

CRN Research Note:

*Community involvement
in the management of
Forest Enterprise woodlands*

March 1996

Countryside Recreation Network

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Countryside Recreation Network
Dept. of City & Regional Planning
UWCC
PO Box 906
Cardiff
CF1 3YN
Tel./Fax 01222 874970
e mail stoce@cardiff.ac.uk

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Countryside Recreation Network

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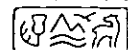


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*The full report by Rob Guest and Fiona Simpson of an article published in
Countryside Recreation Network News Volume 4 Number 1 March 1996*

Edited by Catherine Etchell,
CRN Manager

Community involvement in the management of Forest Enterprise woodlands

Rob Guest and Fiona Simpson
Forest Enterprise, 1A Grosvenor Terrace, York YO3 7BD

INTRODUCTION

Forest Enterprise is responsible for the management of the forests and woodlands owned by the nation. Its objectives include the production and supply of timber for the wood using industry, the conservation of wildlife in its forests and the provision of wide ranging recreation opportunities. The Government's 1994 Forestry Review confirmed the importance of Forest Enterprise woodlands in helping to meet recreation demand not only for tourists but also for local people. Links with local communities, however, go further than the provision of a recreation resource. A move towards increasing liaison and encouragement of active participation by communities enables local people to develop a sense of ownership and pride in their local woodland. Forest Enterprise has taken an active role in encouraging such involvement in its woods close to communities, in the belief that it enhances the management of the woods. North and East England Region has a range of situations where Forest Enterprise has worked with differing local communities in its woodlands. The range of woodland type and the nature of community involvement varies according to the local circumstances, as seen in the following examples.

Whitwell Wood – Derbyshire

Whitwell Wood covers 171 hectares and is situated on the Derbyshire/Yorkshire border close to the former mining village of Whitwell. The wood is held on a 999 year lease from Welbeck Estate and public access is allowed courtesy of the Estate. Whitwell has a very high conservation status including a small SSSI and is notable for its botanical, ornithological, entomological and archaeological interest. The Whitwell Wood Natural History Group has been involved in the Wood for nearly 20 years after originally carrying out bird ringing during the miners strikes of the early 70s. There are now about 250 members with the core from the nearby village who help maintain the security of the Wood. The Group has a licence from Forest Enterprise to carry out certain conservation works such as the creation of butterfly glades and ponds and also co-ordinates recreation and education activities. More recently charcoal production has increased conservation value and produced money for Group funds. The management of the wood is very much a partnership which succeeds due to close liaison between Forest Enterprise and the Group. Formal liaison occurs at monthly committee meetings where the beat forester discusses work plans which are then implemented through liaison between forester and the Group's field officer on a day to day basis.

Boughton Brake – Nottinghamshire

Boughton Brake is a 47 hectare pine wood on the edge of the urban community of Boughton and the former mining town of New Ollerton. Boughton Brake is well used by locals for recreation, especially dog walking, and also attracts the typical problems of 'urban fringe' woodland. Since 1989, the wood has been managed with the help of Friends and Users of Boughton Brake (FUBB) who represent locals. The setting up of FUBB was initiated by Forest Enterprise after consultation with local users, parish councils and community groups, primarily to reduce vandalism and illegal recreation

activities. Partnership with the Boughton Community Development Programme and the efforts of their project officer helped get the project off the ground. FUBB operate under a constitution and a licence from Forest Enterprise and carry out small scale management work within an agreed framework. FUBB has 12 local members who enlist help of other bodies and community groups on working parties for projects. Work is geared towards catering for recreation, initially through the provision of benches, but more recently an easy access trail, pond, school trail have been developed. Low key conservation work on remnant heathland and a nest box scheme has also been carried out. Much of the work is still instigated by Forest Enterprise with significant staff input. The results in terms of reduced vandalism, less dumping and fewer reported fire incidents are of benefit to locals who use the wood. Boughton Brake was designated a woodland park in 1994, a Forest Enterprise award recognising the recreational focus and community input into local management.

