

Coetir Anian project social evaluation

A preliminary report by Arwel Jones Associates
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1 THE BRIEF

AJA were appointed by the Wales Wild Land Foundation to undertake an evaluation of the social aspects of its Coetir Anian project funded under the Welsh Government Rural Communities - Rural Development 2014-2020 Sustainable Management Scheme. This exercise has mainly focused on the primary schools, youth camp and volunteering elements. Guided walks have been deferred for the time being due to Covid-19.

2 THE BACKGROUND

The main aim of the project is ecological restoration of the initial 140ha of Cambrian Wildwood at Bwlch Corog near Machynlleth, providing ecosystem services and a context for education and public engagement with wild nature. This includes the introduction of grip blocking and low density grazing to restore blanket bog and heathland habitats, native woodland expansion using a range of strategies, including the introduction of wild horse, red squirrel and water vole. An agricultural shed construction is incorporated to assist with site activities, tool storage and workshop activities, including volunteer work days and longer courses. A network of trails is also being developed. The project timetable runs from 01.10.2018 to 31.01.22, at a total cost of £581,242.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 What is social impact?

Social impact is defined as a significant, positive change that addresses a pressing social challenge. Creating social impact is the result of a deliberate set of activities with a goal matching this definition. It includes the effect on participating individuals and the wider community and society.

3.2 Monitoring of social outcomes: gathering qualitative data

The qualitative monitoring programme has been designed and planned in partnership with the social evaluation consultant. It includes the following elements, including roles and responsibilities, methodology and the types of information sought and recorded.

3.2.1 PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Person responsible for monitoring

Facilitator for the day / Coetir Anian Education Specialist

Monitoring methods

Report file on each school group to be compiled, to include information from:

- observing participation and outputs of children
- listening to informal feedback from children
- asking for feedback from teachers

Information sought

Levels of engagement and enjoyment with different activities

Relevance to curriculum

Guidance on developing the programme

Benefits of the programme

3.2.2 YOUTH GROUPS

Person responsible for monitoring

Facilitator for the camp / Coetir Anian Education Specialist

Monitoring methods

Report file on each group to be compiled, to include information from:

- observing participation and outputs of youths
- listening to informal feedback from youths
- daily written note posted into bird box to answer question given by facilitator
- creations and presentations by participants to reflect on experiences
- diaries kept by participants
- asking for feedback from adults accompanying youths

Information sought

Levels of engagement and enjoyment with different activities

Guidance on developing the programme

Benefits of the programme

3.2.3 VOLUNTEER WORK PROGRAMME

Person responsible for monitoring

Leader for the Work Day

Monitoring methods

Work Day diary to include information from:

- observing participation and outputs of volunteers
- listening to informal feedback from volunteers
- Inviting volunteers to provide feedback via social media or email / contact through website

Information sought

Levels of engagement and enjoyment with different activities

Guidance on managing Work Days and choice of activities

Benefits of the programme

3.3 Participants in the programme to date are as follows:

Primary schools:

Penrhyncoch, Aberystwyth

Maesyrhandir, Newtown

Penllwyn, Aberystwyth

Bro Hyddgen, Machynlleth

Pennal, near Machynlleth

Dyffryn Dulas, Corris

Youth camps:

Crickhowell Secondary School wild camp

Llanidloes High School wild camp

Volunteers: various individuals and a student group

4 THE EVALUATION

Initial discussions with the Project Director revolved around how to capture both quantitative and qualitative evidence of the programme. This included imaginative means of recording subjective and objective experiences in the form of diaries, collages, sounds, drawings and other expressive means. The idea of a mobile phone blog or diary was dismissed on the grounds that the experiences were meant to be wild nature related and therefore off grid. Removing mobile phones from secondary pupils during the wild camps was a conscious decision which appears to have proved very successful.

There was also some discussion of having a reflective element, asking participants to consider, after some time, whether and how their attitude to wild nature had changed as a result of their experience. There was even consideration of running a time-series part to the evaluation, asking repeat visitors to compare their views and feelings on an annual basis. This was deemed too ambitious, as so many other variables could have occurred in their lives in the interim. Some participants would also have moved classes and even schools. One imaginative time-related initiative that was implemented was to get wild camp participants to write a sealed letter to their future selves, something that they would receive in twelve months' time and be able to reflect upon.

