

Summary of progress Year 1 2012-13

Summary

The Northern Devon Nature Improvement Area is an active, ambitious partnership of 16 organisations working on the river Torridge catchment in Devon, an area of some 72,000 hectares. We are working towards bigger and better quality areas of culm grassland, woodland and river habitat, and more wildlife habitat re-created and re-connected by landowners and local people. We are also seeking to strengthen the connections between local people and this stunning and deeply rural landscape, and a better understanding of the services provided by the natural environment.

We have achieved a great deal already, in the first year of the NIA. Advisory site visits with landowners, and helping with grants and capital works, have been our main way of securing habitat restoration and re-creation, with over 140 site visits and around 350 hectares of habitat restored so far, and woodland planting underway. Action plans have been put in place for our two priority species, the marsh fritillary and the freshwater pearl mussel. Landowner training days were held on habitat restoration techniques, woodland planting, resource protection and soil management. Advisors in the catchment met to co-ordinate the advice provided to landowners. Research was undertaken on the role of wetland habitats in managing water in the Torridge catchment.

Over 30 events were held with local communities, and 15,000 hectares of the area were covered through Parish Biodiversity Audits as a useful resource for local environmental action. Arts projects were started, and 15 school groups visited the river Torridge with a storyteller to develop their own stories about 'Giants in the Forest'. Eight practical habitat management days were completed by volunteers, and our plans for community work in 2013 were developed with the help of a new Community Forum.

Already a number of new projects are developing within the Northern Devon NIA beyond our original aspirations, including a significant nature reserve purchase and restoration, a major new community arts project, and three university studentships. As we move into year 2 we are resolved to meet our original ambitious targets, and to develop the NIA according to the expertise and opportunities available.

Progress by project objective

Objective 1: Develop a more robust and coherent Torridge catchment ecosystem

- Over 140 site visits to landowners were completed during year 1, and around 350 hectares of habitat was restored through agri-environment agreements (mostly culm grassland) and through use of the machinery and grazing rings, working with DWT's established team.
- Areas for habitat creation were researched and our woodland creation effort was started with most landowners planting small patches of woodland.

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- Connectivity and targeting within the project area were explored and developed, including modelling on the risks posed to habitats by climate change.
- Workshops were held for landowners on hedgelaying, woodland planting, deer control and culm grassland management (swailing).
- Action plans were drawn up for the two priority species within the NIA, the marsh fritillary butterfly and the freshwater pearl mussel.

Objective 2: Realise the Torridge catchment ecosystem's potential to deliver high quality ecosystem services

- The Lew sub-catchment was identified as a priority for water quality advice. Landowner visits were targeted towards the Lew and also other intensively managed areas in the headwaters of the Torridge catchment. Catchment Sensitive Farming and small grants for flood risk management were targeted at measures such as woodland planting along watercourses, improvement of yard infrastructure and slurry storage.
- Training was held for landowners on resource protection and soil management, and for advisors and NIA partners on the Woodland Carbon Code and how this could be applied within the NIA.
- Posters and interpretation were produced on the 'Proof of Concept' research by Exeter University and Devon Wildlife Trust, on the value of culm grassland in managing water quantity and flow within the catchment.

Objective 3: Enable communities to understand and value the role of nature in delivering a range of ecosystem services, through active participation and engagement

- Over 30 events were held within local communities to promote the aspirations of the NIA and engage local people in the project's work.
- Eight volunteer days were held on habitat management such as scrub clearance, otter holt building, swailing and hedgelaying.
- 15 school groups visited the River Torridge with a storyteller, visiting the Giants in the Forest art installation and writing their own stories of the river and its environment. A film was made of this work in action.
- A strong communications plan was put in place for the project, and a Community Forum set up to engage local community activists and organisations in our work.
- Parish Biodiversity Audits were completed covering 15,000 hectares of the NIA, and taken forward in work with parishes to secure positive action for the environment.

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- Beaford Arts organised a concert by Norwegian ice artist, Terje Isungset, with a contribution from ice chimes made from river Torridge water by a local volunteer, and a short film was made.
- A scheme of placement students was set up with Plymouth University, enabling three students to work full time with the NIA from June-December on many aspects of our work.
- We worked with Exeter University on developing a meaningful evaluation of community impacts for the project.

Objective 4: Provide an integrated and co-ordinated advisory service to landowners

- A network of advisors was developed across the Culm Natural Character Area (covering the rivers Torridge, Taw and Tamar) to ensure joined-up and consistent advice on land and water management.
- Development of a 'first stop shop' approach to advice was started.
- Proposals were developed for dealing with the 'transition period' following the end of the current round of RDPE grants, and how the NIA might meet its targets after December 2013.

Objective 5: Realise the benefits of ecosystem services by supporting supply and demand in local markets

- Woodland creation work started in earnest, with advice focusing on environmental management, woodfuel and carbon sequestration.
- Support was given to development and continuation of the existing Ward Forester model in the Torridge catchment through funding bids and meetings.
- A Woodland Forum, made up of local foresters, organisations and experts, met frequently to help drive this work forward.

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Some lessons learned so far

- NIAs can only develop an integrated landscape scale approach if they can **build on** years of expertise, experience and data already developed among partners in the area in question.
- NIAs have to be delivered by **partnerships**, they can't be run by one organisation alone; the work of all partnership organisations needs to be represented as the NIA effort; significant **co-ordination** is needed.
- **Enough grant** must be available for work with landowners to restore and re-create habitat in order to achieve Lawton's vision. It's not available at present, and this is the greatest current threat to the success of all the NIAs. We work with Environmental Stewardship, England Woodland Grant Scheme and Catchment Sensitive Farming, and all three come under the RDPE which is of course ending this year. In addition, there is not sufficient funding through even these schemes to achieve the kind of habitat re-creation work that we would like to do and that will contribute to Biodiversity 2020 targets.
- Delivery of landscape scale work is also dependent on the availability of quality 1:1 **landowner advice**, which can be sustained to secure initial grants but is also essential for ongoing land management and development of habitat where required. This advisory provision can become less fragmented and more efficient and effective with partnership working – our Advisory Forum is working well so far. However the true value of advice and co-ordination needed within an NIA has to be recognised and sustained as part of any incentive scheme that is developed through the new RDPE, and through any development of landscape scale working.

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