

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Conservation Advisory Group.
Conservation, Sustainability &
Community Planning Portfolio Holder

AUTHOR/S: Conservation Manager

8th June 2005

OUTLINE OF PROPOSED DEMONSTRATION, PARTNERSHIP PROJECT FOR HABITAT ENHANCEMENT ON THE RIVER SHEP.

Purpose

1. To consider the habitat improvement work undertaken on the River Shep and to outline the scope for future partnership working as a demonstration, countryside access and biodiversity enhancement project.

A presentation will be made on this item by Rob Mungovan, Ecology Officer.

Effect on Corporate Objectives

2.	Quality, Accessible Services	The technical input of the Ecology Officer has enabled a village group to fulfil a number habitat enhancement projects.
	Village Life	The community involvement of two village groups and volunteer work parties with the RSPB has brought people together. Engaging people in community activities and enhancement of countryside access are both key actions of the Community Strategy and thereby contributes to the Conservation service delivery and addressing performance indicator SP901.
	Sustainability	The sustainable management of the River Shep is a key output of any future habitat enhancement work and will assist in the conservation and protection of landscapes and habitats thereby achieving sustainability targets, again contributing to SP901.
	Partnership	Opportunities for habitat enhancement work rely entirely upon partnership working. Development of further projects enables more partners to be invited to participate and will help deliver the implementation of Community Strategy milestone actions (Action no. 22).

Background

3. The River Shep is a small chalk river that rises in the disused watercress beds within the RSPB's Fowlmere Nature Reserve. Draining a relatively small area of Cambridgeshire, the Shep flows northwards through the village of Shepreth for approximately eleven kilometres to its confluence with the River Rhee. Access to the river can be gained along virtually all of its length from source to finish via a public footpath.
4. The River Shep is classified as an Award Watercourse. The Council has a duty to ensure that the watercourse is satisfactorily maintained and does not cause any land drainage problems. The Council also have a commitment towards nature conservation through the local Biodiversity Action Plan process. Since 2001, the Ecology Officer has been able to bring together the different parties involved in the river's management.

5. The Friends of the River Shep (ForShep) group was established by local volunteers in 1999. The ForShep group have enabled local people to influence how the river would be managed and also to input to the conservation of nationally and locally important species.
6. The ForShep group now have a very good relationship with the Council's Land Drainage Manager. His team undertake essential maintenance work, such as the clearance of fallen trees and mechanical desilting, and ForShep undertake hand weed-cutting in the more accessible parts of the river. ForShep also have a River Warden who keeps an eye on the river and reports to the parish council.
7. In the mid 1990s the RSPB became concerned about the condition of the upper reach of the River Shep. Chalk rivers are recognised as a Priority Habitat with their own Habitat Action Plan to guide conservation action. The River Shep was of particular importance as it still provided a habitat for many species of conservation interest including:
 - Otter (*Lutra lutra*)
 - Water vole (*Arvicola terrestris*)
 - White-clawed crayfish (*Austropotamobius pallipes*)
 - Brook lamprey (*Lampetra planeri*)
 - Bullhead fish (*Cottus gobio*)
 - Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*)
 - Wild brown trout (*Salmo trutta*)
8. The River Shep is affected by many of the problems common to many chalk rivers. Namely these are:
 - Lack of flow
 - Habitat degradation through past land drainage activities
 - Siltation of the riverbed
 - Over-wide channels reducing water velocity
 - Poor tree management leading to blockages or over-shading
9. Prior to undertaking any form of physical habitat enhancement work ForShep's first steps were to collect data about the river. To this end the following surveys were commissioned:
 - River Corridor Survey of the entire river
 - Electric fishing surveys of four discrete areas
 - Topographical survey of the entire river
10. Using the data gained ForShep has implemented three small-scale enhancement projects and one slightly more ambitious project. The first three projects utilised the man power of volunteers and worked with existing features of the river. The objectives were to increase fish spawning habitats, to stabilise banks and to improve access to the river.
11. The fourth project was undertaken in August 2004. It involved the careful placement of approximately ten tonnes of gravel to the river together with bank stabilisation works in order to create two spawning riffles and stable aquatic margins. This project was undertaken on private land and funded by the landowner rather than the group.

12. Many other minor projects have been undertaken on the Fowlmere Nature Reserve using the input of volunteers. All of the projects to date have been directed by the ForShep group, and presented to SCDC's Land Drainage Manager and the Environment Agency for consideration and, where necessary, consent (e.g prior to altering the flow of the river).

