

Restoring Marches Mosses BogLIFE Project (LIFE15 NAT/UK/000786)



# Restoring the Marches Mosses (BogLIFE) Project Final Evaluation Report - Evaluation of Impact on Local Communities, Other User Groups and Professional Engagement

Final: December 2022



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## Executive Summary

Natural England (NE) and its partners Natural Resources Wales (NRW) and Shropshire Wildlife Trust (SWT) were awarded funding from the European (EU) LIFE programme and National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) to restore the Fenn's, Whixall & Bettisfield Mosses National Nature Reserves (NNRs), and Wem Moss Nature Reserve. Funding was awarded by LIFE for work starting in October 2016 and NLHF for work starting in August 2017. Given delays caused by Covid 19, the term of funding for each has been extended by a year, to the end of 2022.

The project aimed to create a healthier and larger peatland habitat by storing rainfall on the existing bog where appropriate and better managing the effects of air pollution. Other aspects of the project included improving the bog's water quality, cleaning up a former scrap yard, building a bird hide and viewing platform, sharing knowledge with managers of similar habitats in the UK and Europe and raising awareness of the bog by engaging with a wide range of audiences in the local area.

This evaluation report is all about the people-oriented issues in the project and how they were addressed. Data gathering was undertaken between March and September 2022, and has included 30 one to one interviews, extensive document and management information review, a site visit, internet searches, and a local household postal survey.

The key **highlights and achievements** of the project have included:

- 7 12 month long traineeships (one more than planned) were offered. All trainees progressed to employment in the conservation sector.
- An extensive volunteer programme, with increasingly skilled volunteer activity.

Number of days contributed by level of work undertaken across the whole of the project:

	<b>Volunteer days contributed</b>
<b>Professional</b>	236
<b>Skilled</b>	751
<b>Unskilled</b>	1460

- Two attractive, accessible, and easily maintained structures to engage visitors in the Mammoth Viewing Tower and the Charles Sinker Fields Bird Hide.
- Activities and infrastructure to increase visitors to the Marches Mosses, including events, better disabled access and, at the end of the project, better and innovative signage and interpretation on the Mosses themselves. Estimated visitor numbers have increased according to figures from automatic people counters at the main entrances to the Mosses.
- Improved intellectual access to the Mosses through presentations at relevant professional conferences, as well as presentations to different audiences more locally, and games, models and virtual reality headsets to take the Mosses to those that might not be able or want to visit in person themselves.
- An educational programme working with trainee teachers to give them the tools and confidence to take classes outdoors, especially on the Mosses.
- Exploring the Mosses through art, particularly with Wem Youth Group, and the international Mosses and Marshes project, has given a new dynamic for the Mosses with artists; has made a wider audience aware of the landscape; has drawn in funding from other sources and has improved the standing of the youth group with local young people.

- Dissemination of best practice and lessons learned regarding lowland bog restoration to a broad audience.
- Outputs have been achieved, and many targets exceeded, by a strong partnership between the three organisations, playing to each other's strengths and ensuring that they have achieved the vast majority of the planned physical improvements to the area and all the people focussed outputs.

The household postal **survey** showed the main reasons for visiting the Mosses are for walking, enjoying the peaceful landscape, fresh air, walking the dog and bird watching. Only half of respondents gave reasons for not visiting more often, and of these being wet and muddy was the main reason cited. The views and the paths and tracks across the Mosses are highly rated by respondents, who also appreciated better information about the restoration project. Visiting the Mosses was felt to promote a sense of well-being.

In terms of understanding the issues of the Mosses, most appreciated their place in local history, and the role of peat in carbon capture, but were less likely to understand that trees are not good for the peatbog.

Free comments from the survey varied from those very against what had been done, to offering suggestions on how to do things better and enthusiastic support for what has been achieved. The positive and constructive comments outnumbered the negative ones.

There have also been a number of **learning points** identified in the evaluation:

- Communications must be built into a project of this nature from the start and need to use all channels to get to the required audiences, particularly residents around the project site.
- Work on interpretation should start as soon as possible, in particular agreeing key messages and text so that items can be produced as early as is viable in the

context of the project. Covid and uncertainty over the conditions for building the hide inevitably meant that some aspects could only be installed late, but text and key messages could be agreed in advance.

- Project staffing needs to be adequate for the work, including management and support. There should also be allowance for time for reflection and so that staff can find the best ways to meet project objectives, not just the actions that were planned in from the start, but aspects that might have been overtaken by time and circumstances. Here a role with responsibility for interpretation and marketing might have been useful from the start. Trainees are a valuable staffing resource.

- There needs to be an adequate volunteer training budget to spread across the whole life of a project. It will help sustainability as volunteers can benefit and be able to maintain both physical and intellectual outputs and activities once the main funding has finished.

- Keeping outputs simple in plans, without spelling out too much detail, makes it easier to adapt to changes and still meet the project outcomes and aims without necessarily creating objects and mechanisms that will not be needed in future.

## **Sustainability**

The conservation outputs for rewetting the peatbog are sustainable in themselves, but that sustainability is improved by the better trained and more numerous volunteers who continue to contribute their time to the Mosses. While there will inevitably be some attrition among volunteers over time, the NNR team has been strengthened compared to before the funded project. The Mammoth Tower and Bird Hide have both been designed with keeping maintenance to a minimum in mind.

Activities focussed on helping people to learn about the Marches Mosses have

been well received and well attended, which should mean more people understand the importance of peatbogs. Much of the work undertaken with schools has been around ensuring those lessons can continue to be provided, so giving teachers the tools, materials and confidence to deliver that lesson themselves. Similarly, materials for self-guided learning (albeit with a fun theme running through) have also been developed.

The work undertaken to improve physical and intellectual access to the Marches Mosses means there is now more interpretation to help people understand this remarkable landscape, both on site and on the internet. Extensive work has been done with user groups to make access for those with differing needs as good as it can be, given local conditions and the funding available (more can still be done).

The project has featured on Countryfile and Spring Watch so that both local people and the wider population can see and begin to understand the importance of the Mosses for nature and for the climate. This is contributing to a greater understanding of the importance of peat, and its contribution in the battle against climate change. The profile of the area has been raised within more academic circles, demonstrating the potential for restoring severely degraded peatbogs.

## **Legacy**

In terms of the landscape, the legacy is a lasting one, as the project leaves a larger peatland area better managed and one where measures have been put in place to boost its rare bog habitats and retain water and promote active peat development – the full effect of that will not be seen for many years.

More immediate legacies include a well-trained and reinvigorated volunteer workforce and two structures which provide a focus for visitors and explain the value of the peatbog and the diversity of the wildlife that live or visit there.

There is a suite of high quality learning resources now available for use with children from pre-school age upwards, and teacher aids to ensure that the message about the importance of peatbogs can continue to be delivered. There are also materials for use with adults, and there is now a network of volunteers and staff who are able to engage a variety of audiences, both on site and in venues around the area.

The interpretation, fingerposts and the Viewfinder trail are a durable way of helping visitors experience and understand the Marches Mosses.

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# Introduction

## Broad nature of the project

Natural England (NE) and its partners Natural Resources Wales (NRW) and Shropshire Wildlife Trust (SWT) were awarded funding from the European Union (EU) LIFE programme and National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) to restore Britain's third largest lowland raised bog - the Fenn's, Whixall & Bettisfield Mosses National Nature Reserve (NNR), and Wem Moss Nature Reserve. Funding was awarded by LIFE for work starting in October 2016 and NLHF for work starting in August 2017. Given delays caused by Covid 19, the term of funding for each has been extended by a year, to the end of 2022, but the amounts remained the same.

The project aimed to create a healthier and larger peatland habitat by storing rainfall on the existing bog where appropriate and reducing the effects of air pollution. Other aspects of the project include improving the bog's water quality, cleaning up a former scrap yard, building a bird hide and viewing platform, sharing knowledge with managers of similar habitats in the UK and Europe and raising awareness of the bog by engaging with a wide range of audiences in the local area. These audiences include local schools, residents in the immediate locality as well as visitors to the area.

The aims and objectives of the project are explored in more detail in the Background section, while specific activities are covered in the main body of the evaluation report.

## Scope of the evaluation

The technical aspects of the project, concerning works to restore and improve the existing peat bog are covered within separate reports to LIFE. However, in addition to the ground works, LIFE is also interested in a number of more people-oriented issues, specifically:

- How the project has interpreted and explained the importance of the local ecosystem to the public and how they have encouraged people to become involved with BogLIFE
- How the project has raised awareness, educated and changed behaviours and attitudes of stakeholders
- What social impact the project has had through volunteer opportunities, training and through improved personal wellbeing from visiting the site (some aspects of which are covered in a separate evaluation project).

A requirement of NLHF support is to demonstrate progress towards a number of outcomes, specifically:

- People will understand and appreciate this rare area of natural heritage for its intrinsic value and the services it provides (including well-being benefits)
- The Marches Mosses will be more accessible to a wider range of people from different backgrounds, particularly those with access needs
- Local communities, regular site users and professional audiences will have changed their perception of the Marches Mosses and their management.

This evaluation report is all about these people-oriented issues and how they are being addressed. While the activities to restore the Marches Mosses physically are an integral part of providing the opportunities for engaging people, they are not the key focus for this report, unless they have a wider impact on people and communities.

The output achievements are based on documentation received from SWT to the end of September as well as observations on web materials in October and November 2022. Some activities have benefitted from funding outside the expected project funding sources. We regard this as added value, as the additional funding has meant that more can be done and with a wider audience or in more depth than had originally been planned. Similarly, a number of visits and volunteering sessions were run with students from local colleges, Universities and the Field Studies Council which were not in the original plans but have served to widen the reach of the project beyond what was planned.

# Background

## Restoring the Marches Mosses

In December 2014 a Site Improvement Plan<sup>1</sup> for Fenn's, Whixall, Bettisfield, Wem and Cadney Mosses was developed for the Natura 2000 site, by the LIFE funded Improvement Programme for England's Natura 2000 sites. The expectation was that Natural England and partners would implement the Plan, finding resources to undertake the required actions. While the Meres and Mosses Landscape Partnership Scheme (LPS) and Nature Improvement Area (NIA) were funding projects in the area at that time, there was little activity targeted on the Marches Mosses, so a different source of funding needed to be found, while taking into account lessons learned from the Meres and Mosses scheme. Many of the actions in the Site Improvement Plan have therefore been included in the LIFE and NLHF funded Restoring the Marches Mosses BogLIFE project.

Planning and putting together the funding applications were undertaken in 2015, with close working between NE and SWT, and extensive input from NRW. Funding was agreed via the EU LIFE<sup>2</sup> programme for Natural England in August 2016<sup>3</sup>, with delivery from October of the same year and was planned to run until January 2022, although the funding period was extended until December 2022, with all works to be complete by the end of September 2022. The total budget was 7,141,352€, of which 5,356,014€ (75% of eligible costs) came from the EU. In parallel, SWT applied for a grant from NLHF and were awarded £892,000<sup>4</sup>. While the funded objectives closely match, there are some differences, with more attention to engagement and people in the NLHF plans.

The overarching ambition was that the three partners, SWT, NE and NRW, would undertake works to restore 665ha of bog habitat across the Marches Mosses including their edge habitat (also known as 'lagg') to make the bog a healthy functioning eco-system again. This involved removing invasive species and former wooded plantations, retaining more water on the centre of the Mosses, recreating bog on marginal fields, controlling air and water pollution and creating new habitat on the site of the former scrapyard.

They also planned to make the Mosses more accessible to everyone by installing a wheelchair-accessible bird hide on the neighbouring Charles Sinker Fields, running a volunteering programme, holding community events and installing additional visitor facilities such as a viewing tower on and around the Mosses. This is an adaptation of their original ambitions agreed in 2019 with NLHF, as they had at first planned to build a visitor centre on the old scrapyard and run activities for the public through that.

In 2017 two new developments came to light that could have had a significant impact on the success of the proposed visitor centre on the former scrapyard:

- One of SWT's corporate partners purchased Whixall Marina and mooted plans to open a café, shop and other visitor facilities.
- A neighbouring farm (Holly House) applied for outline planning permission for a shop and café.

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<sup>1</sup> [Site Improvement Plan: Fenn's, Whixall, Bettisfield, Wem & Cadney Mosses - SIP085 \(naturalengland.org.uk\)](https://naturalengland.org.uk)

<sup>2</sup> [LIFE 3.0 - LIFE Project Public Page \(europa.eu\)](https://europa.eu)

<sup>3</sup> [Marches Mosses BogLIFE project - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

<sup>4</sup> [Projects funded with an initial decision between 1 April 2013 to 31 March 2020 | The National Lottery Heritage Fund](https://www.theheritagefund.org)

Although nothing has become of the application by Holly House, Whixall Marina has been refurbished to include a café, shop, large car park and village green.

The development of Whixall Marina called into question the financial viability of a new visitor centre, so after an independent review, a decision was taken not to install a visitor centre at the scrapyards.

