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New Tool For Environmental Impact Assessments

New Volunteering Platform to Support Community Nature Restoration Projects

New Expert Volunteering Platform to Support Community Nature Restoration Projects



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The Nature Action Hub is a new volunteering platform for environmental specialists. Set up by The Southwood Foundation, the platform links experts with community nature restoration projects looking for much-needed guidance, ranging from one-off advice to longer-term mentoring and support. Eastbourne Treebourne, described in this article, is one such project, involving the planting of over 2000 trees with advice from specialist volunteer Orlando Campbell.

Introduction

Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration states that “environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens”. When it comes to local wildlife, citizens constitute a force in the fight back against biodiversity loss in their local area. Community environment groups are springing up across the country, taking things into

their own hands to protect and restore nature in the face of unprecedented decline in the natural world.

The Southwood Foundation, set up to convene action on biodiversity and climate change, observed that people mobilising for biodiversity at the local level often find it difficult to access the expertise they need to achieve the best outcomes. This was confirmed by conservation charities, who report a worrying lack of resources to respond to the crisis and a growing number of requests for advice.

Reflecting on how best to make the most of people’s determination to act, the Foundation researched environment-related opportunities on volunteering portals, to see if positions for specialist advice were available. We found that environmental listings predominantly request administrative or manual help. It became very apparent that specialists wanting to volunteer their expert advice, and community groups looking for guidance, have no easy way to find each other.

With a strong background in the environment sector, The Southwood Foundation has arrived at a solution, notably the Nature Action Hub, that it is hoped will address this issue and help

the environment sector play its full part in making a difference. The Nature Action Hub links expertise with action at the local level to maximise the impact and sustainability of all the efforts being made. The Hub specifically supports community groups that would not otherwise have the resources or connections to access expert advice for their nature restoration projects.

Nature Action Hub support in action: Eastbourne Treebourne

When community group Eastbourne Treebourne, based in Eastbourne in East Sussex, decided to take action on climate change and biodiversity loss locally, they didn’t lack ambition. Given the opportunity to create woodland on a plot of land on the edge of the town the group took it upon themselves to plant over 2000 native trees. Over 250 volunteers of all ages signed up to help.

Treebourne is one of several environmental community groups in Eastbourne formed as a result of the local council’s 2030 Net Zero pledge in 2018. The changes required to achieve a carbon-neutral town are monumental and the ambition undoubtedly ignited the grassroots community response in the seaside town.

Eastbourne, like many coastal towns, has tree cover that is well below the national average. Eastbourne Treebourne prioritised sites with particularly low tree cover that are easily accessible by people of all socioeconomic backgrounds, making sure not to displace other ecologically valuable habitats. The group is made up

of volunteers from a wide variety of backgrounds and ages, with a range of skills and varying amounts of spare time squeezed into busy lives. They do not have a member with a background in arboriculture and found that there is a lot of conflicting information on the internet. They needed direct answers from an expert in the field to provide clarity and confidence.

This is where the Nature Action Hub came in. Ecologist Orlando Campbell is one of many experts who have volunteered through the Nature Action Hub. An experienced arboriculturalist, Orlando was able to advise the Eastbourne group on the best methodology for tree planting, pre-planting management and post-planting maintenance of the site. He also gave advice on specific problems that they had not considered, such as strong winds on the South Downs and pests and diseases in the area.

Eastbourne Treebourne's plans were approved by council ecologists and the South Downs National Park, who supplied the trees. On an unseasonably sunny weekend in February 2022, over



Figure 1. Ash dieback led to the clearance of the project area on the Ratton estate. Clear fell was ordered due to the proximity to footpaths and houses, with a restock clause in the felling licence.



Figure 2. The Ratton estate after 2000 saplings were planted by 250 local volunteers in 2022.

250 volunteers arrived to plant the trees. The sessions were fully booked within 48 hours. The following weekend, local schools brought more children than they had spades for. Project leaders reported an insatiable demand for tree planting in this town: a real desire to do something.

The year 2022 has not been an easy one during which to plant trees, given the severe drought experienced. Teams were set up to care for the trees after planting. Elm, hornbeam, hawthorn and hazel are doing noticeably better the most. As the landscape develops, Eastbourne Treebourne are adapting their plans, taking stock and seeing what takes.

From the volunteer's perspective, Orlando said he was pleased to be able to help such an inspiring group of people. He feels that what they have achieved is a real example of community in action and shows what a difference people can make when they decide to mobilise for nature.

Call to action

Chair of Trustees at the Southwood Foundation, Mark Southwood, believes strongly in collaboration and feels that a collective response from the environmental sector is needed to address the biodiversity crisis. Many sectors have a volunteering arm, and the environmental sector, with its wealth of knowledge, experience and passion for the natural world, has a unique and vital contribution to make. Communities are mobilising and with the right support can make a huge difference in addressing one of the biggest challenges of our times.

The Nature Action Hub works through a registration system whereby experts volunteer, providing details of their areas of expertise, location, time available and

volunteering preference in confidence to the Hub. The Nature Action Hub administrators then provide details of community biodiversity projects that are looking for advice in their area of interest and facilitate a matching process to make sure relationships and arrangements are clear.

Some experts have just a few hours to give, so offer advice by phone, for instance, while others may be able to carry out a survey or do some mapping. Some enjoy longer-term relationships supporting and mentoring the local community group as a project develops. The Southwood Foundation covers travel costs where needed.

Governance of the Nature Action Hub is provided by a steering group chaired by The Southwood Foundation trustee John Turzynski, a former Director at Arup. Members are environment experts and ecologists, including CIEEM Fellow Andy May. Andy has been a strong advocate of the project over its 18 month development, believing the Nature Action Hub has all the ingredients needed to be a significant game changer.

Steering Group member, CIEEM member and founder of The Ecology Consultancy John Newton believes this is a fantastic opportunity for ecologists to volunteer, where their impact will be immediate and tangible. He feels that semi-retired and recently retired ecologists are particularly well placed to help, having a wealth of knowledge, a deep concern for the state of nature and perhaps a little more time to help in volunteering activities.

The Nature Action Hub started in Sussex, working in partnership with the Sussex Wildlife Trust. Expansion plans into London and South East England are now progressing. The facility is growing and will shortly be web-based on the Southwood Foundation website.

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We are currently recruiting more expert volunteers and have many community groups on our books looking for help and advice for their environmental projects. These include requests for help with bat and invertebrate surveys, plant surveys and guidance on woodland management, support on pollinator highways, advice on wildflower meadow creation and requests for mapping of parish nature surveys.

We would urge all environment experts to join us, even if you only have a few hours to give, so that measures taken by communities are as effective and timely as possible. Community groups are keen to find guidance and experts want to help. There is a diversity of opportunities so everyone can find a match that works in terms of skills and time available.

Experts interested in participating in this initiative are encouraged to make contact. For more information about how to volunteer and opportunities available, please contact the author of this article or visit www.southwoodfoundation.org.

About the Author

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