was a strong feeling amongst volunteers that it was a way of giving something back to the local community and of acting as stewards of their natural and historic environment. People enjoyed their local wildlife and wanted to learn more about it and they wanted to be active, meet others and have fun. Armed with this information, the importance of having good plans for both attracting and keeping volunteers was recognised. Incentives to attract new volunteers were suggested, including educational opportunities. It was also important to have a good schedule of work, planning and social events. Care should be taken to welcome new members and help them feel at home in the group, with opportunities to increase their level of involvement. Finally the importance of recognising and celebrating achievements was noted.

Ranking exercises were used to investigate the stages involved in setting up a voluntary group, recognising that the process remained flexible to suit local needs and priorities. Moving onto funding, information on possible sources was handed out and advice given on targeting bids and preparing individual applications to fit well with the aims of different funds. Finally, health and

safety was considered. Using a common sense approach the groups identified tasks that needed to be completed while planning, during, and following a volunteer activity.

**Workshop D (*Paul Finn and Mark Gash, Derbyshire County Council*)
Sharing your LNR with Others**

With much enthusiasm, Paul and Mark presented a lively workshop focusing on attracting visitors to LNRs and helping them to get the most from their visit. Using sites that they manage in High Peak to illustrate their presentation they covered a range of issues, frequently breaking for group discussion. The importance of creating and actively maintaining a healthy people-wildlife balance was stressed. Using case studies, they explained that management for people and wildlife need not be mutually exclusive and can be achieved through careful management. BUT! they also warned that it is essential to consider wildlife first, otherwise it will always tend to loose out. It should then be possible to guide visitors along/over trails (demonstrated by the carrot and stick mentality – new/good surfaces and tracks or windrows and natural barriers) and platforms so that the habitats can be appreciated while remaining essentially undisturbed for wildlife to flourish.

Attention was given to establishing community relations and gradually building a sense of trust. When moving onto previously unmanaged sites a gradual approach was recommended, initially trialling new management practises away from more visited areas and slowly introducing new techniques. Being available to provide explanations and address concerns was also important Looking at interpretation and publicity, ideas for reasonably inexpensive, replaceable interpretation material (A4 plywood holders and tree stump plinths) were found to be helpful.

**Workshop E (*Howard Langley and Helena Stenton, Derbyshire County Council*)
LRNs as a Valuable Community Asset**

Howard and Helena encouraged everyone to participate in their workshop which considered the community value of LNRs. Delegates explored the diverse variety of people that came into contact with LNRs. People spanned all age groups and were largely split into a number of different groups. There are many people involved in the management of LNRs ranging from Local Authority staff and contractors, voluntary groups and local farmers/shepherds. There were then many people who accessed LNRs for recreation, maybe to simply experience the wildlife or to walk dogs, enjoy a family outing, fish, or as part of a bike/horse ride. There are also groups such Walk Your Way to Health Groups which enjoy basing their activities on LNRs. Another group of important users were those who valued the research and educational resource. Such groups included school, youth and higher education groups, local natural history experts and members of the public keen to improve their understanding of local wildlife. Ideas for encouraging and managing community access were discussed.

A final group of users were those associated with anti-social behaviour. While anti-social behaviour took all forms, many agreed that the problems were often more of a nuisance than serious problem. Delegates pointed out the need to distinguish between true anti-social behaviour and groups of children and youths (especially) who were just looking for a place to meet and socialise. As part of the discussion, the morning session was encouraged by an experience, from Carr Wood LNR, where problems had significantly decreased once there was evidence that the site was being managed and cared for.

Workshop sessions were broken by a very enjoyable lunch and more lively conversation. At the end of the proceedings delegates enjoyed more refreshments and rather large slices of cake! while Richard Leafe shared a few ideas on the future (see Looking to the Future on page 7). Richard also thanked everyone who contributed to the events success. We would like to take the opportunity repeat these thanks, especially for all the effort put into planning workshops and talks.