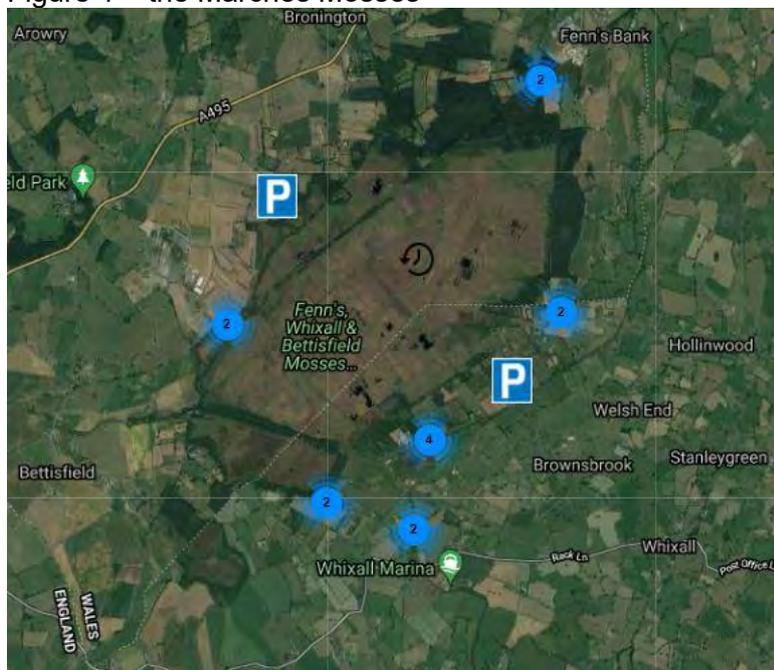
Independent consultants were then commissioned to develop an action plan that would deliver key project outcomes on visitor management, public engagement, information, and interpretation. This was done in two phases; the visitor interpretation and information plan, followed by the specifications and costs report. These reports have informed the current engagement plan.

The Viewing Tower, now known as the Mammoth Tower, was added instead as a valuable focal point for access without the need to generate sufficient income to survive after the external funding was over. The partnership revised the visitor plan so that they could still deliver key project outcomes whilst complementing existing facilities.

An extensive programme of engagement was also put together with different audiences in mind, including local residents, schools, day visitors, tourists, canal users, volunteers, and peatland experts. The list of the activities planned are shown at the start of the report sections dealing with each of the three main aims of the project: Conservation, Learning and Participation. More details about the project can be found on the website<sup>5</sup>.

The screenshot in Figure 1<sup>6</sup> shows the satellite view of the Mosses (Wem Moss is the dark shaded area to the bottom left of Fenn's, Whixall and Bettisfield Mosses) along with a number of points of interest and access to the area. The English/Welsh border can also be seen – the dotted white line within the Moss area.

Figure 1 – the Marches Mosses



<sup>5</sup> [The Meres and Mosses](#)

<sup>6</sup> Screenshot taken 23/8/21 from the Marches Mosses website, which uses a Google Maps/Google World view.

## Methodology

The methodology we have used to conduct this final evaluation is shown below:

Activity	Purpose
<p><u>Plan and conduct final evaluation</u> Meeting in 2022 to start the process. The evaluation process included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of management information, data and reports produced by the project team</li> <li>• Interviews with the delivery team</li> <li>• Volunteer and stakeholder interviews</li> <li>• Analysis of survey and qualitative data gathering exercises</li> <li>• Visit to the Mosses – with project staff, to understand the restoration achievements</li> <li>• Collation, interpretation and assessment of information gathered</li> <li>• Production of main report and executive summary.</li> </ul>	<p>The summative evaluation at the end of the programme sets out what you planned to do, how you went about achieving that, and to what extent you matched your ambition. This story will be essential for you and for NHLF and includes what went well and not so well, and how you coped with any challenges. We advocate a full 360 review process, drawing from a wide range of stakeholders, and utilising the material that has been collected as part of delivery, supplemented by our interviews, observations and assessment.</p> <p><u>Outputs:</u> Main report Executive Summary (up to 6 pages and standalone) Presentation to an audience of your choosing.</p>

The data gathering period for the final evaluation started in March 2022 with the departure of one of the project team, and has continued through to the end of September. There was a site visit in June, before the final interpretation in the Bird Hide was complete, and included some presentations and discussions. The main interviews and discussions have been undertaken by phone or video conference technology between July and September 2022. As the evaluation team are not local to the Marches Mosses, we have not been able to observe or participate in events, and we have used event evaluation information and interviews with third parties instead.

For this evaluation, we have undertaken 30 one-to-one interviews, reviewed the 20 progress reports supplied to NLHF, 7 editions of the 'Bog Standard' volunteer newsletter, the Business, Activity and Marketing and Communications plans and their updates, and the midterm evaluation undertaken for LIFE. We have consulted a variety of reports produced by the project team, on topics as diverse as tourism, dog walkers and education activity. We have also taken data from the visitor and residents survey, website and social media hit data and responses from surveys undertaken by event participants. We have reviewed the website and social media platforms, run Google Alerts and undertaken extensive web searches for references to the project.

All weblinks were correct on the 29<sup>th</sup> November 2022, but may change in the future.

This report is intended for the project team, the Steering Group, NLHF and LIFE, and potentially the wider public, with an aim of setting out what has worked well and should be celebrated, and capturing learning points.

## Visitor and Residents Survey

During 2018, Plantagenet worked with NE to develop a visitor survey that could be responded to online or on paper copy and could be used with any visitor to the Mosses or at events where the Mosses were being talked about. The paper survey was limited to two sides of A4. The e-survey was set up using SmartSurvey, using the NE licence, and the completed paper surveys were entered into the survey software by a volunteer. There was a link to the SmartSurvey on the Marches Mosses BogLIFE website while it was live. The survey was amended after the midterm review to remove a redundant question, to make it appropriate for the final period of delivery.

The questionnaire was then used to gauge opinion from local residents with paper copies distributed in April 2022 via the post and accompanied by a return paid envelope to some 3,432 households around the Mosses. A copy of the final version of the questionnaire can be found at Annex 1.

As of 15<sup>th</sup> August 2021, there were 147 completed questionnaires entered on the system and these were taken as the responses for the midterm review of the project. The hardcopy and posted returns produced more responses, but from a somewhat different audience, making direct comparisons slightly challenging. The time distribution of responses is shown in Table 1. Apart from the postal survey returns in the period April to June 2022, the quarters with most responses were July to September 2019, January to March 2019 and October to December 2020. These quarters are likely to link with events being run by staff, and it should be noted that no questionnaires were completed during the main periods of Covid lockdown from April to July 2020 or January to March 2021. For the data analysis, we have looked for differences between questionnaires completed in 2018 to third quarter 2021 and then those completed after, when the questionnaire had slightly changed. We have only commented on differences where they are statistically significant at the 95% level.

Table 1 – Survey return numbers by quarter.

Quarter of completion	Returns
Q4 2018	1
Q1 2019	45
Q2 2019	3
Q3 2019	55
Q4 2019	1
Q1 2020	17
Q4 2020	24
Q2 2021	1
[slight change to survey questionnaire]	
Q 3 2021	1
Q 4 2021	1
Q 1 2022	3
Q 2 2022	238
Q 3 2022	12
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>402</b>

## Highlights and learning points

### Highlights

The key highlights of the Marches Mosses BogLIFE Restoration project are:

- The successful rewetting programme, which should result in a step change in the rehabilitation of the peatbog habitat – the engineering works that have made this possible were shortlisted for the Institute of Civil Engineers (ICE) People’s Choice Award 2022<sup>7</sup>
- All seven BogLIFE trainees going on to paid employment in the conservation sector
- The NNR volunteers winning a Natural England Graftas Award in 2021
- The physical structures of the Mammoth Tower and the Bird Hide – with respect to the latter, Craig Bennett, CEO of The Wildlife Trusts was heard saying “*I have never seen such a beautiful looking bird hide*”<sup>8</sup> at its opening
- The development of physical and intellectual access to the Mosses to engage a wide variety of audiences, and not necessarily on site
- Sustainable education programme, allowing learning to continue post-funding
- The work with art, artists and Wem Youth Club
- Networking and dissemination of best practice and lessons learnt regarding lowland bog restoration to a broad audience of practitioners, interested stakeholders and the public.
- Excellent working partnership, with the three lead organisations working to each other’s strengths and ensuring the ambitious project outputs and outcomes could be achieved and, in some cases, exceeded.

While not the key focus of this report, the bog restoration works are outstanding, and have received national recognition.

The traineeship element of the project has been hugely successful, and it is a credit both to the trainees themselves and also to SWT and NE that all have gone on to posts in conservation either locally or further afield. The experience and training they received have provided an excellent grounding for their new careers, while the project has benefitted from their hard work and dedication. The value of trainees as staff resource on a project such as this is also a valuable learning point.

The NNR and SWT volunteers have also played a key role in making the project successful, while the extra staff resource to work with the volunteers, encourage them and ensure they receive appropriate training has meant that going forward, the NNR has a solid volunteer force to support maintaining the restored areas. The scale of restoration work achieved would not have been possible without the support of the volunteers. Some have also brought their own expertise and experience to benefit the project, including advice on access requirements, leading guided walks, amazing photographs and ensuring a record of hydrology and wildlife sightings from the Mosses.

The two visitor oriented physical structures – the Mammoth Tower and the Bird Hide – are excellent focal points for visitors and add to the visitor experience as a whole. They are also attractive and include excellent interpretation to inform visitors.

The project has opened up the Mosses both physically and intellectually to a far wider audience than before, with the physical structures as well as the new finger posts and

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<sup>7</sup> [The Meres and Mosses](#)

<sup>8</sup> <https://themeressandmosses.co.uk/2022/07/28/charles-sinker-fields-bird-hide-officially-opened/>

Viewfinder points on the existing Green Trail. The website has a good mix of detailed information and shorter snippets on aspects of the Mosses. There are resources available to take the Mosses out to external venues and learn about the fauna and flora that live there, which will continue to be used post-funding.

By giving teachers the tools and experience of outdoor learning sessions, a larger cohort of children will be impacted by the education programme. Teachers can also access the resources developed for use with very young children if getting to the Mosses in person is not feasible.

The art element of the project is an added value, facilitated by Arts Council for England funding, and has opened the Mosses to a very different audience, both by bringing people in to create art and follow an art trail, as well as by taking art created by the project out to local venues. The ramifications of this work continue, with a book on the Mosses and Marshes international art collaboration as well as a case study with Reading University and an art group undertaking field visits.

The partnership working, particularly between SWT and NE, has ensured that the project has been able to achieve 95% of its ambition. Partners have been flexible and played to each other's strengths while also learning different ways of approaching projects from each other.

## Learning points

The key learning points from the Marches Mosses BogLIFE project are:

- It is never too early to start communications and a communications plan needs to be developed and properly resourced and monitored
- Interpretation – it is never too early to start preparing interpretation, even if it can only be put in place towards the end of the project
- Project staffing also needs to be regularly reviewed and it is important to ensure it is sufficient for the work to be done, including administration, finance and interpretation. Fixed term contract staff also need to have time for personal development, leave and to pursue ideas and opportunities that were not included in the original plans
- A larger training budget, particularly including options for upskilling volunteers for after funding has finished, is a good investment
- Keep outputs as simple as possible to allow for changes in circumstances during longer projects.

The peatland restoration programme has had controversial moments and sometimes the communications programme has not quite met this challenge, despite public meetings, one-to-one sessions at open days, press releases and radio interviews. The Engagement Officer developed relationships with local residents and community activists, and created a stock of non-emotive responses to questions that were raised, that could also be used by colleagues. He also had skills and experience to calm these debates, but there were still issues and non-understanding of some key issues which have festered with the local population and users of the Mosses including; the need to keep dogs on a lead at certain times of the year, the need to reduce birch and other tree growth on the Mosses, while planting native broadleaf species around the edges. Given the emotions related to the local area, this was always going to be an uphill struggle, and it will never be possible to convince everyone. But there are key lessons to be learned in how to manage the communication process.

While some communications are excellent in content, they have not always been well timed, either with too much time before an activity or too long after. It needs a sustained

programme of communication to tell people, to remind people what you have told them, to reiterate what you have told them and then to tell them that you have told them. Even after that, there will still be those who insist they have not received communication, but dealing with those individuals needs a tailored plan, depending on their local significance and their volubility. It is also important to use all available channels of communication, and be aware of the power of “word of mouth” both for positive and negative messages.

It is never too early to start planning interpretation and it needs to be given the importance it deserves by all, and not be considered as an add-on or an annoyance. Ideally it would be a core part of a project worker role. It will always come to fruition at a late stage in the project, and therefore outputs and outcomes that rely on the interpretation being in place are going to be challenging to meet.

Staffing needs to be adequate for the scale of the project, and include resource for project management, the administration of the project (finance, reporting, monitoring inputs including volunteer time and outputs such as numbers of participants at events) as well as actually doing activities. Implementation of the project’s aims required more staff resources than was envisaged the original plans, which put a strain on individuals. Reacting to this earlier by engaging additional staff resources would reduce pressures experienced regarding personal development, leave, and pursuance of ideas and opportunities that were not included in the original plans. That would also allow for the mental space for creativity and looking for links to provide added value or taking advantage of new opportunities that arise that weren’t considered when developing the original plans.

