



Tees Valley Wildlife Trust

Inclusive Volunteering

An evaluation of the Impacts of Nature-Based Intervention on Mental Health

January 2012 – Executive Summary (Part One)



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Introduction

This document is an executive summary of a major report on the benefits of conservation volunteering for mental health and well-being, published by Tees Valley Wildlife Trust. This summary provides an overview of research conducted in 2012 evaluating our Ecotherapy programme - 'The Inclusive Volunteering Project' – managed since 2006. The evaluation involved a review of similar work being done by Wildlife Trusts across the UK, by other organisations across the North East of England and a discussion of the literature available on the link between nature, well-being and volunteering. Primary research involved gathering data from our volunteers, their carers and health care professionals, developing a unique scale to measure the impacts of our project.

Research Background

There is already a wealth of evidence to suggest volunteering in any form improves people's social lives, their skills, provides them with a sense of purpose and enhances their self-esteem, and we have long been aware that our work does benefit people in this way. There is also a growing field of research into the positive effects of green spaces on attention, stress and state of mind. The Tees Valley Wildlife Trust's project therefore offers an exceptionally valuable experience, combining these to achieve unique impacts for people who may feel disadvantaged, vulnerable and excluded by society.

The programme involves a small group of patients from a local forensic mental health unit and a number of self-referrals, who volunteer at our reserves once a week on habitat management and site maintenance. Over the years this project has generated wider interest and our volunteers are from right across the mental health spectrum, with different health backgrounds and at different stages of recovery. We believe this diversity is one of the most valuable elements of the project, for personal development, raising awareness and tackling mental health stigma.

Our volunteers, their carers and health care professionals tell us how valuable our work is all the time but we need more than anecdotal evidence. In order to grow and help more people in need, the Trust decided to conduct professional research, with the aim of passing on the knowledge we gained to others doing similar work. A key part of this was designing our own evaluation to specifically measure the impacts of nature-based interventions on well-being, which would not only demonstrate the impacts of our work but also provide a reliable and valid

method for others to do the same, enhancing our knowledge and potential in this important field. This summary presents our achievements throughout the first stage of this process.

Rationale and Policy Context

Many factors and policy issues, both local and national demonstrate the need for our service and its evaluation;

- It is estimated that 1 in 4 British adults will experience at least one diagnosable mental health problem in any one year, and 1 in 6 will experience this once during their lives (ONS 2001).

- The cost of mental health to the UK National Health Service (NHS) was £105 billion in 2010, a rise of 36% since 2003.

- There an over-reliance on prescription drugs for the treatment of mental health conditions (Beresford 2005) and more evidence-based alternative treatments are called for by GP's (Mental Health Foundation 2005).

- People living in deprived areas have the highest levels of mental health problems (Melzer et al 2004, Fryers 2003). Long-term illnesses are also directly connected to clinical depression (Nash 2011), both of which are unfortunately prevalent in our region and acknowledged by the NHS:

“There is a recognised link between high levels of deprivation, characteristic of Teesside, and common MH (mental health) problems” (Middlesbrough Integrated and Operational Strategic Plan 2011-2014, p.32).

The major strategy (2011) ‘No Health Without Mental Health’ identifies five core objectives for mental health in the UK. Our Inclusive Volunteering Project contributes in the following ways;

More people will have good mental health and More people with mental health problems will recover – Our project is primarily geared towards achieving these objectives. Measuring such outcomes is the primary aim of this study, and we already have evidence to suggest our positive role in good mental health and recovery.

Fewer people will experience stigma and discrimination - Our inclusive approach is not only valuable in terms of providing opportunities that may not be available elsewhere, but also in terms of volunteers meeting and engaging with a diverse group of people, improving their understanding of other's experiences. We believe that this is challenging in a positive way, integrate people back into society in a supportive environment.

More people with mental health problems will have good physical health – We work towards addressing the vicious circle of mental and physical health. Conservation volunteering naturally

involves a range of cardiovascular and resistance activities from walking through to heavy lifting. The positive effects of any form of physical exercise on mental health are well-documented and we intend to collect data on these impacts too.