4.1 Education and Engagement

According to the original submission for financial support, a diary log would be recorded for all organised events, to record names of attendees, activities undertaken, observations and lessons learnt.

Qualitative data would be recorded for all education and engagement activities using interviews and questionnaires. Evaluation of this data would inform how activities are managed as the project progresses.

4.2 Monitoring and evaluating the primary schools programme

The number of primary school groups engaged in the programme and number of days per group would be recorded throughout the project. The programme had a target of 9 groups, each receiving 10 half-day sessions, with up to 20 pupils participating per school.

Year 1 activities would include an introduction to rewilding, nature connection, seed collection and maths, the propagation of seeds and tree planting, storytelling, drama and performance, and creation of nature art. Year 2 would focus on bushcraft and year 3 mainly on tree planting.

In the event, the following activities have been undertaken so far:

Penrhyncoch, Aberystwyth – one half day introductory session, followed by a full day on site at Bwlch Corog, half a day planting acorns and a creative day back at school. A further full day was spent on site developing bushcraft skills. Total 3 days. 15 pupils, one teacher, Coetir Anian staff member and specialist contractor took part in the bushcraft event.

Maesyrrhandir, Newtown – one half day introductory session, followed by a full day on site at Bwlch Corog, half a day planting acorns and a creative day back at school. A further full

day was spent on site developing bushcraft skills. Total 3 days. 19 pupils, 5 adults (3 teachers and 2 parents) and two Coetir Anian representatives took part in the bushcraft event.

Penllwyn, Aberystwyth - one half day introductory session, followed by a full day on site at Bwlch Corog, half a day planting acorns and a creative day back at school. A further full day was spent on site developing bushcraft skills. Total 3 days. 15 pupils, one teacher and two Coetir Anian staff took part in the bushcraft event.

Bro Hyddgen, Machynlleth – one full day introducing habitats and Bwlch Corog, a full day on site looking at habitats, art and outdoor maths. A full day on site developing bushcraft skills, another full day at school planting acorns and learning about oak tree life cycle, oak tree myths and legends. Four full days were spent at school on the creative art project. Total 8 days. According to records received, the introductory day involved 19 pupils aged 7-8, two teaching staff, and two Coetir Anian staff members.

Pennal, near Machynlleth – combined day with Dyffryn Dulas introducing habitats and Bwlch Corog. Further combined day on site looking at habitats, art and outdoor maths. A full day at school planting acorns and learning about oak tree life cycle, oak tree myths and legends. Four full days on the creative art project. Total 7 days. 12 pupils, one teaching staff and the Coetir Anian Education Specialist participated in the oak tree day. 12 pupils, aged 7-11 years (6 boys, 6 girls), one teacher, (plus the head teacher for an afternoon), one classroom assistant, one Coetir Anian staff and one artist participated in the creative art project.

Dyffryn Dulas, Corris – combined day with Pennal introducing habitats and Bwlch Corog. Further combined day on site looking at habitats, art and outdoor maths. A full day at school planting acorns and learning about oak tree life cycle, oak tree myths and legends. Total 3 days. 26 pupils, one teaching staff and the Coetir Anian Education Specialist participated in this event.

The programme was then interrupted by the onset of Covid-19.

4.2.1 Feedback from these events

According to records gathered by Coetir Anian staff and feedback obtained from pupils and staff, all the events were well received and actively enjoyed and appreciated.

FIRST SITE VISIT

After initial briefing at school, this was an opportunity to get directly involved with the site and become familiarised with the various habitats and attendant species. An imaginative mix of observational tasks and nature related games ensured that the children were able to overcome any initial trepidation and become immersed in their activities. The inclusion of a playtime element after lunch both reinforced their usual school rhythm and allowed them to play creatively in a new environment. Some pupils actively demonstrated different and more enthusiastic behaviour than they normally exhibited at school. Others overcame some of their usual fears, e.g. a reluctance to approach horses. Several pupils commented that this had been the best school trip ever, and some made a return visit with family members to show them where they had been. In one instance, children had taken to spontaneously playing one of the nature games at playtime back at school.