The budget balance between training for volunteers and transport and subsistence for volunteers was not quite right and as the training fund was used up early on, NE has had to find funds to do this. Given the important role volunteers will have in helping to maintain the improvements on site, it has been essential to find pots of money to ensure that training can be given that give volunteers the necessary licences or tickets to undertake certain tasks – chainsaw, brushcutter, tractor and all-terrain vehicle – these pay for themselves going forward as it frees NNR staff for other work. An added benefit is that a volunteer that has been trained, can also be employed on a short term contract ensuring cover for key funded tasks. This benefits both the volunteer and the NNR. Training will also give the volunteers the confidence to be rather more autonomous when needed in the future.

It is a difficult balancing act, but less detailed outputs give fewer constraints on delivery, and mean less recourse to negotiating changes with NLHF. So, for example an overarching target to reach a certain number of people through events off the Moss is easier to deliver than 10 events of this type, 10 events of another type, and a number of events in a particular type of venue. This project has exceeded its targets for interacting with the public overall, but some of the constraints with the detailed outputs have perhaps limited more creative ways of reaching out to new audiences.

# Conservation Aim

## Summary of Activities

This aim is to “Conserve our heritage for present and future generations through developing our partnership, establishing a strong volunteer base for practical and monitoring works and through ongoing restoration and conservation works”. The main activities planned for this Aim were:

- *Acquire land in Shropshire and Wales<sup>9</sup>*
- *Remove trees and scrub, raise water levels, divert nutrient rich water away from the core of the peat bog, restore bog edge habitats on the SAC*
- Paid placements - engage with local University students to carry out research projects on the Mosses
- Staff/Volunteering programme - staff training courses.
- Local community will be encouraged to volunteer, and opportunities will include monitoring, restoration management and public engagement
- Volunteer and trainee events - series of events per year aimed at volunteers and trainees to provide updates on project, as well as provide opportunities to socialise and listen to experts
- Age UK Volunteering sessions aimed at older people to help tackle social isolation. This activity was changed as it had been based around the Visitor Centre, and looked at making the Mosses more accessible.

## Achievements

All planned **land acquisition** was achieved by the midterm review in 2021, enabling the partners to include the new areas in the conservation activities and plan for their management post-funding. The new land was declared as NNR in the summer of 2021 and an updated management plan for the NNR will be prepared in 2023, which will take account of this additional area.

The main **conservation works** are outside the scope of this evaluation, which focusses on the people engagement and learning activities. These works are however a key element of the project and impact on the local community and the work of the volunteers and trainees.

The scale of the conservation works was ambitious and included elements that have proved to be unpopular with the local population and some users of the Mosses, particularly the clearance of pine plantation and the removal of some birch and other deciduous trees. For many, there is an automatic assumption that trees are “good” wherever they might be, so the extensive felling activities needed to be explained carefully. The fact that trees serve to dry out peat bog needed to be clarified, and this is well set out on a dedicated page on the Marches Mosses BogLIFE website ([The Meres and Mosses](#)). Local residents can be less inclined to read up on a landscape they live with and may have grown up in, so the communications aspects of the project become particularly important, and are considered later in this report.

Some disgruntlement was expressed by respondents to the Visitor and Resident Survey, with the following giving a flavour of negative comments received in 2022:

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<sup>9</sup> The activity in italics is not part of this evaluation, but is important in how it affects the people aspects of the project including volunteering tasks and communications

*“Not happy with all the trees being cut down. A mess was left!”*

*“I cant [sic] believe that the carbon footprint calculation of cutting down all the trees using heavy machinery in favour of creating a peat bog is beneficial enough to the environment to avert the climate crisis in the near future, especially as we are supposed to be helping by planting trees as fast as we can. The birdlife has been devastated and it's become a wasteland.”*

*“The moss was beautiful. Heart breaking to see the devastation this project has caused. shame on you!”*

In total there were 29 comments expressing negative views about the project, from a total of 121 comments. There were 50 positive comments by contrast, with the following giving a flavour of what was said:

*“Amazing NNR that promotes lots of wildlife that without the hard work and effort would not be seen. For example to see 12 curlews using floodplains adjacent to the moss is down to their natural habitat being preserved.”*

*“Much better than when I used to live on the edge of the moss.”*

*“Thank you for all you are doing to restore the peatbog. I am a local but I do understand the Mosses importance!!”*

*“We did not know the name of the project but have seen a lot of work and good improvements recently particularly love the mammoth tower.”*

The conservation works are starting to show progress and Natural England have been able to use aerial photography to demonstrate how the water and vegetation on the Mosses is moving towards a better peatbog environment. However, as it takes 10 years to develop a millimetre of peat, the true impact of the restoration will not be known for many years to come. Plantagenet has been invited to return in 500 years to see how well the restoration has worked!

The works have been undertaken with a philosophy of trying to be good neighbours to those living around the edge of the Mosses, with the Community Engagement Officer undertaking many one-to-one conversations with local residents, as well as reporting to local parish councils on a regular basis.

It has been challenging for the team to get the balance right between doing the work that is set out in the LIFE project and not upsetting neighbours and others. One example has been around the World's End works where residents were against essential tree felling but some needed to be done. This was addressed in a number of ways, including orienting the cleared rides so that the visual impact would be reduced for specific dwellings affected, taking the neighbours on site walks to allow consultation and explanation, and also carrying out required reinstatement to a higher standard than the original specification to give a better outcome for the residents.

In another instance, scrub was allowed to regenerate to form a screen by a house near Charles Sinker Fields so that the householder did not feel they were being observed from the Bird Hide. Wildlife has also been taken into account throughout the programme of site works, with for example some redesign to bunding works in one area to avoid impacting an important winter roost for short eared owls. This attention to natural details has not necessarily been widely communicated and understood. It is also inevitable that the works will impact wildlife in the short term and that has upset some consultees.

The Marches Mosses BogLIFE team has employed seven **trainees** during the life of the funding – an increase on the planned six. This aspect of the project has been particularly successful, as the trainees have contributed extensively to the work being undertaken, initially on the conservation side, but with the final posting, both in terms of conservation and helping with people engagement. All seven have gone on to jobs in the conservation sector, including two gaining roles as Reserve Managers with Natural England at the Marches Mosses.

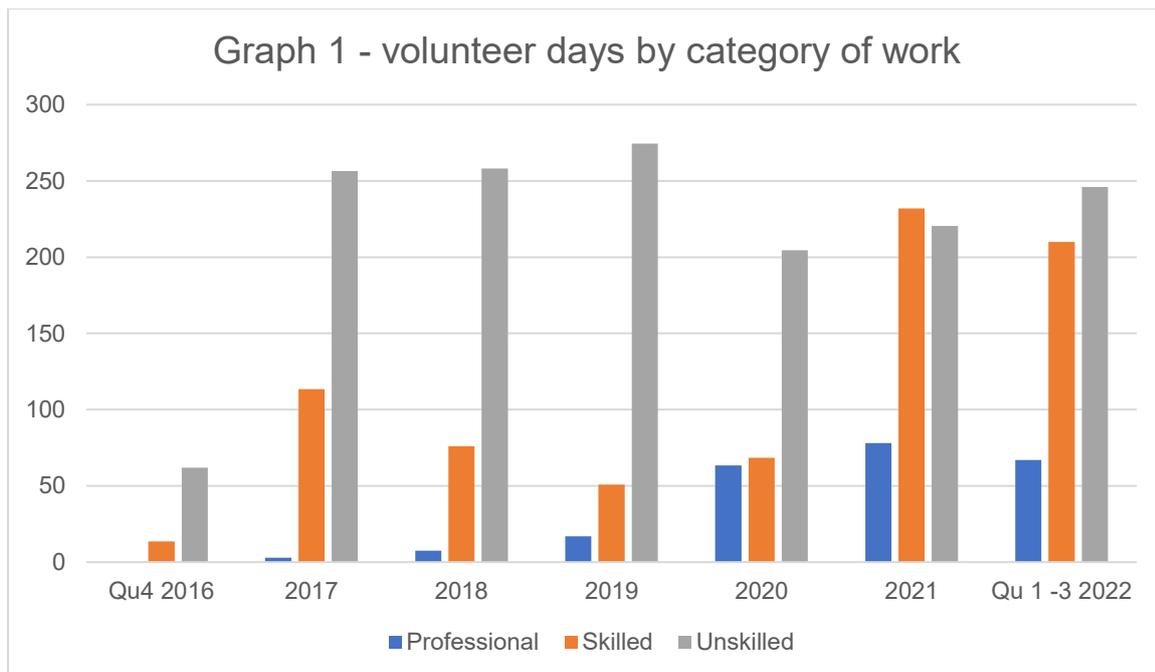
Of the seven trainees, three have been interviewed as part of the midterm or final evaluations. One said that the traineeship had been excellent for getting training and practice in practical skills, which wouldn't have happened without the project. They also said that their identification skills had improved and that it was good to be immersed in one site so that you really get to understand it. That trainee went on to get a temporary and then a full-time contract with NE and recognises a huge progression over time from being shown aspects of the site to telling others about them.

The sixth trainee started out as a volunteer, before applying for the traineeship, then was taken on with a short-term contract and has now been made permanent. He also recognised the value of hands on experience and has become expert in sphagnum moss. At the time of his traineeship, he was doing a conservation based degree part time, which he has now finished and gained a first. The final trainee has moved on from the traineeship to two part-time roles, one with NE and one in London working on river restoration. He commented on the amazing practical work and training, which helped to boost his self-confidence. The traineeship helped him to drive improvement in his own organisational skills as he was working between NE and SWT more than previous trainees had. He feels his new jobs were totally facilitated by the experience and the certificates gained while being a BogLIFE trainee.

Final Trainee: *“The practical experience of habitat management and the training have been ‘amazing’. The training and the competence tickets I’ve acquired have made me very employable in the sector.”*

The project has benefited from significant numbers of **volunteers**, helping with a variety of aspects of work, from unskilled conservation activities including clearing scrub and removing fences, through more specialist activities including running events, monitoring water and wildlife to very specialist activities including adder surveys, curlew ringing, and wetland bird survey transects (WeBS).

BogLIFE has an extensive volunteer element and the reported volunteer days over the life of the project are shown in Graph 1. Table 2 shows estimated numbers and the value of volunteer contributions. 2020 activity was affected by Covid 19, but the skilled volunteer days did not cease, largely due to those volunteers who worked on their own to undertake hydrology monitoring. The increase in skilled volunteer days in 2021 was partly due to the volunteer days required to support the Springwatch filming, as well as the bird surveying work that has been going on. By contrast, unskilled volunteer days were on a par with 2020. In 2020 and 21 there was less activity than normal as with Covid because the decision was taken to suspend volunteer task days for periods of time due to high levels of Covid infection. Numbers of unskilled days in the first three quarters of 2022 are higher than for both 2020 and 2021 as activity returns to normal. The extra training received by volunteers has made them able to undertake more skilled work which will be a bonus once project funding has finished.



Volunteer numbers have risen over the life of the project while the estimated value of the work they have contributed to the project is in excess of a quarter of a million pounds in total. The increase in the value of skilled volunteer work in 2021 and 2022 is particularly impressive and relates to the training that has been undertaken to allow more volunteers to undertake wildlife surveys. Also, more volunteers have achieved certificated training with various equipment, enabling them to undertake more skilled tasks. Finally, volunteers have been involved in events and guided walks as well as disabled access auditing, contributing to improving intellectual and physical access to the Mosses.

Training benefited volunteers, a number obtained licences for using chainsaws, brush cutters, and aspects of tractor work, while others have done first aid courses. There are also less formal training opportunities including moss identification and how to do hydrology surveys. Some have been able to take on paid work as a result of this training, with the NNR or with other local NNRs. Volunteer numbers have increased and with new people, the team has become more welcoming and inclusive, further encouraging new volunteers to join.

In addition, it should be noted that for the past couple of years the BogLIFE project volunteers have been nominated for the NE Graftas awards. In 2020 they were runners up and in 2021 they won, which is excellent recognition for what they have contributed (the prize is a charitable donation).

Table 2 – volunteer numbers and value of contribution

Period	Category	Number of volunteers	Value (£)
<b>Qu 4 2016</b>	Professional	0	0
	Skilled	7	1,620
	Unskilled	7	3,720
<b>Year 2017</b>	Professional	3	900
	Skilled	45	13,620
	Unskilled	49	15,390
<b>Year 2018</b>	Professional <sup>10</sup>	4	2,250
	Skilled	15	9,120
	Unskilled	31	15,480
<b>Year 2019</b>	Professional	9	5,100
	Skilled	28	6,090
	Unskilled	25	16,470
<b>Year 2020</b>	Professional	16	19,050
	Skilled	41	8,220
	Unskilled	64	12,270
<b>Year 2021</b>	Professional	37	23,400
	Skilled	73	27,840
	Unskilled	60	13,230
<b>Qu 1 - 3 2022</b>	Professional	20	20,100
	Skilled	74	25,200
	Unskilled	100	14,760
<b>Total value</b>			<b>253,830</b>

Making the Marches Mosses more **accessible** to all people has been a challenge, and while the original plan was to work with Age UK volunteers at the Visitor Centre, without the Centre, there has had to be a rethink about engaging those with specific access requirements. The project has undertaken work with the Lyneal Trust, which is discussed in more detail both in the learning and in the participation sections, while the Engagement Officer has taken presentations out to village halls and other events. There has been work with Derwen College and with Autism West Midlands as well.

