

Coetir Anian project social evaluation

Final 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 initially focused on the primary schools, youth camp and volunteering elements. An initial evaluation report was produced in August 2020, detailing these activities and discussing their impact.

2 THE BACKGROUND

The main aim of the project was 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 included the introduction of grip blocking and low density grazing to restore blanket bog and heathland habitats, native woodland expansion using a range of strategies, and the introduction of horses and cattle. An agricultural shed construction was incorporated to assist with site activities, tool storage and workshop activities, including volunteer work days and longer courses.

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 data

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.

3.3 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 would be managed as the project progressed.

The qualitative monitoring programme was 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.

3.3.1 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

3.3.2 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

3.3.3 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 / website

Information sought

Levels of engagement and enjoyment with different activities

Guidance on managing Work Days and choice of activities

Benefits of the programme

4 THE EVALUATION

Participants in the programme up to August 2020 were as follows:

Primary schools:

Penrhyncoch, Aberystwyth

Maesyrrhandir, 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

A separate initial evaluation report details the activities up to that point.

4.1 Activities since August 2020

Since the advent of the Pandemic, the project has had to rethink its approach and emphasis, turning adversity to advantage wherever possible. This has involved revising its residential wild nature programme and introducing new elements and approaches based on prior experience, some of which have been aimed at new audiences, all of which has attracted positive and constructive feedback (see appendices).

4.1.1 VIDEO WORKSHOPS

A series of successful video workshops was held with vulnerable teenagers during the winter of 2020-21.

4.1.2 PRIMARY SCHOOL PROGRAMME

In the summer term of 2021, Corris, Pennal and Bro Hyddgen primary schools came on site for their bushcraft skills day. These were run in a very similar way to the ones in 2019,

within the restrictions imposed by Covid compliance, such as the use of hand sanitiser, keeping a distance of 2m etc. The team was able to collect feedback from Dyffryn Dulas/Corris school. For all the schools, this was their first school trip since before the pandemic and would probably be their only trip for the summer term. The teachers said that they came to the bushcraft skills day because it was outdoors and as they had been on site before, so they knew it would be Covid safe for their pupils. The teachers and the pupils appreciated the chance to leave their school site and go on a trip, taking part in outdoor activities in a beautiful setting. Very positive feedback was provided by both staff and pupils.

Bro Hyddgen also sent another class to the site for a 3-day project. This was to take part in an art project to do with decorating the newly finished shed. All the staff and pupils again commented on how lovely it was for them to be out of the classroom and out in nature. The pupils dug clay from the land and learnt to make natural clay paint, colouring it with natural dyes. They then used the clay paint to decorate the walls inside the shed using leaves/leaf shapes as the theme. They also made plaster cast tiles of natural materials to display on the walls. They also fitted in games, other nature art activities, some tree and plant identification etc. The team worked with 16 new pupils and 3 school staff on this project.

In the autumn of 2021, the team welcomed 3 new schools onto the primary schools' programme. Tal-y-bont (23 pupils), Llanidloes Primary (24 pupils) and Ysgol Dafydd Lloyd (26 pupils). Each school visited the site for their habitat/maths/environmental art day, and the education specialist visited each school for their 'oak tree' day – sowing acorns, learning about the life cycles of oak trees, nature connection games, fun oak tree facts etc.

In the spring term of 2022, Bro Hyddgen, Corris and Pennal arranged to come on site for the final day of their 3-year programme. Unfortunately, due to staff shortages as a result of Covid, Pennal and Corris had to cancel. Bro Hyddgen came to plant trees, play nature connection games, 'interview a tree' (a writing activity where the pupils, in pairs, would 'interview' a tree and write what they thought the tree's answers would be e.g., how old the tree was, what its favourite season was and why, the funniest thing it had ever seen or heard, its name etc.). This was a good exercise for the pupils to use their imaginations and practice their writing skills. Working in pairs, most pairs managed to plant an average of 8 trees. The 'interview a tree' activity ensured plenty of discussion, imagination, and then amusement as they tried to think what the funniest thing the tree might have seen would have been. Each group then had to read their interview to the rest of the class. They were also taught about the amazing world under their feet – the 'wood wide web' – and how trees communicate with each other and other plants via mycorrhizal networks, sharing information and nutrients.