Lessons learned and applied by the Coetir Anian team included the need for a clear signalling device such as a whistle in order to call people back to base, the introduction of more nature games and acquiring magnifying glasses in order to study and appreciate mosses and lichens.

ACORN PLANTING AND OAK TREE DAYS

This was an opportunity to appreciate the ecology of oak trees and their folklore, and plant acorns which could be planted at the school and possibly transplanted to Bwlch Corog in due course. Getting children to hide five acorns each and then try to rediscover them later in the day was a good way of demonstrating how squirrels can misplace their cache and inadvertently plant new oak saplings.

BUSHCRAFT SKILLS DAY

This included an introduction to basic survival skills such as lighting a fire, with or without a match, using various combustible materials. For most children, this was a new and memorable experience, along with foraging for hazel nuts and crab apples and baking their own bread in the flames and embers. As a follow-up activity, one school intended some written work on how to light a fire as part of a planned wildwood display in one of the school corridors.

CREATIVE PROJECTS

These were planned with the school, so each project was unique. One school wanted to create artworks for the Eisteddfod (printing and weaving) but the guidelines given proved quite restrictive, perhaps more a comment on the restrictions of the competition rather than the creative process. Another school wanted murals to brighten a dark shelter in the school yard. The pupils produced four large, brightly coloured murals of four native tree species including oak. Warm-up activities for these creative projects included nature colour palettes, bark rubbings and blackout poems about rivers and waters. For most, these were totally new activities. There was also an element of story-telling.

4.3 Monitoring and evaluating youth camps

This included recording the number of youth camps delivered and the number of young people attending each camp. The programme had a target of 14 groups, each with 10 young people. This has been revised downwards due to Covid-19. To date, two youth or wild camps have been held, with Crickhowell and Llanidloes Secondary Schools. Both were attended by the Coed Anian Educational Specialist, supported by a storyteller and two experienced camp leaders. The Project Director also visited the camp. The Education Specialist had visited the schools to meet the students and their families a week before the camp in order to inform and reassure them of what was planned. One parent even said that he would have liked to have joined in!

4.3.1 CRICKHOWELL

This took place between 17th and 21st June 2019. It included 12 students (originally planned for 10) and comprised 8 girls and 4 boys all aged 13-14. The school was very positive about the camp from the beginning and the School Welfare Officer, supported by a

classroom assistant, attended for the full duration. The Welfare Officer had been on mindfulness and well-being training courses and therefore appreciated the games and activities aimed at these aspects. All students who attended were chosen because of their personal issues which sometimes affect their ability to access their education. Students who attended this camp had a range of issues: very high anxiety levels; depression; self-harm; witnessed/experienced domestic abuse; suffered serious bullying; one student was a young carer.

Day 1 included setting up camp and general orientation, including establishing camp rules and safety measures. Challenges included walking barefoot and washing in the stream. An evening talk around the campfire was about primitive man and his tools and hunting implements.

Day 2 split the group into two, one preparing vegetables, the other preparing firewood and bracken bashing. Most had never done any of these tasks before and were shown how to do them safely, including the same fire skills taught to the primary school pupils. In the evening a story-teller visited the camp to regale the students with tales from the Mabinogion around the campfire. During the storytelling, many students chose to eat lots of sweets which they had brought with them. The following day, after one of the girls was ill through over-consumption of sweets, a 'sweet amnesty' was called. The students voluntarily handed in their sweets, no one else was ill for the rest of the camp, and all the sweets were returned to the students at the end of camp.

Day 3 was a foraging day, but the group were less interested in this than wild swimming, unlike the Llanidloes group the following week which preferred the converse. They learnt how to make pesto from foraged plants and how to gut and fillet trout for their tea.

Day 4 consisted of more nature related activities, and the now customary 'sit-spot' where each student was asked to stay still and reflect on their day.

On day 5 each student wrote a letter to their future self and asked to consider establishing their own regular sit-spot when they got home, choosing a favourite outdoor location. After a couple more nature related games, it was time to strike camp and make their own observations on the week. Here are some of the selected quotes:

We've had a good week. We need to hang on to the good bits. We'll have a special relationship back in school. Nice to be part of a group, sharing. (This was the contribution from the welfare officer)

Memories have been made and will be treasured. Nice to meet you all in a different way. Nice to see you being respectful of each other. (This was the contribution from the classroom assistant)

It's been a happy time and we've had different experiences.

