

Transforming our Landscapes

Many BES members are involved in conservation activities either through political action, delivering restoration projects on the ground or engaging in applied and basic research to improve our evidence base of what works, where and why. We all recognise there is never a perfect evidence base, not least because we're moving into uncharted territory due to climate extremes, a cocktail of legacy and novel pollutants, and changing land use and management (see the Novel Ecosystems article in this edition of the Niche), but there is an urgent need to apply at scale what we already know whilst learning and adapting as we go.

That phrase 'at scale' recognises that many outcomes from conservation projects are dependent on changes both within and around where any individual action is taken. If actions can be appropriately clustered in some way it is hoped outcomes will be more than the sum of the parts. This could be through emergent properties from a wide range of ecological, hydrological and biogeochemical processes or increased peer to peer learning resulting in land and water managers adopting more sustainable and novel practices. Recognising the importance of these large-scale projects, the BES worked with the Ecological Continuity Trust to bring together the UK landscape community in two workshops, involving more than 50 organisations, to explore how we could better support their needs. While we recognised there are also many global initiatives which seek to support and promote inspirational landscape restoration projects across the world, such as the UN Decade of Landscape Restoration, we decided to start where we could have most traction and influence.

The top priorities from the workshops were clear, there was a need to build a more cohesive community and develop a more standardised approach for monitoring outcomes. As a start to building this community, the BES worked with 7 other organisations to organise a 'Resilient Landscapes for Nature, People and Climate' symposium in June at the University of Birmingham attended by over 170 delegates from 95 organisations. Talks and posters were all focussed on large (>500 hectare) landscape projects from the uplands to lowlands, and linked coastal and marine systems. Breakout sessions explored future priorities to better support the community.

It was a fascinating event and we were overwhelmed with the sheer number of projects already in place. The breakout groups all agreed this was a surprise for everyone and there was a clear need to increase the awareness of, and connectivity between, these projects. We're now exploring how we can meet this need in partnership with many other organisations who expressed an interest in working together with us. More challenging perhaps was the number of speakers who described how conservation experts had initially set targets and objectives for their landscape projects but were now having to revisit their approach to be more inclusive of local communities and their needs and views. Ben Porter from the Tir Canol project described how they had to completely start again after two years, changing funders and their whole approach to 'take the slow lane', listening and learning and truly co-creating the project with local landowners and communities. This approach was supported by Diana Pound of Dialogue Matters who encouraged us all to 'power share'.

During the workshop a fascinating split in initiatives emerged between those 'cracking on' and focussing on action with no need for baseline or follow-up surveys and those who were passionate about the need to capture evidence of change and test new approaches using experiments. However, it is the case that many communities, funders and investors are likely to require evidence of outcomes and recognizing this, the BES will be working with partners to develop a more standardised approach to monitoring. It's also the case that experiments embedded in projects improve our restoration understanding, however sensitivity is needed as even the word experiment can evoke strong reactions from those whose livelihood and culture is embedded in these landscapes. The BES and our partners are exploring ways to defuse this tension. Watch this space...