

Project description

Background

The Coetir Anian project is based at Bwlch Corog, a 350 acre site near Machynlleth, Wales. Our project is funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Developments. Wales Wild Land Foundation (who administer the Coetir Anian project) acquired Bwlch Corog in 2017 on a 125 year lease from the Woodland Trust. The project started in 2018 with the appointment of the Project Director, followed by appointments in 2019 for a Project Officer and an Education Specialist. The project is best described as ecosystem restoration with a substantial element of education and other people engagement activities.

An overview of our project

Our aim is to regenerate native woodland, blanket bog and upland heathland habitats at the same time as introducing people to the benefits of being in nature through education and a varied programme of activities. We have a holistic vision for the project in which through education, volunteering and experiencing nature on many different levels at Bwlch Corog, people can 'see the big picture' and realise that they can become agents of regeneration in harmony with nature. "Reconciling the broken relationship between humans and nature, between land and people, is perhaps the most important part of restoration" (Kara Moses, facilitator of social and ecological regeneration, supporting people and land to rewild, and Vice Chair of the Coetir Anian/Cambrian Wildwood Project).

What we have been doing

Infrastructure Works

To create better access and improve facilities thereby enabling more groups to participate in activities on site).

1 Compost toilets

With the help of volunteers (mainly from the local community but also visiting groups e.g. Chester Zoo staff) a compost toilet was built using larch timber harvested from our woods on site. A stand of larch had been planted on what was ancient woodland and gradual clearing of this larch will allow native tree and woodland plants from the ancient woodland to re-

establish. Using our own wood in the construction of the compost toilet has helped reduce our use of carbon and is a more sustainable way to build. The toilet has a sedum roof to help it blend into the scenery. It is used by volunteers, visitors from the general public and children and adults taking part in the education programmes. It is also a 'loo with a view!'



The compost toilets



View from the window!

2 Round shed

Again, using volunteer help and our own timber we have built a shed for storage and workshop space. It uses roundwood timber framing, straw bale walls and a green roof. Volunteers were able to join in with the building work and learn about sustainable building techniques. This improves self-confidence and self-reliance skills.



Construction of the round shed in progress



Interior with clay plaster

3 Access track

Improvements to the track leading to the site have been carried out to enable easier access.

4 Corral and crush

We have built a corral and crush to assist in managing the health and welfare of the large herbivores.

Habitat and species restoration

1 Species surveys

A formal mammal survey has been undertaken which found we have dormice living in our ancient woodland and evidence of visits from otters.

A formal invertebrate survey discovered 281 species on the site, including 9 designated for their rarity or decline.

Informal surveys of birds and plants are ongoing.

2 Blanket bog restoration

Drainage grips, which were dug to drain the land in the 1930's, have now been blocked and small pools/scrapes have been created in their place. This has already led to an increase in the diversity of insects present which in turn has attracted a wider variety of birds e.g. swallows, swifts, snipe, red grouse, hen harrier. Combined with light grazing by horses and Highland Cattle, the restoration work is leading to the vast acres of ecologically degraded purple moor grass (*Molinia caerulea*) becoming vibrant bog habitat, heather moorland and upland meadows. At present we have small patches of heather and bilberry and some specimens of bog-loving plants such as bog asphodel which we hope will respond positively and increase as the habitats develop.



Damming of the drainage ditches to restore bog habitat has created around 1,400 scrapes and pools leading to a greater diversity of plants, insects, amphibians and birds. Raising the water table will restore blanket bog species over time

3 Woodland restoration

The aim is for tree cover to gradually increase over the site. About 1,000 trees have been planted in 2 separate enclosed areas. A few hundred trees are being planted each year across the site using 'no fence planting' techniques: oak, crab apple, hawthorn, birch, cherry, aspen, willow and pine.

4 Heathland and grazing animals

Heathland and other upland habitats such as acid grassland meadows are being restored using large herbivores. Our small herd of wild horses has bred for two seasons. These are joined by small number of Highland cattle for the summer months. The grazing animals are helping with the restoration of moorland by eating *Molinia*. This helps give space and light to enable regeneration of heather, bilberry, flowering plants and trees. Their trampling in the bracken areas has a similar effect of diversifying the habitat.