With the two structures that have been installed – the Mammoth Tower and the Bird Hide – account has been taken of accessibility considerations, both intellectual and physical and both NE and SWT have learned a lot about how to make facilities more usable.

Derwen College are very enthusiastic and have brought different staff and students and each group have thoroughly enjoyed their day as they have been engaged in the activities and talks. They found the staff from SWT made the visits very interesting because of their knowledge, information and enthusiasm.

Autism West Midlands (Autism WM) have visited the Bird Hide and found the experience was particularly engaging and interesting to the young people for whom it provided an activity that could have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing. Their feedback highlights that Autism WM staff feel they are opening up new environments and experiences to their beneficiaries. They also appreciated being able to use good quality equipment and

<sup>10</sup> For this report, the figures do not include professional days associated with a PhD student, who worked with the project for 3 months, looking at ammonia issues and helping to develop the Site Nitrogen Action Plan (SNAP).

found the facilities really enhanced their experience. The hide and tower offered great and different opportunities to appreciate and interact with the environment. They found the lack of visual distractions and focus on what could be seen and heard from the confines of the hide really helped participants to look and observe more closely. The sensations of height and openness afforded by the tower area were a really different element and then contrasting that with looking at and for really small things like cranberries and insects was lovely and a good experience.

Becky Hedley writes a blog about accessibility and nature and attended a Moths on the Mosses<sup>11</sup> event at Manor House in August 2022. She has praised the accessibility of the event as follows:

*“ Any event with the word ‘nature’ or ‘wildlife’ in it, cannot be expected to be without the odd change in surface or effort needed. However, the whole team at this event made the experience so much more than physically accessible. They were all very thoughtful, and made sure I had every opportunity to get close to the traps and take part. This was an inclusive event and the combination of a practical and accessible site, together with a genuinely kind and inclusive group of people, made it close to perfect.”*



[Photo: Shropshire Wildlife Trust, 2022]

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<sup>11</sup> [Moths on the Mosses | Shropshire Wildlife Trust](#)



[Photo: Plantagenet Consulting Ltd, November 2021]

## Sustainability

The sustainability of aspects of the Conservation Aim revolves around the ability to maintain the volunteer force to allow conservation work to continue, and the durability of the works and structures that have been created.

The NNR has always had a volunteer work group, including those that do physical conservation work, those that undertake monitoring and surveys, and the experts who work with specific fauna and flora. It is a fact of life that volunteers age and may move away from the area. The project has provided opportunities for the NNR to raise its profile, engage new volunteers and to upskill a number with specific work licences or tickets to allow them to operate machinery on the NNR and be covered by insurance. Having a keen Reserve Manager with responsibility for the volunteers has also been beneficial. The Reserve Manager and the Engagement Officer developed a reasonably regular and very informative newsletter targeted at the volunteers to ensure that they were fully informed about the project and what everyone was doing – The Bog Standard<sup>12</sup>, which is helpful for team building among the volunteers and gives a useful insight into volunteering for potential new recruits.

While there are some concerns regarding ensuring there is sufficient staff capacity to maintain the conservation improvements achieved during the project there is confidence that at least for several years ahead, the NNR team are better staffed than before to enable it, augmented by contractors to keep scrub under control along the bund network, for example. In addition, recognising the increased size of the NNR and the new commitments, both NRW and NE have allocated more staff and financial resources to the management of the area.

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<sup>12</sup> An example of The Bog Standard can be found at [The Meres and Mosses](#)



[Photo: still from a drone video of the NNR, Marches Mosses Project]

The other key structures that have been built are the Mammoth Tower and the Bird Hide. Both have been designed to be able to weather the environment and not require daily upkeep. The tower is close to the Llangollen Canal and is reached by a boardwalk with a mix of timber and recycled plastic “timbers” for ease of maintenance. The periscope attached to the tower has no moving parts, which reduces its appeal in some ways, but also reduces maintenance and wear. The tower also included the recycled plastic “timbers”, but these proved to be not up to the task and have been replaced by wood. The tower should now be durable and provide an outstanding view across the Mosses for years to come.



[Photo: Plantagenet Consulting Ltd, June 2022]

The bird hide has better access and includes a small car park solely for the use of disabled visitors, other users have to park at Morris Bridge car park. Again, the building has been developed with minimum maintenance in mind, but is more likely to attract visitors who cause minor nuisances and damage. Access to the hide is via a door with a coded keypad, and the code can be obtained before visiting or via a QR code when on site – SWT need to maintain the ability to change the code in case of major issues. They are also aiming to develop an informal group of volunteer users who will report any issues requiring intervention to the Wildlife Trust. As the bird hide has only recently been opened, this is still a work in progress.

The hide itself has been widely praised as a facility, and there are expectations of it being an excellent resource, particularly as the winter migrants start to arrive and the landscaping around the hide matures.

## Legacy

The project leaves a legacy of more and better visitor facilities and an area that is better able to regenerate and start to build new layers of peat, very gradually.

From a paper presented to the Restoring Lowland Peatland for Biodiversity and Carbon: Lessons from the Meres and Mosses Conference<sup>13</sup> hosted by Harper Adams University in July 2022 by Robert Duff and Sophie Laing of Natural England, the following achievements for conservation were cited:

“Analysis of monitoring results indicate that recent rewetting works are effective at raising water levels. A case study considered Bettisfield Moss which was bunded in 2017/18 and 2018/19.

- Water levels recorded in 2019 are significantly higher than previous years across Bettisfield (9.7 cm – 18.1 cm mean increase per management group relative to 2018).
- Based upon the linear relationship between annual precipitation and mean annual water level, Bettisfield dip wells located near bunding in 2017/18 are up to 35 cm wetter than expected for precipitation received within 2019.

In terms of habitat change, a habitat map was produced for an area of 794 ha using multispectral and Lidar imagery captured in July 2021. It was created using an object-based image analysis process. From analysis it is estimated 46% of the area held ‘wet’ bog habitats (cotton grass, heath, mixed water and vegetation). 22% was classed as purple moor grass, 13% as bracken and 9% as trees and scrub.”

They concluded that the Marches Mosses is a case study showing that a severely degraded bog is capable of restoration when adequate funds are made available, and a sufficient time is allowed for recovery by natural processes. The ongoing hydrological monitoring performed by volunteers and repeat vegetation surveys over the coming years will be able to determine the effectiveness of the implemented conservation measures over the medium and long-term.

The Mammoth Tower and Bird Hide are a more concrete and, for the layperson, more visible legacy of the funding. Both will last for a number of years and provide a focus for visits to the Mosses for many.

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<sup>13</sup> More details can be found at [The Meres and Mosses](#)

# Learning Aim

## Summary of progress

This aim is to “Help people learn about their heritage through a well-developed communications and interpretation programme of activities and publications”. The activities covered by this aim include:

- Media activity
  - Media releases with some press calls focusing on different aspects of the project
  - Website promotion through NE and SWT web pages, use of social media, bird’s eye tours and video at different points during project
  - Site videos to be used in presentations and online, use of drone technology to give a view from the air.
- Outreach activities
  - Presentations, talks and demonstrations - community awareness raising events to explain the technical aspects of the project and engage people in the heritage and ecological value of the site, at local village halls and community buildings
  - Local group support for children / young people - work with young people groups to encourage use of Mosses, engagement activities
  - Guided site visits - expert led guided walks to explore bog restoration, with a variety of specialists walks such as birds, plants, and natural history
  - Visitor Centre Events programme – for adults, school holiday activities, mother/toddler sessions one morning a month, drop-in family activities all year round – venue changed, but principle of events maintained
  - Get Moving on the Moss
  - Bird Hide Events programme – for adults and for children, events/workshops based at the bird hide, with wildlife as the inspiration, using other venues until bird hide complete and ready.
- Education activities
  - Educational visits including John Muir Award, revised targets to - 10 schools engaged and 300 children
  - University visits - trips will be subsidised
  - School / college engagement in addition to the original action plan.

## Achievements

Marches Mosses BogLIFE set out an ambitious programme to help people learn about their heritage through a range of activities encompassing different approaches and media.

At the time of the mid-term review, many of the initial targets relating to **media coverage** had already been achieved. A single episode of BBC Springwatch in which the Mosses were featured, reached an estimated audience of 3 million. Since the earlier review there have been numerous additional press releases together with posts on both Facebook and Twitter. These have had extensive reach with an impact far beyond the local community, increasing awareness of the project and, more importantly, the value of this threatened habitat. Although direct comparison of figures has been complicated by a change in the website host platform and changes by Facebook and Twitter in their reporting, it is obvious that the project’s communication targets have been exceeded.

In a world dominated by multi-media, static webpages or one-off press releases are not sufficient to achieve maximum impact. This was recognised in the project's planning stage with the inclusion of a target to produce **three videos**. (These are in addition to a number of short films about the Marches Mosses restoration which are available on YouTube<sup>14</sup>). In the event, 4 were commissioned, a technical film, one for promotional purposes, which is part of the work to encourage tourism, one for disabled visitors and a drone film<sup>15</sup> providing views of the Mosses from the air, giving viewers a very different perspective from ground level, or even from the Mammoth Tower. The technical film is still in production at the time of writing due to delays receiving the script from Natural England. In addition, the project has produced a Virtual Reality film which enables up to four individuals at a time to gain an immersive experience of the Mosses without setting foot outdoors.

Targets for **engagement activities**, both on and offsite, were ambitious. Even in a normal period they would have been hard to achieve, but the pandemic and repeated lockdowns, as well as not having a visitor centre as a focal point, introduced a whole set of additional challenges. All partners in the project experienced reductions in staffing due to the impacts of furlough, sickness, isolation and, when lockdown was lifted, limits on group size and confidence of people to come to events. Although remote work enabled progress to continue in many instances, there were some inevitable delays across many of the project's target areas. However, visits to the Moss never ceased, ensuring a significant level of good quality engagement, and targets for numbers exceeded. The project successfully introduced a number of resources to encourage further visitor access – over 20 third party organisations put information on their own sites, the Marches Mosses visitor information on its own website was enhanced with material for canal boat users, updated maps for walking and a leaflet is in production, due for the last quarter of 2022. The project did undertake a number of practical events, as well as creating 'Taking the Moss to You' - resources to enable self-guided activity on the Moss.

Over the duration of the project, 25 events have been held in person or online, specifically covering technical aspects of the restoration. In addition, an article was produced for the e-newsletter of CIEEM - the Ecological Restoration & Habitat Creation Special Interest Group which was estimated to reach approximately 1,000 people. Other technical dissemination highlights include:

- **IUCN UK Peatland Programme Annual Conference presentation & visit, poster 2016, 2020 & 2022**
- Hosted **NE's England Air Quality Network visit & SNAP Workshop (6/07/2018)**
- Ran a **Hydrological restoration Webinar (9/03/2020)**
- Presentation at the **16<sup>th</sup> International Peatland Congress (5/5/2021)**
- Presentation **Eurosite webinar (3/11/2021)**

33 events have been held in local village halls / community buildings etc to explain the project and raise the awareness of almost 1,000 attendees about the heritage and ecological value of the Mosses.

However, improving adults' understanding is only one aspect of ensuring the future of the Mosses and the project engaged with 7 local youth groups to ensure that younger people are also aware of the landscape's value. One of these groups, Wem Youth Club, became a participant in an international project (The Mosses and Marshes Project<sup>16</sup>) initiated by local artist Andrew Howe. Members of the club had visited the Mosses with SWT in Year 4 of the project but in Year 5, supported by extra funding from the Arts Council of England and with

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<sup>14</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=Marches+Mosses](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Marches+Mosses)

<sup>15</sup> <https://youtu.be/T0y7J46YUM4>

<sup>16</sup> [Mosses and Marshes project comes to life – Of the Mosses](#)

the guidance of two local artists who were volunteer youth workers and SWT staff, they returned to the Mosses. The Club members collected materials from the Moss (with appropriate permissions) and on return to the Club, these were mixed with different art media and applied to fabric to create three 4-metre banners. These were hung on the Mammoth Tower for the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the designation of the Moss as a National Nature Reserve<sup>17</sup>. Subsequently they were displayed at Wem Town Hall in 'peat-surface-sky', an exhibition of artwork, photographs and information about the Mosses. All the children who had participated in the process, as well as their parents, were invited to the opening night, along with the High Sheriff of Shropshire, the Mayor of Shrewsbury, local Councillors, and other guests. One of the artists reported that it was a fantastic night and that the children and their parents were 'bowled over' by seeing their work on display. Many of the parents had never visited the Moss and when asked if they would now visit, several said yes, and some have since been for picnics.

