

Making it happen: Fife Air Cadets Conservation Group



A successful year. With 6,206 volunteer hours of practical conservation work under their belts during 2006 this is probably an understatement for the Fife Air Cadets Conservation Group. In fact, it's been a very successful six years, with 29,150 volunteer hours since the group started in 2001.

Around a hundred volunteers, mainly young people, dedicate much of their free time to conservation work week in, week out, year upon year. Which begs the question, how do staff achieve such a high level of motivation in so many young, volunteers to 'get up and go' rain, hail or shine 'for the greater good of mankind'? They're just another conservation group after all

This group does achieve a huge number of practical conservation tasks, but they also excel in facilitating the personal development and education of both staff and young volunteers. Not formal education, although some formal courses can be taken by choice, but hands-on skills-based learning combined with ongoing promotion of the sustainability and biodiversity messages. Environmental education is central to the group's work and development – what they do is a great example of truly turning the countryside into a green classroom.

Included in the programme for 2007

Formal Courses

- First Aid
- Know the code – Access rights and responsibilities for young people
- Water, Water Everywhere
- Earth Colours
- Toolcare and Maintenance
- Field Studies Course – National Vegetation Classification, NVC Woodland
- Grasses & sedges Training Course
- Discover & Explore Scotland – Museum visit, Isle of May
- Ponds & Wetlands – introduction to plants and fauna, habitat management, health & safety and risk assessment
- Computer skills – designing interpretation posters

Simply wanting to make a difference to the countryside isn't enough in itself to encourage people to give up such a large chunk of their free time on an ongoing basis. But add fun, enjoyment, challenge and the opportunities to learn skills and gain knowledge and you have a recipe for 'brilliant commitment'.

And it's not surprising that people have taken on a pride in their group. This is clearly a reflection of the attitude of Mark Pearson, Group Founder and Chair, who declares his admiration and respect for the work of all the volunteers whenever he has the chance.

'What I find so amazing is the commitment from everyone, as we must never forget that everyone is a volunteer'

Mark himself has an uncommonly positive view of young people today:

'Young people want to get out into the countryside and they

want to learn. They like socialising, getting dirty and they want to do something challenging, but fun. They actually want to work hard and that's quite key – if kids are not occupied, that's when high jinx starts.

The youngsters of today get bad publicity across communities. However the sheer determination enthusiasm and hard work of the Cadets and Explorer Scouts prove again and again that direction is all that is needed. What comes shining through every project is the hard work and enthusiasm of everyone involved.'

At the beginning:

So how did it all start? A family decision to do a touch of conservation work at Christmas and a move by the 2311 Glenrothes/Leslie Squadron of the Air Training Corps to undertake a conservation challenge to recognise the ATCs 60th Anniversary, matching in hours of conservation work, the number of years of the ATC's existence.

And we could all find a reason like this to set up a group or project. 'Just get out and do it' is the advice – but more of that in due course.

Mark Pearson, self confessed, didn't know a lot about conservation work. He contacted his local countryside rangers for help and advice, and could not speak more highly of the support the group has received from them since. *'We're very lucky, we have brilliant rangers who help out all the time – not only in 'ranger' time, but in their own time, they're absolutely brilliant'*

The first project was very low key – a small piece of work in an urban countryside park. And from there, it snowballed.

Hands-on Skills Training

Hedging, Woodland training Footpath construction, Drystane dyke building and Habitat creation, Grow your own, Bat monitoring – Educational, Wildlife surveys, Mountain biking, Conservation Day as part of National Red Squirrel week, Seed collecting and planting to grow groups own trees

In five years, the group has grown in its membership, knowledge, experience and not least, its enthusiasm. It now has around 100 volunteer members consisting of Air Cadets, Explorer Scouts and local families. Each project regularly involves 30-50 individuals. The main focus of their work is in their own county of Fife, where numerous conservation projects have been completed, working with Countryside Rangers, landowners and other environmental organisations.

