

People and nature: learning through doing

Action research programme

Broughty Ferry Environmental Project and DightyConnect



Broughty Ferry Environmental Project near Dundee is one of six community and voluntary sector groups in Scotland to have taken part in the action research programme **People and nature: learning through doing**. This programme aimed to identify successful approaches to involving people in enjoying, learning about and caring for nature and was supported by Scottish Natural Heritage and Scottish Community Development Centre.



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This **People and nature: learning through doing** project aimed to explore the ways in which the Broughty Ferry Environmental Project and DightyConnect activities in Dundee were successful in engaging a wide range of people. The research was carried out by the Broughty Ferry Environmental Project/DightyConnect project worker and management group volunteers.



Background

Broughty Ferry Environmental Project (BFEP), on the outskirts of Dundee, is a community-based initiative which supports local groups to develop and deliver environmental activities. These range from species surveying and habitat creation to eco-poetry, outdoor drama and environmental art. BFEP employs a part-time project worker to help local people turn their ideas into projects on the ground.

'DightyConnect' is a two-year project led by BFEP which involves communities along Dundee's Dighty Burn in environmental projects and associated cultural activities.

BFEP aims to promote the conservation of local wildlife and the environment for the benefit of the public and to advance understanding of environmental issues. Over time, the group has widened its interpretation of environmental activities to include cultural, historic and artistic responses as well as practical ones.

BFEP has been running since 1999 and at any one time involves 40-80 people of different backgrounds, ages and interests. Many come from disadvantaged groups, including unemployed and people on low incomes and people with physical and mental health problems.

The research project

BFEP wanted to use their research to evaluate their work, by exploring the experiences of people who got involved with BFEP and DightyConnect activities. Specifically, they wanted to:

- explore the significance of 'the environment' in engaging volunteers, and the extent to which their broad interpretation had helped to engage a wide range of people;
- explore how their ways of working met the needs of those who got involved, and what kept them involved.

The group used a research method called 'story dialogue', a structured way of sharing personal experiences, where individual volunteers' stories were used to stimulate reflection from others in a discussion around four topics:

- What got you involved and what have you enjoyed?
- Why has it worked / not worked for you?
- So what can we learn from this?
- What next: how can we incorporate this in our activities?

6 sessions were held, involving 32 volunteers from the DightyConnect mosaic group, BFEP management group, DightyConnect conservation volunteers, Nature Nutters youth group, poetry group and 'Spirit of The Dighty' drama group. The sessions were held outdoors where weather allowed.

The group produced a DVD to capture highlights from their story dialogue sessions.

"Our ethos is to start with people's ideas and passions – the energy – and build projects from there."





“You might not be interested in reptiles or this or that, but there are mosaics, making bird boxes, growing seeds...”

Research findings

Key success factors in engaging and retaining a wide range of people in BFEP and DightlyConnect activities were:

A focus on the environment.

Volunteers gained great satisfaction from making a difference to their local area. Being outdoors was good for people’s health and well-being, and for some was an inspiration for creative activities.

“It’s been satisfying; the changes in the garden have happened really quickly and people are starting to notice.”

A wide interpretation of environmental activity.

The diverse range of activities — cultural as well as practical — helped attract a wide range of people, many of whom got involved in other projects too.

“The poetry group has provided opportunities to get involved in a wide range of community environmental activities.”

“It’s easy for outsiders to think that groups can just sustain themselves. The project worker role is really important in bringing new people in and giving them support.”

Open and inclusive. People of all circumstances work together in a supportive and encouraging environment, where people find new skills, confidence and friends.

“People have come with mental and physical health problems and this has helped them a lot.”

“The people involved bring sunshine into your life.”

Intergenerational working.

Volunteers found it refreshing to work with people of different ages — sharing skills and ideas and developing community ties.

“Working with a different generation brought the young person out of me.”

Starting with volunteers’ ideas.

Activities are built from volunteers’ ideas and passions, not from the ‘top down’. Local knowledge and skills are valued and used.

“It’s not a project that is designed. You come in and you fit in and you do whatever it is that you want to do.”

Making things happen. BFEP supports ‘doers rather than talkers’ and enables people to deliver things on the ground for the environment and their communities. The skills and knowledge of the project worker were seen as vital in turning ideas into practical projects — helping with training and funding and removing red tape.

Regular conservation activities in local greenspaces. Key for everyone was delivering practical action in local greenspaces — making a difference close to where they live.

“It’s great to be part of a wee group that’s doing something purposeful.”



Impact on the group

“The research has allowed us to step back and hear people’s views on being involved. Also to reflect on what we’ve been doing and think about how to go forward.”