*"It has been important to let them [the children] know there is something 'other' than their little rural town. This was a big deal for some who had never seen that landscape before, and it will be memory-making for many. Hopefully, they now have a greater appreciation for wildlife, and they have experienced a far-reaching horizon that is there to be explored." Kate Johnstone, Artist and Youth Worker, 2021*

From Wem Town Hall, the banners and other materials were moved to a second exhibition at Theatre Severn<sup>18</sup> in the centre of Shrewsbury. The banners were suspended from the balcony on which the other aspects of the children's work were displayed and SWT ran a workshop. The club members who had taken part in making the banners were invited to the opening and treated as artists in their own right. The event was attended by various dignitaries, including Shrewsbury's Mayor, 60 people in total. The banners remained in place during the pantomime season and were seen by thousands of people. In addition, materials from this project have been included in an exhibition about wetlands, staged by Andrew Howe at the gallery of Shrewsbury's Gateway Education and Arts Centre<sup>19</sup>. This exhibition features the reciprocal link between the Mosses projects and the McQuarrie Marshes in Australia, which was one of the factors that influenced the initial Arts Council funding. The work on the Mosses therefore takes on an international dimension.

The banners are now at Soulton Hall<sup>20</sup>, near Wem, a stately home and farm. The owner is very supportive of the local community and National Theatre and National Youth Theatre productions have been staged there. He has created a hot desking environment for local business and the banners now hang there permanently, along with information about the Mosses. It has been agreed that they can be removed if required for other purposes and they were hung at the 12th IUCN UK Peatland Programme Conference<sup>21</sup> (IUCN UKPP) in Aberystwyth in October 2022. It has been estimated that the banners and associated materials about the Marches Mosses have now been seen by over 78,000 people.

The Mosses project has an even wider impact because there is an intention to use the Wem Youth Club project as a case study with an international dimension in the landscape research project, AALERT<sup>22</sup> (Arts in Landscape and Environmental Research Today) which concerns storytelling and the environmental crises. Andrew Howe, who initiated the Arts

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<sup>17</sup> <https://youtu.be/4QroOm7NBFY>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.theatresevern.co.uk/>

<sup>19</sup> [About the Centre - County Training \(ctapprenticeships.co.uk\)](http://About%20the%20Centre%20-%20County%20Training%20(ctapprenticeships.co.uk))

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.soultonhall.co.uk/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.iucn-uk-peatlandprogramme.org/events/iucn-uk-peatland-programme-conference-2022#:~:text=The%2012th%20IUCN%20UK,Mosses%20BogLIFE%20and%20Pennine%20PeatLIFE.>

<sup>22</sup> <https://research.reading.ac.uk/aalert/project/>

Council funded work on the Marches Mosses, is authoring a paper on how his work, and art more generally, could influence decision making. In addition, he has co-authored a book with Australian artist Kim V Goldsmith about their collaborative Mosses and Marshes project, which connects the Ramsar-listed wetlands at the Fenn's Whixall and Bettisfield Mosses (UK) and Macquarie Marshes (NSW, AUS), which reflects local differences and shared global challenges for these fragile environments on opposite sides of the planet.



[Photo: Wem Youth Club, 2021]

*“It has been a joy and a privilege to work in this special landscape with the BogLIFE team and to use art in an environmental context with the local community to help build understanding for all of us. I could see people forming a closer relationship with the wetland and, perhaps, a greater sense of ownership.” Andrew Howe, 2021*

*“The involvement with BogLIFE has helped to transform my practice, I am working more closely with landscapes and materials from them. It’s been really positive for me.” Andrew Howe, September 2022.*

*“The project with Andrew Howe, the artist team and Wem youth group had real depth and I believe will have created lasting memories and a sense of connection to the Mosses for the young people involved.” Anna Martin, SWT, 2021*

The project significantly raised the community profile of the Youth Club which has waiting lists of children who want to join, and it has helped the Club raise funds. Subsequently, youth club members have been taken on a visit to a woodland learning centre, something that might not have happened previously.

Indirect contact with many children has also been achieved through a link with Churches North Wales (the Diocese of St Asaph<sup>23</sup>). Their youth team was prevented from carrying out its normal range of activities during lock-down. However, they felt it was important to provide something that was engaging for children at a difficult time and came up with the idea of making a series of videos on the themes of Earth, Air, Fire and Water. Each one featured a 12–14-minute interview with someone involved in one of the areas of interest, in one case SWT’s Anna Martin. Alongside each film, they provided various other resources and a set of questions for children to consider. This interview and the resulting ‘Earth’ video<sup>24</sup> contributed perfectly to their objectives. They wanted to know about the BogLIFE project, about the area’s history and about how people now and in the past relate to the earth and its wildlife. They also wanted to include a spiritual element which was provided through comments about bog bodies and sacrifice.

The videos are being used by Diocesan schools as part of collective worship or as curriculum resources and will continue to be used in future. The Diocese had an Ecofest planned at which the videos would have been played but it was postponed due to the period of mourning for the Queen and was held instead on 1<sup>st</sup> October. The videos have already been shown to about 1,500 pupils at some of the 50 Diocesan schools and will be shown in most, if not all, the others. If shown in an assembly, they could be seen by around 100 pupils, so they have the potential to reach thousands of children, as well as adult staff.

*“Anna was amazing, she was so knowledgeable, and so generous with her time; really lovely.” Esther Andrews, youth and children’s chaplain.*

Despite the impact of the pandemic and interruptions in activities caused by repeated lockdowns and restrictions, the project has been very successful in promoting **expert guided site walks**: 48 such events have taken place, involving over 4,000 people. One effect of the pandemic here and in other respects was that it forced a recognition that with support the public can carry out activities themselves and a number of these events have been led by others, not SWT staff. The project now has a publication in production to support self-led activities in future. One respondent to the Visitor and Resident Survey commented *“The opportunity to walk with someone informative increases my understanding”* so the events are clearly valued.

Through **22 events aimed at adults** almost 800 individuals have been engaged, over double the original target, and a similar number were engaged through **family events** in school holidays; all provided the opportunity to provide information and resources relating to the Mosses. In addition, team members established a relationship with 10 **parent/toddler groups** and produced resources for small children that can be used by the groups without third-party support. These include an outreach pack for focused circle time in which the children 'build a bog' as well as peatland-related sensory activities with simple learning outcomes that are as targeted at the adults as much or more than the children.

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<sup>23</sup> <https://dioceseofstasaph.org.uk/>

<sup>24</sup> [Collective Worship - Earth - YouTube](#)

Although not a parent/toddler group, Bronington Bumblebees welcomed a visit from the BogLIFE team. This is a registered pre-school and playgroup providing sessional and full day childcare for children aged between 18 months - 4 years during term time. At the time of their visit, they were addressing the subject of wildlife with a group of 10 children, and the session provided by SWT fitted very well.

In terms of sheer numbers however, the BogLIFE team and their partners have been particularly successful at reaching people through **drop-in activities** for which they have developed a range of resources. Included in this were the 'peat-surface-sky' exhibition at Wem Town Hall (see above) and the subsequent Theatre Severn event, both of which featured a team presence in addition to the art works that were on display.

Trying to encourage initiatives for walking for health was another area affected badly by the pandemic. Before Covid, project staff undertook consultation with a number of groups including Energize and Age UK and trained a member of the BogLIFE staff as a Walking for Health leader but Covid restrictions curtailed activities. The changing rules for social distancing and the Rule of Six made it too challenging to restart the activity in a way that made best use of staff time, while some of the groups were also slow to restart in any case.

Scarce resources were, instead, used to create information and provide training about the Mosses for **Lyneal Trust** skippers, briefing them on how to visit, including the barriers that the Moss and facilities might cause for their clients. BogLIFE has created a resource box, specifically for the Lyneal Trust and has developed other resources to be placed on the boats.

BogLIFE was targeted to deliver a number of **events** for adults and children focused on the **Bird Hide**. The hide itself was only completed late in the project, largely as a result of difficulties appointing a contractor to undertake the civil engineering works to create the wetland which the hide overlooks and the pad upon which the hide sits. Nonetheless events were staged throughout the project using other venues as and when Covid restrictions made it possible to do so. The 19 adult events reached 422 individuals and a further 41 children's events reached another 531 through activities ranging from animal origami, through pond-dipping to wreath making. Where beneficial, SWT worked with a variety of experts to appeal to a wide audience, including story tellers, willow weavers and artists, as well as running events with specific species themes. This approach brought in people that would not have normally engaged with the Mosses.

The project's original plan for educational activities was revised in March 2018. Feedback from teachers and the experiences gained through the Meres and Mosses LPS suggested that there was little point expending effort to engage with **secondary schools** where the curriculum is tightly defined and staff have little opportunity to engage with new topics, let alone undertake outdoor learning. More recent years have seen the inclusion of peat bogs and their conservation in A-level and GCSE biology curricula, and an increased policy focus on environmental matters may lead to further change.

There was also an early recognition that impacts are more likely to be greater and more sustainable as a result of working intensively with a small number of teachers who can carry their interest and knowledge forward into successive years, rather than simply exposing a large number of children to one-off events.

Significant numbers of secondary and tertiary stage students have visited the Mosses however, including between 2018 and 2022, 600 from Shrewsbury College, and a number of groups from the Field Studies Council. In addition, Derwen College has made several trips to the tower and the bird hide at Charles Sinker Fields via the canal, with the Lyneal Trust.

In 2019 SWT received support from Restored Earth, via funds from Clarity Environmental, for the delivery of three **John Muir Awards**<sup>25</sup> to complement the education element of the BogLIFE project. John Muir Award (JMA) activity began with St Peter's Church of England Primary School in Wem, in the Autumn term of 2019 when two classes of year 4 pupils took part in practical work in school grounds and learnt about waste and recycling at Wood Lane Nature Reserve. A visit to The Mosses was planned for these groups in spring 2020 but had to be cancelled owing to the COVID pandemic and lockdown (it was eventually possible to reschedule this visit to October 2020 and the children completed their award during year 5). Unfortunately, as with so much else, the pandemic intervened and the key member of SWT's staff, was furloughed from January 2020 to March 2021 and had to reengage with schools on return to work. This was not easy, however, as in addition to the pressure on schools to make up for lost time in their students' learning, a range of Covid-related restrictions over the ensuing months severely restricted activities that could be carried out by schools. Following this pause in project activity it was decided to put the additional time left from the Restored Earth funding towards building a stronger and more in-depth relationship with St Peter's school in Wem.

The remaining funding from Restored Earth made it possible to complete two further John Muir Awards (involving two new classes of Year 4s) with St Peter's school in Wem during the extension phase of the project. The strong relationships developed with this school has led to them beginning a new, self-funded JMA this year, without additional project funding. A number of other schools have visited the Mosses, including three schools from the Goldstone Federation which brought over 100 pupils onto the Mosses, the Kettlemere Centre<sup>26</sup> at Lakelands Academy (secondary age pupils with Special Educational Needs) who brought a small group of autistic teenagers with three of their teachers and other schools have been contacted to discuss ways in which visits to the Mosses could become part of their wellbeing offer.

BogLIFE's **educational activities** were enhanced by having the opportunity to work alongside the Nature Friendly Schools<sup>27</sup> initiative which has brought additional resources and motivation to the engagement of students with the outdoors. It has been possible for BogLIFE to support NFS initiatives with local opportunities and bespoke resources, including for example, pre-written risk assessments. As a programme backed by the Department for Education and DEFRA (the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) with support from Natural England, this lends credibility and support for the desire of individual teachers and their Head teachers to work outdoors with their pupils. Unfortunately, the significant problem of funding transport remains an issue for many schools. SWT's attempts to establish a permissive path to enable Whixall School safely to access the Moss on foot has not yet yielded results.

*"It's been great to be able to take the learning from the Meres and Mosses project and what we are doing now with Nature Friendly Schools to use in developing our approach for BogLIFE. Having these two projects running at the same time has meant that they have added a lot of value to each other." Ellie Larkham, SWT, 2021*

As noted above, SWT's focus has changed from facilitation of one-off visits or school trips, to trying to encourage teachers to do more locally, regularly. This is better for both wellbeing and establishing an ongoing connection to nature. They are keen to get local schools to use the Moss as a place of interest within their curriculum, an inspirational place around which a whole topic can be created even if the children don't actually visit. SWT's team have produced a range of resources to lend out to schools which are more than just lesson plans,

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/john-muir-award>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.lakelandsacademy.org.uk/about-lakelands/the-kettlemere-centre>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.naturefriendlyschools.co.uk/>

and include interactive materials, puppets, costumes, videos, virtual reality resources etc. They hope to persuade teachers to cover the same topic each year, creating a known set of activities, making use of a familiar set of resources and culminating in a trip.

The opportunity to engage **trainee teachers** with the Mosses was a key aim of BogLIFE and an early link was established with what was then the North Shropshire Teaching Alliance (which was made up of 19 schools). A decision was made to focus on developing and delivering training for Associate Teachers (AT's), trainee teachers on the school direct PGCE that are placed in various schools across Shrewsbury and North Shropshire. The intention was to use the Mosses as a location to convince them at the start of their careers that outdoor learning is important and will benefit their learners and their own mental health and wellbeing. Visiting the Moss allows them to take part in a wide range of outdoor activities that they then have the confidence to deliver as they progress through their careers. In the process, they are also able to learn about the Mosses and their importance, globally and locally, as a rich habitat and an important player in the fight against climate change.