More people will have a positive experience of care and support – We provide pastoral care where appropriate and our process of evaluation includes collecting feedback so we can continuously improve our service and ensure volunteers are satisfied with their experiences.

Fewer people will suffer avoidable harm – Staff and volunteers are fully trained wherever necessary and tasks are designed according to individual levels of ability and fitness. Standard policies and procedures are in place with strict commitment to best practice in health and safety and safeguarding vulnerable adults. We are committed to maintaining the standards of care for community health services set by the Care Quality Commission (cqc.org 2012).

Previous Research

Academic research is building in this area, but the connections between good mental health, engaging with green spaces and volunteering have been noted for some time.

Two main theories underpin most contemporary research in this field. Wilson's Biophilia Hypothesis (1984) and Ulrich's Psycho-evolutionary Framework of Stress Reduction (1983) propose that there is an innate human need for nature, and therefore create the premise that experiencing nature is important, perhaps vital, for good health and well-being. Researchers since have investigated the physical and emotional effects of green spaces, generating some very interesting findings. Ulrich et al (1991) found dramatic reductions in blood pressure and muscle tension after students were shown videos of nature in comparison with urban landscapes images, from which he suggests that natural settings generate 'restorative responses' (1999) which restrict or displace negative, stressful or anxious thoughts resulting in more "positively toned emotions" (Hartig et al 2011, p.149). Kaplan and Kaplan highlighted the need to identify ways of maximising the benefits of green therapies to health back in 1989 and their investigations lead to Attention Restoration Theory (1995), directly connecting positive thinking processes of attention and focus, which are vital for survival and recovery from illness, to engaging with nature. Hine et al (2011) found improvements in mood, Body Mass Index and self-esteem after people with poor mental health participated in organized hiking groups.

In terms of volunteering, Takaki (2010) and Lasker et al (2011) have shown that feeling useful to others can protect against and reduce feelings of stress and depression. WellScotland, the government department for mental health improvement in Scotland also advocate learning new skills in order to improve sense of purpose and personal value, highlighting these feelings

as central in combating stress (2012). Commenting on the mounting evidence, it is argued by Bird that “the natural environment has a quantifiable health value” (2007, p.5) and that we run the risk, through lack of understanding of this, of depriving future generations of a ‘natural health service’.

Our Objectives

The following objectives have been set for this first stage of research;

- To analyse the relationship between mental health and engagement with the natural environment
- To identify the personal impacts of ‘nature-based intervention’ (in the form of conservation volunteering) on participants of Tees Valley Wildlife Trust’s Inclusive Volunteering Project
- To design and conduct an evaluation of the impacts of nature-based interventions on mental health and well-being which is reliable, valid, robust and available to similar projects
- To identify the wider impacts of environmental engagement through the Inclusive Volunteering Project to Tees Valley Wildlife Trust and the local community
- To develop a solid evidence base valuable to other Trusts and organisations

Methods Used

The research design was multi-method, collecting qualitative and quantitative data as recommended for best practice in this area.

Primary data was collected through semi-structured, qualitative interviews and three measurement scales, with thirteen participants who were volunteering on the project. Interviews were based around key themes including motivations, personal development and relationships. The Short Warwick and Edinburgh Mental Well-Being (SWEMWBS) (Stewart-Brown 2006) and Personal Growth Initiative (PGI) (Robitschek 1998) were employed to measure well-being, whereas the Inclusion of Nature in Self (INS) (Schultz 2002) scale was selected to measure each individual’s connection to nature and attitudes towards the environment. The first two scales cover the core components of well-being identified by the New Economics Foundation (2009) including indicators of psychological functioning and life satisfaction.

Although the focus of this study is on individuals, we also aimed to identify wider impacts, so further data was collected regarding impacts at organisational and community levels.

Key Findings

What's already out there?