BFEP had found in the past that volunteers weren’t very keen to get involved in evaluation processes, but everyone who took part in the story dialogue sessions seemed to enjoy sharing their experiences. People were open in their comments and took advantage of the opportunity to reflect on their involvement and think about future activities.

For BFEP, their research gave them a clear understanding of what was important to people who got involved in their activities, as well as valuable evidence of the many ways people benefited, which they can use to support their work.

The project involved 20 days of staff and volunteer time from the BFEP/DightyConnect project worker, BFEP management group and other volunteers.

Future actions

The research confirmed the importance of BFEP continuing to develop projects that combine natural heritage dimensions with cultural, social and artistic ones. Also the importance of working in a range of communities and providing opportunities for people to make a difference to their local environment.

Supported by their research findings, BFEP has submitted an application to the BIG Lottery Community Spaces fund to continue its work along the Dighty Burn. The Dighty passes through several areas of multiple deprivation where there is great potential for improving the natural environment and where people are very keen to get involved.

A member of the BFEP management group is writing an academic paper about their research findings on engaging people in environmental activities.



“People in the Dighty communities are very keen to get involved; they have a deep connection with the Dighty Burn.”



Key learning for other organisations

- Environmental activities can have practical, cultural, creative and social dimensions — different things attract different people
- Delivering things on the ground is important — people take pride in making a practical difference in their local area
- A community's connection with their place can be the energy that drives a project
- Developing projects around volunteers' ideas, skills and passions can encourage ownership and longevity
- Fresh air, good company and a sense of purpose are great for health and well-being
- Some people from disadvantaged backgrounds prefer not to join projects that focus on their circumstances
- Projects don't just happen by themselves — funding and support workers can help local groups get ideas off the ground

“We have created a fantastic piece of public art, which local people who use the area are pleased with.”

What did Broughty Ferry Environmental Project learn from the action research process?

“We will definitely be using story dialogue for ongoing evaluation of our activities. The sessions flowed really well and people seemed to enjoy the experience.”

The group found story dialogue to be very well suited to their ethos — and thanked their research mentor for suggesting it! The sessions were facilitated by the BFEP project worker and a member of the management group, both of whom had research experience. The ‘storytellers’ were coached by a local performance artist to help them convey their stories in a relaxed manner.

Producing a DVD has allowed the group to share their findings with a wider range of people than just those who would read a full report. They have shown the DVD to everyone who participated and will use it as a handy format of evidence to support funding applications.



People and nature: learning through doing

was an action research programme supported by Scottish Natural Heritage and Scottish Community Development Centre which ran from Autumn 2009 until Spring 2011 with six participating groups. The programme aimed to increase understanding and improve the ways in which voluntary and community sector organisations, and the agencies and organisations which support them, work with excluded and disadvantaged groups to involve them in the natural heritage.

Action research is often defined as research done *of and by* a particular group of people, rather than *on and to* them — and with the aim of achieving change. The benefit of this approach is that the skills, knowledge and understanding developed through the research remain within the group and are directly relevant to their work. The wider benefit from the **People and nature: learning through doing** research is in providing others with an insight into what works ‘in practice’ from the perspectives of those directly involved in engaging people with nature.

Each group had mentoring support from Scottish Community Development Centre to help them develop and carry out their research, plus a small amount of funding for research and dissemination expenses. All of the groups gained new skills and contacts from their action research, as well as insights and evidence that will shape and encourage support for their work in helping more people to enjoy Scotland's nature and outdoors.

To find out more

Read the full action research reports at www.snh.gov.uk/learning-through-doing

For more information on SNH's work on increasing and broadening participation in outdoor recreation, see www.snh.gov.uk/increasing-participation or contact Elaine Macintosh at Scottish Natural Heritage elaine.macintosh@snh.gov.uk, 0141 951 4488

For more information on Broughty Ferry Environmental Project, or to request a copy of their action research DVD, see www.trp.dundee.ac.uk/~bfep/ or email environ.project@dundeecity.gov.uk

For more information on action research see www.scdc.org.uk/what/community-led-action-research

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The People and nature: learning through doing projects

- Blarbuie Woodland Enterprise, Lochgilphead
- Broughty Ferry Environmental Project / DightyConnect, Dundee
- Clackmannanshire Disability Awareness Group, Alloa
- GalGael Trust, Glasgow
- Neilston Development Trust, Neilston
- SAMH Chrysalis Project, Dundee (*focus group only*)

“There seems to be significant value in taking a wide interpretation of the environment spanning practical and cultural activities — both in attracting volunteers and securing funding.”

Broughty Ferry Environmental Project



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