



Community Nature Reserve

Outline Proposal: Paper 3 Aug 2015

Background

Dr Adrian Cooper made an enquiry at the end of June with the idea of creating an Urban Nature. At the same time a thread for a Community Garden started on Streetlife by Mark Angliss. Felixstowe Forward introduced each to the other. As a result the two parties met and discussed the potential for an urban nature reserve.

Dr Cooper attended the engagement event on the 17th and has subsequently worked up an outline proposal.

There follows an updated progress report confirming commitment by identified partners and Felixstowe Forward's recommendations.

Outline proposal - Community Nature Reserve

"We now know that... the whole of the urban landscape is available for wildlife, and we should make it more welcoming for wildlife."

"We should make sure that the suburban gardens which represent a very significant proportion of the area of this country are made more and more accessible, and more and more suitable, for wild creatures."

Sir David Attenborough; address to RSPB Conference for Nature, 2014

Introduction

There is more to wildlife conservation than protecting a few charismatic high-profile species like Avocets and Ospreys. While they undoubtedly deserve protection, awareness is growing that focusing on these species can distract attention from the broader picture.

Many studies over recent decades have shown that biodiversity in the British countryside is in steady decline. Urbanisation, the industrialisation of agriculture, and increasing use of the countryside for recreation are major factors in this.

Conversely, it is also becoming apparent that urban areas can provide refuge for much wildlife under pressure in its native habitat, particularly in public parks and privately owned gardens. Song thrush and the Common frog are just two examples, and recent studies have shown that urban areas can support as many as 8000 different species of insect, including an ecologically significant number of bee species.

Public awareness of this is growing; garden owners are increasingly interested in the wildlife of their gardens and many actively manage their gardens to attract it, and many Local Authorities are adopting wildlife-friendly management practices in public open spaces.

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In parallel with this growing interest in garden wildlife, the use of gardens to grow fruit and vegetables is also experiencing resurgence. The vegetable plot has always been a traditional part of the garden, of course, but “austerity” is prompting a wider interest in home-grown produce alongside a growing awareness of the importance of encouraging pollinating insects and natural predators into the garden.

Clearly the urban landscape, the “space between buildings”, is, potentially, of considerable environmental and conservation importance.

In his address to the Conference for Nature, Sir David Attenborough identifies two imperatives that must be met if the urban landscape is to reach its full potential as a wildlife resource; *accessibility* and *suitability*. This proposal outlines a community-based project for meeting these imperatives in Felixstowe consisting of two separate, but overlapping and complementary, land management projects.

Suitability

The attractiveness to wildlife of a domestic garden depends on the garden’s owner, and his or her willingness to create suitable habitat; but despite growing public interest, wildlife gardening remains a minority pursuit. I believe a great deal could be done to promote wildlife gardening in Felixstowe by providing a local site where advice can be sought, techniques demonstrated and, possibly, appropriate plants purchased.

This would fit comfortably within the remit of a Community Garden.

Accessibility

However well-designed and managed a wildlife garden may be, it will only attract the wildlife that already exists in its immediate environment. The majority of domestic gardens are isolated from the countryside by buildings and roads. While this presents few problems for birds, larger mammals and stronger-flying insects, it is a significant obstacle for less mobile creatures.

The principle of “wildlife corridors” is well-established as a way of maintaining connections between sites of known wildlife value. In an urban context, as well as being wildlife resources in their own right, they also have the potential to link town gardens to the countryside, facilitating the spread of, and colonisation of gardens by, a greater diversity of wildlife.

This proposal identifies four existing wildlife corridors in Felixstowe which, loosely grouped together as a “Community Nature Reserve”, have the potential to be improved by appropriate management and habitat creation. To what extent this is practical remains to be determined, and is contingent on suitable agreements being reached with the relevant landowners.

N.B. It must be emphasised that the aim of this project is not primarily to improve public access to open spaces. While that is a desirable aim in itself, and it may yet prove to be a fortunate outcome to some parts of the project, the principle goal is to promote biodiversity in an urban environment; in many such cases restricting public access is fundamental to success.