Event Feedback

End of Event Discussion

The final workshop were immediately followed by a 10 minute discussion on the way in which the event had been organised and presented. This focused on 4 main questions.

1) Has today been well organised and how could the organisation have been improved?

- The general feeling was that the event had been well organised.
- People felt that the pre-event information had been adequate and had accurately reflected what took place on the day.
- The timing of the day went according to plan and people felt that the time allocated to different activities was adequate.
- It was suggested that Name badges should also have indicated which LNR or organisation delegates were associated with.
- The food was complemented and the supply of dessert and cake was generous, maybe we should consider a greater variety of healthy alternatives in the future.

2) Did you enjoy the initial main group session and would you have liked this session to have been longer?

- People felt that the content of the main group session was good.
- The session helped set scene for the day.
- It was felt that an hour was sufficient and that this balanced well with the longer workshops.
- Although enjoyable and informative, opinions were mixed on how useful the talk by Steve Berry had been. Some people appeared to be more interested in the present and future situation regarding LNRs rather than past history. The lack of visual aids was also commented on – possibly due to traffic noise which made continuous talking hard to follow. The effort made by Steve to attend the event and his commitment to LNRs was appreciated.
- Delegates enjoyed Debbie Court's talk as they were able to identify with the more local account of Biodiversity and LNR designation. They felt that it helped set the scene in Derbyshire and place their group/organisation within this wider picture. As part of her talk, Debbie was able to recognise the valuable contribution made by different groups to LNRs in the county.
- Some delegates felt that the main session could have been more interactive by having a time allocated to questions and answers.
- It was also suggested that the session could have incorporated some specific case studies taken from LNRs in the County.

- 3) Have you found the workshop sessions useful, have they been well organised and have you felt able to take part?
- The workshops appeared to be a great success with many comments that the preparation and presentation was excellent.
 - Delegates felt able to participate in workshops and appreciated the flexibility which allowed the groups to consider some issues in greater depth.
 - It was suggested that workshops could have been longer and that the same groups could have worked together throughout the day.
 - It was recognised that the workshops provided only a brief opportunity to consider fairly broad topics. While some delegates expressed an interest in exploring further topics, others suggested that future events could focus on specific issues.
 - The noise between workshops was commented on, particularly in the larger room where 3 groups were present at the start of each session.
 - Some delegates felt that they had not been offered a choice in which workshop to attend.
- 4) Overall, has today been a useful event and would you be interested in a similar event next year?
- Delegates felt that event has successfully brought individual groups, who can feel quite isolated, together.
 - There was support for future events including an annual or even 6 monthly forum
 - There was also support for organising specialist workshops to address specific issues.
 - It was suggested that the National Forest could be more involved in future events.

Additional Comments from Notice Boards.

Delegates felt that they had improved their understanding of LNRs, their importance to both wildlife and communities and the current situation within Derbyshire. Some felt better equipped to become involved in LNR designation and management.

The idea of being part of a county-wide LNR network was very appealing. Voluntary groups were very keen for opportunities to get together with others, to visit other Local Nature Reserves and to share concerns and experiences.

Delegates wanted the true value of LNRs to be recognised. While making an obvious and valuable contribution to BAPS it was thought that LNRs provide a valuable resource for schools to focus curricular activities. It was also felt that Primary Care Trusts should recognise the contribution they can make to health and wellbeing. In terms of government, it was felt that LNRs should be promoted within community strategies and supported by all levels of government ranging from Parish Councils to Regional Assemblies.

Delegates welcomed support given by English Nature and felt there was a need for both improved and continued support.

Delegates felt that LNRs in Derbyshire needed continued support and did not want the Forum to be a one-off event. Interest was shown in yearly or even six monthly Forums, other meeting or workshops and other projects or competitions

There was much support for the development of a county-wide strategy, though some concern about whether this should specifically address LNRs or include all green space. Tran-boundary issues were highlighted as needing special attention. Friends of groups also felt that they could benefit by being included in, and guided by, a strategy.