Chopwell Wood – Tyne and Wear

Chopwell Wood is approximately 350 hectares and is situated close to the communities of Rowlands Gill and Chopwell and within 10 miles of the Tyneside conurbations. The wood is very diverse with considerable wildlife and historical interest. For an estimated 30,000 visitors a year, Chopwell is an important recreational resource. Walking is the main activity with also horse riding, cycling, orienteering and other special events. There is a degree of misuse with vandalism and rubbish dumping. A very active, keen and enthusiastic group 'Friends of Chopwell Wood' (FoCW) has been operating under a group constitution since 1991 and now has some 200 members, with a core number of professional countryside managers.

A Recreation/Education Ranger was appointed in 1993 to help improve links with and facilitate the involvement of FoCW in the wood. This was followed by designation of the wood as a Woodland Park in 1994, recognising the recreational focus and the valuable input of the local community. For the official launch a 'Memorandum of Understanding' was signed, laying out terms for the partnership between FoCW and Forest Enterprise within an agreed framework. FoCW arranges walks and events for the locals, including a very successful 'Working Woodland' weekend. The Group also produces a regular newsletter and sell some 5000 Christmas trees which raise funds that then are put back into projects in the wood. A recent project involves the conversion of an old building into a classroom for visiting school groups.

Pleasley Park – Derbyshire

Pleasley Park is a 75 hectare woodland found between the mining towns of Shirebrook and Mansfield Woodhouse. The wood is mostly broadleaved, planted on limestone with an escarpment feature on its southern edge, so providing significant geological and conservation interest. There has also been undermining by five collieries in the area creating a patchwork of fissures in the wood. There is community involvement in the Park through the Pleasley Park Natural History Group. The Group started as bird watchers but became interested in expanding their scope and with the experience of the Whitwell group behind him, the local Forester suggested they formalise their input. The Group now has some 200 members who monitor the state of the fissures, thus maintaining public safety and act as extra 'eyes and ears', carry out practical conservation work and undertake survey work which assists in the management of the wood.

Guisborough Forest – Cleveland

Guisborough Forest covers 473 hectares to the south of Guisborough Town and close to the larger urban conurbations of Teesside. The forest is heavily used for walking and cycling, but the full potential of the forest is limited by legal tenure, as only part is freehold. The Cleveland Way runs through the forest and there is also specialist recreation – e.g. rock-climbing. Teesside County Council has developed recreation facilities on adjacent land and has developed a public transport scheme to encourage further use of the area. In response to vandalism, about twenty local concerned citizens have formed a volunteer wardens group and work with Forest Enterprise staff in controlling use of the forest. The wardens act as 'eyes and ears' of Forest Enterprise and have been issued with appropriate clothing to advertise this role. The group has examined community initiatives elsewhere but has chosen to restrict its activities to wardening for the time being.

Bourne Woods – Lincolnshire

Bourne is a 517 hectare diverse wood of mixed broadleaf and conifer and is situated on the edge of Bourne town with some housing actually backing onto the wood. The wood has an estimated 100,000 visitors per annum and recreation facilities have been vastly improved recently to include a new car park with toilet facilities, an easy access route, children's play equipment and interpretation panels. Joint funding has come from South Kesteven District Council in recognition of the value of the wood for the community, one of the results being a three year sculpture project. In 1993, a 'Friends of Bourne Wood' was launched as a means of improving communication with the local population and fostering community involvement in management. There has been a generally slow start and membership is now up to about 60 people. Members attend arranged events and receive a newsletter produced by Forest Enterprise every six months. Many may, however, have joined principally to take advantage of the car parking concession on offer because there has been little enthusiasm for practical participation in management of the Woods or 'Friends' activities, and the future of the group is in the balance.

Wooler Common – Northumberland

Wooler Common is a compact wood on the western edge of Wooler town. The common includes plantation, low grade agricultural land, some archaeological interest and a large open common which includes a network of ponds. The area has been very popular with locals for informal recreation for many years. More recently there has been practical input from the local community and the local Forest Enterprise Wildlife Ranger in providing an easy access trail, benches and interpretation in a Forest Garden. There is now local enthusiasm for the recently formed 'Friends of Wooler Common' and increasing the involvement along the lines of the other community initiatives described here.

Thetford Forest Park – Norfolk/Suffolk

Thetford Forest Park is a large forest of 20,000 hectares and provides a setting and a recreational resource for many small towns and villages in the vicinity. Recently at the suggestion of local staff, a 'Friends of Thetford Forest Park' has been established. Since its launch in May 1995, it has been determined that its objectives are to increase the knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of the Forest Park and to encourage the involvement of the community with what goes on in the Forest Park. The group now has over 100 members who are independent of Forest Enterprise, but staff contribute by attending meetings.