*“What’s important is sharing knowledge and experience, getting people to be familiar with this environment”. Greg Smallbone, then School Director, teacher training lead for North Shropshire Teaching Alliance. 2021*

In March 2019 a pilot session was delivered at St. Peter’s School, in Wem followed up by visits to the Moss. Further school visits took place in 2019 and all included a significant element of training for the accompanying teachers. Unfortunately, teacher training sessions planned for 2020 were abandoned due to the pandemic. They were finally delivered in 2021, structured to take account of government guidelines and the ‘rule of 6’. An initial training session delivered by zoom was followed by two days of visits to the Mosses. These provided the opportunity for trainees to carry out a range of activities in which they could engage children in future, see the resources available to deliver different cross-curricular subjects during a visit, and for SWT staff to highlight how important the Mosses are, particularly in relation to climate change. Unfortunately, due to restrictions, it was not possible for trainees to plan and actually deliver activities with children.

That opportunity was realised in 2022 for a group of 11 trainee teachers who, over a period of two days, were introduced to the Mosses and a range of activities that can be carried out there with children. During this period, they planned for a visit. On the third day a group of 60 Year 4 children from St Peter’s Primary School visited the Moss and the trainees were able to observe and try delivering some of the activities. The original intention was for the trainees to run the activity sessions. However, Greg Smallbone, who is now the strategic lead for initial teacher training for Shropshire and Telford Educational Partnership<sup>28</sup>, insisted that they should be run by the experts and felt strongly that the trainees would learn more by working with them in this way. He feels that this was successful and was clear that the trainees became very excited and inspired through this approach. Part of the fourth day was used to share experience and debrief. (This had been intended as a full day, but they were forced to use some of the time for catch up activity arising from Covid). The weather was extremely challenging, and the experience was useful to show the trainees the importance of dynamic risk assessment and planning for all contingencies. Despite this and the various changes to accommodate the conditions, all the children had a great time.

Greg’s stated intention is to continue this successful 3-day programme in 2023, although there are likely to be some differences - one of these will be the funding model. Whilst the Educational Partnership will pay SWT to run sessions for the trainee teachers, participation by the children will have to be funded by the school and/or parents. Greg recognises that many schools remain under pressure and that outdoor approaches do not appear in key curriculum

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.stepwm2.co.uk/>

outcomes (and that some schools merely pay lip-service to going outdoors). However, sessions in the outdoors can contribute to the delivery of most key curriculum outcomes and resources have been developed by SWT support this.

Greg wants his students to be enthusiastic about working outdoors and to overcome any challenges placed in their way, to go into schools assuming that they *will* work in this way. He was a Head Teacher when he first engaged with SWT and at that time, their approach was to come into the school and run sessions. This has changed, SWT acknowledge that they now have a clear strategy to give schools the tools to fit in to cross-curricular activities, they train school staff to run the sessions and then step back. They will continue this approach and replicate it elsewhere, thus reaching more schools and new audiences. For his part, Greg is very happy that this is now their approach and, in his opinion, it's much more sustainable.

*Greg said, "All children should have the opportunity to experience outdoor learning as part of the curriculum to enhance and develop their understanding of the natural world they in. We talk about an 'I can' attitude with children. We as educators need to do the same. There's no such thing as you can't [deliver learning outdoors], you need to assess the challenge and find ways to do it."*

The final few months of the project have seen a focus on the production of resources and lesson ideas that teachers can borrow to support topics on the history of the local area with cross-curricular links to science, geography, writing and art. Following discussions with teachers and based on the experiences of previous projects like The Meres and Mosses LPS, SWT have been keen to avoid producing lots of paper resources or lengthy lesson plans. Instead, they have commissioned exciting and inspiring physical items, such as puppets, costumes, games and activities, plus video content including stories, myths and legends. The physical items will be available in resource boxes that can be loaned to schools or used by local schools. These resources have been extremely popular with users, eliciting comments such as:

Re: Treasure of the Moss Box  
*"Thought the paintings on the box are magical".*  
*"I liked the fuzzy moss it felt nice to touch".*

Re: Match Game Dominos - Peat Measure  
*"Gasped at the thought of depth of peat and how long it takes to grow the bog."*  
*"Liked the images on the backs too. The peat and the moss".*

Re: Tsuru/Pathways  
*"Very engaged in the game play and the idea of moving across the moss and finding a path."*  
*"Liked the idea of the history and myths of the mosses".*

Re: Top Trumps  
*"Like the variety and the cards as quality. All wanted to have a go and some children wanted to take them back with them to carry on playing and learning more about the creatures, plants and wild cards".*



[Photo: Marches Mosses website]

## Sustainability

It has been clear throughout the process of interviewing individuals for this report that SWT’s team has been very conscious of the need to undertake activities that are sustainable when BogLIFE, and its funding, draws to a close.

The reduction in dedicated funds is likely to reduce the specific focus on and volume of social media posts, although these will continue to be a feature of SWT’s normal media activities.

Undoubtedly, the pattern of delivery of BogLIFE activities was seriously affected as a result of the pandemic and repeated lockdowns, but care has been taken to ensure that activity does not simply drop off an edge when the project finishes. Much of the work of the BogLIFE team has been to provide people with the information and resources to support them and give them the confidence to continue to visit the Mosses without expert guidance or input from SWT. Interpretive displays have been provided and materials for self-led activities have been developed to suit a variety of groups, from walkers to parents of small children to Lyneal Trust’s skippers. Digital multi-media resources will be useable for a very long time, at least in theory providing they remain accessible although it is likely that their currency will decline to the point where they become of interest only as archive materials or content with which to compare the Mosses as they develop following restoration. However, the increasing ease with which anyone can produce, edit and publish video will mean that the existing films and video clips can be constantly updated.

BogLIFE has enabled the training of four members of staff to work with young people with a focus on the Mosses and they will be able to bring this knowledge to groups in the future. 19 youth group leaders have been introduced to the Mosses and its facilities, taught about the Mosses and trained in some activities they can do independently. The artist leaders, who worked with Wem Youth Club, have been involved in forming a new collaborative artist group at Welshampton whose members visit the Mosses and create artwork inspired the land. They also run activities for children and young people<sup>29</sup>.

St Peter's School in Wem has developed a close relationship with SWT and has indicated that it wants to continue working with them on John Muir Awards, on a paid basis. It is hoped that other schools also take this opportunity or, if they do not want to pursue the John Muir approach, enter into agreements with SWT to provide support to develop outdoor learning. One other school is actively considering this.

The enthusiasm of schools to engage in outdoor learning will, hopefully, be encouraged by the increasing focus on environmental issues coming from policy makers. This may also come from teachers and head teachers themselves who recognise that outdoor learning can be used across the curriculum, as well as providing valuable input into maintaining the wellbeing of staff and pupils. In this respect, SWT's approach of introducing trainee teachers to the Moss and its potential for a wide range of activities is likely to bear fruit in coming years.

## Legacy

At its conclusion, BogLIFE will have left a considerable legacy. In practical terms it has developed a suite of resources for use by members of the public and specialist groups.

The project's website<sup>30</sup> features a range of resources for members of the general public to encourage and support them to visit the Moss, to learn about its history and restoration and to understand its international importance for biodiversity and carbon sequestration.

A number of physical resources have been developed including interpretive displays on the Mosses and specific materials for the boats of the Lyneal Trust to provide information about the Mammoth Tower and the Bird Hide. Artists have been commissioned to develop resources based on trials with various user groups. These include a 'Treasures of the Mosses' box containing games and sensory experiences relating to the Mosses (some of which are named above, with users' comments). There will also be a Super Sphagnum costume which will embody the 'superpowers' of peatlands to help demonstrate them to groups in an interactive way. The 'bog in a box' created for Mosslings (pre-school children) was also designed to be able to be adapted for older children and young people. All the resources will have instructions and can be self-led by groups or can be taken and used for work with groups by a member of SWT or Natural England staff, although NE has already stated that it wishes to continue to use SWT to provide outdoor education. Template risk assessments have been provided to teachers to reduce the administrative load and provide confidence to those who want to visit the Moss; educational materials encourage the use of the environment to deliver cross-curricular outcomes.

The care taken to consult with individuals and user groups regarding access to the Mosses and the installations has created a body of knowledge about good practice which can be shared within SWT and partner organisations to encourage access by all to this landscape.

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<sup>29</sup> <https://ofthemosses.com/blog/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://themeressandmosses.co.uk/marches-mosses-boglife/>

Although not direct deliverables of BogLIFE itself, the Earth film produced by the youth team of Churches North Wales and the banners produced by Wem Youth Club members have brought the Mosses to the attention of thousands of individuals who may otherwise have been entirely unaware of this landscape and its importance.

Perhaps most importantly, BogLIFE's work with young people, teachers and pupils has created a wider awareness and appreciation of this critically endangered ecosystem and will continue to do so.

## Participation Aim

### Summary of progress

This aim is to “Help more people and a wider range of people take an active part in and make decisions about their heritage by making the project accessible to a diverse range of people with different interests and abilities”.

While many of the events and work with social media contribute to this aim as well, the main activities considered here are:

- Information material - design and production of information material such as themed site leaflets, project information leaflets, layman’s report and a final project report. Where possible information will also be made available online
- Bird Hide interpretation - design and production of interpretation panels to be situated in the Bird Hide, in conjunction with Shropshire Ornithological Society
- Local group support
  - Flood action group - self led independent group to look at local flooding issues
  - Horse Riders - work with local horse-riding groups to promote bridleways, circular routes, horse riders’ facilities at visitor centre, horse rider social events
  - Engage dog walkers (not part of the original plan)
- Project launch event - a launch for partners and stakeholders
- Trail markers for new circular access routes onto Moss
- Canal boat landing stage and interpretation to encourage canal users to stop at the site - interpretation could include info on short walks, 'take away' food, drop-in activities for children
- Project staff networking - staff working on the project will attend other sites for best practice.

### Achievements

**Information and interpretation materials** have been slow to materialise, not least as they required other activities to be completed in advance, however going into the final quarter of the funded project, two new printed leaflets are in production. New maps for the trails on the Mosses are available on the website, and include the new structures, but a 2011 leaflet is still a key link. Excellent work has been done around the Mammoth Tower and the bird hide in terms of fixed interpretation however, with beautiful murals at the bird hide and key facts on sundew shaped panels at the Tower. In addition, more thought has been given to keeping notice board information current and tidy, with volunteers keeping these better managed than before.

The murals received positive feedback from those attending the opening in July, including the following statements:

*“Those murals are amazing really captured the essence of the birds.”*

*“It’s really good in fact to enhance bird pictures where too many words would put people off.”*



[Photos: Plantagenet Consulting and Natural England, 2022]

While the **Flood Action Group** was not established as envisaged, the use of the Engagement Officer to spend time with neighbours and keep them informed about what was happening was well received. In addition, he kept the parish councils updated, by attending and reporting when invited, but aiming for interaction at least twice a year. This more targeted and personalised communication has been appreciated by locals and has been supplemented by close working with local residents when they would be affected by works to try to minimise any negative impacts. The NNR team, going forward, realises that communication has to be a key part of being a good neighbour, and the need for this approach to be maintained.

The **Horse Riders Group** was first convened after approaching the British Horse Society in early 2018, asking for local contacts. There were a series of seven meetings in 2018 and 2019 with five active members in the group. They agreed a draft plan document with options for making links to existing networks of tracks and bridleways, which needed to be discussed with Shropshire Council and Wrexham Council in the second half of 2019. The group met again in April 2021 to look at how to take plans forward after the hiatus of Covid. While there was progress on the bridleway proposals, one key landowner refused to give permission for the change of use. Although excess spoil was used to upgrade some stretches of the existing bridleways, from the 2022 survey, local horse riders continue to request circular routes and more access, so there is a need for more communication with them about the feasibility of this. The current bridleways are shown on the trails map on the website, and shown overleaf – marked in white dashes.

While not an activity originally proposed, it was clear that **dog walkers** were a key user group at the Mosses, and attention needed to be paid to their needs. The NNR team estimate that 50% of visitors to the Mosses are dog walkers. During September 2020, 42 interviews were undertaken with dog walkers visiting the Mosses, with the majority at Morris Bridge car park and some at World's End car park. The information gathered from these interviews was synthesised by the BogLIFE team into the internal report "Engaging dog walkers in conversation and conservation" (June 2021), which includes ideas and options for better engaging with and meeting the needs of dog walkers. A key aspect of this was the potential to create a dedicated area with waste bin facilities where dogs can run free and defecate close to the start point of their walks (so ideally near Morris Bridge car park) before moving out onto the wider Mosses.



[Trail map downloaded from the Marches Mosses website, November 2022]

NE have sought approval from Canal and River Trust to use a piece of leased land close to the car park for just this purpose and subject to change of use planning permission being obtained the aim is to progress this. A social media dog walkers' community was considered but finally agreed not to be manageable. There are plans to make messages more positive, rather than lots of "Do Not" messages in communications with this section of users in the future.

The **Project Launch Event** was held on 6 June 2018 and had 21 attendees from local charities, other organisations and stakeholders. There are a number of photographs available of the event, but no formal feedback was collected.

The **Viewfinder Trail** was installed in the July to September 2022 quarter, too late to be mentioned by any of the respondents to the survey issued in April 22, but is providing an intriguing and popular circuit for visitors. The new fingerposts are also in place and there is anecdotal evidence of positive feedback on these, again these were too late for the survey. The Viewfinders are marked on the new walking maps that can be downloaded from the Marches Mosses website, and can be seen on the map above, designated by purple squares.