Our secondary research initially involved a review of the work being done by other Wildlife Trust's in the area of improving health and well-being. The following projects were identified;

- 'The Wiltshire Wellbeing Project' was set up by Wiltshire Wildlife Trust in 2008, has delivered a range of well-being programmes including green gyms and has strong connection with the local NHS Trusts.
- 'Mud to Muscle' is delivered by Lancashire, Manchester and North Merseyside Wildlife Trust focussing on improving physical and mental health through conservation volunteering. The project has been supported by the prestigious Health and Social Care Volunteering Fund.
- 'New Frontiers' ran from 2006 to 2009 with Dorset Wildlife Trust, involving a range of participants in green spaces, including people with learning difficulties, physical disabilities and clients of addiction recovery services.
- Gwent Wildlife Trust's 'Green Key Project' started in 2003 in partnership with community mental health teams and local Mind branches. Participants worked on reserve management tasks until 2009.
- 'Wildsteps' is a project ran by Staffordshire Wildlife Trust funded by local NHS Trusts. The project involves graded outdoor activities based on participants' abilities and also offers bespoke sessions to groups.
- Northumberland Wildlife Trust were involved in the national BBC campaign 'Breathing Places' in 2009 working with volunteers referred from social care and their support workers to improve the grounds of a local mental health unit.
- Herefordshire Nature Trust deliver the 'Orchard Origins' project working with members of their local Mind charity, based upon the success of their previous 'Past in Mind' project which focussed on mental health improvement.
- 'Stepping Out' at Warwickshire Wildlife Trust focussed on supporting carers, particularly from Asian communities. As a Natural England Project and part of DEFRA's Diversity Review in 2004 the project won the Me2 award for working with young people with disabilities.

- CAN is a new exciting project currently being developed by Avon Wildlife Trust. This project will work in six areas of high deprivation in Bristol, BANES and North Somerset to improve well-being and reduce isolation of marginalised communities through practical outdoor activities.
- The Surrey Greenspace Project is currently in development, aiming to involve volunteers with poor mental health as part of its outreach work.

Ecominds was a major grant-giving initiative set up in 2007 by the national mental health charity Mind to encourage development in nature-based intervention in mental health.

Somerset, Nottinghamshire and London Wildlife Trusts achieved Ecominds funding and have since managed very successful projects. In the North East of England Ecominds projects have included Out and About in Middlesbrough, Workcraft in Northallerton, Load of Old Rubbish in Durham, Muddy Wellies in Consett, The Walker Challenge and Green steps to Well-Being in Malton. These projects took part in a short evaluation and received excellent feedback with some gaining extra funding to continue.

Unfortunately though, in discovering these amazing projects, we have also identified gaps in services, specifically in the Tees Valley. Many valuable organisations have simply come and gone because of unavoidable funding difficulties (Mental Health North East Conference 2012) while other national organisations simply don't offer any services here. 192,000 people accessed mental health services in the Tees Valley in 2010/11, and these needs are increasing. GP's have also highlighted the lack of variety and non-medical interventions for mental health (Mental Health Foundation 2005), and the need for more voluntary-sector providers.

Findings

Our study generated very positive qualitative and quantitative data. The results of the scales used demonstrated our impacts on key indicators of mental well-being, while the information collected through interviews raised important themes and strongly supported quantitative data. Our most significant results are summarized here;

- The highest scores from SWEMWBS were received in relation to volunteers' feelings of usefulness, relaxation and independence of thought.
- The UK population mean average score for WEMWBS is 51 (of a possible 70 from a scale of 1-5 with 7 items). No equivalent score for the SWEMWBS scale is available but as a relative fraction, an average score per person could be assumed to total 25.5. The average score for each individual taking part in our primary research with this scale is 31, and therefore we can reasonably assume that the well-being of our existing volunteers is higher than average.

