

Minet Country Park,

Green Space of the Month June 2004

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Minet Country Park is a newly created country park on a site of abandoned farmland in West London. International Christian conservation group A Rocha is facilitating the Living Waterways project with involvement of local Asian, white and Black communities from Southall and Hayes.

In an area of high-density housing where people have little access to green space, this once derelict site is beginning to flower, providing a welcome resource for local people and a vital habitat for wildlife. Skilled environmental scientists work alongside community activists to monitor changes in the way the site is used by plants, animals and human visitors. The site now has permanent legal protection. But developers are hoping to construct a huge housing estate on adjacent gas works land.



A Rocha's strong links with local community groups help to give voice to the concerns of different sections of the community regarding the future of Minet Country Park. The project's inclusive approach ensures equal opportunities for all staff and volunteers, whilst stimulating interfaith dialogue and assisting social cohesion. A wide-ranging programme of activities gives people of all ages and abilities a chance to get closer to nature. This project is a good example of faith groups working together to tackle issues of social and environmental justice.



Living Waterways

A Rocha UK's Living Waterways project centres upon Minet Country Park, a new green space being created for wildlife habitat and human recreation in the densely built up area of West London where the boroughs of Ealing and Hillingdon meet. Flanked by the well known British Asian community of Southall to the East and multicultural Hayes to the West, A Rocha's flagship site is situated in one of the most populated, and one of the most polluted parts of England.

Once owned by the Minet family, the site at Springfield Road comprises approximately 90 acres of former farmland just four miles from Heathrow airport. The land was allowed to fall derelict at one time and was bought by the GLC in the 1950s. Over the years, it has been used by certain of the local people for motorbike scrambling, car boot sales and so on. The entire site has been prone to fly tipping, and particularly the waterways - Yeading Brook, which runs along the Western edge of the land, and a storm drain which runs through the centre of the park.

There is an ongoing history of intense of industrial activity in the surrounding areas. Ancient and modern industrial architecture dominates the skyline in all directions save one: to the East, alongside the massive gasometer, can be seen the golden dome of the largest Sikh Temple outside of Amritsar. (See the web link at the end of this piece for more information about the opening of the Gurdwara in 2003, and about the Sikh community in Britain.)

One zone of this sizeable site, a thin strip of land between the river and the canal, belonging to British Waterways, is badly contaminated by chemical waste from canal dredging and waste products of the nearby gas works. Adjacent to Guru Nanak Sikh school and a residential neighbourhood comprising 80% people of South Asian origin, 10% Black British and 10% white people, this is as clear cut an example of a social and environmental justice issue as you could hope to find. This is a major issue, which A Rocha and the Southall Sustainability Forum intend to address.



The work so far

At a cost of one and a quarter million pounds, a brand new, very attractive Country Park has been created on the land, which is now owned by Hillingdon Borough Council. Rich in wildlife and accessible to local people, the site has a children's playground and a lodge to house indoor, nature-based activities. Extensive landscaping has been undertaken to create water features, pathways, and a cycle track. The gas works zone is currently fenced off and negotiations are underway to create a local nature reserve here.



Spiritual ethos, inclusive approach

The lead organisation in the partnership responsible for creating Minet Country Park is A Rocha, an international Christian environmentalist organisation committed to the conservation of nature through local, community-based programmes around the world. They have branches in 12 (15!) countries, including Portugal, India and the UK. The name A Rocha is Portuguese and means The Rock.

A Rocha is an equal opportunity organisation and, while distinctly Christian in its beliefs and practices, is open to people of all faiths and backgrounds. There is no discrimination on the basis of sex, race, ethnicity, religion, disability or sexual orientation. As an Anglo-Welsh, practising Pagan I felt really welcomed by the staff and many diverse volunteers at their UK office. I joined the group for lunch

– everybody eats together once a day - and was inspired by experiencing a profound depth of dialogue and debate about pressing issues of spirituality and sustainability.

Conservation, Education and Community

There are three main strands to the work of A Rocha UK: conservation, education and community. They aim to achieve the holistic transformation of a diverse multicultural urban area through partnerships with groups and individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds, finding common ground in learning to understand, appreciate and care for the local environment.

For instance, the idea of 'Creation Care' crosses religious and cultural divides. A Rocha was given £4,000 of Network Development Fund to bring together community and religious leaders to address environmental issues during 2003. Leaders from every major faith group in Southall and Hayes have signed an 'eco pledge' agreeing to practice what they preach about the environment.

Faith Leaders' Environmental Pledge

As representatives of the religious communities of Southall and Hayes, we: Express our deep conviction that religious and ethical values are vital in addressing the environmental challenges facing humanity both globally and locally.

Acknowledge that members of our faiths have often contributed to the poor state of the environment and have rarely practised the true teachings of our faiths.

Commit ourselves to educating our respective communities and followers on the environmental content of our religion with a view to promoting environmentally responsible behaviour.

Commit ourselves to promoting practices that are in accordance with our religious beliefs and based on respect for life and the need to live in harmony with nature.

SHARE newsletter (that's Southall and Hayes Action to Renew the Environment) Issue no 1 in Spring 2003 carried details in Punjabi, Urdu and Somali about the religious leaders' Ecoplege, plans for Minet Country Park and details of planned activities. It also included a survey of residents' attitudes on environmental issues. Respondents' ethnic origins reflected the wider population. Results showed that most Southall residents strongly agree there is a connection between the quality of the environment and people's quality of life. Many believe that living wastefully is wrong and that religious organisations should take more responsibility for the environment. Top issues were fly tipping, pests and drugs, followed by crime, litter and traffic congestion. Most people only visit green spaces occasionally and 60% had not yet visited Minet Country Park.