The Nature Reserve

1. The railway line (2.1 miles)

Running from the bridge over the A14 just to the east of Trimley St Mary, the railway line creates a narrow but unbroken strip of vegetation almost as far as Landguard Common, as well as linking two important green spaces;

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Langer Park and Felixstowe Cemetery. A spur of the railway also extends eastwards to Felixstowe Station and the town centre (0.6 miles). The vegetation appears to be dominated by Sycamore and Elder.

2. Peewit Hill (0.5 miles)

A broad and continuous band of vegetation runs from the railway, where it is crossed by a footbridge leading to the east end of Coronation Drive, west along the south-facing slope of Peewit Hill to the A14/A146 roundabout at Haven Exchange. The vegetation appears to be a mix of scrub and mature trees, dominated by Hawthorn, Blackthorn and Elder, with some open areas of grassland. A semi-natural watercourse runs along the foot of the hill.

3. Ordnance Hill/Undercliff/Sea Front (2.3 miles)

East of the railway, the band of vegetation along Peewit Hill continues in fragmentary form along the slope of Ordnance Hill, comprising private gardens and one or two small blocks of woodland, until it links up with the Spa Gardens, continuing north-east along the seafront through private gardens to the open space along Golf Road, eventually meeting open countryside at Felixstowe Golf Club.

4. A14 margin (1.6 miles)

The A14 “Dock spur” runs south from the roundabout just north-east of Trimley St Mary, looping round to the east to meet Peewit Hill at the Haven Exchange. For most of this length it runs through a deep cutting, forming the western and south-western boundary to Walton village.

An organised programme of tree-planting has been carried out along both sides of the road. This appears to be mainly of native species and has created a dense mosaic of trees of varied ages, with some small patches of grassland.

Wildlife value

These sites clearly have existing value for wildlife and, it seems reasonable to suppose, also serve as food sources and distribution routes for migratory birds that make landfall at Landguard and along the nearby coast. Their precise value is worthy of further study, but it seems very likely that this value would be increased by a planned programme of habitat management.

The Community Garden

From the website of the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens:

What are city farms and community gardens?

They are community-managed projects working with people, animals and plants. They range from tiny wildlife gardens to fruit and vegetable plots on housing estates, from community polytunnels to large city farms.

They exist mainly in urban areas and are created in response to a lack of access to green space, combined with a desire to encourage strong community relationships and an awareness of gardening and farming.

City farms and community gardens are usually set up by local volunteers. Some larger community farms and gardens go on to employ paid workers, while smaller groups rely on dedicated volunteers. Most groups are run by

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a management committee of local people and some are run as partnerships with local authorities, whilst retaining strong local involvement.

These groups provide food-growing activities, training courses, school visits, community allotments and community businesses. In addition, some provide play facilities and sports facilities, and after school and holiday schemes.

Benefits of city farms and community gardens

- *Provide productive, creative, safe, high quality open spaces*
- *Offer opportunities for people to learn new skills and abilities, either informally or on formal accredited training courses*
- *Provide approximately 2,500 training places for adults with learning disabilities each year*
- *Add to the economic wealth of the area in which they are situated*
- *Employ the equivalent of approximately 500 full-time paid staff and over 15,000 volunteers*
- *Have a combined annual turnover of up to £40 million*
- *Improve physical and mental health in their communities*
- *Provide a valuable tool for bringing people together of different abilities, ages and cultures*
- *Aid in community cohesion and community development*
- *Are often producers of fresh food*
- *Allow many communities contact with real live food (both animals and plants)*
- *Attract more than three million visitors and regular users every year - around 50,000 of these visitors are school pupils*

Although community gardens are traditionally associated with areas of urban deprivation - a description which doesn't really apply to Felixstowe – many of the benefits outlined above are as applicable here as they are elsewhere.

I have identified three adjacent parcels of land as a possible site for a community garden.

1. The former Beach Station site

The site of the former Beach Station, in the angle formed by the railway and Beach Station Road, comprises approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ acre on land embanked several feet above ground level. The site has clearly not been used for some time and is covered in Buddleia and other invasive weeds.

The station was built in 1877 by Colonel George Tomline to bring holidaymakers to Felixstowe's sea front. It remained in use until 1967 when it was closed, and then occupied by a printing works. Despite being listed the buildings were demolished in 2004, causing much controversy in the local community. Formerly owned by Network Rail, I understand it is now the property of a commercial business company.