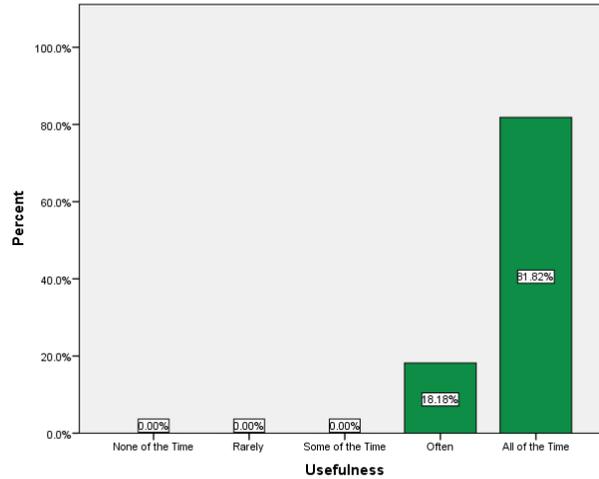
- Responses to the PGI statement 'I take charge of my life' achieved the highest scores with an average of 5.3 (on a scale of 1-6) and considering the fairly strong wording of this item this is a pleasing result.
- Item six of the PGI scale ('I have a Specific Action Plan to Reach my Goals') generated the biggest range in responses, with two participants stating that they 'definitely disagreed' with the statement.
- The mean average of PGI is 43.9, and although no population mean average has yet been identified, this equates to an average well-being 'score' of 81%.

Skills and Knowledge

This was the strongest theme to emerge from qualitative interviews was considered both as a direct impact and as a motivator for volunteering (and continuing volunteering) with Tees Valley Wildlife Trust.

- Volunteers commented that they found volunteering in green spaces "comforting" (Interview M) and an important way to maintain important skills, "for the good of your body and your mind" (Participant E).
- Several volunteers expressed interests in taking formal qualifications. One key point raised by four volunteers was that training should be approached from an individual perspective, as each of them wanted to pursue different interests within conservation.
- Volunteers reported that they had learnt a great deal from our reserves officer, commenting "he has an excellent way of teaching and working with us" (Participant E), and "I was impressed with how much knowledge the wildlife trust staff have and the days are well planned so you can learn a wide variety of skills" (Participant H).
- As displayed in graph 1 below, SWEMWBS data shows that 81% of our volunteers feel useful 'All of the time', with all volunteers feeling useful at least 'often'.

Graph 1. Responses to SWEMWBS Item Two - 'I've been feeling useful'



Confidence and Independence

Confidence and independence are strongly connected here as in other mental health studies, directly associated with learning through building self-esteem, a sense of purpose and value to society (Learning and Skills Council 2008).

- Volunteers raised issues of confidence mainly in relation to learning as a form of personal development which could lead to more independent living through employment or training.

- It was clear from one carer that our project has exceptional value to his patients' confidence;

“...when they come back they're the big 'I am'. It's all about self-esteem and confidence with them when they go back...Our lads, they're governed by rules, there's always somebody watching them when they're on the wards...obviously they get the satisfaction of going out and coming back and promoting, bullying themselves up on what they've done on the day. You do see it.” (Interview 1).

- Volunteers stated that they felt more independent because they were engaged in meaningful, structured work (participants B and D) while some carers and volunteers felt independence came from the freedom of being outdoors in green spaces.

- Participant D commented that her growth in confidence was completely unexpected and participant K referred to working on the landscape as an unexpected “confidence-builder”.

- The strongest source of confidence-building identified was the opportunity to see and hear about the impacts of volunteers' work on others, the wildlife and the landscape. Further, immediate visible impacts were stressed as very important by five volunteers;

“It seems a simple thing for someone to be taught to use a strimmer and it's the easiest thing to see a result of your labours. Now if you're doing a path you can look back and think 'I've done that'” (Interview E)

The data collected through measurement scales shows how levels of confidence translate into psychological functioning in everyday life.

- Responses to the SWEMWBS statement 'I've been able to make up my own mind about things' were extremely positive, with 81 % stating they were able to make their own decisions all of the time.

