

LIFE COMES TO AN END IN JUNE

LIFE comes to an end in June – but it's a cause for celebration to herald the end of a four-year partnership project restoring New Forest wetlands and habitats.

The £2.9 million LIFE3 project, managed by Hampshire County Council and part-funded by the European Commission, has notched up a list of successes since August 2002.

Almost 11km of rivers – principally Black Water and Highland Water on the upper reaches of the Lymington river – have been restored; 261 hectares (ha) of riverine woodland and 18 ha of bog woodland have been improved; 130 ha of mire has been upgraded; and 97 ha of wet grassland has been cleared of scrub.

LIFE3 followed the LIFE2 project that restored 4,000 ha of wet heath, valley mire and broad-leaved woodland habitats within the New Forest Special Area of Conservation. Although successful, the approach to restoring the wetlands was piecemeal, and a need for a more integrated approach was identified. LIFE3 was born.

Now the partners – the County Council, English Nature, Environment Agency, Forestry Commission, National Trust and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds – are hosting a 'signing off' event on 2 June at the New Park Manor Hotel, followed on 13-14 June by a technical conference at Careys Manor, to mark the successful conclusion of LIFE3.

Leader of the County Council, Cllr Ken Thornber, will chair the 2 June event, and representatives from the other partners will outline their organisations' input to the project before guests have the chance to see some of the success stories for themselves.

Members of the public will be able to join in between 11am-3pm with a variety of family activities, project restoration site visits and a talk by wildlife expert Chris Packham at 2pm, about the importance of New Forest wetlands.

Cllr Thornber said: "The aim of LIFE3 was to restore a vulnerable habitat for the benefit of wildlife, the landscape and visitors. The partnership has achieved all that and more thanks to years of co-operation and sharing of expertise.

"LIFE3 saw one of the UK's largest river restoration projects, and several species have benefited from the project work such as the southern damselfly, slender cotton grass and brook lamprey.

"Careful attention was paid to keeping local people informed of what was being done and why, with plenty of visits to restoration sites. One of the most popular was held last summer when more than 100 people came to see Ardennes heavy horses removing a three hectare area of non-native species, such as sycamore, that had been felled.

"Allied to all the excellent conservation work has been the benefit to the local economy, with more than 60 staff employed during its four year life."

Notes to editors

The conference on 13-14 June is fully booked and is aimed at environmental technical specialists, particularly those involved in wetland restoration projects through the UK. Day one consists of speakers and workshops, with day two focusing on site visits to project restoration areas.

Practical actions of the LIFE3 project - riverine and bog woodland

The riverine woodlands grow on the wet, relatively fertile floodplain soils found along Forest streams, which flood seasonally as water levels rise. Their mixture of alder, willow, field maple, ash and oak trees support a rich and diverse ground flora. A total of **261 hectares of riverine woodland** have been restored, or conditions created in which it will re-colonise over the next 50-100 years. Areas of remaining habitat were restored by coppicing and pollarding holly and by pollarding ash, beech and oak trees to let more light in to encourage natural regeneration and to benefit wildflowers and lichens. Exotic, invasive species were removed to prevent their further spread. Within the Inclosures, large areas of conifers were removed from the floodplain to create the right conditions for further regeneration.

Bog woodland is an increasingly rare habitat and occurs on peat in which bog species make up a significant part of the ground flora. Only small areas are left along Forest streams. A total of **18 ha was restored**, mainly by the removal of conifers e.g. at along the Dockens Water at Newlands Plantation.

Valley mires

Mires are rich in plant species, which include sphagnum mosses, sundews, cotton grass and orchids. Through the infilling of drains with heather bales and bank spoil to stop headward erosion and raise water levels, and the clearance of invading scrub, a total of **130 ha of mire has been restored**.

Wet grasslands

The New Forest wet grasslands are found on poorly drained clays which seasonally flood. They are an important part of the Forest landscape, providing rich grazing for commoning stock and supporting unique and rare species of plants. The LIFE 3 project has restored **97 ha hectares of wet grassland** through the clearance of encroaching scrub and indirectly through the river channel restoration work.

River restoration

A total of **10.7 km rivers** were restored between 2003-05, concentrating on the upper reaches of the Lymington river – the Black Water and the Highland Water. The techniques used included the re-connection of old meanders, using clay plugs to block off former, straightened channels, and the raising of river bed levels to reverse past over-deepening, and to reduce head ward erosion. In addition, large woody structures (debris dams or engineered log jams) were created to reduce flow rates and encourage seasonal flooding to reconnect the rivers with their floodplain. The LIFE3 project is one of the UK's largest river restoration projects.

Conclusion

The Life 3 project was successful in meeting its objectives. The project employed innovative practical restoration techniques to solve some difficult problems. It has received extensive publicity and it has raised the profile of the New Forest wetlands and of the LIFE fund. The New Forest LIFE partnership has worked well together and the experience gained in restoring the wetland habitats will continue to be used beyond the end of the project.

In the Future

Some minor remedial works will be carried out until mid August 2006 but the majority of the planned restoration works have now been completed. A 10 year wetland management plan has been prepared which identifies and prioritises further work which will be implemented by the partners. The WBMF will continue to meet up on an annual basis to monitor progress of the LIFE3 restoration sites. As the project has demonstrated a need for future wetland restoration work in the New Forest, DEFRA have provided funding for English Nature to restore 2000 hectares of wetland habitats.