DISCUSSION

There is a number of common issues which have arisen in these community initiatives and which have a major bearing on the success of such ventures. They are raised here and include group roles, group dynamics, staff commitment, funding and agreements.

Roles

There is significant variation between the different groups in the role played in the management of the wood. Participation may be very active through practical work, for example the pond construction work with the natural history focus at Whitwell, patrolling to reduce vandalism as at Guisborough or organising events to improve the appearance of the wood, e.g. the Friends of Chopwell Wood litter pick. There could be an access focus to the role of the group as seen at Boughton Brake and Wooler Common with the erection of benches. Participation may not have a practical 'hands on' approach at all and could be restricted to keeping up to date with management of the Wood and participation in promotional events as with the Bourne group. Even within the same group there is a mixture of these roles. The formalisation of community involvement through creation of a recognised group means that they are better informed about management of the Wood, able to communicate their own ideas and influence the nature of change in what is to them 'their' Wood.

Group dynamics

The dynamics of the Group are important as they determine the nature of action and often roles within the Group. From the examples outlined we can see differences in the number of members in a group. These individuals will bring different qualities, skills and levels of enthusiasm which will affect direction and nature of participation. In all the community initiatives discussed here there is a small enthusiastic core who tend to motivate and decide work for the whole group, with the direction being influenced by the core group's skills and aspirations. Individual changes in this small core can often mean substantial changes for the whole group in terms of commitment and enthusiasm.

Staff commitment

As the functioning of the group is usually based around a small core of distinct personalities, it is essential that good communication channels exist between the core members and Forest Enterprise. For all the initiatives outlined there is a degree of Forest Enterprise staff input; in some cases this input is almost full time. Whatever the staff time commitment, a good and honest relationship needs to develop for the initiative to thrive, and this can depend on the personality of the Forest Officer involved. There has to be a certain amount of negotiation and compromise on both sides to assure success. Staff themselves need to be committed to the initiative and be able to appreciate the Group's point of view. This can all take up a great deal of staff time, often outside normal working hours and therefore it is vital that the community involvement clearly enhances management of the wood.

Funding

The way the group is funded depends on its role. Some groups have developed significant income generation opportunities – e.g. Friends of Chopwell Wood with their Christmas tree sales and the charcoal sales at Whitwell Wood. This income is then ploughed back into the wood through group activities. A different arrangement exists at

Boughton Brake; Forest Enterprise have agreed locally to match any funds raised up to the sum of £1000 per annum. This tends to get spent on tools or materials for working parties. Groups may also seek external funding from grants and awards. Low key groups such as the Guisborough Wardens need very little in terms of funding and this reflects their role.

Agreements

Some sort of memorandum of understanding or agreement is needed to determine and record the nature of the partnership arrangement. Such an agreement can be very useful in resolving any issues such as funding arrangements at the outset. It will also cover exceptions to the Forestry Commission byelaws, raise points of safety and decide objectives and activities. Some agreements include a working plan to outline what will be done by the group in a certain time period, although such plans need to be very flexible to accommodate the uncertainties of voluntary input. Agreements are very useful in keeping continuity through personnel changes which is particularly important with woodland management as it is such a long term commitment.

SUMMARY

The examples given indicate a substantial variation in the nature and extent of community involvement in the management of Forest Enterprise woodlands in North and East England. It is clear that there is no simple formula for determining the appropriate means of involvement – this depends on the local situation, and different approaches are quite acceptable providing they are successful. We have little doubt that community involvement, in whatever form, is invaluable in enhancing the management of woods and helping to optimise the benefits derived from them, and we expect to see the trends described here accelerate in future years. In recognition of the value of community involvement, Forest Enterprise has encouraged such participation in recent years and committed substantial resources to the initiatives. It is clear, however, that for community involvement to be truly successful the momentum for involvement must come from the community.

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Department of City and Regional Planning
University of Wales, Cardiff
P.O. Box 906, Cardiff, CF1 3YN.
Tel: (01222) 874882 Fax: (01222) 874845