- No participants stated they felt they were generally unable to make decisions for themselves, although 9% did feel this was the case 'some of the time'.

- SWEMWBS item four 'I've been dealing with problems well' gained very good responses overall, with all participants stating they have been able to deal with their problems at least 'most of the time'.

- 16% of participants reported just some level of agreement with the PGI statement 'I take charge of my life' with 8% stating they did not really feel they took charge of their lives. However, 83% gave a positive response that they felt they took charge most, or all of the time.

Structure and Freedom

Lamb (1999) referred to structure as the 'neglected ingredient' of community services for mental health treatment and rehabilitation. It is generally agreed that having structure and some degree of responsibility is naturally conducive to creating a sense of purpose and consequently a sense of self-worth in individuals.

- Qualitative data showed that carers and volunteer participants are well aware of the value of this form of structure in distracting them from negative behaviours.

“We know if these lads are unoccupied they tend to wander astray, get back in with the wrong crowd and the last thing we want to see is the revolving door where they come back into the service, go back out, come back in and you see it so many times...working in

green spaces has got to have a good impact on their mental health, it encourages flexibility and they have more freedom over their behaviour because there are no walls” (Interview 1).

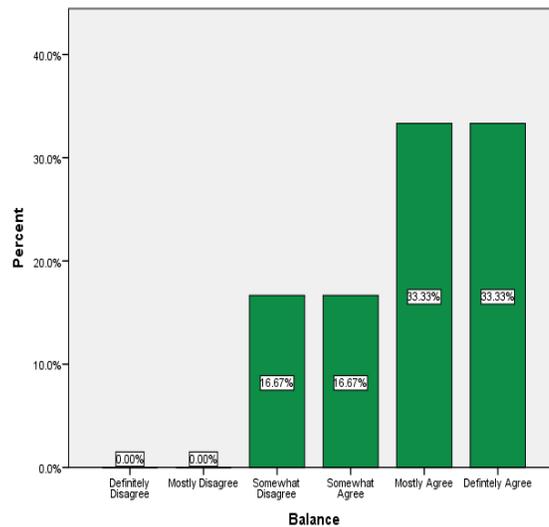
- Three volunteers said the project cleared their mind and provided a form of retreat from everyday life (Interviews H, I and J). Participant M stated felt the project helped him deal with being in a structured setting most of the time, “it lets me relax, freedom, brilliant”.

- Participant E commented that freedom and working outdoors was also important for carers to enjoy and relax.

- PGI item nine asked how much volunteers agreed with the statement ‘I have a plan for making my life more balanced’ and 66% mostly or definitely agreed with this.

- Over a third (36%) of volunteers reported they did not have a plan for making their lives more balanced, but this could be due to the ‘planning’ element more than recognising the importance of balance.

Graph II. PGI Item Nine ‘I have a plan for making my life more balanced’



Achievement

Legault and Rebeiro (2001) found that a sense of achievement through occupation may enable persons suffering from multiple personality disorders to better control their illness.

- Participant J based his goals on what was available to him and ultimately feels that these have been satisfied in just three months.

- For many volunteers, goals are of independent living and employment. Participant J talked about the benefits of working with volunteers at different stages in recovery as they present something for others to aim for. This was supported by comments from Participant M.

- One carer highlighted the fact that the project presents an opportunity to break the cycle of poor self perception and low achievement;

“...they’ll have been useless at school and it’ll have progressed throughout their lives so they’ll never have known to achieve anything much in their lives so it’s a big thing for them when they do achieve something...it boils down to confidence and self-worth”
(Interview 1)

- 16% of volunteers disagreed to some extent with the PGI statement ‘I know what I need to do to get started towards reaching my goals’, but one did highlight the reason for doing this was because he felt this was aimed at younger people with goals of employment. 75% of participants agreed with this statement though, supporting the qualitative data on the importance of goals and achievement to volunteers.

- Displaying achievements to others was found to be a great source of satisfaction for volunteers. Participant C described how the fact his granddaughter could get more involved in wildlife through the things he had created gave him a “great feeling”.

