



Natural Connections

The story so far, July 2016



Student's reflection

"From this experience I have gained a lot of skills, some conservation skills and general teamwork and communication skills. Before I started working with Cumbernauld Living Landscape I had no idea that there was such a wide range of things that you could do to help the environment and protect the wildlife. I also didn't know what I wanted to do for a career when I leave school.

Natural Connections has helped me realise that I love working outdoors and helping to protect and improve the environment. Through Natural Connections I gained a 3 day work experience placement (2 full days and 1 half day) this also helped me realise that for a career I want to do a course on Countryside Management, I feel that even when I go to college and if I don't enjoy the course as much as I thought I would (very unlikely) that Natural Connections and the Cumbernauld Living Landscape have set me up with skills for further employability and life in general."

Emma Louise McGurk (16)

Thank you

We would like to thank all of the people who have collaborated with our project so far. As we have already mentioned, this project is a success because of the dedicated young people and volunteers involved. We would not have been able to reach them without the support of North Lanarkshire Council Community Learning and Development, St Maurice's High School and Greenfaulds High School. The project would not be happening without the cash contributions from the Heritage Lottery Fund, North Lanarkshire Council, NHS Lanarkshire and the Scottish Wildlife Trust.

Introduction

The Natural Connections project is building on the activities of the Cumbernauld Living Landscape to enhance, restore and reconnect green areas of the town. We want to ensure that both people and wildlife benefit from our natural environment. The project is encouraging young people from marginalised groups to learn about, value and celebrate their local natural heritage. It is giving local volunteers the opportunities and skills to make real and lasting improvements to three important wildlife sites. In addition, the project is promoting and celebrating the town's greenspaces through outdoor artworks, events and volunteering.

This report outlines the impact we have had halfway through our project, which is supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. This work would not have been possible without the support of the players of the National Lottery, funding from North Lanarkshire Council, NHS Lanarkshire and the Scottish Wildlife Trust.



Photos (Top to Bottom): Common Blue at Ravenswood Local Nature Reserve; Roe deer in Cumbernauld Glen Wildlife Reserve; St Maurice's Pond



This report was written by Ian Mackenzie & Tracy Lambert, Scottish Wildlife Trust, July 2016 (v1.3)



Young people



It is recognised that there is a drop in engagement with nature when we move from working with primary to secondary schools. Activities that primary school pupils are enthusiastic about quickly become very “uncool” to teenagers and engaging this age group with nature becomes more challenging. With the competing pressures on young people’s time and interests, the Natural Connections project has found innovative ways to make its work relevant to our community. We have done this through creativity, fun and sex (of bees!).

In the first year of the project 45 young people (aged 14-16) from 2 high schools worked with us to create community action plans and start delivering them at two local wildlife sites (the third site will follow next year). They have engaged in art projects and connected with their community. This has been made possible by forging successful partnerships with the schools, giving us time to build our relationships with the young people over 42 workshop and practical sessions.

At the very beginning the students explored issues that are important to them using the values and frames set out by the Common Cause foundation. The results showed that while they were disconnected from the town and their future, there

was a tentative connection to the environment. What environment actually meant was sometimes unclear, but they did have a desire to be ‘responsible’ and to ‘protect the environment’. One of the most striking findings was that for teenagers, about to leave school and enter the world, they had very little belief in themselves and very little ambition. Over the course of the workshops we observed a change in attitudes and this was reflected when values discussions were repeated. The young people developed a more mature attitude towards their town, environment and their own future.

Working with the groups was sometimes challenging, but there were key events which deepened the engagement. One such turning point was at St Maurice’s Pond when the young people came across a local nursery school outing. Many of the group had younger brothers and sisters and this brought home the importance of the site to the community. This realisation was then reflected in the action plan. One group’s imagination was really caught when they started talking about the sex lives of bees and this led to lots of questions for many weeks.

Giving young people the opportunity to follow their interests allowed us to set up a group that developed and commissioned the art installations. They took inspiration from workshops carried out with 350 of their peers from primary school upwards. The brief they set the fabricators was for an artwork that would be both functional and beautiful to celebrate each of the sites.

The project has also had more personal impacts for the young people involved. Where they have shown a specific interest we have facilitated meaningful work experience. This has led to the students making different life choices and in some cases going onto further education or apprenticeships. Noticeably the confidence of many of the students has grown. A highlight was the celebration at St Maurice's High School, when young people took to the stage and shared their work with representatives from across the community. In total 40 students gained their John Muir Award through the dedication they showed to the project.

It is not only the young people's confidence that is growing. A key goal of the project is to build the skills and confidence of the group leaders. This ethos is built into every session so that the teachers and supervisors participate in all of the activities. An initial Continued Professional Development (CPD) training session for 8 teachers was so popular it was repeated with 8 more. This resulted in the teachers themselves organising a 2 day event with 80 pupils building shelters and cooking on open fires.