4.1.3 2021 YOUTH CAMP

Only one camp held due to pandemic school visit restrictions, but this was very successful. A 5-day camp in late June, for 11 Young Carers and 1 staff member from Credu. Staff feedback and analysis is included below:

It was very important for the young people to have time away from their caring responsibilities and time outdoors after the lockdowns and restrictions of the past months. All this contributed to the very high energy levels, high volume levels and need to push boundaries (e.g. absconding from their tents during the night). The mix of activities worked. They loved their free time too – spent a lot of time down in the river at the bottom of the site,

hanging around in trees, and up by the compost loos. For next time, make sure to build in plenty of free time to the days' activities, and remind them at the start of each day when their free time is. High energy games – only after the feast and before sleeping out under the stars. Timings of the camps: The teenage brain is vastly different to the adult brain! Sleep patterns are very different too. Perhaps shift the timings of the camps, maybe start at 11am and go on until late in the evening. Explore the magic of dusk/night, star gazing activities, flaming torches etc. Onward ideas to emerge included researching the teenage brain and sleep patterns, read book “Why do we sleep?” Could do a Credu ‘camp with a twist’ and try out some of these ideas.

4.1.4 2022 SUMMER YOUTH CAMPS

These were held without funding in order to deliver some of the camps cancelled in 2020 and 2021. They included a group from the Penparcau area of Aberystwyth, an area with large numbers of children living in poverty, and high levels of social and economic deprivation. There were 10 students aged 11-13, 3 girls and 7 boys, accompanied by a member of staff from Penparcau Community Hub, one volunteer, camp facilitators, the Coetir Anian Education and Community Engagement Manager, plus a storyteller. Feedback from the event is included in the appendix.

The Credu (young carers) camp was a return visit, with three of the nine young participants having been to the previous year's event, along with the same member of staff. This group of 12-14 year olds included 6 girls and 3 boys. One other girl had been unable to attend because social services had been unable to find a carer for her mother whilst her daughter was at camp. Again, feedback is provided in the appendix.

Llanidloes High School youth camp included 10 teenagers, five girls and five boys, and two members of staff who split the week between them, along with the usual Coetir Anian support.

The City of Sanctuary, Cardiff youth camp included 9 young male refugees aged 14-17, accompanied by two members of staff. This time, because of language issues and potential barriers, it was decided to add a musician to the group for an evening's activity. Staff feedback is provided in the appendix.

4.1.5 NATURE ARTS DROP

Nature Arts Drop was a project based on the highly successful ‘Arts Drop’ packs that were created for vulnerable children in Yorkshire during the first lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was adopted and adapted by Coetir Anian/Cambrian Wildwood and incorporated into its work programme, working with vulnerable children in North Ceredigion, Powys (Machynlleth, Llanidloes and Newtown areas) and Meirionnydd/Tywyn areas.

Nature Arts Drop was led by Cambrian Wildwood's Education Specialist, Clarissa Richards, who worked with Elaine Burke, the health expert who jointly devised the original Arts Drop project. Clarissa was supported by project officer Nia Huw, who helped with translations, communications, bag packing and delivery.

Clarissa's and Nia's hours were contributed by Wales Wild Land Foundation and funded as part of the Sustainable Management Scheme project as an adaptation to the effect of the pandemic on the schools programme. When project officer Nia sent the press release to

the Welsh Government about Nature Arts Drop, they were extremely pleased, saying that this was exactly the sort of innovative project that they want to see happening and asked us if they could produce a short video/film about it for their climate change week conference that they were running the following week. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough time to both get enough footage and produce a film.

The packs were specifically designed for children identified as being at home, at risk and with limited access to the internet. From Tuesday 10th of November, key workers and teachers distributed specialist creative activity packs to 600 children and young people who had been identified as the most vulnerable in Cambrian Wildwood's 'catchment' area outlined above.

Packs consisted of a tote bag of high quality art materials and 20 age-appropriate creative activity postcards. Three different packs were developed and distributed for children and young people across a wide age range:

- 80 packs for early years children – from infancy up to 5 years old
- 370 packs for children aged between 6 and 11
- 150 packs for young people aged between 12 and 16

This to some extent compensated for the suspension of the secondary schools camp programme, which was disrupted by the onset of the Pandemic. A separate evaluation report has been prepared for this aspect of the programme.