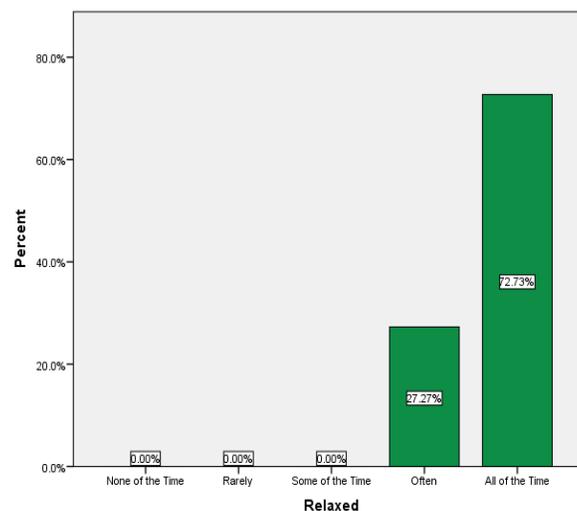
- Six volunteers reflected on times when their work had been recognised, and when the public made positive comments the mood among the group was observed to be very high.

State of Mind

Our study focussed more on state of mind in reference to how volunteers have been feeling and thinking, rather than attempting to assess mood levels.

- Several volunteers commented on how being out on the project 'lifted' them and made them generally happy. Two volunteers said the project gave them more energy allowing them to deal with the negative side-effects of their medication more effectively (participants A and M).
- In response to statement five of the SWEMWBS scale 'I've been feeling relaxed', 100% of participants stated they had been feeling relaxed 'most of the time', with 72% claiming they felt relaxed 'all of the time'.

Graph III. WEMWBS Item Three 'I've been feeling relaxed'



Clarity of thought is another important measure of state of mind and indicator of well-being.

- In response to the SWEMWBS statements 'I've been thinking clearly', 90% of volunteers stated they felt their thought processes had been clear 'most of the time', with no participants claiming they had rarely or not been thinking clearly at all.

State of mind is not only related to mood, but also outlook. A person's perspective on life and how they envisage their future is naturally connected to their present emotional state.

- Participant F stated he felt his positivity "without a shadow of a doubt" had come from working with the Trust.
- Participant J simply said "The future's bright".

- Unfortunately 9% of participants stated that they never felt optimistic about the future in responses to SWEMWBS Item One. However, 45% of volunteers reported feeling positive about the future 'often', while 36% claimed they felt this way 'all of the time'.

- Responses to PGI scale item two 'I have a good sense of where I am headed in my life' were variable, with 8% stating that they definitely disagreed and 83% mostly or definitely agreeing with the statement.

- Participant J gave a fantastic response when asked how volunteering made him feel;

"How does it make me feel coming outside here when you've been on the ward?...Normal!" (Interview J).

Social Networks

Social bonds are essential to normal psychological and physiological functioning (Hammer 1983) and have even been linked to mortality (House, Landis and Umberson 1988, Holt-Lunstad, Smith and Layton 2010). Healthy relationships can affect medical treatment outcomes and buffer against stress and anxiety (Greenblatt, Becerra and Serafetinides 1992).

- Social contact came through interview data as extremely important to our volunteers, as both a significant motivator for volunteering in the first place and an unexpected, but also as a strong positive impact.

- Participant G saw the project as a real opportunity to improve his social networks as a turning point from depression;

"it got me out the house and it got me involved with things and it got me living again...getting involved with the team it's done me a lot of good...I never used to leave the house back in the, I call them the dark days and it got me out and involved, getting involved with people again" (Interview G)

- Participant F highlighted the destructive effects of being alone and feeling isolated, commenting on exclusion he had experienced with other groups;

"The worst thing that can happen to somebody with mental problems whether they're sort of minor things or major you know like people having nervous breakdowns is to be excluded, it's an absolute no-no....then you go home and you feel even worse, not good for mental attitude" (Interview F)

- In response to item seven of SWEMWBS, the majority of participants (54%) stated they had been feeling close to others 'all of the time', while all participants felt this way at least 'some of the time'.