What a week, we've done so much. We've come so far as humans. Enjoyed seeing you as 'real' – go out and be 'real.' You don't need make-up – be real, be yourselves. (Contribution from one of the camp leaders)

Sad to be going home.

This has changed my head a little. You've been the best group to help me.

We've enjoyed times around the fire, touched on deep stuff. Remember the natural world. Go to nature in the future to help you in the future. Nature will inspire and help you. Hope this will inspire you to learn more about nature. (contribution from another camp leader)

The past 2 months have been difficult for me. This has distracted me.

I find relationships difficult. I'll remember the help I had here. Thank you for teaching me new things.

It's been nice not to see my phone. I hope the next group have a good time. I feel I have relationships here I wouldn't have had at school.

I haven't missed my phone once. I've built up lots of friendships and learnt new things.

We've rediscovered who we are. I couldn't imagine a better group to come with.

I've built lots of friendships. This has been a really different school trip.

Everyone's made this trip a success.

I'm thankful to everyone, they've made me all happy.

4.3.2 LLANIDLOES

This ran from 24th to 27th June 2019 and included 10 pupils (8 boys and 2 girls) all aged 12-13. Originally planned for 5 days, the school could only provide staff for 4 days, with one staff member present from Monday to Wednesday, when another staff member took over. The second teacher had a slightly unsettling effect on group dynamics, confronting one of the pupils on his behaviour, which up to that point had been exemplary.

The participants had a range of issues, with a couple of the students exhibiting ADHD symptoms, one on the autistic spectrum and two from homes where there had been domestic abuse. This group seemed a lot younger and quieter than the previous group. Once again, mobile phones were removed at the outset. The week broadly followed the same pattern as that of the Crickhowell wild camp.

Day 1 included orientation, river trekking, supper and free time.

Day 2 involved fire-making and carving butter knives. One or two exhibited some anxiety but the group gradually gelled and gained individual confidence. One participant demonstrated a particular aptitude for story-telling. Another drew a picture of her mobile phone on a sheet of paper as a surrogate for the real thing!

Day 3 was again a foraging day with wild swimming and trout preparation. As stated earlier, the group particularly enjoyed the foraging exercise, although they tired more easily. One student with behavioural problems had improved considerably during the week, but began

reverting in the presence of the new teacher. Another introverted pupil chose to keep away from the main group and not interact socially.

Day 4 again included the sit spot and a letter to their future self, along with more nature games. Selected quotes at the end of the camp:

I will really miss every one of you. This has really changed my life.

Thank you for teaching me new ways and to carve a butter knife.

Thank you for my first camping experience.

Thank you for the activities and food.

Thank you for letting me stay, thank you to Caspar for coming from Africa to teach us and to Jane for teaching us.

Thank you for my first camping experience. Thank you to Caspar for the songs and teaching me that if I'm depressed, to go to the woods and nature. My highlight of the week was going up the river.

After the event, all students were awarded a personalised certificate of merit which highlighted their own individual achievement and contribution to the wild camp experience.

Further wild camps were planned for 2020, to be held in May, June and September, but these have had to be postponed for the time being.

4.4 Monitoring and evaluating the volunteer programme

The original target volunteer person days was 100 per year for on-site activities and 30 per year for long-term volunteering.

Work day diaries were kept during 2017, 2018 and 2019, covering activities such as fence removal, bracken and bramble cutting, spruce removal, new fencing, creating a fire shelter, tree planting, installing a compost toilet and roundwood timber framing. These diaries were completed by Coetir Anian staff and individual volunteers and included both practical accounts of physical tasks and an appreciation of the site and nature. Volunteer numbers ranged from 5 to 20 individuals and volunteer hours logged on each occasion. Volunteer days were held as follows:

DATE	ACTIVITY	HOURS
2017		
November	Tree seed collecting	30
Total 2017		30
2018		
January	Removing fencing	40
February	Removing fencing	40
March	Removing fencing and cutting sitka spruce	30
April	Removing fencing and rabbit spirals	15
May	Removing fencing, rabbit spirals and bracken cutting	65
June	New fencing in gorge and bracken cutting	32

