



Research summary 14: Sound of Sopranos

'A biodiversity project to improve habitats for the Soprano Pipistrelle bat is further evidence that work on green infrastructure can have far-reaching economic and social benefits.'

Key messages

- Work on bat habitats demonstrated significant, wider benefits to the Northwest on five counts: climate change adaptation; quality of place; health and wellbeing; recreation and leisure, and land and biodiversity.
- The use of trainees from the New Deal Environment Task Force provided long-term unemployed people with important opportunities to develop their skills and employability.
- Funding streams such as SITA Trust's Enriching Nature programme are not only good for biodiversity but also provide local economic and community benefits.

The context

The Sound of Sopranos project¹ was launched by the Wildlife Trust for Lancashire, Manchester and North Merseyside following the discovery that the Soprano Pipistrelle bat (*Pipistrellus pygmaeus*) is a distinct species from the Common Pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus pipistrellus*), and that both are resident in the UK.

The trust obtained funding from the SITA Trust's **Enriching Nature** programme to monitor and enhance habitats for the Soprano Pipistrelle. As well as training volunteers to collect data on the bats, the project also aims to enhance bat habitats on selected sites. This habitat enhancement work received funding from Natural Economy Northwest to optimise the benefits, especially those for the local economy and community.

For the habitat enhancement, the wildlife trust worked with the New Deal Environment Task Force for long-term unemployed people. A total of 61 people were recruited via referrals from jobcentres at Preston and Chorley. The trainees participated for 30 hours per week, spread over three days of practical work on site, one day carrying out job search activities and half a day of training, progress reviews and additional assistance.

The project focused on six sites that offered the wetland and riverside habitats favoured by the Soprano Pipistrelle.

Work consisted mainly of managing wetland and controlling water levels. This included:

- At Moston Fairway Nature Reserve, a unique marshland area on former railway sidings in Manchester, the team removed dense willow scrub to create open areas where bats can feed.
- At Red Moss Site of Special Scientific Interest at Horwich, near Bolton, the team installed dams to raise water levels and thus create more feeding areas for the bats.
- At Brockholes Nature Reserve, a former sand and gravel quarry offering a mix of wetland and woodland, work included installing a pipe to control water levels; clearing scrub; thinning woodland; erecting fences; controlling invasive species; and propagating common reed for reed bed areas.
- At Redscar & Boilton Woods, the team worked to control the invasive Himalayan Balsam and constructed bat and bird boxes.
- At Duxbury Woods, rhododendron was removed to enhance habitat and feeding areas.
- At Withnell Nature Reserve the team worked to thin trees, improve access, plant trees and shrubs and install silt traps in a stream.

The findings

The project activity and target work sites were measured against the 11 economic benefits of Green Infrastructure as identified in the summary publication *The Economic Value of Green Infrastructure* (Natural England and NWDA, 2008)².

In terms of **climate change adaptation and mitigation**, the activities made a significant contribution. At Red Moss, formerly part of an extensive mossland complex, the work will ensure active growth of sphagnum across the site. Mosslands are by far the most effective UK habitats for carbon sequestration, but many are releasing CO₂ due to erosion and exploitation for horticultural peat and low water tables. With an area of 47 ha, Red Moss has the potential to capture 169 tonnes of CO₂ per year.

All of the work carried out by the teams has had a positive impact on **quality of place**, improving visual amenity, biodiversity, access and education. In terms of **health and wellbeing**, the benefits extend to both the

users of the sites and the members of the work team. The links between health and wellbeing and the natural environment are well documented and it follows that any work that encourages local people to use nature reserves for recreation has a positive impact. In addition, for some trainees, joining the New Deal team represents a significant increase in levels of physical activity. Team supervisors often report a noticeable improvement in trainees' fitness. The routines and timekeeping required can also represent a lifestyle change.

All of the sites worked on by the team are used by local people for **recreation and leisure**. The positive management enhances the leisure experience, helping to provide a safer environment for members of the public and to increase opportunities for activities such as walking and cycling. In terms of **land and biodiversity**, the work carried out at Red Moss and Brockholes was part of much larger projects involving the engagement of contractors working in the land-based industries. These projects have also created four new posts with the wildlife trust.

The New Deal trainees received on the job training and developed skills related to GI management. They also developed more generic workplace skills, such as effective team working and communication. Several trainees gained qualifications in areas such as health and safety and manual handling. The wildlife trust became a centre for delivery of Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) unit awards.

The Wildlife Trust hopes to continue to make use of government schemes to tackle unemployment, perhaps even developing apprenticeships that could provide a supply of skilled GI managers for the future.

The challenge

The project period coincided with a major downturn in the employment market. Unemployment levels were increasing significantly and employers who were recruiting were able to access a pool of candidates with recent employment experience and up to date skills. This may explain why only one trainee went on to employment, although it is encouraging that this was in GI management.

Since the project started, the Government has announced a new package of measures to tackle unemployment. The most immediate is the **Future Jobs Fund**, and the wildlife trust is working with partners to develop short term jobs under this programme. This may provide access to additional funding, including the Working Neighbourhoods Fund. The trust is keen to

develop these opportunities into apprenticeships with the aim of providing a supply of skilled GI managers to meet potential future demand.

Find out more

Natural Economy Northwest
www.naturaleconomynorthwest.co.uk

Wildlife Trust for Lancashire, Manchester and North Merseyside
www.lancswt.org.uk

New Deal
www.jobcentreplus.co.uk

Future Jobs Fund
www.dwp.gov.uk/futurejobsfund

SITA Trust
www.sitatrust.org.uk

North West Biodiversity Forum
www.biodiversitynw.org.uk

^{1&2} *The Sound of Sopranos: Supporting people for their contribution to the economy, environment and community*
www.naturaleconomynorthwest.co.uk/resources+reports.php



Environment task force workers help to construct bat boxes.