Choosing the role someone wants to have in such a group involves confidence, awareness of self and others, thinking rationally and social negotiation skills. Working and communicating in groups is often a core part of occupational therapy, with the philosophy behind it that "participation in groups is essential to participation in life" (Cole, 2008 p.316).

- 83% of participants strongly agreed with PGI's item four 'I can choose the role I want to have in a group', while 8% somewhat agreed. Unfortunately 8% of participant also somewhat disagreed with this, and this is something that we must work on, providing the opportunity for choice in all tasks.

- Some volunteers referred to relationships they may not previously have had with people without the help of the volunteering group.

"Over a period of time you obviously create bonds with people and I think that happens definitely...because of the nature of the tasks, there's a definite process there where you can definitely interact with people" (Interview C).

Community Impacts

It was deemed important to note wider impacts of the Inclusive Volunteering Project on local communities, but this was raised as a theme by interviewees themselves.

- In relation to how our project contributed to social inclusion, one carer noted

"It can only promote that mental health isn't as daunting as people perceive it. A lot of our friends still live in the age of people with mental health problems are like out of One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest and people still, because they don't have enough knowledge about mental health problems, they just make up their own ideas of what it is and as soon as you mention it, it's not measurable so people don't want to know." (Interview 1).

- Nine participants stated that they either wanted to contribute to their community, or become more actively involved in it. Participant A connected the two;

"I do feel more of a connection with the community because I've improved their area for them to use" (Interview A).

- Participants C and D said they had seen things in their local community environments that motivated them to get involved.
- Participant H felt it was important for reserves to be kept clean and tidy for others to enjoy.
- Participant G also commented that he felt their work would benefit the mental health of everybody else who uses the reserves by allowing them to engage with green spaces.

Organisational Impacts

Among many, many other things the following have been achieved by Tees Valley Wildlife Trust through this programme;

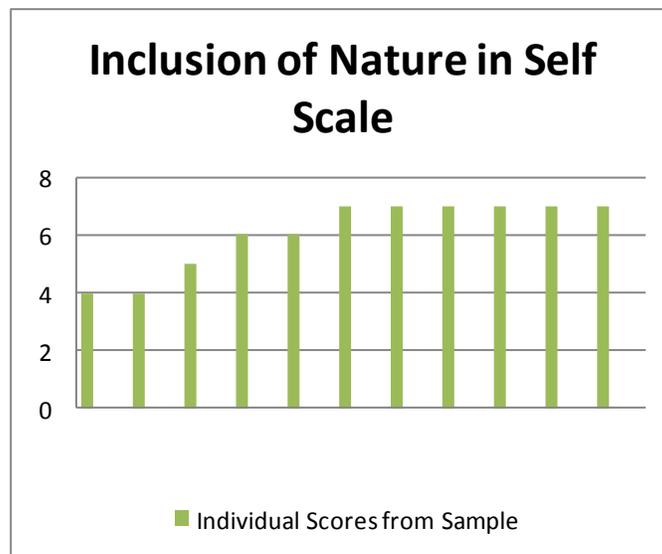
- 480 hrs were contributed per volunteer in 2012, which amounts to 3840 hours that the Trust benefits each year from this project.
- Volunteers have undertaken a broad range of activities during 2012 including fencing, hedging, path laying, installing benches and interpretation panels, building platforms, pruning, and essential maintenance.
- In 2012 volunteers laid approximately 1km of footpath utilizing 120 tonnes of gravel, all shovelled and barrowed by hand at Portrack Marsh in Middlesbrough.
- Volunteers were responsible for installing a 110m long boardwalk at Coatham Marsh in Redcar and Cleveland in 2009/10.
- In Stockton-on-Tees over 5000 trees were planted by our volunteers to create native woodland on the slopes above new lakes our work team had created on the site.

