

Project profile

An important part of the Ecosystems Knowledge Network is to put a spotlight on local initiatives around the UK that are putting the ecosystem approach into practice. Reconnecting people and nature is at the heart of the approach. Many of England's Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs) have placed great emphasis on this. In this profile, Lisa Schneidau, manager of the Northern Devon NIA, describes progress so far and some of the challenges ahead.

Northern Devon Nature Improvement Area: community connections



Riverfly training day on the river Torridge near Hatherleigh © Devon Wildlife Trust

The Northern Devon NIA covers the river Torridge catchment from its source near Hartland to where it meets the Atlantic at Bideford. The NIA is a long-term partnership within the North Devon UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Devon Wildlife Trust is the lead partner and at least 16 other partners are active contributors including Natural England, the Forestry Commission and the Environment Agency.

The NIA covers a deeply rural and sparsely populated area of about 72,000 hectares, with small mixed farms and an increasing number of intensive dairy farms. Since the NIA was launched in 2012, it has delivered an abundance of activity and some impressive outcomes (see the NIA in numbers below). We have also increased our understanding of how to achieve positive environmental change, putting local people at the centre.

Northern Devon NIA in numbers

£3.7 million

raised in agri-environment grants

52

school visits to farms and nature reserves

280

landowners advised, covering 21% of the catchment

45

volunteers surveying the River Torridge monthly through the Riverfly initiative

150+

community events

1,500

hectares of habitat restored

81

hectares of new habitat created.

36

volunteering tasks

15

parishes started new environmental projects

7

citizen science projects

2

sites being considered for Local Nature Reserve status

Cultural Ecosystem Services

Cultural ecosystem services are key to linking local communities to their natural environment. In 2013, the University of Exeter studied cultural ecosystem services in three parishes within the NIA area: Hatherleigh, Meeth and Merton. A questionnaire to residents was issued to identify what they saw as positive and negative aspects of their local environment. The survey was followed by workshops to provide an additional opportunity for people to have their say.

Ideas of character, tranquillity and wildness resonated strongly in survey respondents' understanding of their local environment and why it is valuable to them. Of the respondents, 80% went walking regularly in the natural environment, whilst about three quarters cited bad weather as a restriction (if you know north Devon, this is entirely reasonable). Nearly one in ten respondents associated 'health' with their local environment. In contrast, 'inspiration' and 'belonging' were cited as roles of the environment for the majority (86% and 70% respectively). The landscape of the Torridge river catchment was considered an important environmental asset, even though access to the river was in general viewed as poor.

This kind of research involving local people is a vital element of local projects. It has helped the NIA to understand motivations and perceptions of the environment from key local communities (the three parishes). In particular, it helped them to gain an insight into low levels of public access to natural greenspace in what is a very rural landscape.

Reaching across boundaries

Since its inception, the NIA has targeted and delivered an ambitious and varied programme of community outreach activities based on three principles:

- **Understanding:** developing and promoting messages and information about the Torridge catchment and its value.
- **Using:** getting people out into the environment.
- **Undertaking:** encouraging direct contribution to the NIA's efforts through surveys, practical work and research.

As shown by the numbers above, numerous projects involving people have arisen from the work of the NIA. It has been common in these projects for farmers to work with the wider community leading to new and stronger community connections.

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The courage to experiment

Getting the community involved in projects that explore the environment in a more unusual way has been successful in helping people engage with nature. It has provided a way of highlighting what the environment gives us, and has shown that cultural ecosystem services play a central role in a landscape-scale project in which people are also key.

Beaford Arts is a rural arts initiative that has developed numerous projects exploring the community values of the Torridge environment. One such project was the Concert for Norwegian ice musician Terje Isungset in the town of Appledore. In this concert, the composer played on ice chimes made from water from the River Torridge as well as the ice horn he brought with him. 'The Bureau of Extraordinance Survey' was a community theatre piece by local artists Burn the Curtain, where families were invited to make the stage as a model of their own parish. 'The Common', consisted of dialogues that explored the ways in which adults view and value the natural environment, shaped from interviews with local people. The results were challenging and thought-provoking. 'The Common' also toured to other NIAs across England.

Devon Wildlife Trust's recent purchase of an old clay quarry at Meeth has brought another opportunity for new audiences. The long distance Tarka Trail runs through this site, and leads to new possibilities for the cycling sector.

These are not 'usual' environmental projects, and they develop the reach of the ecosystem approach. We have learned a great deal about people's curiosity and sometimes frustration with the landscape in which they live, as well as attracting new audiences to look at the world a little differently.



Culm grassland: our local speciality © Devon Wildlife Trust

The challenge ahead

Defra funding for NIAs finished in March 2015. All twelve original NIAs across England are pursuing their vision through different project and funding routes. This requires significant investments in development time from project partners. One year on, Northern Devon NIA has four environmental projects underway. The Phase 2 Business Plan, which runs from 2015 to 2020, has identified health and wellbeing projects as a priority for action, however no fundraising approach for this work has yet been successful. Our action within local communities at present is very limited. We hope in the next two years it will be able to develop.

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Ultimately, we aim for a greater sense of ownership and longer-term commitment to wildlife from the people we work with – achieving a joined-up approach within the community, as well as across the land itself. Community connections are not just about what your landscape does for you; but, crucially, what you can do for your landscape.

Further Information

Northern Devon NIA

www.northerndevonnia.org



Lisa Schneidau is the Northern Devon NIA Manager at Devon Wildlife Trust. She has a background in ecology, land management advice, advocacy, project development and management and leadership, working within the Wildlife Trusts partnership. Outside her day job, she is also a professional storyteller specialising in stories about the land and nature.

Contact: lschneidau@devonwildlifetrust.org