And as the group has evolved, there have been expeditions to other parts of the country, residential weekends, and 12

days visiting and carrying out a conservation project in the Czech Republic in 2005. A full programme of events is now scheduled for each year. A programme organised in advance helps people plan what they can do, when and how, and of course, it aids the funding applications

But it hasn't all been plain sailing. Communities and in particular adults, found it difficult at times to believe in the young people when they were trying to work in a community or for an organisation. Acceptance has taken time and evidence. Finding projects is no longer an issue. In fact, there don't seem to be enough hours to satisfy either volunteers or recipients of their work.

What do they do?

They lay hedges, build dykes, clear woodland, improve drainage, grow vegetables, plant trees, construct and reopen footpaths. They learn about history, plant identification, fungi, native trees and wetlands. And the group promotes self discipline, loyalty, commitment, responsibility, leadership, involvement, healthy living, adventure and active citizenship. *'The main aim is to have fun whilst working hard'*



The policy is no pressure – 'just turn out to as many events as you can – and remember that school work always comes first'. Many use the work to contribute towards prestigious John Muir and Duke of Edinburgh awards. A fair system of points shown in the annual programme guides volunteers to what is essential or important and this also ensures that those who do put the effort in throughout the year are rewarded with the opportunity to take part in residential.

What's driving it all?

Caroline Burt, Group Secretary insists that it's the dedication and professionalism of Mark Pearson, together with the untiring hands-on support and enthusiasm of his family, wife Sharon and children Ashley and Louise, which have driven the group to date. Mark will always add that it's the dedication and enthusiasm of the group which makes it all happen. There is little doubt that the group as a whole is now very driven by its own history of success and plans for the future.

There is general agreement that one of the things which makes volunteers come back is that everything is organised for them, all administration and regulations are in place, transport provided and the tasks set. All they have to do is turn up and put their backs into the work. Many organisations find the paperwork and particularly funding applications very onerous and are off-putting, so that the whole area of administration becomes a burden. Get a handle on this aspect and the more fun stuff should fall into place.



It's important to mention here that the main adult staff in the group also have full time jobs and families of their own and this begs the questions of how do they find the time and why do they do all this. The answer seems to be a combination of burning midnight oil and 'because they love it'. Mark and Sharon are clearly very disciplined and seem to ensure that both logistical and administrative systems and procedures are set up to last, not just to apply to a single element of the whole. All adult staff and volunteers give enormous amounts of time and effort willingly, sharing the load easing the burden. In theory, young people will see the benefits of good organisation and model this in their own practice.

Asking why people take the trouble to run any group like this always gives them the opportunity to present the 'right' response. Honest dedication, enthusiasm and enjoyment are clearly apparent when talking with members about their group and project work. It's a bit like religion, some people need a cause, a focus in life and a feeling of belonging and importance – and some have a true and deep belief. Here it seems it's because everyone 'loves it'.

The management

But it's important not to get the wrong idea about the management structure here. The Group gives young people the power to decide on what tasks and activities are undertaken and how money raised is spent on their behalf and on behalf of others in their community. The constitution allows full representation from all members so everyone helps in the decision making process.

Getting there - Project 'Green Transport'

Management Committee

Key staff: Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer, Equipment Manager, Project Co-ordinator – young people shadow the same committee tasks.

The constitution allows for the following to be on the committee which makes the final decisions:

- An adult and a young person as a representative from each ATC Squadron and Scout Group;
- two parents;
- two Countryside Rangers who give technical advice

To date, the group has relied on volunteers using their own cars and public transport to allow group members to participate. The costs, environmental issues and personal commitment associated with this are obvious.

In 2006, the Group asked all the youngsters what stopped them coming along to volunteer more regularly and the most common answer was '**transport**'. Many youngsters come from urban and deprived areas of Fife and suffer due to lack of transport to rural areas, especially at

weekends. The problem is common countrywide. So, in September 2006, they launched a green transport plan promoting an increase in cycling, car sharing and the reimbursement of public transport fares. Critically, they also applied for funding to purchase a 17 seater minibus to facilitate the increased inclusion of young volunteers from outlying communities.