Importance of the Natural Environment

As stated, associations can be made relating to volunteers' attitudes and behaviours towards the environment from the INS scale.

Graph IV displays the scores obtained from this single-item scale, with the mean average score calculated at six (from a possible 1-7). These scores suggest our volunteers feel very close to nature, with six participants responding that they felt completely 'at one' with nature.

Graph IV Inclusion of Nature in Self Scale – Individual Scores



- Seven volunteers commented on the value and importance of being outdoors in nature, some because they had always been involved in nature and they felt it was part of them.
- Equally nature was identified as a strong attractant to those with no experience of it. One carer said while he felt the reserves gave his patients a feeling of freedom, he also felt they gave him a sense of freedom in his work that could not be achieved elsewhere (Interview 1).
- Participant M commented on how the project has completely changed his perception of green areas and that rather than taking them for granted he now respects them.
- Participant H told us that since working with the Trust he felt the need to put the skills he had learned, and his new-found enthusiasm for nature into practice more at home, taking on an allotment. He stated;

“The fact that I was helping the outside was a significant thing...being out in the outdoors is quite rewarding in itself” (Interview H).

- Participant C felt the environment of this volunteering has “kept him going a lot more physically” and he relished the fact that you “get to be involved in unique situations where you choose your activity to suit your physical presence”.

- Six volunteers mentioned their improved physical fitness, with three claiming they had lost weight as a result. One volunteer stating that being involved in our project has helped him manage his medication better” (Interview M).

- Several volunteers commented that they felt the fresh air they took in during volunteering felt better for them than the air of surrounding towns, and improved the physical benefits they were getting from their work.

Discussion and Conclusions

The data here, and what is to come, can be used to demonstrate the value of environmental volunteering to mental health, identifying that there is a strong link between high levels of key indicators of well-being and participation in the Tees Valley Wildlife Trust Inclusive Volunteering Project. We have also identified some of the economic, social and environmental impacts of the project, although more in-depth research in these areas would be very useful.

There is a clear demand for our service as stated by our participants - Participant F said that the project was a core part of his life, and that if the work couldn't carry on he “would miss it terribly” (Interview F) and one carer commented that for his patients;

“This is probably one of the few vocational projects that the lads are involved in more where it's like a therapeutic activity” (Interview 1).

In the Tees Valley, it is fair to say that green spaces have significant competition against heavy industry and urban landscapes. Therefore being able to participate in projects like ours is highly valued as a contrast and a place of sanctuary for well-being. For people who may feel excluded from society because of their mental health, our project offers them this place of escape and safety, but also one of opportunity, providing them with the skills, confidence and relationships to integrate back into the community. Our qualitative and quantitative data presented here is incredibly valuable and will hopefully be valuable to others, but this is just the first stage.

Our findings so far communicate the value of our work but there is much more to do. We are currently creating new partnerships with mental health organisations and services across the Tees Valley so we can deliver pilot projects, which will be evaluated to establish a baseline to measure impacts more reliably (results to be published July 2013). We will continue evaluating our work in order to build strong evidence that we are indeed providing a successful and efficient mental health service in line with the needs of our communities. This evaluation project has resulted in Tees Valley's own well-being measurement scale which is currently being trialled in our pilot projects and will hopefully be trialled by other wildlife trusts in the near future.

In terms of generating funding based upon this evidence we have been successful in securing £9,837 from Big Lottery's Awards for All which will help to offer formal training and a new award scheme for volunteers. We have also been very fortunate to secure funding from the Department of Health's Health and Social Care Volunteering Fund for £49,907 until 2015 which will allow us to expand our work in many ways including improving promotion, access and management, which we are very excited about.

These funders have recognised the innovative approach we, and other organisations have taken to support and treat mental health in the community and as a result of this study it is hoped that many more will too.

For a more in-depth discussion of the results presented in this document please refer to the full report available soon at www.teeswildlife.org or by request using the contact details below;

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