Considerations

13. ForShep have demonstrated that a village group can successfully co-ordinate small enhancement projects, at relatively little cost. The undertaking of appropriate surveys beforehand enabled the Environment Agency to evaluate the impact of the proposal (i.e. when seeking Land Drainage Consent).
14. ForShep are now considering the viability of a more ambitious project, in discussion with the RSPB, the Barrington Conservation Trust (BCT), the Environment Agency and SCDC. Two areas of the river have been considered for project work :
 - (a) Top of the river (in Fowlmere Nature Reserve) - creation of new riffle.
 - (b) Lower reaches at the Barrington Boot Lane Nature Reserve - options being considered, include bank stabilisation, reprofiling, and channel narrowing in order to improve the river's flow characteristics and accessibility.
15. To assist with the concept development of these projects the Environment Agency has jointly funded the River Restoration Centre to undertake a scoping exercise and produce a report of project ideas that could be presented to the local groups for their consideration as a "next steps" document. The aim is to develop these projects over the summer months, for implementation autumn/winter of 2005.
16. Funding to implement the "next step" projects will be sought by ForShep, with a potential funding package comprising support from : the Environment Agency; SCDC; RSPB; other grant giving bodies, with voluntary labour provided by ForShep and BCT.
17. The Council has assisted ForShep in the past through a grant of £4,000 (which was matched by other sources) to assist with the topographical survey. This data will be used by ForShep and the Environment Agency to justify and direct further project development. In order to facilitate the development of the programme it is now considered appropriate to assist in the actual delivery of habitat enhancement work on the river. The financial implications are outlined below.

Options

18. The Conservation Advisory Group are requested to support the development of habitat enhancement projects for the River Shep as demonstration projects for the district and :
 - i) recommend that the Conservation, Sustainability & Community Planning Portfolio Holder authorises officers to continue development work with local groups and the Land Drainage Manager in order to progress river enhancement projects in the district.

Or

 - ii) recommend that the Conservation, Sustainability & Community Planning Portfolio Holder agrees to allocate funding support for a demonstration project on the River Shep, subject to budget availability to help lever other partnership funding from the Environment Agency and other suitable bodies,

Or

- iii) recommend that the Conservation, Sustainability & Community Planning Portfolio Holder declines to support this initiative and requires detailed submission of costed project plans, prior to consideration of the allocation of any future funding support for a demonstration project on the River Shep.

Financial Implications

19. The overall cost of the demonstration habitat enhancement project is unknown to date. An, in principle, cash limited contribution by SCDC will enable other grant sources to be levered by the voluntary group and it is, therefore, considered appropriate to allocate funds to enable the funding package to be completed within 2005/06.
20. Funding of £5,000 could be available within the Conservation budget by re-allocating an unexpended previous revenue commitment for river work. This has been confirmed by the Director of Finances. Funding was authorised on 3rd March 2000, under the budget for *Ecological Support Services*, by the then Conservation Committee, for works to repair Wilbraham New Cut. These works were completed without need to use this funding. It is therefore proposed to re-allocate this funding to support the demonstration project at the River Shep, subject to leverage of partnership funding and completion during 2005/06.

Legal Implications

21. The Land Drainage Manager has a duty to maintain the Award Watercourses to prevent flooding. In discharging this duty he is also obliged to consider the nature conservation impact of their works. The sustainable management of the river that balances the legal protection afforded to certain species with the needs of land drainage would be a desired outcome of these possible projects.

Staffing Implications

22. The Ecology Officer already attends the committee meetings of the ForShep group and has produced project designs for river projects in the past. It is not envisaged that the development of further projects will become a hindrance to other work areas.

Risk Management Implications

23. Works to a watercourse that effect the flow need the consent of the Environment Agency under the Land Drainage Act, 1991. Similarly, works to re-profile banks may be subject to planning control.
24. The landowners will ultimately be responsible for the management of their own sites with land drainage works undertaken as necessary.

Consultations

25. The Land Drainage Manager has been kept informed of the general direction of habitat enhancement work upon the river. His support for any activities on the river is crucial. The Environment Agency and RSPB will be further consulted on the development of the project, along with the Parish Council and local member.

Conclusions/Summary

26. The River Shep represents an important resource within the district both for its biodiversity value and as an area for quiet recreation. Habitat enhancement work could further increase the value of the river within the district and should form the basis of a demonstration for sustainable river management which other community groups may wish to explore.
27. A desire exists amongst the local community to further the scope of habitat enhancement work already undertaken on the river. The further development of projects will require the input of volunteer time and specialist consultants.
28. Through partnership working over this summer it is anticipated that at least two habitat enhancement projects could be delivered by spring 2006. Both of these sites would be publicly accessible.

Recommendations

29. The Conservation Advisory Group are requested to consider the above options and recommend that the :
 - (i) Conservation, Sustainability & Community Planning Portfolio Holder authorises officers to continue development work on a river enhancement demonstration project with local groups, in order to progress river enhancement projects during 2005/06.
 - ii) Conservation, Sustainability & Community Planning Portfolio Holder agrees, in principle, to re-allocate funding of £5,000 from the budget for *Ecological Support Services*, (previously authorised by the former Conservation Committee for works to Wilbraham New Cut) to support the proposed demonstration project on the River Shep and confirmation of other partnership funding from the Environment Agency and other suitable bodies,

Background Papers: the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report:

An Introduction to Habitat Enhancement On The River Shep, Nature In Cambridgeshire, Rob Mungovan 2004

Notes of site visit to the River Shep (draft), River Restoration Centre, May 2005

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