

Volunteer-led activities for wetland establishment

The power of learning from the bottom up





Key Message

- Fostering a practical and functional relationship between communities and local authorities and government agencies can lead to robust and sustainable outcomes for nature
- Taking time to understand differing motivations and ambitions of all members of multi-stakeholder groups develops a more powerful shared vision and increases the likelihood of achieving desired goals

Policy Relevance

International policies

- Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)
- EU Nature Restoration Law
- EU Bird Directive

National policy

- The National Biodiversity Action Plan



What is the Challenge

The impact of the human population on the planet has resulted in multiple environmental and climate challenges, and to address these, large-scale transformational change within multiple sectors is urgently required. Accelerating nature restoration is a crucial element of this change in which communities have the capacity to play a key role through their dedication, sense of ownership and long-term focus. However, examples of successful community-led or 'bottom-up' restoration projects, in which communities are the architects of the action - as opposed to the recipients of it - are not well documented. This blueprint describes a bottom-up approach to nature restoration that has been extremely successful at Harper's Island Wetlands, Co. Cork, Ireland.

"I'd say that 90% of the initiatives have actually come from the Community Association... or from the BirdWatch Ireland [an NGO]"



An Innovative Solution

This solution comprises a collection of key components to be considered by groups that are at the beginning of community-led nature restoration journey. It highlights the challenges, opportunities and benefits of working in a 'bottom-up' way for biodiversity and nature restoration. It also details the essential components and steps that should be taken to maximise likelihood of success and ensure the longevity of your restoration project.

The Benefits the solution produces

This solution results in nature restoration, biodiversity protection, and a huge amount of social benefit for local communities.

- Opportunities for social connection.
- Increased understanding of climate and biodiversity issues.
- People connected to their environment.
- A dedication and commitment to the local area that is community-based.
- Increased robustness of the environmental achievements.

For example, Harper's Island Wetlands' reserve was discussed since the early 1990s. 2016 saw the first bird hide installed, and a Steering Group formed in 2017 coordinating and accelerating efforts. Over the years, a thriving, accessible, and growing nature reserve has been created, built on community-delivered interventions and enhancements. Now open year-round, it hosts school groups, birdwatching groups, community events, and volunteering mornings.



How developed is the solution

At Harper's Island, the solution has been implemented over the course of 20 years. It is highly developed (Societal Readiness Level, SRL, 8). Comparing imagery from the 1990s and 2020s, it is evident that the area has improved in terms of its biodiversity value, and the amenities and interventions created on the site. Those involved with the project have a lot of belief in the work they have done and continue to do, and there is evidence that footfall at the reserve continues to increase, with more school groups, volunteer groups and members of the public enjoying the space.

"[The Municipality helped] get funding, and putting [Harpers Island] onto the agenda, and getting the project moving, and then keeping it within the bounds of regulations"

Where else could this be applied to?

This solution could be applied in any part of the world where there is a piece of land or area that has high potential or existing biodiversity value, yet needs a community around it to ensure biodiversity can thrive and survive.

Area characteristics

Communities that are interested in developing a piece of land in their area in a way that supports biodiversity and/or community use

Existing Nature Reserves or recovering land parcels where co-management options are being explored

Municipalities where biodiversity-friendly strategies exist and options are being explored to increase community involvement

Intention for applying this solution

To increase biodiversity value, provide a community amenity, allow space to people to enjoy nature, increase educational space and improve connectedness with nature

To improve the management of existing nature reserves, increasing engagement, or to establish

Communities can connect with their municipal authority to realise broader policy goals in biodiversity restoration and climate resilience. It is highly beneficial for community groups to have the backing and support from their municipality. In particular this solution connects community action with national and even international aspirations.



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Who is this relevant to?

- Local community groups, school groups and Community Associations
- Nature conservation or environmental NGOs
- Local Authorities/Municipalities

What do you need to have in place:

- **A collaborative coordination group:** A well-operated, highly collaborative Steering Committee gives partners the space to develop mutual respect, and empowers them with new shared motivations, and opportunities for cross-learning between trades, science, and environment.
- **A community or group with (i) Mixed skill sets, (ii) Passion and commitment, (iii) Determination and Resilience, and (iv) Responsiveness and agility.** Build the right mix of partners to be successful. Buy-in, passion and commitment needs to be broad and significant, helping to share the workload among all. For lasting progress (Harper's Island work has been ongoing for 20+ years) partners need a level of determination and resilience to temporary set-backs. Despite challenges along the way, there was a "win" or a benefit in this project for all partners. Being flexible, dynamic and willing to explore and seize new opportunities can lead to big wins (e.g. the bird hides).
- **A facilitator with knowledge and influence:** A Local Authority (Municipality) can act as an anchor, adjudicator and advisor on the Steering Committee, with links to funding and planning guidance.
- **A forum to connect with different skills and knowledge:** In Harper's Island, the local Mens Shed and an ecology-focused NGO (BirdWatch Ireland) enabled the steering committee to harness expertise and knowledge and connect it within the local community.
- **A culture that recognises effort and success:** Acknowledging successes creates further success at various stages, while it motivates and energises partners. Ensure you have, or create, the space to recognise and honour the community's successes.