[Photos: Shropshire Wildlife Trust, 2022]

In the original plans, an additional **landing stage** was envisaged on the Bettisfield Moss side to allow **canal boat** users to alight and explore the Mosses trails. However, as the Canal and River Trust would not manage the landing stage, it would be an ongoing burden on the reduced NNR management team once funding ends, this was not a viable or sustainable option. Since the landing stage was originally proposed, the Mammoth Tower was conceived of and erected. This provides a different focus for canal users on the opposite side of the canal along which there are already in place a number of existing nearby moorings.

There is a link<sup>31</sup> on the Marches Mosses website targeting canal users, but this is still very much a work in progress. There is a link to a canal boat company, and on the accommodation and food page, there are links to Whixall Marina Café and its associated shepherd's huts. The Marina Café reciprocates by frequently referring to activities and events on or about the Mosses on their social media pages.

Work is ongoing with the **Lyneal Trust**, who have accessible canal boats offering day trips and holidays for people who are disabled or vulnerable, and their carers. There is a backpack that is being tested that groups can take on the boats with interactive activities about the Mosses, as mentioned earlier. The reactions to the materials are noted in the learning section, while feedback from the Lyneal Trust skippers is a mix of pleasure at the tower and hide and the materials produced, and a slight frustration that they are ready at the end of the 2022 season. They are ready for 2023, however.

BogLIFE has also forged a relationship with Autism West Midlands<sup>32</sup> which has enabled the latter to meet their objective of providing new and different activities for their teens by offering a 3.5-hour structured session, broken down into individual activities, two years

<sup>31</sup> [The Meres and Mosses](#)

<sup>32</sup> <https://autismwestmidlands.org.uk/>

running during the school holidays. The experiences have encouraged the group to do nature-based activities, but they were able to recognise that when doing so, they need support, the wildlife expert who was brought in by the BogLIFE team brought the events to life.

This was by no means a one-way relationship as the involvement of Autism WM has enabled BogLIFE to gain valuable insights into specific requirements relating to access on the Mosses. There has been a significant focus on access requirements involving consultation with a number of other advocacy groups to ensure the facilities are as inclusive as possible. These have involved AutismWM, SENSE<sup>33</sup>, and Sight Loss Shropshire<sup>34</sup> whose volunteers have visited the Moss and further valuable input has been provided from Derwen College<sup>35</sup>. This process has been generating good ideas and has resulted in extra work being commissioned to improve boardwalks, pathways, and the car park / gate mechanism at Sinkers Fields. As a result of these consultations SWT has also made changes to the bird hide including a small change to the code pad, the positioning of door stops to prevent slamming and the introduction of signage, as part of the mural on the walls, to stop birders moving benches into the wheelchair space and then leaving them there. This engagement helps to ensure they understand the lived experience of visitors with mobility requirements and the learning is being shared widely in SWT to ensure that best practice is adopted in future projects.

**Staff networking and links to other sites** were halted by Covid for a time, not least links to sites in other countries. While physically visiting other sites and being visited by others has been hampered by Covid, the team have recorded presentations and produced webinars that provide materials for sharing with others. Even so, there have been exchange visits with six other peatland LIFE projects and one Interreg Care-Peat project. The project was also represented at the Estonian LIFE platform meeting “Volunteering for Nature Conservation in September 2018. The 2021 webinar on hydrological monitoring has been recorded and is available on YouTube<sup>36</sup>, and the project ran a webinar on Hydrological Restoration in March 2020. In July 2018, the project hosted the NE England Air Quality Network, including a site visit and a SNAP workshop. There has been a conference on Restoring Lowland Peatland for Biodiversity and Carbon, run by Harper Adams University<sup>37</sup>, presentations at the 16<sup>th</sup> International Peatland Congress in May 2021, and at a Eurosite webinar in November 2021, as well as contributions to IUCN Peatland conferences in 2016, 2020<sup>38</sup> and 2022<sup>39</sup>.

In March 2019 the project hosted a Demonstration Day to show the practical works being undertaken on the Mosses, including cell bunding and forestry clearance. This was an event targeted at professionals from partner organisations and was attended by 29 people. In December 2020, the Chair of the Lindow Moss Restoration Group visited the Marches Mosses to see what has been done.

## Sustainability

The interpretation already in place at the Mammoth Tower and Bird Hide should both be relatively easily maintained in the short to medium term. The materials used at the more

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.sense.org.uk/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.nhs.uk/services/service-directory/sight-loss-shropshire/N10501601>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.derwen.ac.uk/>

<sup>36</sup> [Hydrological monitoring at Whixall Mosses webinar - YouTube](#)

<sup>37</sup> [The Meres and Mosses](#)

<sup>38</sup> [#PeatConf20: Day 4 | IUCN UK Peatland Programme \(iucn-uk-peatlandprogramme.org\)](#)

<sup>39</sup> [Conference 2022 | IUCN UK Peatland Programme \(iucn-uk-peatlandprogramme.org\)](#)

exposed site of the tower are robust, and the relatively isolated venue makes them less likely targets for idle vandalism. The interpretation murals in the bird hide are indoors also protected from the elements, while the need for a code to enter the hide and the relative remoteness of the site again make them unlikely targets for casual deliberate damage. The hide will need to be checked regularly for damage and incidents, and SWT will need to build up a volunteer group to do that.

The old leaflets both on paper and online are dated now, and it is anticipated that the new materials will have a long shelf life as updates are expensive and time consuming. The new maps, as they can be downloaded on demand, should be easier to maintain, along with other online resources.

Work with canal users is growing and the links with the Marina Café are showing promise, not least as this enterprise expands and becomes better known. The Lyneal Trust are more likely now to turn towards Whixall on their day trips, and are impressed with the facilities, although in the longer term, it would be useful if the Canal and River Trust could police the use of the disabled friendly landings and maintain the tow path near the tower rather better.

The profile of the Marches Mosses has been raised in peatland conservation sector circle with presentations at the IUCN UK Peatland Programme among other fora, as well as working with placement students, and with Covid restrictions now lifted, the opportunities for hosting demonstration field visits to the site exist once again. Monitoring the condition of the bog is planned to continue and this will benefit from routine data gathered by volunteers on hydrology, fauna and flora and the success of the rewetting programme.

## Legacy

The key legacy elements of this aim are the interpretation around the site and on the internet, which will keep the message of the value of peatlands to the planet available to physical and virtual visitors.

There is also a legacy in terms of its contribution to the science and knowledge base as the project team have shared their learning and experiences extensively with other projects and with the international community that has an interest in peatland, its conservation and its restoration.

The relationships built with different groups of users and local residents will need to be nurtured, but are also an asset going forward. In particular the relationships built with organisations to widen participation among those with access needs have helped to build a reputation for parts of the Mosses as being suitable to visit, as well as deepening the understanding of both SWT and NE as to how to make new assets more accessible. The website contains clear assessments to support all users<sup>40</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> [The Meres and Mosses](#) and [Compressed-Access-Statement-Oct-2022-V1\\_compressed.pdf](#) ([themeressandmosses.co.uk](http://themeressandmosses.co.uk))

## NLHF Outcomes

While the BogLIFE project has its own aims and objectives, NLHF uses its funding to support a number of national outcomes, and individual projects such as this support those outcomes. In this section we set out how 'Restoring the Marches Mosses' has contributed to the NLHF outcomes, focussing on the key people-oriented outcomes.

### Heritage will be in a better condition

While not entirely within the remit of this report, the conservation aim has firmly supported this outcome with 660 ha of internationally important wetland rewetted, sphagnum moss planted, the 2.4 ha Furber's Scrapyard cleared and made safe, 63 ha of land purchased, 24 ha of lagg managed and nutrient rich water diverted from the Mosses. It will take many years for the peatbog to regenerate fully, but there are already signs that it is becoming healthier, and there is a volunteer workforce as well as a larger NNR team on hand to maintain the improvements.

Numerous consultees appreciated that the physical improvement works had been done to protect the moss and welcomed interventions to make the moss healthier and more sustainable. The tree clearance work at Whixall was known to have caused some hostility. A few consultees were themselves unhappy about the felling of trees and most had heard negative views expressed about the clearance work. At least one thought the work had damaged wildlife habitat.

The works have won praise from leading experts in the field. In October 2021, Dr Joan Daniels, project officer with the project, published a blog for Natural England setting out what had been done<sup>41</sup>. This solicited the following comment from Prof David Goode<sup>42</sup> "*Your story brings hope for these and other cut-over raised bogs. I am very impressed by your achievements. Very significant for nature conservation and restoring a carbon sink. Win Win. Looking forward to visiting next June with the 49 Club.*" Also, from Tim Appleton<sup>43</sup>, "*Congratulations to you all what an incredible achievement. A habitat so threatened and a wonderful storer of carbon !*"

From the Visitor and Residents Survey, those respondents who had visited the Mosses within the past 6 months were asked to rate a number of features, using a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is very poor and 5 is excellent. These were used to calculate an average rating per feature as shown in Table 3 (the two rating columns).

Those respondents who had also visited 2 years before were asked whether those features had improved, deteriorated, or stayed the same. These figures are also shown in Table 3. It can be seen that the highest rated features in both sets of responses are the views and paths, tracks and trails. All features were felt to have improved in both sets of responses. The aspect which more respondents thought had improved was information about the Mosses' restoration. While nearly 2 in 5 in 2021-22 thought that the paths, trails and tracks had improved, 15 percent thought they had deteriorated. There is a similar disparity on views. Parking was an aspect where people were most likely to feel there had been no change, which is reasonable given that the project scope did not include no plans for car park improvements following the decision not to proceed with the visitor centre development.

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<sup>41</sup> [Rewilding the Marches Mosses – Britain's third largest raised bog - Natural England \(blog.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>42</sup> [Goode cv.pdf \(ukmaburbanforum.co.uk\)](#)

<sup>43</sup> [TIM APPLETON – The Urban Birder World](#)

The main difference between the two batches of responses, is the improvement rating on car parking, where on balance far fewer felt it had improved over time.

Table 3 – Rating of features and how they have changed

Feature	Rating 2018 - 2021	Rating 2021 – 2022	Improved 2018 - 2021	Got worse 2018 - 2021	Improved 2021 – 2022	Got worse 2021 – 2022
<b>Signposting to the Mosses</b>	3.62	3.57	26%	3%	33%	1%
<b>Parking</b>	3.51	3.31	24%	1%	17%	5%
<b>Information about the Mosses’ restoration</b>	3.77	3.57	56%	3%	57%	3%
<b>Paths, trails and tracks</b>	3.91	3.67	32%	6%	38%	15%
<b>Signposting on the Mosses</b>	3.47	3.36	25%	1%	34%	7%
<b>Views</b>	4.34	4.19	20%	3%	37%	11%

## Heritage will be identified and better explained

The project devised a multi-faceted programme of actions to achieve this outcome. The plan included events, physical signage and interpretation, and the development of physical and digital materials for information and publicity. A large body of work has been undertaken across these different types of activities, making a significant contribution to improving the interpretation and explanation of the natural heritage of the Mosses.

The variety of approaches target a number of different potential audiences: the general public, local people with an interest in nature, existing supporters of the conservation agencies (including volunteers), partners and stakeholder groups, day visitors, holidaymakers and people with restricted mobility.

A range of delivery methods has been used to make the information and interpretation created attractive/accessible for different audiences:

Interpretation within and around the newly created structures – the Bird Hide and the Mammoth Tower – appears to have been very well received and will have lasting benefit. The creativity of design and the use of extensive artwork has been mentioned repeatedly by consultees, in survey returns and on social media in positive terms. These have helped to make a lasting impression and may also lead to repeat visits. An encouraging indication is that we heard from various consultees that they have taken other family members and friends to see and use the structures.

The interpretation boards should have a reasonable lifespan beyond the life of the project. These are a sustainable way of helping anyone visiting the location to understand both the importance of the Mosses and to identify flora, fauna and points of interest to look out for, thus making the visitor experience more informative and engaging. Other more temporary means of interpretation have also been used to create different experiences of the mosses and to engage different audiences including a soundscape, art exhibitions and an art trail.