4.1.6 WINTER OF WELLBEING ACTIVITIES

These sessions were partly funded by Welsh government's 'Winter of Wellbeing' funding and partly funded (staff time) by the original SMS grant.

There was a succession of six Saturdays through the winter for teenagers aged 12 – 16 and were extraordinarily successful. There was a core group of about ten teenagers who came every time and another group of about eight who came when they could, fitting in and around the core group. The teenagers formed very close friendships and were a delight to work with, throwing themselves wholeheartedly into every activity offered – spoon carving, felting, shelter building, campfire cooking, making rush torches, tree planting, river trekking, games etc. Two sessions were also offered to primary school children which were also very successful and very much valued by the parents. Many of these children returned for activity days held in the 2022 summer holidays.

4.1.7 WILD RECOVERY

As part of the development of the adult education programme at Coetir Anian, in 2021 the team ran a pilot project called 'Wild Recovery.' They offered 2 residential camps to Changes UK, a charity which supports people recovering from addiction issues. They worked with the Changes UK branch in Birmingham. The camps were facilitated by Kara Moses, another facilitator and then Coetir Anian staff did the logistics, catering etc.

Each camp had a 'taster day' when staff and clients travelled over for the day to experience the site and activities 3 weeks before the residential camp. Around 15 clients attended the taster day, and then around 10 – 12 of them came back for the camp. Each camp had a different group of clients. The camps were very helpful to the clients. It is hoped that funding

can be obtained in order to run 3 taster days + camps each year with this organisation. Activities included fire lighting skills, butchering a deer, foraging walk, making baskets, AA style meetings around the campfire in the evenings.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Coetir Anian programme has demonstrated amply the opportunities and benefits from introducing individuals of different ages and backgrounds to a nature based and outdoor experience, coupled to a sense of self-sufficiency and survival. The art and creative element was also a key and memorable component. The careful and meticulous planning and execution of the various activities shows how much care and thought went into organising and managing the events, especially when dealing with children, young people and vulnerable adults. The addition of a summer camp for young refugees from the Cardiff City of Sanctuary project demonstrated another valuable level of engagement.

It also shows the inventiveness and ingenuity of the programme organisers in adapting the work in the face of the unforeseeable effects of the Covid pandemic. They modified their activities to take account of lockdown and took the opportunity to review and reflect on their direction. The fact that new activities and partners came on board demonstrates the relevance and adaptability of the programme as a social and educational catalyst.

A large body of information (developed and agreed at the outset) was gathered during the course of the programme, in the form of staff notes, diary entries and written reflections, some which are given in the appendix. This body of knowledge will be useful in informing any future activities by this or any other group planning similar or comparable events. It can also be used to advise policy makers in the areas of youth development, outdoor learning, mental health and general wellbeing.

The social value of such a programme can be difficult to assess, but making positive changes to often troubled or insecure lives can be life changing in many instances. It may have given some participants newly found confidence, a sense of belonging and a greater sense of their place and worth in society, along with a better understanding of the natural world, especially at a time when climate change and ecosystem degradation are very live issues. The experience may have given some of the participants a new sense of direction and purpose, possibly preventing harmful or antisocial behaviour in later life. It may even have informed and inspired future career paths in environmental and green activities.

The three and a half pages of positive feedback given in the appendix provide ample evidence of the effect the project has had on the lives of its young participants, with many expressing their feeling of happiness and appreciation, along with a sense of belonging and active involvement.

It is easy to underestimate the disconnect between children and young people (even in rural areas) and their natural surroundings with the advent and growing popularity of online activity and concerns about public safety. The pandemic may have exacerbated this sense of isolation and separation and a programme such as this which provides safe and structured access and (re)introduction to the countryside is to be welcomed.

The events should also have proved useful and inspirational to the teachers and other educators who took part in the exercise, reminding them of the rich and diverse natural

resource on their doorstep which can be used as an outdoor classroom for the delivery of a wide range of science and arts based curriculum subjects.

It will be important to keep the momentum going, either through a follow-up programme or by embedding or mainstreaming activities into established bodies such as schools and social and cultural services. Much of this work reflects the ambitions of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act and should be used as a model example of active intervention and innovation with young people.