The Context

Aside from Minet Country Park, there are only two very small areas of green space within walking distance of Southall: Spikes Bridge Park and Southall Park. One local resident and businessman I spoke to recalled playing cricket there as a child, but complained that these places have not been well maintained. They have become unkempt and subject to the usual issues facing urban green spaces – litter, graffiti, dog mess, drug problems and so on, making people feel unsafe to use them.

Making it Happen

The Living Waterways project acknowledges that Minet Country Park does not exist in a vacuum, but is embedded in a very diverse community with many challenges and problems of community cohesion. Home to settlers from every ethnic and political group in South Asia and many North African communities besides, all the tensions of the sub-continent are acted out on street corners in this little West London town. Southall is a microcosm, intensely reflecting the pressures and conflicts of globalisation.

In this context, the 9 paid staff and many volunteers, reflecting the local population, work together to improve biodiversity and wildlife habitat, through an approach known as ‘restoration ecology’ whilst developing community based activities which help to improve people’s access to the natural environment and their relationships with one another.

There are debates within conservation circles about the extent to which restoration projects such as this should simply allow nature to ‘do its own thing’ or whether we should intervene to enhance the chances of rare plants and animals surviving. Colin Conroy, Scientific Officer, has adopted the middle ground, by passively observing and monitoring the migration of species such as cornflowers, meadow cranesbill and poppies onto the site, whilst introducing marsh marigolds and watermint.



Things to do

Previous activities at Minet Country Park have included health walks, wildlife walks and boat trips. A programme of events for 2004 is available from A Rocha, including, for example: a family picnic; a summer play scheme for 30 children, with fun bug related activities, culminating in a family fun day out; nature based Art in the Park for women; autumnal bird watching; a talk about foxes and badgers; and a 'winter wander'.



Getting involved

Over 100 local volunteers have been involved in the Living Waterways project in recent years. They have come from every background – Sikh, Muslim, Hindu and Christian, students, asylum seekers, young offenders and pensioners. They have been involved in various aspects of the project such as tree planting, art and craft. They have also benefited from the community-based approach, offering a chance to make friendships, improve English language skills and enjoy some exercise in the open air.

Volunteers are invited to assist with the programme of events in various ways. Other tasks include weekly and monthly work parties, which tend to take place on Fridays involving a wide range of people in practical conservation work on the site, or elsewhere in the local area.

A Rocha also carries out a range of scientific surveys at Minet Country Park, including bird counts, dragonfly counts, butterfly transects, botanical surveys, weekly bird-ringing and fortnightly moth trapping. Experienced or trained volunteers are very welcome and there are some opportunities for committed volunteers to receive training in this type of work. Volunteers are also needed for data tabulation and manipulation, for the biological surveys and for processing the findings of consultations with local communities. Of course there are always regular office tasks to be done too. If you would like to help with any of these, please contact Colin at the A Rocha UK office.



The future –developments big and small

Developers are drawing up plans for a vast housing development on a brownfield site bordering Minet Country Park. Southall Sustainability Forum, an alliance of business leaders, local elected community leaders and voluntary agencies, is inputting to the planning process with a view to ensuring that the development is appropriate, affordable and sustainable. There is real potential for street level involvement in designing sustainable communities but severe challenges, against a backdrop of the poor record of social and environmental justice in the area.

Concerns raised by SSF about the Gas works proposal address demographic factors of the particular communities in Southall and Hayes, such as the relatively young population and demands on education, healthcare, shopping and recreation facilities. The forum urges developers to take advantage of the opportunity for this estate to become a progressive model of renewable energy design. At present designs fall even to meet statutory minimum requirements. Traffic congestion, pedestrian access and enhancement of the canal-side environment are stressed in the Forum's response to the plans, and wildlife corridors are recommended. Measures for inclusion of an Environmental Community Centre are included, linked to a consideration of the amount and type of green space available. Attention is given to the needs of wildlife, such as migratory birds, as well as people. Noting that "existent green space is of far greater value for conservation than artificial green spaces" the report asks the developers to rethink positioning of a cricket pitch, community green space and neighbourhood park, in line with best practice in nature conservation.

A Rocha are campaigning to convert the contaminated British Waterways owned land alongside Minet Country Park into a local nature reserve, although it is within the 'green belt' so there is some contention surrounding this proposal.

Meanwhile more modest ideas are being developed by A Rocha and local communities for gardening and horticulture projects in the area around Minet Country Park, possibly including an allotment and demonstration garden for the environmentally sustainable production of fruit and vegetables.

Commitment to an inclusive, community based approach

Here at BEN we talk about our aim of 'doing ourselves out of a job' by ensuring that ethnic environmental participation becomes embedded in every level of mainstream activity. At A Rocha UK they put this philosophy into practice in a very real way. Micah Ingalls, Community Projects Officer, has as the ultimate objective of his work programme the 'smart' target (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time limited) of recruiting his own replacement, from within the local communities with whom he works. He has been head hunting and has already identified a number of potential candidates to carry forward his good work.

Visiting and walking the wildlife trail, or just reading more ...

For more information about Minet Country Park including a detailed 'virtual walk' of the site, a fascinating step-by-step guide to the site with an easy to read aerial photo/map and excellent nature photography, you can visit <http://ianhday.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/index.htm>

Resources

A Rocha produces an annual "Conservation Sunday" pack. Recent themes have included 'Healing the Land' and 'The Celts, Creation and the Bible' and these popular packs are still available from A Rocha at £6 each or £10 for both.

For news of the opening of the Sikh Temple, and information about Sikhs in Britain, please go to

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/london/news/march/templegallery.shtml>