

Green Space of the Month – June 2003 – London Wetland Centre

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Directly under the flight path of London's Heathrow Airport is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), protected by law because it is the home of the rare Smew, a small duck. This may sound at first like a rather obscure Green Space of the Month, but read on, because this is in fact one of the top wildlife sites in England, and it is taking special steps to involve the many ethnic communities living nearby.

BEN worked with London Wetland Centre on a consultancy to see how they could increase the participation of ethnic communities in the use, improvement or design of elements of this urban green space. We helped them to look at what they have done so far to encourage and enable ethnic community groups to participate; what response this has received from the groups; the potential for developing ethnic community involvement and how this might be realised. The aim of this article is to share this learning with other green space groups who may be engaged in a similar process.

London Wetland Centre was originally a reservoir complex on the outskirts of the capital, which became redundant when the London Ring Main was installed. It is now an enormous 105 acres of specially created wildlife habitats including a lagoon and many ponds, pools, lakes and reed beds attracting more than 150 different kinds of birds and a host of butterflies, dragonflies, bats and frogs.

More than this, it is also a fast growing visitor attraction, the first of its kind, offering Londoners and tourists alike the chance to submerge themselves in nature and commune with wildlife at very close quarters without even leaving the Greater London area.



Opened in 2000, this project is a good example of the way the environment sector has developed over the years, moving beyond a purely scientific, ecological remit to include important social elements. The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust's stated mission is "saving wetlands for wildlife and people", and this is clearly reflected in the high quality design of the Wetland Centre, in terms of sustainability and access. Furthermore, a unique programme of public awareness and environmental education ensures that people have the chance to engage meaningfully with wildlife in a natural setting.



This ethos really chimes with BEN's philosophy. As Judy Ling Wong OBE, Director of BEN, has often said, people will only learn to love and protect nature if they have the opportunity to experience and enjoy contact with the natural world. A visit to London Wetland Centre offers an excellent opportunity for any community group to really engage with wildlife in context, in the landscape. For ethnic communities there is a special dimension, since the Wetland is a sanctuary for a great diversity of migratory birds from all corners of the globe. Whatever your cultural heritage, you will be able to find links connecting you – connecting us all – into the global web of life.

In terms of social commitment, Centre Operations Manager Stephanie Fudge told me that she and her staff are passionately keen to get disadvantaged people out here. They want to encourage a feeling of wonder, safety and entitlement among all their visitors. To this end they are seeking funding for an

outreach/social inclusion worker. Meanwhile they are working to foster an organisational culture of trust, safety and spiritual nurturing, which will radiate out into everything they do. In this way they intend to keep people interested and learning, inspire them, and let people be themselves.

In practical terms, it is hard to monitor the Wetland Centre's visitor profiles in terms of ethnicity. Yet as Stephanie Fudge, Centre Operations Manager explained, casual observation suggests that audiences are becoming more diverse. However, the challenge is now to find ways to build on initiatives to date, in order to increase the participation of ethnic communities in the use, improvement or design of elements of this urban green space.



So far the staff team have looked at how they can offer access to different groups, for example by getting companies to sponsor groups to visit and make a contribution to the environment. This approach has been tried with a group of young carers – a diverse group of young people of whom around 50% are from ethnic communities and most are also from deprived backgrounds.

Southwark Young Carers came to the Wetland Centre for a respite break, sponsored by BP. The staff here developed the project with the young carers group, raised funds for transport and materials, and organised special activities to help the young people enjoy a rare chance to connect with nature. After icebreakers and a site visit they went on a bat walk, learned how to build bat boxes, some of which they put up here and some they took home to put up as part of London Biodiversity Action Plan. They made a moth trap in the evening – and met David Attenborough, who had just chanced by! They slept over, did a spot of bird watching before breakfast and on the second morning they made plans to come back in the future and monitor how many bats have moved in. They had a party to celebrate their achievements, and obviously had a great time.

Staff of the Wetland Centre are engaged in an ongoing access project, of which the Southwark Young Carers Project is just a small part. They have in place an outline outreach programme, have raised some funds and a working to raise more. They want to encourage ethnic community groups to organise events linked to international wetlands themes. For instance, Stephanie suggested that London's

Brazilian community might like to help support the endangered Merganser duck. Or perhaps there is a group who would wish to adopt the White Winged Wood Duck from NE Asia?

Birds have immense symbolic value in most cultures. Think of the crane, symbol of longevity in China; the Eagle, signifying freedom for many Native American peoples; or the owl which augers bad luck in certain Mediterranean cultures. To the early Christians in Celtic Britain, the 'wild goose chase' was a metaphor for the journey of the spirit through life. The custom, still common in Britain, of greeting magpies with a courteous gesture, derives from a tradition among one of our older ethnic communities – the Romanies.

People, like birds, have always migrated. Swallows, swifts, house martens and sand martens fly in from Africa, heralding the start of summer. Shoveller ducks and teal, commonly found in India, travel East to West and can also be seen here in Britain. The Wetland Centre aims to reflect this natural diversity in both its human and winged visitors.

The site is divided into three main areas, the world wetlands, water life and the wild side. The world wetlands area is a bit like a zoo for birds. The whole area is protected by a strong fence to stop foxes from catching the birds. Within that you will find 14 zones representing Africa, South America, The Falklands, North America, Hawaii, Australia, New Zealand, East Asia (rice paddy), South West Asia (reed swamp), Siberia, Spitzbergen, Scandinavia and Iceland. There is also a peat swamp forest and a kingfisher bank.



Wetlands are special areas where the land meets the water. There are many types of wetland including riverbanks, water meadows, flood plains, mangrove swamps, peat bogs, ponds, pools, lakes, reed beds, lagoons, coastal estuaries, mud flats, salt marshes, coral reefs... They are very important places for all kinds of wild plants and animals, especially fish, amphibians and mammals, but most particularly for birds, whose presence serves as an indication of the ecological health of an area.

Wetlands world wide are under threat, from every manner of unsustainable development – increasing air travel, inappropriate building projects, degradation of water quality through agriculture, industry, damming and tourism. 50% of wetlands have been lost in the last 100 years. It is vital that this trend be halted, and indeed reversed. The Wetland Centre wants to build links between community associations across the world to assist with monitoring populations of wild birds.



If you are interested in finding out more about national and international wetlands conservation projects, and helping to make them more inclusive, check the BEN website for a Newsflash about the Wetland Link International website, due to be launch shortly.