Key components of implementation:

Assemble a core committee with diverse skill-sets:

To identify potential members, public meetings and workshops should be held to initiate conversation and to gather diverse perspectives. Diversity of opinion and motivation within the group should be encouraged but it is essential that the committee develops a shared goal and aims, even if motivations differ.

Run and sustain the committee:

This work should include establishing clear roles within committee (the role of a facilitator is critical, along with establishing a culture of mutual respect, listening and open-mindedness)

Create a strategy for the project:

The strategy should cover short-, medium- and long-term timescales and objectives. Consider including: (i) a risk register, (ii) initial practical tasks with nominated people to lead them (iii) a plan for communication with the wider community, and (iv) ideas for funding sources or awards to apply for. Make sure you consider (v) how to monitor your successes and challenges. The strategy should be kept updated - being flexible is the key to success!

Begin practical tasks as soon as possible:

Organise collaborative and enjoyable practical work on the ground (enabling groups to bond and socialise). Where possible, use local contractors and groups. Ensure people are working together, allowing time for the work to develop and considering pathways to assess the success and impact of their partnership.

Take the time to demonstrate what is working:

Work carefully and mindfully, progressing the project in phases and developing a well-informed future plan (e.g. a conservation management plan).

Reward and acknowledge the community's success:

Acknowledging successes creates further success at various stages and also motivates and energises partners. Make the effort to apply for and win awards that acknowledge the collective efforts of the community and groups involved. This also imbues the community's journey with wider legitimacy, publicity and further buy-in.

Monitor your progress:

In order to enable the impact of the work to be assessed, monitoring is essential, including monitoring of biodiversity impact, societal impact and of volunteer effort and perspectives.



Monitoring your success

“building that Sand Martin Bank the first summer, 24 Sand Martin families occupied the 24 spaces and people coming down and looking at them and seeing them... that was a YES (moment!)”

What to monitor

Your work's biodiversity impact

What to monitor

- Diversity of different groups such as insects and birds on the site on an annual basis.
- Plant diversity, especially with regard to invasive plant species, and the success of grazers (horses) in keeping these invasive plants at bay.
- Impact of habitat creation on biodiversity.
- A log of visible species groups (e.g. bird life) observed by ornithologists using the site.

Societal use

- Footfall through access points to the site.
- School groups and events.
- Education and cultural events involving the site.
- Interviews and periodic surveys.

Your volunteer community and its sustainability

- Periodic check-ins and informal surveys.
- Volunteer profiling for sustainability.
- Evidence of volunteer-to-volunteer mentoring.

Costs and Timeframes

	Approximate cost *	Cost range*	Approximate timeframe**	Timeframe ranges**
Assemble a core committee with diverse groups	Low cost		Short-term	Short- to Medium-term
Running and sustaining the committee successfully (per year)	Medium cost	Low to medium cost range	Short-term	
Undertaking practical tasks and interventions (e.g. build pond - install well - build bird hide)	Very high cost***	Low to Very High cost***	Medium-term	Short- to Medium-term
Reward and acknowledge the community's success (e.g. applying for awards)	Low cost		Short-term	
Monitor your work's biodiversity impact (data collection, analysis, use of students)	High cost	Low to High cost	Medium-term	Short- to Medium-term
Monitor work's societal use (use of ped counter)	Medium cost	Low to Medium cost	Medium-term	Medium- to Long-term
Monitor your volunteer community and its sustainability	Low cost		Medium-term	Medium- to Long-term

* Low cost <500 EUR; Medium cost 500 – 5,000 EUR; High Cost 5,000- 20,000+ EUR; Very high cost 20,000+ EUR

** Short term < 1 year; Medium term 1-5 Years; Long term 5+ Years

*** Very High cost projects could require works, meaning engineering, construction, materials costs, and/or formal planning applications.

The challenges you may encounter

Activity	Challenge 1	Challenge 2
Assemble a core committee with diverse groups	Lack of people with an interest or awareness of the issue or core group	Competing interest groups, power dynamics
Running and sustaining the committee successfully	Resources to run meetings (venue, catering)	Availability and willingness of participants
Undertaking practical tasks and interventions	Availability of skills and materials to undertake practical work	Navigating complex planning and consenting processes, land ownership
Reward and acknowledge success	Complexity of applying for awards and lack of skills to apply for them	Building awareness of award programmes
Monitor biodiversity impact, societal impact and volunteer community	Maintaining volunteer community over time	Availability of scientific skills and knowledge to enable effective and appropriate monitoring.



Key Contact who to talk to about your application idea

Sharon Casey
(Cork County council)

Emma Verling
(University College Cork)

Rory Scarrott
(University College Cork)

Further information

- [Verling E, Power M, Biaisque M, et al. The power of learning from the bottom up: working towards a blueprint for community-led biodiversity protection and restoration. Cambridge Prisms: Coastal Futures. 2025;3:e14. doi:10.1017/cft.2025.10002.](#)
- [Webinar associated with the above paper](#)
- Learning Brief co-created with the community at Harper's Island
- [Harper's Island Wetlands website](#)

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Blueprint

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wetland establishment

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