Arun and Rother Connections - Linking Landscape and Community (ARC project), West Sussex

RSPB, Environment Agency, Sussex Wildlife Trust, South Downs National Park Authority, Natural England, West Sussex County Council and the Arun and Rother Rivers Trust

BIG Biodiversity Challenge Award category: Community Engagement

Project overview

ARC is a £2.2m, three year conservation and engagement programme. Working together for the first time, a partnership of seven organisations has been undertaking landscape scale conservation in the Arun and Rother river catchment in West Sussex. In addition to wetland habitat and river restoration, community engagement is the other key strand of the project, embodied by the project strapline 'linking landscape and community'.

976 volunteers contributed their time to help tackle issues like poor water quality, flooding, soil erosion, agricultural run-off, invasive non native species, disconnected habitats and threatened wildlife - community action that is building a more resilient landscape for the future.

ARC has enhanced the visitor experience at three nature reserves and directly engaged 2391 adults, 740 young people and given advice to landowners in 400 interactions.

Our wildlife recording ARC Explorer app has been downloaded nearly 1000 times generating valuable data for wildlife conservation.

What were the biodiversity conditions on site, prior to the enhancement?

Rivers and floodplains were disconnected, resulting in poor flood management. Fragmented habitats resulted in physical and genetic isolation of species e.g. water vole. Soil erosion and agricultural run-off caused problems for farmers and wildlife. Water quality was poor, fish populations struggled, non-native invasive plants caused erosion, flooding and threatened wildlife.

Practical river restoration workshop, Storrington meadows chalk stream

Were there any specific conditions that led to you carrying out this work?

Internationally, wetlands continue to be lost and their benefits eroded. Between 1960 - 1980 an estimated 60% of Sussex wetlands were drained. The Lawton Review recommended action to meet climate change challenges by providing more, bigger, better and more connected areas for wildlife.

Water quality was poor: 87% of the catchment's water bodies were below 'good' under the Water Framework Directive.
53 'wet spots' were identified in West Sussex, with around 100,000 properties being susceptible to surface water flooding from a 1 in 200 year event. Young people are more disconnected than ever before from nature.

What were the biodiversity measures taken?

Through engaging landowners the project has opened up opportunities to deliver enhancements on private land. We facilitated nine new Higher Level Stewardship Agreements bringing 240 hectares of land into long term conservation management (representing £600K match funding to the project) as well as creating/restoring 5 hectares (ha) wet heath, 11.3ha floodplain meadow, 5ha wet woodland, 3km chalk stream and 3.5ha fen. Nine landowners were engaged with our river restoration project enabling restoration of 3.5km of the Upper Arun.

A £32K fund was built into the budget to reactively support community-led projects. 40 projects have been supported including restored ponds, hedgerows and chalk streams, installation of boardwalks, pond dipping platforms, bird and bat boxes and benches. Each project needed to demonstrate how it would benefit key species, habitats, provide ecosystem services or improve access to nature.

The Rother Riverfly Scheme was established in 2015 to provide training to volunteers to monitor water quality by recording the presence and abundance of eight riverfly groups. 24 volunteers have now been trained and are monitoring 16 river sites facilitating early detection of pollutants.

Volunteers from the Littlehampton Academy planting the Littlehampton rain garden

Volunteer parties have been tackling invasive non-native species, clearing 9ha of Himalayan balsam alone to date as well as carrying out species surveys: collectively surveying 61km of rivers for dragonflies and 36km for water voles.

We worked with communities in Pulborough, Horsham, Littlehampton and Midhurst, developing rain garden projects to showcase the value of sustainable drainage systems to tackle localised flooding.

We developed four sites for river based learning, delivered nine field trips and produced case studies and a curriculum-linked resource pack about the rivers, distributed to 100 primary schools and available to download for free online.

With these resources we hope to encourage educators to bring the natural and cultural heritage of these rivers alive for current and future generations.

How would you best describe the project?
An enhancement

Further information
Opportunities were promoted through conferences, newsletters, site visits and the combined social media reach of the project partners. Young people were directly engaged through attending river field trips, kayaking, bushcraft, angling taster sessions, otter and water vole discovery days and wildlife photography workshops. The landowners we engaged collectively manage over 14,000 hectares of land. Each of these interactions represented an opportunity to share the project aims or an aspect of the cultural and natural heritage of the project area.

Development of the volunteer workforce plays a large part in securing long term benefits. Volunteers have been trained in a broad range of areas including: water vole, dragonfly and pond surveying, invasive species management, leading volunteer work parties or field trips, oral history interviewing and wetland habitat restoration activities. Long term benefits have also been secured through early identification of legacy projects and future funding sources, as well by producing strategies that outline future priorities including for volunteering and invasive non-native species management at the catchment level.

Primary children on an ARC river field trip on the Rother

Lessons:
- Local people are passionate about their local environment and willing to get involved in varied and quite specialist activities with the right support
- Our community grants scheme was administratively heavy but a worthwhile community empowerment exercise
- Building four rain gardens was ambitious and these projects can take a very long time to reach the point of delivery
- Getting schools to engage with our education programme was time consuming at first due to the need to develop contacts within schools .

What was your personal motivation for carrying out the enhancement?

Our motivation was to enthuse local communities about the special Arun and Rother landscapes, and to help them to understand the threats by communicating complex issues in an accessible way. We aimed to, and succeeded in, inspiring and empowering people to help safeguard their precious wetland heritage for future generations.

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Left: Children at Plaistow primary school help carry out enhancements to school grounds

Above: One of eight pond survey training sessions delivered in partnership with the Freshwater Habitats Trust

Left: Chris Packham helps launch the ARC Explorer app at a walk around RSPB Pulborough Brooks reserve

Far left: ARC volunteers at the ARC Explorer launch event