2. Adjacent embankment

The embanked land on which the old Beach Station is sited continues northward between the railway and Langer Park for approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of a mile. At its southern end it is approximately 50 yards wide and narrows continuously along its length until it disappears into the railway cutting at the northern end of Langer Park.

Formerly railway sidings, the land is now well vegetated, but the vegetation lacks diversity and is dominated by Sycamore.

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3. "Gasholder" plot

Immediately to the southwest of the Beach Station, on the opposite side of the railway and on the south side of Walton Avenue as it approaches the level crossing, lies a rectangular plot of derelict land of approximately 2.5 acres. Roughly one quarter of this site is occupied by a telescopic gasholder and associated structures, and a 'phone mast is sited in the southwest corner. A single-storey brick building, of unknown use, is located on the western perimeter. The remainder of this parcel of land appears untended and well vegetated, but dominated by Buddleia.

Wildlife value

Together with Langer Park, the three areas described create a discrete ecological unit of grassland and scrubby vegetation, surrounded by residential properties, commercial/industrial premises and a caravan park, which is also an important component of the railway line wildlife corridor. Although well vegetated, they lack species and habitat diversity and are dominated by the invasive non-native species typical of unmanaged "brownfield" sites.

Future management

There is considerable scope for environmental improvement of these sites through habitat creation (ponds, wildflower meadows, native hedges etc.) and planned management.

The "gasholder" plot, if it is available for use and proves suitable from a safety angle, could be turned into a small-scale "ecological park".

The Beach Station site is of considerable historical importance to the town of Felixstowe. Although the buildings were long gone by the time I moved here, it is not hard to imagine the bustling and vibrant centre of activity it must have been when the town was in its heyday as a seaside resort. Turning it into a community garden would, I believe, be a much more fitting use for what was itself once a significant community resource, and a more attractive "gateway" to the sea front, than the derelict eyesore it is now. It could even become a visitor attraction in its own right.

I understand that, immediately prior to its demolition, attempts were made to raise funds to purchase the site. Would it be possible to repeat this exercise, using modern "crowd funding" methods, and buy it back for the people of Felixstowe?

Social benefits

"After decades of research, the scientific world is moving closer to pinpointing how exposure to nature seems to promote well-being.

A recent US study found that being close to nature might soothe the mind by reducing rumination - when negative thoughts get stuck on repeat, playing over and over in the mind."

BBC News 8.7.15

Alongside the growing interest in urban wildlife, there is a growing awareness of the social benefits of having access to nature. As well as improving mental health, a Community Nature Reserve would promote healthy

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exercise through volunteering, healthy eating through organic gardening, opportunities for people with learning or physical disabilities to engage with nature, and educational resources. It might even provide employment.

Conclusion

Like every town, Felixstowe has a history. Over the last 150 years, however, the landscape and nature of Felixstowe have experienced a series of particularly dramatic transformations. From its first flowering as a seaside resort, through its military role in two world wars, to the large-scale development of the docks, this process of change has left a legacy of oddments in the landscape. As ever, nature is quick to colonise these nooks and crannies and start the slow process of succession that will eventually turn them back to woodland.

Unfortunately, however, in the 21st Century this process is almost inevitably usurped by aliens. Competitive non-native species like Sycamore and Buddleia quickly come to dominate this unconsidered landscape to the considerable detriment of native flora and fauna. The only way to prevent this is through human intervention.

In 2011, Defra published *Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services*, a national framework for an integrated, landscape scale approach to conservation in England, with "putting people at the heart of policy" as a priority.

This is to be achieved by:

- *Working with key stakeholders to consider how the nature conservation sector can engage the public even more effectively in future and how government might support this.*
- *Getting more children learning outdoors, removing barriers and increasing schools' abilities to teach outdoors.*
- *Establishing a new green areas designation, empowering communities to protect local environments that are important to them.*
- *Helping people 'do the right thing', at home, when shopping, or as volunteers. For example, we will provide funding to support the Big Wildlife Garden scheme and launch a new phase of the MuckIn4Life campaign, offering volunteering opportunities to improve the quality of life in towns, cities and the countryside.*

The project outlined above meets these objectives and, if it proves achievable, would not only leave an enduring legacy from this generation to future generations living in Felixstowe, but could even become a national exemplar, putting Felixstowe firmly on the environmental map of Britain.