As we write, this funding has been granted. The running costs will be met by group funds made up of bag packing in local supermarkets, a levy taken from personal contributions on residential and money made carrying out environmental improvements from long-term sponsor Smith Anderson Packaging, and more recently Exonmobil.

The right tools for the job – The Green Trailer

The Green Trailer was purchased early on, and allows the Group to be totally self-sufficient and to run tasks without having to borrow equipment each time.

It contains 2 large tents that can be used for a shelter or control point, a 70 ltr gas water urn and brew box containing a tea pot and 30 mugs. There is enough clothing, safety equipment and tools to allow up to fifty people to carry out various practical tasks at any one time. Equipment is loaded into the trailer for each project/task to ensure the right tools are carried for the task in hand.



For security reasons the trailer has a "tracker" device attached to it. Crucially, other youth and community organisations can borrow the "Green Trailer" for their own projects and they'll often find FACCG are willing to help, moderating their own volunteer numbers depending on the size/type of the project.

Staff and younger group members take courses on tool maintenance. Looking after the trailer contents is shared and part of the whole learning experience. A tool control book records breakages and losses.

And with all this success under their belts, is it just more of the same from now on?

Yes, plenty of the same, but with 'Active Green Citizens' as a focus and 'Project Green Transport' facilitating their work. And there are always new initiatives. In 2005 for example, the group participated in Czech Mates, an expedition to the UNESCO World Heritage site in Bohemia where they spent time exploring Prague, its history and culture and carrying out local conservation tasks.

In 2007, in recognition of the strong and historic relationship between Scotland and Poland and the estimated 8000 young Poles living in Scotland at present, FACCG is running a project called '**Polska Alliance**'. It intends to work with three Polish youth groups undertaking two major conservation projects in Scotland and Poland. The Scottish location will be in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park and thirty FACCG members will visit the Tatra National Park in Poland. The main funding for this project will come from supermarket bag packing (thirty volunteers can earn approximately £800/day) and regular paid conservation work.

Quite apart from the hard work involved, this wide reaching initiative will allow youngsters from different communities to meet in an atmosphere of mutual respect and shared ethos, gain greater understanding of each others communities and promote their own country under the banner of active volunteering. There's no denying the enjoyment and value of experience for youngsters who may not have set foot out of Scotland before.

The Colin Burt Reserve for Wildlife Conservation

In 2004, Caroline Burt made a decision to embark on a project which would be a lasting tribute to her late husband, Colin, who was tragically killed in a motorbike accident that year. Colin was committed to preserving and protecting wildlife and believed strongly in the education of youngsters as the way forward to securing a healthy planet for the future.

Already a member of the Group and knowing that it was looking for its own piece of land, Caroline decided to set up a partnership project with them and in due course, a fifty acre site



was purchased in Glen Dochart, near Killin. Originally named 'Project Woodland' the project had intended to focus on purchase and enhancement of a piece of native woodland. In fact, the **Colin Burt Reserve for Wildlife Conservation** project will involve the 'creation' rather than the management of existing woodland and the site has scope for a wide and diverse number of habitats.

Not surprisingly, Caroline is passionate about the project. But her enthusiasm seems as much to do with her own love of nature and dedication to giving youngsters the opportunity to live in, learn from and love their own precious countryside.

Caroline video clip saying what the reserve means to her

The stated aims of the project are to *'discover, explore, conserve and share the land, to encourage greater diversity of plant and animal species and promote environmental awareness, as sense of ownership and create a wildlife reserve for others to visit' ... "and overall our wish is to pay a long-lasting tribute to Colin Burt and his love for wild places'*



And this is really happening.

The group has spent numerous hours on site already creating pathways, planting trees, constructing bird hides, otter holts and shelters, designing and producing way-marker signs – not ad hoc – but as always, planned both logistically and with thought on how the site will develop for people and biodiversity. A Phase I survey of the area by a senior ecologist has shown a great diversity of species growing in the wetland and grassland areas and the young people now have a good idea of what they really own.

