

# Wet feet and dirty hands

## *Practical Conservation Volunteering*

Practical conservation volunteering has been valued for decades as promoting the many outstanding places of natural beauty across the country together with the benefits to personal health, of team work, companionship and escape.



There are excellent examples of organisations which have made conservation volunteering work well for both land and individuals, including The National Trust and BTCV. Indeed many 'experts' in the environmental education sector consider their experience as volunteers to have equal value to their formal qualifications in terms of opening doors to opportunities for employment in their field.

The popularity of using conservation as a means of encouraging people of all ages to engage with the natural heritage of Scotland is ever growing in a climate of outdoor education and inclusion. Centred around a practical task, fun, discovery, learning and art are all linked up with the environment, and participants experience an increased sense of ownership and value in their local biodiversity. At worst (or best depending on which angle you're coming from), they have a great fun, healthy day out.

We have presented one specific story about this kind of work ([link to Fife Air Cadets Conservation Group](#)) but there is much else going on worthy of attention and we summarize a few of these initiatives and ideas here.

## The Green Team

The Edinburgh-based Green Team celebrated its tenth birthday with a weekend of partying and willow weaving in 2005. A celebration of ten years of giving 14-25 year olds the opportunity to take part in environmental projects as one-day activities or residential weekends. Core funding enables The Green Team to cover four staff and administration costs, while the organisation relies on support from volunteer leaders (trained by the Green Team) to actually lead courses. Places on courses must be booked and paid for and the testimonials on the Green Team 'Blog' are full of positive comment about both the learning and the experience.

Ask the Green Team what makes a difference to the success of a project:

- The excellent support of the Ranger Service and their expert knowledge
- The bonus of having a leader volunteer with real environmental knowledge and enthusiasm to share
- Making good use of 'packaged' activities for their timeless popularity – mini-beast hunting, pond dipping and bat walks
- Fun, stimulated by games and activities

## Conservation volunteering and social inclusion

Why don't people take more action to protect and improve our environment? Amongst all the other good reasons, many don't know what's out there and if they do, they often feel left out and excluded.

Many of the National Parks across the UK have successfully introduced strong learning and inclusion programmes and demonstrated commitment to introducing people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities to our natural heritage. BTCV and its Environments for All programme can evidence enormous achievements locally and nationally.

Engaging people in practical tasks can facilitate confidence building and integration, and in the right environments can also generate inspiration. As a departure from traditional conservation volunteering, some programmes, use practical conservation work to tackle severe behavioural issues amongst 'excluded' teenagers. Courses are tailored to specific groups and the principle aim is to make use of the natural environment and tasks undertaken to help build self-esteem and positive behaviour. These courses also often allow young people to work towards sections of John Muir and Duke of Edinburgh awards.

Is it really that simple, and who benefits? In this scenario, the natural environment is needed for its lack of formal boundaries and for the perception of freedom which the outdoors offers young people for whom restriction is a real issue. The courses are run using the environment as a tool to promote skills for 'living' as well as 'making a living'. The outdoor experience facilitates the opportunity for young people to be 'aware of themselves' in a different environment.

You might expect some of these young people run riot in the freedom of their new surroundings? Not surprisingly, being 'out in the wild' is well outside the comfort zone for many of those involved and it takes time to become familiar with the surroundings. And this time can be used to good effect.

So is there any spin off benefit to the environment apart from the obvious associated with the practical task? Do these young people take knowledge away which can be shared with friends and family?

## Green Shoots Project

A group of pupils supported by 'The Link' unit of an Edinburgh High School recently completed an eight week Green Shoots course at Vogrie Country Park near Edinburgh. After the project they wanted to return to their work site with their families to show them what they'd done. Penny Radway, Green Team Manager said '*I was amazed at how much they had learned about the natural environment*'. One of the participants was certainly able to recall much more than just the weather and cutting down rhododendrons – for example: tree types, how to build and light a fire, why it's important cut back some shrubs and cut away damaged fencing. And we heard of one mother who brought her toddler along for her 'first ever walk in the countryside' to see her brother's work. The child had such a good time, the mum promised herself she'd bring her back.

**BTCV's recent residential course at Marr Lodge** in the Cairngorms National Park provided an opportunity for a small group of refugees and asylum seekers from Egypt, Somalia, Algeria, Syria and Iraq to experience everything from panoramic views to embracing a five hundred year old tree.

Intimidated at first by the vast space - for some, this was a first trip outside of Glasgow and away from direct family, the group was gradually brought together through a course of light practical tasks – it was Ramadan – which developed team spirit and confidence in their surroundings.

This was an enormous personal journey for all participants and their 'end of course' testimonies are poignant for the thanks they give to BTCV for the opportunity to be in such a special place in the midst of such beautiful countryside. 'Walking for many hours' is highlighted as one of the best activities. Learning about nature from Ranger guided walks comes close. Some 'wow' stuff came from participants recognizing plants from their own country in the tropical greenhouses. The happiness and camaraderie of the group, despite four days of rain, is testimony in itself to the benefits this course could provide.

BTCV staff tied the experience with each person's home location by using aerial photographs to illustrate how much greenspace there is to enjoy within Glasgow City – one lady became aware of a local nature reserve very close to her home. Achievement came in the form of John Muir Discovery Award certificates for participants.

The Green team <http://www.greenteam.abel.co.uk/blog.html>  
Green shoots project : LINK To evaluation statements from students