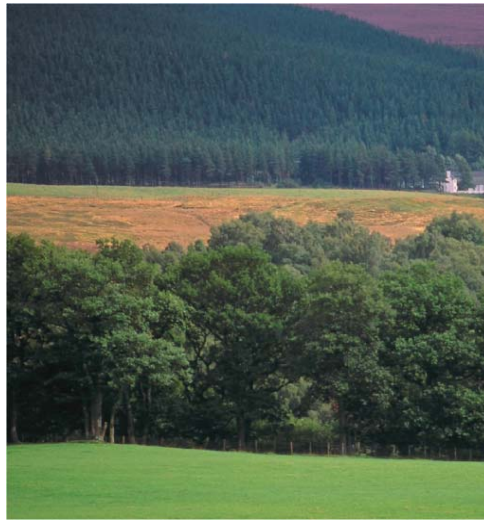


Case Study



Project

Volunteer Rangers and Active Lifestyles

Organisation

Mourne Heritage Trust

Date

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Contact

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Contacts details

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Project value

£72,000 over 3 years

About the Organisation

The Mourne Heritage Trust (MHT) was established as a charitable organisation in 1997. It looks after 57,000 hectares of the Mourne Mountains using a small core team of 7 full time and 7 temporary staff. These are supported by a team of volunteers.

Project overview

Active Lifestyles funded two strands of work for MHT. With a relatively small amount of funding, £72,000, MHT has run a programme with two distinct elements:

- Youth Ranger project – working with young people on specific countryside projects. This project developed from the existing volunteer ranger programme. MHT received enquiries from under 18's about volunteering with them. However they did not have the resources to work with them; and
- Active Lifestyles Groups – working with groups to develop a tree nursery, 'Trees for Mourne'. Existing groups from Day Care centres and the local community were involved in the collection and planting of seeds to create a tree nursery.

MHT also had a small amount of funding that they could use for purchasing new equipment to support the delivery of these programmes and other projects that would link to them.

What has it achieved?

The Youth Ranger project has been a major success. It is the first project in Northern Ireland to offer volunteer ranger opportunities to 14 to 16 year-olds. In all three years they have filled all the places on the programme. In the third year they started to receive applications even before adverts had been placed. The young people get a chance to experience the countryside and gain skills and knowledge whilst being physically active.

The Active Lifestyles project is successful too. At the start of the project the nursery had 150 saplings. Soon they will have 30,000 going out and will be able to cover an area of about 50 acres. The project gives people with learning disabilities the chance to plant and nurture saplings. These people are getting a regular physical workout, with the added benefit of socialisation and a change of environment. This is a big improvement to their quality of life.

How did the project get people involved?

The project initially ran adverts in the local press. In the first year the ranger programme was not over-subscribed but by year 3 they were receiving applications before adverts and marketing started.

Young rangers have a specific role in the management of the Mourne Mountains but they also have a variety of tasks. As well as managing the woodland they are involved in repairs of fencing and styles. They go on mountain navigation courses, where young people will be on the mountain for 3 to 4 hours.

Through contacts in the local council social work services a group of people with learning disabilities from the local Day Centre have been working on the Active Lifestyles groups. They work one day a week planting and nurturing the saplings in the tree nursery. This gives them strenuous exercise, a day out from their routine and they feel rewarded. They are given £3 for their lunch money, which they like to refer to as their 'wages'.

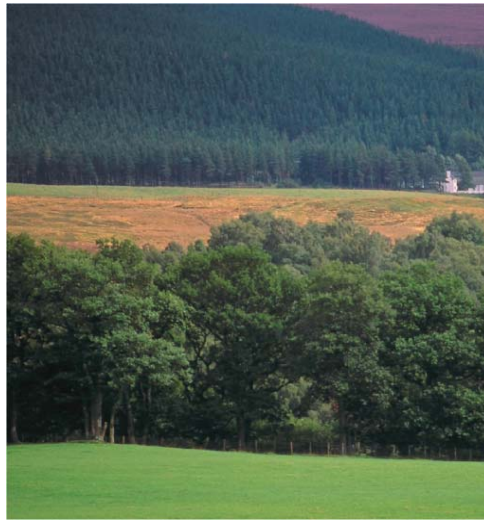
What was innovative and what worked well?

The project was the first to offer a volunteer ranger programme for 14 to 16 year-olds. The Young Rangers have a specific role in the management of the Mourne Mountains. They are not asked to do odd jobs but are involved in longer term projects. At the moment this involves the mapping of rhododendron bushes, these are a non-indigenous, invasive species and the young rangers are responsible for their removal.

The Active Lifestyles groups also gave participants an opportunity to take ownership for their activities. Groups with learning disabilities are responsible for the planting and nurturing of saplings. The work of these groups allows the trust to offer landowners the chance to create a wood comprised of indigenous species. All the landowner has to do is to make 2-3 acres of land available. They would not be able to do this without the work of the groups.

The project has evolved over time and now the seeds that each person plants in the nursery are marked. Once the saplings have been raised and planted they will be able to return to woods in future years to watch the progress of the seeds they planted.

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Were there any unexpected outcomes?

The rhododendron management plan, developed for the Young Ranger project and funded by Active Lifestyles, had another positive effect on MHT. Through this project they formed links with an organisation called Employers in the Community. This links large organisations, for example Pricewaterhouse Coopers and the Halifax, with conservation projects in their local community. So far two organisations have sent staff to two sessions, one group with 25 people and the other with 60 people.

Another unexpected outcome was when a walking group asked if there was anything they could do, as part of their regular walking to support MHT. Through Active Lifestyles MHT were able to purchase GPS and some mountain gear, the group were then given a practical project each year. In the first year they completed a full condition survey of The Mourne Wall – a wall which circumnavigates the mountain. This is being used by the Water Company to fulfil its obligation to maintain the wall. In the second year, using donated mobile phones they completed a signal strength survey across the whole mountain range. In an emergency going 300 yards the wrong way could be the difference between getting help or getting into trouble. Using a Geographical Information System at Queens University, the data collected by the group was mapped, and can be used by walkers and rescue organisations. In the third year, the group are being trained to do an ecological survey to produce a grazing management plan to keep the Water Company's catchment area in good order.

The manager of the Day Centre sees a change in those who come to the Active Lifestyles groups, he said: *"They get to work with others and it's really good for their social skills. They don't get mollycoddled, they are out in all weathers, yet they are really highly motivated to go"*.

The future...

The project is essentially building a volunteer base for the future. All youth rangers automatically become Friends of Mourne. They have a pathway into becoming volunteer rangers at the age of 18.

The project has a higher level of demand than it can supply and is looking at taking more groups and changing the rotation basis from two weeks to three weeks. While this will increase the number of people involved, it will reduce individuals' level of involvement. However without more resources there is no other way of servicing the demand.

Lessons from the project

There are many key lessons to take from the Volunteer Rangers and Active Lifestyles Groups about engaging vulnerable young people and adults in different environments and regular physical activity.

- Support from volunteers has helped make the most of a limited amount of funding.
- A secondary benefit to this sort of project is the conservation element. By the end of the project there will be a tree nursery with 30,000 trees.
- The repetitive nature of the physical activity tasks actually appealed to beneficiaries with learning disabilities due to the control it gave them over what they were doing.
- The programme has given the Mourne Heritage Trust a more sustainable long term future as they now have a much larger database of volunteers.
- By selecting applicants for the youth ranger scheme they were able to have greater control over attendance and drop out rates, there is a very high completion rate on the course.
- As well as benefiting the participants, the programme has been a great benefit to the Mourne Heritage Trust. Essential tasks have been completed by new volunteers on the site.