Visit from 5th World Congress Rangers

In June 2006, the group camped for a weekend on the reserve. On the Saturday, fifty-four Rangers from all over the world (attending a conference in Stirling) visited the group. Youngsters acted as guides and were able to demonstrate how the theme of the Ranger conference can *really work* 'People and Place, the Natural Connection!'

Thanks to deer dung – A new fungi species has been found at Glen Dochart!!

Amazingly, a new species of fungi, was found on the reserve in 2006. Professor Roy Watling carried out two fungi surveys in June 06, with groups of young volunteers. The fungi is encouraged by deer dung (found in plenty on the reserve) and a 'dung fungus' expert has confirmed the find as unique. The species is currently being registered, and if you're interested in WOW factors, this must have been really amazing for all concerned.

It wouldn't be hard to enthuse endlessly about this project, but visit www.projectwoodland.org.uk and the group's enthusiasm springs out from the pages itself. Suffice to say it would be impossible to doubt the group's intention for this to become a wonderful place for the much wider community – local and visiting.



Inspiration for a career – two young volunteers talk about how volunteering with Fife Air Cadets Conservation Group helped them decide on their future.

Paul Coakley and Alastair MacLeod attribute part of their decision to take a full-time course in Conservation Management at Elmwood College in Fife to their very positive experience doing conservation work with FACCG. Their comments about their background, decision to take the course and how they feel about the Colin Burt Reserve speak for themselves

Video clips – Paul and Alastair – Elmwood College

A vision for the future

'I would like to see Green Trailers everywhere' It costs about £5K to set up a group with the green trailer, after that routine projects don't cost that much and you raise funds for larger, specific initiatives.

It seems this should end on a note of recognition for all staff, volunteers and professionals, for Ena who produces such wonderful catering at residentials, and for the ongoing input of professional organisations and especially the Ranger Service. Mark Pearson's words leap from the page on the website on 'Active Citizens Programme 2007:

'We are into our 6th year now and have achieved so much. Remember it is your group; you all have worked very hard to make it so successful, keep up the hard work and remember, you are all amazing!'

Keys to success – Video clips of Mark?

Mark Pearson on the keys to success in running a volunteer group:

- If you don't ask you don't get
- Just get out there and do it
- Plan really well before hand
- If you have lots of enthusiasm you'll get enthusiasm back from volunteers and sponsors alike
- Dedication

More difficult areas

- Health and Safety issues – these need to be tightly managed
- Access to land by a uniformed group can be difficult. This can involve large amounts of administration to overcome restrictions and avoid chains of authorisation
- Senior management resistance to ideas and actions
- Early resistance to young people working on community/owned land
- The need for dedicated funding to enable focus on education

Contact details

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www.fifeaircadetsconservationgroup.co.uk

Possible links/additions

2007 PROGRAMME OF EVENTS)

For more information on the progress of project Polska Alliance, visit www.polskaalliance.eu

BOX – CONTENTS OF GREEN TRAILER IN DETAIL See attached file: FACCG Equipment List

Sponsorship – link to box

Fife Council, SNH, ExxonMobil Chemical, YouthLink Scotland, Yorkshire Tea, J Sainsbury plc, S&R Transport, Asda, Grow Your Own, The Vandervelle Foundation, Falkland Stewards, Scottish Native Woods, Fife Constabulary, CSV, The Cooperative Group, Carillion, The Courier

LINK TO BOX COMMENTING ON THE DEDICATION OF COUNTRYSIDE RANGERS WITH QUOTES FROM FACCG ANNUAL REPORT 2004 SHOWING MUTUAL SUPPORT AND RESPECT

Countryside Rangers are recognised country-wide for giving time both within normal working hours, and in their own personal time. Clearly, however, in this instance, the respect and commitment to each other's work is mutual. – quotes from ranger dialogue Annual Report 2004

Link to box showing Colib Burt Reserve Project list for 2006-2007, map of reserve?