



CONVERSATIONS LEAD TO CONSERVATION

CPD that brings together outdoor practitioners and environmental NGOs

by Felicity Harris, IOL Wessex

We all enjoy being outside but just how aware are we of the environmental impacts of what we do and how responsible should we be. The Wessex Region decided that to explore our thinking around impact and responsibility through a workshop. The day was jointly organised with the National Trust at their Purbeck estate and was designed to provide an opportunity for outdoor activity providers and conservationists to explore three habitats found within the estate and consider the ways in which activity practitioners could better incorporate environmental understanding and stewardship within their practice. If there was one phrase that summed up the event it was that ‘Conversations lead to Conservation’.

Perhaps one of the most surprising things to arise was the fact that unconsciously we saw the differences between ourselves rather than the shared views.

*“I walk past these guys everyday but we’ve never stopped to chat.”
“They are interested in helping the environment. That’s great.”*

The three habitats that the workshop focused on are described in the boxes below.

PURBECK CLIFFS – are an important habitat for nesting sea-birds and the eastern refuge for auks such as puffins, guillemots and razorbills. Dancing Ledge is a common area used by providers and individuals for climbing. To access Dancing Ledge groups walk across some of the finest lowland grassland in the UK host to a variety of rare plant species including early spider orchid and sawfly orchid.

● **What is the activity** – Climbing and coastering are popular at the site but there are also many boat trips full of sightseers that stay offshore. There is a code of conduct for the site as well as licensing agreements for users and all of our group were aware of these and adhered to them.

● **What is happening?** – Whilst some species seem to have stable or increasing populations many species are declining. The reasons for this are unclear but may be related to disturbance, adults unable to leave their nests and get food from the sea for their chicks because of the activity both on the cliffs and out at sea. Rat predation may also be a factor. However the evidence base for the decline in populations is currently unclear.

STUDLAND DUNES – important botanically and for reptiles, birds and insects, and internationally recognised for the diversity of species found there.

● **What is the activity** – fieldwork with many groups undertaking transects to look at dune morphology and the process of succession. The area is also heavily visited by tourists and there are many dog walkers.

● **What is happening?** – Conservation management has stabilised the dunes in some areas leading to the development of scrubby heathland. Where such areas receive e.g. foot traffic there is erosion enabling different suites of pioneer botanical species to survive. At the foredunes the need for conservation practice is clear – eroded foredunes lacking species such as sea rocket which were easily found on the protected foredunes.

POOLE HARBOUR – the tidal mudflats and salt marshes an important feeding ground for migrating and over-wintering birds and the harbour is a RAMSAR site – an international designation based on the importance of the wetlands for wildlife. The relatively shallow harbour means that the feeding grounds are extensive when the tide is out.

● **What is the activity?** – The relatively shallow waters are fabulous for kayaking and walking around the harbour with its many inlets is also a popular past time.

● **What is happening?** Birds are disturbed both by kayakers and walkers and therefore are spending less time feeding and refuelling and expending energy by flying off when disturbed. This means they are taking on less energy for their migratory journeys. In addition nitrogen run off from fields into the rivers that enter the harbour has led to increases in algae and weed which effectively reduce the area for feeding.

A combination of talks and field visits enabled the group to learn more about the different sites and to consider threats. Experts from the National Trust and conservation charity Birds of Poole Harbour on hand enabled all of us to experience environments in a much deeper way. What emerged was the way in which an expert can open your eyes to what you thought was familiar. Many of our group regularly lead students on sand dune coursework but learning to identify sand sedge and seeing that this was indeed a sedge and not a young marram grass was an eye-opener, something that brought home gaps in knowledge. The data gathered long-term could be an opportunity for tutors to incorporate monitoring and citizen science into their practice.

Watching the birds in the inter-tidal zone gave us a greater understanding of what disturbance was. The birds come to feed on the muds at low tide and have to take in as much food as possible to get them through harder times. People walking around the shoreline disturb or flush the birds which means not only are they reducing the amount of time they have to eat but they are expending energy on flying away. A recent study has shown that whilst the number of disturbances from kayakers is far less than disturbances caused by walkers, including dog walkers, the length of the disturbances (the time the birds are away from their feeding sites) was greater. We found out that there is a leaflet which shows which parts of the harbour are more preferable to access in terms of minimal disturbance to wildlife – however none of our group had seen it.