Photos (Young People): Pupils sketch ideas for the Living Window, planting wildflower plugs; getting stuck in to clear paths; equipped for all weather; the sites are used by local nursery schools; young people celebrating their work



Community



One of the key aims of the Natural Connections project is to connect our community to its natural environment. To help raise awareness of and celebrate our great greenspaces we have spoken to over 6,800 people at public events and explored the areas with 320 more. Often the people we talk to are surprised and inspired when we show them the town's amazing wildlife, but that's not the only hook the project has used to get people involved; health, wellbeing and lifelong learning have also been important in engaging a wider audience. But mostly it has been about having fun and more people are now contacting us to get involved and tell us their wildlife stories.

Our end goal is for people to take action to improve our town's environment and the skills and development of local volunteers is key to this. So far we have been supported by 38 individual volunteers at events, through internships and at Sunday practical sessions, adding up to over 500 days of effort. Each volunteer day provides different opportunities for both the volunteers and the project.

We would not be able to reach as many people without the support of a small team of dedicated events volunteers. It takes a special type of person to turn up at public events and speak to hundreds of people about the amazing wildlife and sites in Cumbernauld. These volunteers are passionate about sharing their knowledge of wildlife and their community. Through the events programme we have developed the confidence and knowledge of our volunteers and this has led to a spin-off Wildlife Watch group aimed at getting kids outdoors and taking environmental action.

The Sunday practical conservation sessions are also proving popular, with numbers increasing each month. The group started with two adults and one child and now has up to 22 volunteers, who call themselves the Nature Ninjas. The hooks to attract people to this group are simple, but are not offered everywhere in Cumbernauld. The sessions are held at a time when busy working people can come, the activities are fun and the sessions are also genuinely open to all, regardless of age or ability. This means that a wide range of

people have been attracted and, with an average age of 36, it might be one of the youngest conservation groups in the area. The Nature Ninjas are delivering some of the biggest impacts at the sites and a key challenge is to develop their skills and confidence so that the Nature Ninjas have a lasting legacy.

One of the unexpected impacts of the project so far has been through the volunteer internships. Interns have developed their skills and improved our understanding of the natural heritage of the area. So far 4 interns have completed 12-week placements and each has used their experiences to go onto employment or further training. The project benefits from the specialist skills the interns bring and we now have a better understanding of the ecology and threats to the sites. With each new intern the project gains a new perspective and knowledge that helps us improve our Natural Connections.

So much work by so many people has not gone unnoticed and the change the project is achieving is being recognised. The Living Windows exhibition in the town centre was seen by thousands of people in an area that nature very rarely reaches. An empty shop window was taken over to tell the story of the design process and celebrate the young people's work. This shop was then opened up for people to take part in art workshops and find out more about the project.

People are now coming to volunteer sessions because they have been inspired by the work the young people have done and new partnerships are forming. The project sites have received further support from Sanctuary Homes and Tesco Bags of Help to take forward elements of the action plans that the young people proposed.

Photos (over page) Nature Ninjas job well done; (top to bottom): Sunday volunteers of all ages; relaxing in the Living Window exhibition; sheltering at a fun day at St Maurice's Pond; scary goings on at Halloween in the Glen;



Nature



We have seen the young people and wider community develop a greater appreciation of the nature that surrounds them. Each school we have worked with has expanded their use of local sites and now recognises their importance for integrating Outdoor Learning into the curriculum. The trees at St Maurice's are now being climbed as part of adventurous PE classes and a new orienteering course explores Ravenswood. The community are now recognising the amount of effort that is needed to ensure that future generations can experience nature close to home.

The understanding of the natural heritage of the sites has improved thanks to the volunteer effort. Each area now has a detailed Phase 1 habitat survey and an invasive species survey. Overall we have identified 57 species that have not been previously recorded on these sites. This information will be made publically available through the local biological record centre. One of the reasons these sites are so important is the mosaic of habitats they provide in an urban area. Understanding this informs the Action Plans and steers future improvements.

The existing wildflower meadows - important for both their wildlife and cultural value - are being reinforced. These areas provide homes and food for a huge range of birds and insects as well as colour and interest for people. We have been working closely with North Lanarkshire Council to

improve the meadow management regime and volunteers have planted over 1,500 plug plants. These plugs have been carefully selected to complement the existing wildflowers found in the different conditions from the clay loams at St Maurice's to wetland meadow at Ravenswood.

A key feature of Cumbernauld is the woodland: no matter where you are in the town you will never be far away from a tree. Therefore it is very important to get the right trees in the right places. This means that in some areas we have planted more trees and in others we are removing them. In Cumbernauld Glen the volunteers have planted 160 native oak trees to reinforce this important Semi Natural Ancient Woodland. At St Maurice's Pond an area of amenity grassland is being turned into a mini orchard with 18 Scottish heritage trees providing fruit for the local school, community and wildlife. In other areas, regenerating scrub is being removed at Ravenswood LNR to ensure that wetland meadow orchids and wildflowers have room to grow.

Across all of the sites we have been removing non-native invasive plants that can out-compete the species we rely on to balance our natural environment. This means that *Rhododendron ponticum* and snowberry have been removed from the woodland understorey and garden escapes have been removed where they have been spreading onto the wildlife sites.