Horses on the moorland

People and the wildwood

1 Volunteer Work Days

These are held on the last Saturday of every month. On average, a group of half-a-dozen volunteers (both locals and visitors to the area) join us for a day of activities on site. Tasks have ranged from tree planting and fence-removal to helping with building the compost loo and shed, and collecting acorns for growing new oak trees to be planted in the future.



Volunteers tree planting

2 Open Day

We hold an annual Open Day in Machynlleth where members of the public can talk to staff, look at displays about the project and listen to presentations. A guided walk on site is offered during the afternoon, with transport arranged for the public. This was very popular at the last event, with 45 people taking part.



Visitors arriving
on site during
Open Day

3 Communications

The project manages social media accounts with Facebook Twitter and Instagram. The website has Welsh and English versions and is regularly updated. We produce press releases for local publications, and newsletters on paper and digitally. We regularly host groups on site for visits, in particular from universities.

4 Youth camps

Two 'Wild Camps' were run in June 2019 and we plan to hold 6 a year in future. Our Wild Camps are aimed at teenagers who struggle in school because of issues such as high anxiety levels, self-harm, domestic abuse backgrounds, etc. No mobile phones are allowed on camp and over the week students learn fire making skills, carve spoons or butter knives, forage for food, go wild swimming and take part in nature connection games and activities. Plenty of time is made for mindfulness activities and opportunities to talk around the campfire. These camps were a great success with students and teachers, with the students reporting that the

camps had helped them gain self-confidence, increased their levels of resilience, improved their social and communication skills and taught them the importance of nature and mindfulness techniques.



Learning to make fire by friction

Practising fire lighting skills



Carving a butter knife

River trekking

5 Primary schools

Six local primary schools are involved with our education programme for younger children. We are working with the geographically nearest schools to help build links with our local community. The focus of our work with primary schools is habitat restoration and nature education and nature connection. Each school works with us for 3 years on a varied programme of activities which includes site visits, sowing acorns and establishing a tree nursery in school, a creative arts and nature project, bushcraft skills, life cycle of an oak tree and planting trees. Three more schools are set to join our programme in autumn 2020.



Primary school pupils weaving with natural materials



Children on the primary school programme cooking bread over the fire after a day spent learning fire-lighting and foraging skills



Learning about homes and habitats

Creating a home for a variety of animal puppets



Outcomes

In the first year of the project we have worked with:

121 primary school aged pupils and 10 teaching staff

22 secondary school aged pupils and 4 teaching staff

125 adults on Volunteer days

60 adults on Open Day

164 adults and students (some from overseas) on guided tours of the site

In such a short time we are already seeing an increase in insects, birds and animals. In 2018 the only birdlife recorded on the acres of purple moor grass was meadow pipit. This year, stonechats, house martins, snipe and red grouse have been recorded as well as a visit from a

hen harrier. The house martins were attracted by the insect life beginning to establish in the recently excavated pools. Dragonflies and butterflies have also started to frequent this area. Frogs have set up residence in the ponds, ready to lay frogspawn in the spring. A slow worm was recently recorded.

Plans for the future

With much of the habitat regeneration work having been undertaken, we are looking forward to watching the unfolding story as nature reasserts her dominance and the numbers and variety of insects, birds, animals and plants increase. We are currently looking at carrying out a feasibility study for the reintroduction of red squirrels and water voles. Pine martens and beaver live locally so we hope they will spread naturally to our site.

We are very aware of the effects of 'nature deficiency' on our children and young people and the increase of mental health problems and loneliness in the adult population. We feel very strongly that we have an important role to play in helping people to connect with nature through our site, leading to an improvement in their well-being and quality of life. This will be a major focus of our work for the future as well as exploring ways of working with other landowners and purchasing land in order to achieve habitat restoration at a larger scale across the landscape.