Relevance, Responsibility, Respect and Relationships

We have summarised what we learnt and our next steps in the table below, taking these four modern Rs as a way of ordering our collective thinking.

Reducing impact through understanding more about the habitat and species we could reduce our impact ie accessing certain places and certain times of year or at certain tide times.

Sharing understanding – of the environment and being able to explain the ‘why’ can help groups gain a sense of place as well as improve understanding of environmental issues. Our journeys / walks to our activity sites are useful opportunities to do this.

Taking action. We could play a key role in enhancing understanding of how species / habitats are changing or are affected by activity e.g. impact of kayaking on bird disturbance. We could support practical tasks e.g. path maintenance.

Promoting responsibility – Whilst not seeing ourselves as enforcers we did all think that we could talk to other providers / those taking part in leisure activities for example sharing our understanding about bird disturbance.



As a CPD event

The day was run as a CPD event with IOL members having an opportunity to reflect on what the impact of the day would be on their practice. Here are just some of our reflections.

A view from David Brown, NT Purbeck Land Outdoor and Nature Manager.

"The National Trust has always been about access to the countryside, and 'experiences that teach, move and inspire'. The sheer number of people who enjoy Purbeck's beautiful countryside brings pressures. Whether it is the impacts of dog-walkers on the ground-nesting birds, the damage that mass cycling events can cause to the chalk ridge grasslands, or the possible disturbance to nesting seabirds caused by coasteers and climbers the balance between conservation and access can be a hard one to strike. We can only get it right by building partnerships with all those who run activities on our land. Our aim is to support those who lead activities on our land to become the best champions for conserving its wildlife. The IOL workshop was a brilliantly positive step towards this and felt like the start of a long-term partnership with the IOL and with our local outdoor activity providers."

A view from Paul Moreton, Birds of Poole Harbour

"Meeting and talking with regular recreational users of the harbour along with those that operate businesses from the harbour shoreline was immensely helpful for us. The harbour is there for everyone to enjoy, whether it be for kayaking, sailing or wildlife watching the opportunities for people to get out learn and explore are vast. However, responsible use of the harbour and a basic understanding on how we keep it a special and disturbance to a minimum is vital to its on going protection. Working together will allow responsible yet rewarding encounters which people will hopefully remember for years to come"



More networking events

There is no doubt that irrespective of our line of work (outdoor provider, conservationist) everybody gained from exploring the issues together. There is clearly merit in providing more opportunity for networking and already Paul Morton from Birds of Poole Harbour has offered to take the group out on a boat trip around the harbour to learn more about the birds and Sophie Tanner from Land and Wave has offered to take the group coasteering. Joint volunteering days e.g. path maintenance on NT land would also provide an opportunity for networking

Opportunities to build relationships

Opportunities to build relationships
Whatever our role it was clear that we all shared a love of the outdoors. It was also clear that at the beginning of the day we were unaware of how much we had in common. 1-2-1 job shadowing for a day could offer an easy and low cost way to build relationships and something the committee is exploring.

Actions

Access to habitat and species ID training

Our clients benefit when we can interpret the environment. We need to develop our knowledge and skills. Many conservation NGOs run funded projects with free training and the Wessex Region is lucky in having a high number of conservation NGOs based within the region. The committee will be contacting these organisations to explore scope for joint events. The idea of developing a Purbeck Ecology Certificate for local providers was mooted and was well received. We will be exploring this.

Better access to and visibility of information

There is a lot of information out there but it was not always accessible. We will be using our Wessex Group Facebook Page to signpost people to information more. Appropriate information is important. Resources focused the importance of having a suite of, for example, identifiable and charismatic species (flagship species) with little anecdotes of those species to aid with bringing a habitat to life for those we worked with.

What next?

This CPD event has provided a platform for new opportunities within the Region. We have identified a number of short term actions that we will be taking forward over the next two years. ■

Relevance	Respect	Responsibility	Relationships
	✓	✓	
✓	✓		
✓		✓	✓
✓	✓	✓	✓

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Photos of the IOL Wessex CPD event by Rachel Jones.