Simple actions to improve access to the wildlife reserves have also been widely appreciated. The work that the young people started, and the volunteers finished, to clear paths and open up sightlines has made people feel more welcome and safer. The litter removed has not returned and the additional funding secured to improve the boardwalk has made it more accessible. These simple actions have gone a long way and have been appreciated by people that use the greenspaces.

One of the most visible aspects of the project is the Living Window installations created by the young people. The resulting installations have been praised for both their form and function and are already being well used. So far the impact of the project on the sites has been appreciated by the local community. This effort was recognised by the Cumbernauld Environmental Society, who included St Maurice's Pond in their 2016 Beautiful Scotland submission.



Photos (clockwise from top left): Clearing paths has improved access; artworks have provided interpretation; Living Windows have form and function; surveys at Ravenswood have improved our understanding of the site; tree planting is reinforcing native woodland regeneration. (Over page) existing meadows are being reinforced;

The future



Halfway through the project we have demonstrated that there is a clear need and a demand for this work. The outcomes for the young people and the community have been immediate, whilst the impact for nature will be longer-term. However there are some key challenges we will continue to face.

As more people from across the community become engaged, we need to make sure everyone understands the sensitivity of these natural sites. Well-meaning actions could have a negative impact if carried out in the wrong season or the wrong place. This is especially important for controlling non-native invasive species. It is everyone's moral and legal obligation to ensure that no harm comes to either wildlife or people from our activities. Therefore we need to make sure that activities are carried out safely and with the landowner's permission.

There is a need to have a long-term partnership with schools and communities if we are to truly have a lasting effect. The dynamic in our high schools today is one of constant change, whether through subjects, exams or external projects. It is crucial that the next generation of teachers, leaders and community activists have the skills and knowledge to take action.

In the next year the project will continue to consolidate strong partnerships with the local schools as the best outcomes are achieved when we have time to build relationships with the young people. Support from senior management in the schools is key to this.

We will also seek to build the skills and confidence of our volunteers. This will be crucial to creating a lasting legacy as it is local communities that need to take action to improve their environment. We will look to support community organisations and develop the capacity within these.

To ensure that the legacy of this project is sustainable we will continue to work closely with the site managers. This is key to ensuring that the management actions can be maintained in the future.

Whilst progress has been encouraging so far there is still a long way to go and thoughts are already turning to planning a programme to consolidate achievements and replicate these successful activities across a wider area. This project has demonstrated that there are innovative ways to address the increasing dislocation between young people and nature; let's keep creating more Natural Connections to benefit both communities and our natural environment.



Intern's reflection

Name: Louise Smith

Age: 24

Previous employment: Unemployed graduate

Role: Community Engagement and Outreach Assistant

Benefits of the internship: I now find it much easier to talk to a wide range of people about wildlife and why nature is so important. Planning and organising events has taught me the importance of having a backup plan and how to get the word out. For my personal project I decided to do a survey of the town's squirrels. I planned this from scratch and it has taught me how important working in partnership with neighbouring landowners, like local golf courses, is. I am really pleased to be able to help set up Cumbernauld's first Wildlife Watch group.

Skills gained: Project management; managing volunteers; better communications using blogs and social media

Future aspirations: I would love to continue working with communities to encourage them to take part in citizen science and practical conservation work. I would like to work with young people to make sure that they care about nature and get the best career advice for their future.



KEY IMPACT

Young People

- Strong partnerships with schools gave us time to build relationships with young people
- 45 students between 14-16 yrs old took part in 42 sessions with 88% gaining accredited awards
- The sex life of bees was a turning point for some while others connected through family and art
- More young people are using the sites more as 16 teachers are putting training into practice
- Confidence and awareness grew which was recognised by teachers
- Values shifted to a more mature attitude to their town, environment and future


100% of the young people felt they had improved their connection to the community




KEY IMPACT

Community

- Support from volunteers means we have reached over 6,000 people, raising awareness of Cumbernauld's amazing wildlife sites
- Our community is better connected to nature, with 82% of our Nature Ninjas living locally
- Internships have developed the professional skills of the volunteers and the knowledge base of the project
- 320 people who might not normally join a conservation group have visited the sites to find out more and get more active
- Volunteer skills and confidence is growing and has fledged a children's Wildlife Watch group
- More people are connecting with us through social media to get involved and share their wildlife stories


 "Just back from a lovely big walk with the dog and really noticed the difference. You did a fantastic job!"



KEY IMPACT

Nature

- The sites and the nature within them is now more widely appreciated, with local schools and communities using them more
- We have a better understanding of the ecology of the sites thanks to expert volunteer surveys
- Existing natural habitats are being reinforced with 1,500 native plug plants and 160 oak planted
- Non native invasive species have been systematically removed from 80% of 2 sites
- The natural environment is now more accessible by clearing paths and improving boardwalk.
- The impact has been recognised with the project included in the 2016 Keep Scotland Beautiful competition

 We know far more about these wildlife sites and are delivering action plans improve them