Looking to the Future

As a one off-event I feel that the LNR Forum was a success. However, a true measure of its success will be whether it can help lead to better support for LNRs in Derbyshire. This support needs to come from all areas including voluntary groups, local authorities, other locally based organisation and indeed English Nature and Natural England. While it is easy to offer supports it has to be recognised that this takes both time and money. By everyone doing what they can, it can be hoped that the LNR profile will be raised -hence attracting more support and resources in the future.

Developing a County-Wide LNR Strategy.

During October a core group of people met to discuss how we could take the idea of developing a county-wide LNR Strategy forward. Richard leaf announced, at the Forum, that we were planning to hold a workshop for Local Authority Heads of Planning and Heads of Recreation - the people who ultimately need to give a strategy their full support. We have now decided that some work is required before such a workshop is arranged. Working with key partners, and hopefully engaging staff from all local authorities within Derbyshire, we would like to come up with an outline of ideas/draft document that we can sell. A document that is innovative and exciting; that allows Local Authorities to meet Biodiversity and Community targets and can be used to attract further support and funding. The starting point will be to research and collate relevant information and data, this can be broken down into areas covering; the contribution of LNRs to biodiversity; geographical distribution throughout Derbyshire; potential for educational use; and community needs and priorities.

Networking, Motivating and Capacity Building.

--Something for everyone --

We are hoping to arrange a schedule of events next year, possibly every six weeks, which people can dip in and out of. The idea is to strengthen contact between groups and provide an opportunity for people to meet each other and share experiences and ideas.

Events could include LNR visits, training workshops/talks and possibly visits to a Derbyshire Wildlife Trust Site and the Derbyshire Dales National Nature Reserve. To achieve this we need help – if your organisation or voluntary group would like to host an event please get in touch. We are not looking for anything too difficult, the emphasis being on simplicity and low-budget events.

Ideally the formal part of event should last about 1-2 hours. For example, you may do a guided tour of your LNR, highlighting issues that are currently relevant or sharing recent successes. Following

this you could suggest a pub or tea room where people could go for continued discussion. During the summer months a picnic may be a good idea.

English Nature will investigate a small amount of funding, but the events described above should not really require a budget.

Please get back to me on tel: 01629 816640, email: emma.dagless@english-nature.org.uk if:

- **You are interested in taking part in this programme of events.**
- **Your group/organisation is interested in hosting an event.**
- **You have any other ideas or comments.**

Springwatch 2006

Since the Forum, English Nature's people and Wildlife team have been in touch with details of Springwatch 2006 and the BBC's Breathing Space campaign. Next year it is hoped that attention will move away from the importance with gardens for wildlife and focus on local green spaces including LNRs. One aim will be to demonstrate a link between the natural environment and the physical and mental well being of those who experience it. I have replied to Steve Berry stating Derbyshire's interest in becoming involved – and he has already witnessed the enthusiasm that we have for our LNRs! So far I know of a plan to update English Nature's Nature on the Map web pages to show additional information for 10 LNRs in the county. I am working on a list of potential sites throughout Derbyshire which are actively managed, ideally have a 'Friends of' or similar group and can accommodate the additional visitors who may be encouraged to visit.

Derbyshire Biodiversity Website

At the Forum Debbie Court explained about the Lowland Derbyshire Biodiversity Website. You can find the website at www.derbyshirebiodiversity.org.uk. If you then follow the link for Important Sites in Derbyshire and then Local Nature Reserves you will find a list of all LNRs. If you click on the reserve name more information will be provided. In many cases it defaults to the English Nature website which currently gives only basic information. Others link to sites giving far more details. If you would like to link your reserve to a website with more details please let Debbie know: debbie.court@derbyshire.gov.uk. There are plans to develop this site further in the future.

Please keep in touch with successes, problems, comments and ideas.

Emma Dagless