Mark Angliss, July 2015

Progress to date:

Partners

The following partners have been identified with the following interest and support.

Job Centre

Volunteers to assist on clearance work and/or woodland management labouring.

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'It was lovely to meet you and hear about your fantastic community project. I look forward to working with you and supporting you to find suitable volunteers to bring your ideas to fruition!'

Lucy Thurman, Employment Adviser, 01394 623334

East Suffolk Greenprint Forum

Happy to advise, publicise and potential for funding for a scattered orchard through the Suffolk Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Felixstowe Dementia Action Alliance

Keen to work with, since the value of urban green spaces for vulnerable people is evident

Jan Garfield (Governor for two schools)

Would like to see both schools involved with links to curriculum – geography and biology – but also extending it as a resource for creative writing, music etc

Margaret Morris

Has indicated support through Streetlife

Suffolk Wildlife Trust

Suffolk Biodiversity Partnership

Suffolk Traditional Orchard Group

'Our project fund is small – we usually offer a maximum of £500 at a time and the projects needs to benefit Suffolk Biodiversity Action Plan (Priority) Species or Habitats. A list of these can be found at <http://www.suffolkbiodiversity.org/content/suffolkbiodiversity.org/PDFs/action-plans/Suffolk%20BAP%20list%20Jan%202015%20final.pdf> . I've attached a blank proposal form so you can see the criteria for projects.

In this context, you'll see that Traditional Orchards are one of Suffolk's Priority Habitats.

I also work as the Project Manager for Suffolk Traditional Orchard Group (STOG). We may be able to help with advice and supplying appropriate trees for the orchard. I've copied in Paul Read, chair of STOG, who can probably help you further with planning the orchard.

Genevieve Broad MCIEEM

Project Manager, Suffolk Traditional Orchard Group
c/o SBRC, Ipswich Museum, High Street, Ipswich, IP1 3QH.

Tel: 01473 264308, Mobile: 078948 85337

Website: www.suffolkbiodiversity.org/orchards.aspx

Liaison Officer, local Church Organisations

'I am delighted to advise you that Rosalind Page has agreed to support the Community Nature Reserve as Liaison Officer to the local Church congregations. That is, Rosalind has undertaken to tell local Church congregations about the work of the Community Nature Reserve, and to invite their active participation in maintaining the reserve. Rosalind will also encourage local congregations to plant wildlife-friendly plants in their gardens and allotments. Rosalind's current role as a Town Pastor in Felixstowe, and leader of many Church groups, makes her an ideal candidate for this role. Rosalind will begin this work as soon as we secure our first piece of land for the Community Nature Reserve, so she has something definite to talk about.

Rosalind is also closely involved in a group called Coffee Break which works with local communities of East European women, and Asian women to make them feel welcome in Felixstowe. Within that capacity, Rosalind will tell those women about the Community Nature Reserve, invite their active participation, and to also invite them to plant in a wildlife-sensitive manner in their own gardens. Significantly, Rosalind told me that several of those women live close to Langer Park.

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Overall, Rosalind's support will bring a great deal of grassroots credibility to the Community Nature Reserve project. Rosalind is widely respected, and is often asked to give talks to a broad range of congregational groups.

Rosalind can now be counted as the Community Nature Reserve's seventh strategic partner alongside Felixstowe Forward, Suffolk Wildlife Trust, East Suffolk Greenprint Forum, the Job Center, Suffolk Biodiversity Partnership, and the Suffolk Traditional Orchard Group. That is, an encouraging foundation of active support, technical advice and funding has been identified and cultivated.'

Other partners to be approached:

- Federation of City Farmers and Community gardeners
- Trust for Conservation Volunteers
- Suffolk Ornithology Group

Recommendations

- 1. Felixstowe Forward help find suitable and appropriate sites**
- 2. Use this initiative to create a wider total place based initiative to bring together other interested partners - Felixstowe Seafront Gardens, Landguard Reserve and the Grove - as a joint approach to increasing volunteer support, environmental habitat and diversity**
- 3. Support and identify sources of funding**
- 4. Signpost to Community Action Suffolk to establish a clear governance group**

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