

New Forest springs into LIFE

LIFE III, a major project to restore 10km of watercourses and 600 hectares of wetland habitat in Hampshire jewel, the New Forest, has been completed.

Described as "awesome" by a renowned national expert in river restoration, the project has received wide acclaim and international interest. It was even presented at this years European Nature Conference 2005 by English Nature.

Over four years, 50 Environment Agency staff from Southern Region put their specialist skills to use, carrying out everything from water level monitoring, channel surveys, and examination of macro-invertebrate populations, to the actual engineering works – all ably project managed by Maxine Elliott.



The project aimed to restore 600 hectares of wetland habitat, targeting three of the main water basins - the Avon Water, the Hampshire Avon and the Lymington river. One of the key objectives within this was to restore 10km of watercourses. Over the years, these watercourses had been turned into canals. Canals have faster flowing water, and this had led to increased erosion and the adjacent wetland habitats drying out. The project wanted to restore them to a more natural condition by re-connecting the original 'meanders' - putting the river back into it's previous course. This was successfully completed this summer.

(Left: Before the restoration)

Reinstatement of these natural meanders has seen the river length increase by as much as 40%. Slowing the water flow and raising the riverbed (in places by over one metre) means that now, at times of intense rainfall, the water will spill over onto the surrounding area, the river's original natural floodplain. This in turn will help to recreate the wetland habitats which had all but dried up as a result of historic drainage practices.

Surveys are being carried out regularly to get evidence of the naturalisation process – for example, the return of certain types of fish and macro-invertebrates will show us that the work we have done is bringing back a variety of habitats and wildlife. We will be waiting with baited breath to find out how the restoration work "beds in" over the winter months, with any minor adjustments being made in spring next year.

(Right: After the restoration)



At a cost of £2.9million, the project has brought more than environmental benefits. It has helped to forge strong working relationships with the LIFE 3 partnership - English Nature, the Forestry Commission, Hampshire County Council, the National Trust and the RSPB. In fact, the Forestry Commission now actively seeks our expert advice on other river restoration schemes.

Further information on the project can be found on the partnership website: www.newforestlife.org.uk or you can contact [Maxine Elliott](mailto:Maxine.Elliott@newforestlife.org.uk) on 7 23 4841.