

Reedbeds Access and Community Involvement in the Cotswold Water Park

Project Summary

1. Project Background

The project is located in the Cotswold Water Park (CWP), an area of approximately 40 square miles which has been subject to gravel extraction for over 60 years. Gravel extraction has targeted two areas; the Western CWP, situated to the West of the A419 Swindon Cirencester Road, and the Eastern CWP situated near the towns of Fairford and Lechlade. Gravel extraction is starting to wind down in these two sections and the main focus is now moving into the third and final area of the CWP, the Central Section.

The creation of over 140 gravel pits has resulted in considerable landscape and biodiversity change over time but also has resulted in many benefits and opportunities. This application seeks to take advantage of some of these opportunities and maximise their potential in a way that involves local communities but also the wider communities of Cirencester and Swindon that are increasingly looking towards the CWP as a place to walk, relax, and enjoy a variety of activities.

2. Aims and objectives

The main aims and objectives of this project are:

1. Establish a reedbed and other wetland habitats of over 15 ha in the Cotswold Water Park.
2. Create and improve public access to enhance and encourage the enjoyment of several ex gravel extraction sites in the Cotswold Water Park.
3. Involve local communities by developing an innovative and participative outreach and education programme.

3. How will the project achieve its objectives?

The project focuses on two main sites and seeks to connect them through improvements to the local footpath system. As well as improving physical access, a webcam and innovative website created with the involvement of the local community, will give online access and provide a useful resource. In addition to this, the project will employ a project officer to coordinate works on the ground, work with appointed consultants to commission artworks and coordinate the outreach events, gather data and assess the feasibility of the creation of a dedicated reedbed nursery.

The location of the project sites is depicted in Figures 1 and 2, which accompany this document, Figure 1 shows the extent of the proposals in relation of ongoing gravel extraction, Figure 2 shows the project area in greater detail and the layout of each project component.

The main project components consist of:

1. Creation of 15ha of reedbed habitats at Cleveland Lakes
2. Access improvements and landscaping at Lake 12 (Lakeside Car Park)
3. Creation of 2km of multi-use path in Cleveland Lakes and access improvements from Waterhay Car Park to Lakeside Car Park
4. Involve local communities in developing a innovative outreach / education programme.

Reedbed creation at Cleveland Lakes

Cleveland Lakes was purchased by the CWP Society in 2003 with the aim of developing the site for nature conservation, public access and paddle sports (rowing, canoeing and dragon boat racing). The Society has developed a master plan showing how this will be achieved.

A key part of this master plan will be to alter the old restoration scheme to one that promotes both biodiversity and access. An application to do this has been submitted and is expected to be approved in the next few weeks.

Although the minerals company, Aggregate Industries, has agreed to work with the CWP society to deliver basic restoration of the site to the new plans there will be no obligation to provide any specialist landscaping works or reed planting. Part of the project being applied for seeks to take over once basic restoration of the site has finished in September 2007 and will:

1. Prepare the reedbed for reed establishment
2. Translocate reed turfs from another area of reed on site into the new reedbed
3. Fence off newly established reed to prevent damage by grazing waterfowl and mammals
4. Closely monitor the reedbed over the winter of 2007/08 to ensure its survival over this critical period.

A recent aerial photograph of Cleveland Lakes showing the extent of the proposals is shown in Figure 3.

Access improvements at Lake 12 (Lakeside Car Park)

Lakeside Car Park is one of the several free car parks the CWP Society inherited when it came into existence ten years ago. This car park is typical in that it requires a considerable amount of maintenance as a result of poor design and restoration; this has led to rutting and an unattractive finish in what could be a particularly attractive landscape setting.

These issues are compounded by artificial feeding of waterfowl which is a problem specific to this area. The feeding of waterfowl at this site has resulted in an unnaturally high density of birds causing many problems such as:

1. Destruction of vegetation leading to a serious threat of bank erosion and collapse
2. Deterioration of water quality potentially leading to damage of the SSSI Lake (designated for its importance for aquatic macrophytes)
3. Presence of a considerable amount of bird faeces leading to concern for public health and safety.
4. A physically unattractive site.

To realise the full potential of this area this application will:

1. Re-landscape the car park to address bank erosion issues, in doing this we will be creating extensive shallow margins which will be much more suitable for a range of wildlife.
2. Create shallows specifically targeted towards aquatic macrophytes – particularly Lesser Bearded Stonewort (a CWP speciality).
3. Reduce the number of car parking spaces and in their place create attractive areas for the public to sit and enjoy the countryside.
4. Provide new furniture such as picnic tables and benches.
5. Provide notice boards and work with the local community to control artificial feeding of waterfowl.
6. Re-finish the new car parking areas with durable and low management surfaces.
7. Incorporate Sustainable Urban Drainage techniques (SUDS) into the design.

An aerial photograph of the area showing the extent of the proposals is shown in Figure 4.

Improvement of access from Waterhay Car Park to Lakeside

The CWP Society manages Waterhay Car Park which allows users to access the Thames Path National Trail and other rights of way in the area including Sustrans Route 45, part of the National Cycle Network.

There is no obvious footpath route running from Lakeside Car Park and users there are therefore not encouraged to leave their cars and explore the area.