APPENDIX

Selective feedback from 2019-22 activities

2019 Youth camp

Participants

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.

2020 Penparcau Hub youth camp

Feedback from teenagers in the closing circle at end of camp

I feel very good. Happy I've been through 4 nights without my phone and spending most days and nights with friends.

Happy to spend time with friends and get closer.

I'm happy, no one was messing around. I got to spend 4 days with friends and got to know E--- (name of one of the girls)

I loved doing the tanning, that was very interesting.

It's been really fun. I learnt to carve a knife and we went on walks and stuff, it was fun.

I enjoyed cutting wood, putting stuff on the fire, and carrying wood with the wheelbarrows.

Feedback from the Penparcau hub staff member

Love how everyone has really helped each other with their problems.

After returning home, the staff member in a phone call said that she had had a lot of positive feedback from the families and that the grandmother of one of the boys had brought a bunch of flowers to the hub to say thank you and that the week had been 'life-changing' for her grandson.

Credu Youth Camp 2022

Feedback from teenagers in closing circle at end of camp

I enjoyed it.

I'm grateful for spending a week with random people. Once you take everything away it shows who people really are, not the mask they usually wear.

Thanks to all the staff for being understanding to everybody. I know a gang of teenagers with hormones raging is not the easiest thing.

You're all really kind people.

You welcomed us as a family. We were never looked at as anything other than friends and family from the beginning. It was nice to be accepted.

Thank you for pushing us to our limits.

I was really nervous for coming. The moment I got here all my anxieties went away and I forgot about the real world.

Cardiff City of Sanctuary feedback

Kate, Chris and the young people loved their time with you and the rest of the staff during their week at the camping residential. We would love the opportunity to take part again next year if that's an option! It would be good to get a group of the more isolated young people to something like this and with advance planning we can ask their social workers to help with the arrangements to get to the site if that helps.

Nature/art shed feedback

I really liked doing the mandala leaf bashing picture. I feel happy and feeling great. Nature is fun and you get to learn new things and you get to explore new things. I have had fun with you all.

I liked making the mandala. I feel happy.

I enjoyed leaf and flower mashing. I'm calm and happy. I've learnt the tree, bracken and moss names.

I really liked when I learned new things. I feel very happy and I feel very nice. Nature means to me if it's fun you can learn new things and have adventures. I would love to come back.

I have enjoyed the tiles. I'm feeling happy. I learnt the names of trees.

I enjoyed discovering new stuff. I am feeling happy. I learnt about bracken.

I enjoyed digging the hole (to find clay), making the tiles, playing with clay, picking the bilberries, adventure to the rain forest, mandalas, going on the walk to see trees. I loved it.

I loved the tiles, leaf printing, making mandalas, digging holes, adventures and picking berries.

I enjoyed leaf printing, having lunch, having blue berries, mandalas, digging in a hole, playing in the river. I feel happy. I learnt names of trees.

I enjoyed when I made different kinds of stuff with paint and digging in the mud hole and the sieving and the bus and knowing the different trees and the mandala and playing in the sun and playing in the mud. I feel tired and happy and hungry and crazy. I learnt different kinds of trees.

I enjoyed berries, painting, tiles, walking, going in the river, mandalas. I feel happy and tired.

I enjoyed tiles, leaf prints, mud baths, bilberries, mandalas and walking. I feel happy and hungry. I have learnt to dig a hole.

Staff

Thank you for 3 wonderful days. Hope to come and join you again. Enjoyed the leaf and flower printing. Feeling calm, relaxed and happy.

Wild Recovery quotes

This has given me a bit more self-awareness. I've realised I'm not alone. I've been on my sit spot and surrounded by nature. I've realised I'm never alone. This has boosted my recovery.

This is the best experience I've had in rehab. If I relapse in the future, I will remember this, and this might be the one thing that keeps me sober and gets me through.

This has been the single most important part of my recovery.

This has shown me that when I'm feeling low and thinking of using drugs, I can think of this experience and know I can push through.

This has been the best day of my adult life.

Today I feel more comfortable being myself.

This is one of the best experiences I've ever had.

This has shown me that I can be happy - I thought I never would be again.

From a recovering addict's point of view, this has done me the world of good.