July	New fencing in gorge	12
August	New fencing, snedding and erecting bell tent	30
September	New fencing, fire shelter and bracken cutting	42
October	New fencing, taking down fire shelter and tent	54
November	New fencing	48
December	No volunteer work	0
Total 2018		408
2019		
January	Tree planting and bramble slashing	30
February	Tree planting and bramble slashing	60
March	Tree planting	60
April	Roundwood timber framing	60
May	Compost loo construction	60
June	Compost loo construction and bracken slashing	60
July	Fence removal and bracken slashing	12
August	Bracken slashing and bark stripping of poles	36
September	Bark stripping	36
October	No volunteer work	0
November	Putting up electric fencing	84
December	No volunteer work	0
Total 2019		498
2020		
January	Removing fencing, preparing fencing etc.	24
February	No fence tree planting	36
March	No fence tree planting	42
Total 2020		102

Each volunteer hour can be given a financial value, depending on whether it is unskilled, skilled or professional support. The Wales Council for Voluntary Action can give guidance on suitable hourly rates for each category. However, they can have unquantifiable value for the individual volunteer, boosting physical and mental health, well-being and self-worth, as well as providing valuable life experience and onward opportunity for work in the sector.

The work day diaries not only list the main activities undertaken, but contain a list of named individuals, weather conditions, and accounts of social interaction. They provide a useful record of individual commitment and group dynamics, as well as chronicling the volunteer skills gained and shared.

5 DISCUSSION

This initial report brings together the main elements of those activities which are of most relevance to the social impact of the project. It is largely a formative exercise which lays out the information gathering processes put in place to capture both quantitative and qualitative evidence relevant to the site. More information on all aspects of the scheme, including habitat enhancement, is held by the Coetir Anian team and a separate environmental impact assessment is being conducted.

The main findings to date are largely positive, the activities undertaken by participants allowing them to experience new and interesting aspects of wild nature and conservation work. Staff have conscientiously captured or recorded the process through a range of

means, including minuting key meetings and reviews, writing field diaries and encouraging participants to reflect upon and note down their own reactions to being involved in the project. The appreciative response of teachers and pupils has been perhaps the most significant and heart-warming part of the exercise, where individuals have clearly been touched by their experience. Pupils and students have been able to gain self-confidence and pride in their achievements and, in many cases, overcome anxieties and neuroses. This could stand them in good stead when they return to their everyday lives and give them a fresh perspective on who they are and what they can achieve.

It has also demonstrated the benefits of team-building and collective action, giving shy and reluctant individuals new confidence and boldness. New skills have been learnt and hidden talents revealed. New friendships may also have been formed.

The Educational Specialist and her support workers have demonstrated considerable empathy and understanding for the challenges facing young people and found interesting ways of helping them to overcome their fears and trepidations. At the same time, they have not been afraid to confront unfortunate behaviour patterns and habits, even if these were exhibited by one of the figures of authority.

A review of the wild camps has resulted in several improvements being made for future events, such as improved washing facilities, more and more varied nature games and revision of the butter knife task, whilst at the same time retaining some of the more successful activities, such as the sit spot, foraging and food preparation, along with the open air wild sleep. These will also be useful for the primary school programme.

For both primary and secondary school programmes, it would be useful to review the activities in relation to the National Curriculum and feed in ideas which could be applied more widely throughout Wales. Consideration should also be given to the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and how the Coetir Anian experience could inform its ambition to improve our social, cultural, environmental and economic well-being.

Much of the early volunteer work was clearing the site, its unnecessary fencing and invasive species and it is assumed that more constructive tasks such as tree planting, habitat enhancement and access and interpretation will follow. It could be useful with the regular volunteers to set aside a day or half-day for reflection of their own experiences and for each to write down the skills set that they have acquired through the process.

Staff will continue to be asked to gather information in a systematic manner and provide their own narrative where possible. Social impact is not a precise science and depends to a large extent on interpersonal interaction. It therefore does not lend itself to precise measurement and is more of a journey than a destination. The project will continue to be monitored and assessed as it develops and as Covid-19 restrictions gradually ease.

One of the main future tasks will be sharing the experience with others, learning from mistakes and applying best practice elsewhere. Some of this can be put on-line via the Coetir Anian website and other distribution avenues such as Zoom and Skype should also be explored, including interactive events on site and away from the location.