The Thames Path runs to the south of Cleveland Lakes, owned by the CWP Society, it is particularly prone to flooding and, during the winter of 2006/07, was under water for several weeks.

There is a significant degree of unauthorised access within Cleveland Lakes itself, although a 50m path was created in 2003 to access a hide from the Thames Path there is no other authorised access. As the site is still classified as an active quarry under the Mines and Quarries Act further public access cannot be provided until enabling works are carried out.

This application seeks to improve access to the project area by:

1. Joining up Waterhay and Lakeside Car Parks with a way-marked trail, sympathetic to the local landscape, taking in part of the Cleveland Lakes site. Commissioned artworks will be created along the route.
2. The creation of 2km of multi-use path within Cleveland Lakes in a manner that will allow users to enjoy the site in a safe manner.
3. Landscaping a section of bank at Cleveland Lakes to allow safe public access over the Lakes outlet.
4. Provision of basic furniture such as benches and picnic tables at Cleveland Lakes.
5. Provide enhanced opportunities for walking and cycling from Lakeside Car Park.

Outreach and education programme

This application seeks to actively involve the local community on a scale not attempted before in the Cotswold Water Park by the creation of a community outreach and education programme. This will involve the creation of a dedicated website and educational sculpture trail backed up with public events and involvement.

To achieve this the Society will employ an Education Officer for one day per week during the project period and will also appoint consultants already working for the Society on other programmes to assist with the outreach, website and development of the Sculpture Trail.

Website:

1. Development of an interactive project website which will be designed to educate in a positive way the outcomes of gravel extraction and renovation.
2. Website design to be led by a commissioned artist who will spend time in local schools and villages.
3. Community will shape the website by providing drawings, video, photographs and text.
4. Under represented groups will be particularly targeted e.g. "Golden Years" group in Ashton Keynes (elderly residents) and pre-school group in South Cerney (consisting of a large number of children from barrack families).
5. Website to be hosted and managed in conjunction with CWP Society website to ensure long term sustainability.
6. The installation of a remotely controlled web cam at Cleveland Lakes which will focus on the lakes' wildlife and will upload video to the internet to stimulate interest from both local and global communities.

Sculpture Trail:

1. Creation of a sculpture trail which will focus on promoting understanding and debate on the areas biodiversity and landscape as well as encouraging people to walk from Lakeside to Waterhay (promoting health and well-being).
2. Six commissions will be let to individual artists on a competition basis; artists to be briefed to focus on images of post gravel extraction and wetland biodiversity – particularly reedbeds.
3. Sculpture trail to be extended in subsequent phases to provided full circular route passing through the villages of Ashton Keynes and South Cerney.

Events and education:

1. A series of five walks and talks given by specialists as part of the programme.
2. Research and development of educational content with the new website for all ages
3. Production of educational materials for school groups and teachers linking in to Key Stages.
4. Will organise a special celebration event to mark the completion of the project.

Project Officer

The project will be coordinated by a dedicated project officer who will report to the Project Director and Director of Conservation and Education.

The project management of works at Cleveland Lakes will be particularly demanding and the Project Officer will receive intensive support from the Project Director to achieve the projects objectives.

In addition to coordinating the primary activities described above the project officer will, during the ten month project period, also carry out two secondary tasks to add to knowledge of an important habitat in the Cotswold Water Park and ensure its sustainability:

Reedbed survey.

Carry out a survey of all existing reedbeds within the CWP to establish their extent and coverage, ecological value, management requirements and to identify potential new sites for reedbed creation, this will be achieved with input from the CWP Society biodiversity team and will involve site visits and mapping of existing reedbed areas and a small number of aerial surveys involving photography and the use of GIS where reedbeds are larger and more difficult to map.

The survey will allow the Society to:

1. Accurately quantify the extent of this BAP habitat to allow any future changes in extent to be monitored.
2. Identify areas where existing reedbeds could be improved or extended at little/no cost
3. Identify areas for the creation of new reedbed habitat – the RSPB is already looking at Habitat Creation in the Central Section of the CWP this study will seek to complement this work not duplicate it.
4. Identify any areas of reedbed that could be used as potential donor sites for translation along with any potential constraints.

Creation of a reedbed nursery.

The creation of a dedicate area of reedbed which could be used as a source of reedbed for reedbed creation projects would greatly facilitate the delivery of the CWP Reedbed Habitat Action Plan. Reed is available commercially as pot grown plugs, these can be very effective in reedbed

establishment but have been shown to require intensive management in the first few years to successfully establish. There have been some cases where newly planted reedbeds have been completely wiped out as a result of waterfowl grazing.

Translocated reed turfs are much more resistant to grazing and sub-optimal water level control and are therefore better suited to post aggregate restoration where there is usually less intensive management. The main constraint in using turfs is the cost of transportation over long distances – this can be overcome if a local site could be identified and developed into a reed nursery.

The Project Officer will carry out a feasibility study on the creation of a reedbed nursery in an active quarry site several potential sites have already been identified and initial negotiation has been commenced with mineral operators. The feasibility study will:

1. Identify the most appropriate location for a reedbed nursery.
2. Identify cost implications and any practical constraints for project start-up.
3. Liaise with minerals operators over in kind support for the project.
4. Produce a costed project proposal for further funding applications.