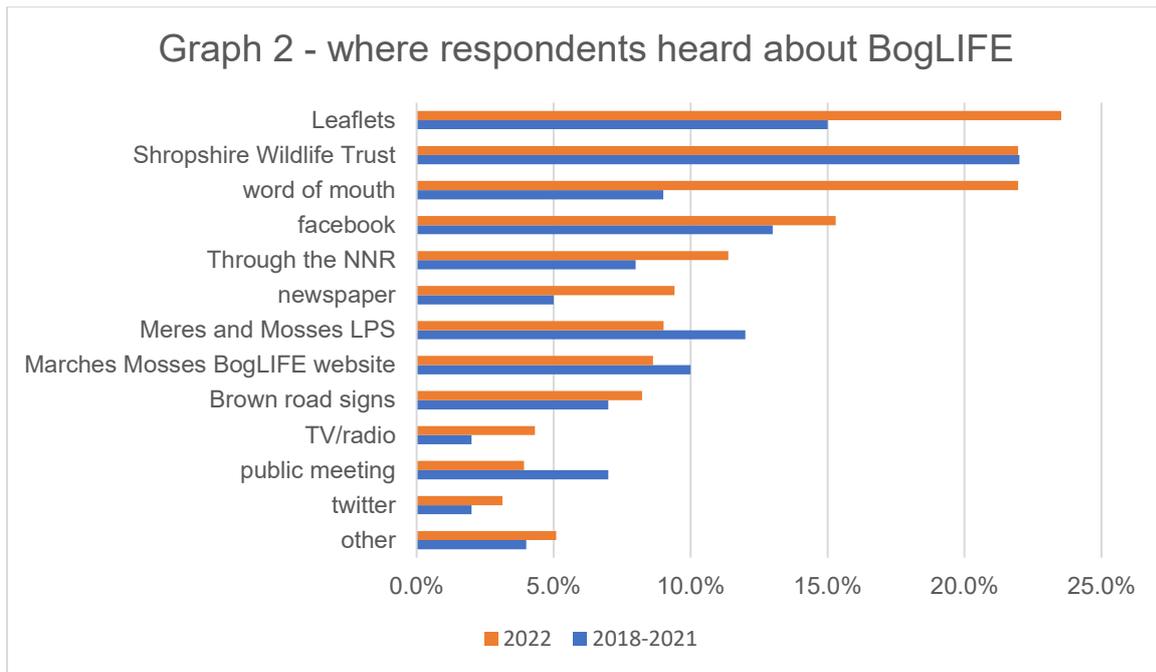
[Photo: Andrew Howe, 2021]

Digital information, delivered via both the BogLIFE website and social media feeds, has been a major tool for explaining the landscape and the work that has been undertaken, as well as publicising events, walks and the new structures that have been constructed. The strategy employed has been to issue regular new posts to keep the information fresh and relevant. A variety of formats has been used to extend the appeal and keep audiences engaged, including web pages, videos, aerial footage from drones, social media posts and even a virtual reality tool.

Respondents were asked how they had heard about the BogLIFE project, and Graph 2 shows the percentage of respondents for each given option – respondents could choose more than one. For the first tranche of respondents, the highest number of responses was 22% for Shropshire Wildlife Trust, and the second highest was 15% for leaflets. With such small numbers per option, only limited conclusions can be drawn from further segmentation. Given that BogLIFE has appeared on Countryfile, which has a significant television audience, and did cover the Scrapyard Challenge, the percentage citing TV or radio was disappointing. Similarly, the reach achieved by press releases (so appearing in the newspapers) is also disappointing, but this had increased in 2022.

Among the responses in 2022, leaflets, Shropshire Wildlife Trust, word of mouth and Facebook were the most commonly cited sources of information. But at 23.5% of respondents citing leaflets, even this was not particularly high, and only SWT and word of mouth had more than 20% of respondents as well. This emphasises the need to use multiple methods of communicating the key messages of BogLIFE, not least as word of mouth may not be reliable or unbiased in what is communicated.

Graph 2 - where respondents heard about BogLIFE



A further part of the communications plan was to encourage partners and stakeholders to include information/links on their own website and social media feeds. These not only serve to extend the reach of publicity and information but add value by showing people what other facilities exist and by encouraging people to think about how to make the most of visits to the sites. Plenty of examples of this can be found, for example Whixall Marina<sup>44</sup>. It was also interesting to note that indirect promotion has been achieved from articles about the mosses on external websites much further afield e.g. the Royal Photographic Society's Nature Group, which undertook a guided walk on Whixall:

<https://rps.org/news/groups/nature/2022/may/nature-group-visit-to-rspb-whixall-moss/>

More traditional forms of publicity have also been employed, such as hard copy leaflets and posters. Reportedly, Natural England's many noticeboards on reserve sites have been updated regularly and consultees reported that leaflets made available for attendees to take away from events that would aid planning a trip to the mosses have been very popular and well received.

New trail markers have been installed and new maps have been added to the website.

Events and activities provide a different opportunity to inform people's knowledge. Albeit that events themselves are ephemeral, direct delivery of information can make a significant and lasting impact on the recipients. Multiple sessions have been delivered to different interest groups and by different speakers. Consultees noted that speakers with specialist knowledge had been particularly well received and activities pitched at the right level for the audience were really appreciated. In particular, some sessions for toddlers and their parents were noted as having subject matter that worked for both age groups. In addition, some groups have had repeated exposure to the site and to information about the Mosses, including Wem Youth Group and schools.

Outreach staff reported that involvement in planning and delivering events has better equipped them to understand the aims of the project and those staff with an ongoing role within the organisation plan to continue delivering sessions after the project has closed. The

<sup>44</sup> See Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/whixallmarina/> Multiple entries reference the BogLIFE work, for example, see post for 22 September re Mammoth Tower.

ongoing availability of physical resources created for the events, together with digital resources will add value to this work and contributes to the legacy of the project.

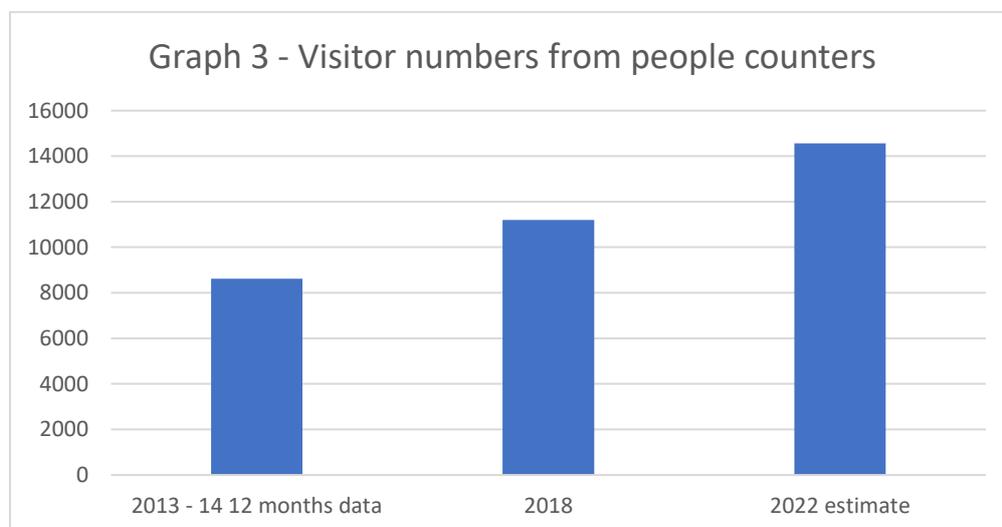
Overall, there appears to be a good balance of new interpretation resources that help people to understand specific aspects of the landscape and explanation that informs people about the importance of the peatlands, not just for nature but also to reduce climate change. The work that has taken place to preserve the peatlands is also addressed, including some potentially more controversial measures, such as tree removal. Whilst some of the information is specific to the Shropshire Meres and Mosses, a lot has relevance to all peatlands, wherever located, and so is performing a useful broader awareness-raising function.

There were mixed views about the effectiveness of communication with the local community about what works were to happen as part of the restoration and why; some consultees thought more work was still needed to explain the rationale, as there is a tendency to blame the work done for ongoing negative incidents rather than understanding the actual causes. But some felt that some local people would simply never be happy about the change to the landscape they had grown up with.

### People will have learned about heritage leading to change in ideas and actions

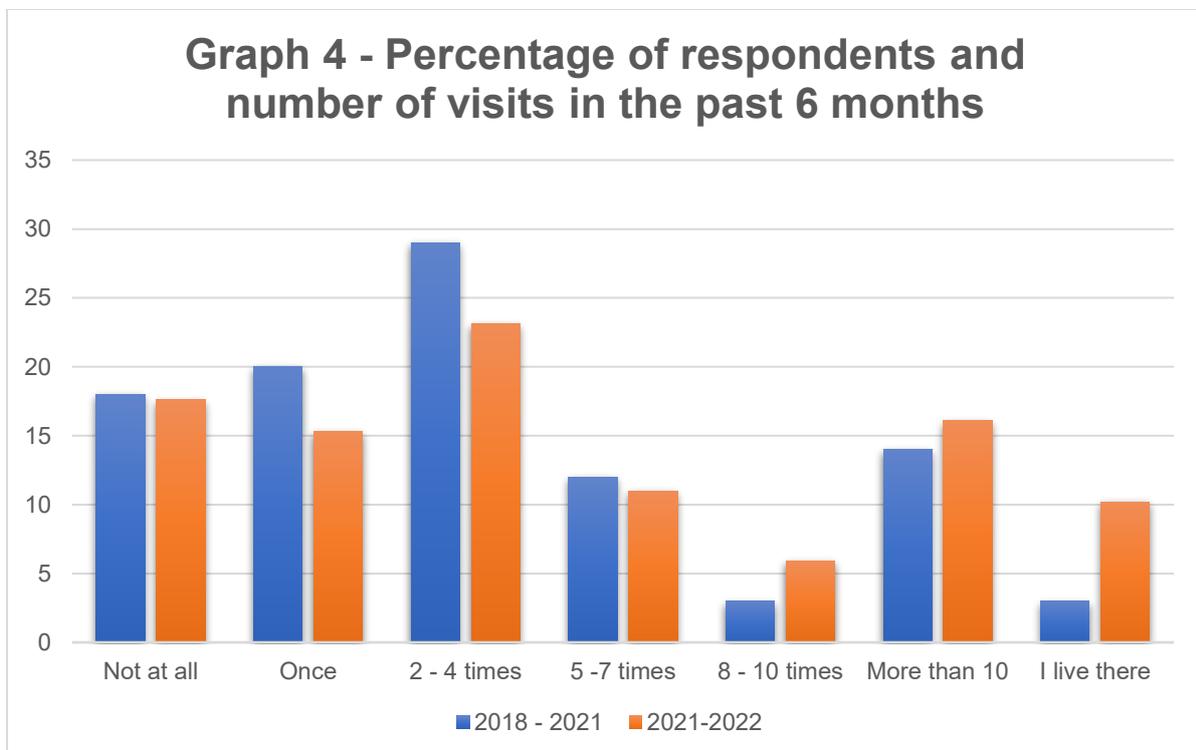
Whilst it is difficult to demonstrate a specific correlation between changed attitudes/behaviours and activities undertaken with the local community, feedback suggests that many of the activities have engendered an intention to find out more about the Meres and Mosses and to undertake visits or organise trips. Anecdotally and formally, visitor numbers are increasing, so one can reasonably assume that the combination of heightened publicity, working with tourism-based organisations and local awareness-raising are strengthening people's interest in and engagement with the landscape.

While the onsite people counters have been out of action for part of the project period, graph 3 below shows the estimates of visitors developed by NE from the data they have been able to recover. The people counters are now in working order and will continue to provide visitor data going forward.



In the Visitor and Residents Survey, respondents were first asked how often they had visited the Mosses in the past 6 months. Graph 4 shows the percentage of respondents against frequency of visit. Respondents from 2018-21 were less likely to have visited the Mosses more than 5 times, while the 2021-22 respondents were more likely to visit more than 8 times in the past 6 months and more likely to be resident in the area – as might be expected from the distribution of the surveys. The only significant difference by gender was that men were more likely to not have visited at all among the early responses, but in 2022, women were more likely to have not visited. Those who are aware of the BogLIFE project were more likely to have visited more than 10 times in the past 6 months and those who were not aware of it were more likely not to have visited at all.

Among those responding in 2018 – 21, for 20% of respondents, the frequency of visits had increased. Responses from 2020 were more likely to show an increase in visits, with no variation by awareness of the BogLIFE project, and men slightly more likely to say that the frequency of visit had stayed the same.



Respondents were asked to say whether a number of statements were true or not, in part to gauge how well the messages about managing the Mosses were being understood. Table 4 shows the overall proportion getting the response right, and then the proportions by year.

Table 4 – correct responses as to whether a statement was true or not.

	<b>Overall</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2022</b>
<b>It's important to retain water on the Mosses</b>	67%	65%	71%	76%
<b>Good quality peat bog is good for carbon capture</b>	71%	71%	71%	77%
<b>The peat in the Mosses holds a unique historic record</b>	82%	83%	79%	81%
<b>Birch trees are not good on a peat bog</b>	38%	41%	31%	35%
<b>Peat cutting ended here in the 1990s</b>	29%	26%	36%	57%
<b>The Mosses played important roles in both World Wars</b>	43%	41%	48%	66%
<b>Good drainage is beneficial for the Mosses</b>	60%	57%	67%	57%

The fact that the peat holds a unique historic record is well understood and that level of understanding has not changed. The responses to the 2022 mail out of the questionnaire show a better understanding of when peat cutting ended and the role the Mosses played in both World Wars. It is also pleasing to note that over three quarters of respondents in 2022 understood that it is important to retain water on the Mosses, but concerning to note that the contradictory statement that good drainage is beneficial to the Mosses was thought to be true by 40% of respondents overall. The message that birch trees are not good on a peat bog is not well understood, with only just over a third of respondents in 2022 saying this was true. There is a long way to go with the messages about trees on peat bog.

Table 5 – 2022 correct responses and differences by respondent characteristic

	<b>Overall</b>	<b>I live there</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Aware</b>	<b>Not aware</b>
<b>It's important to retain water on the Mosses</b>	76%	65%	79%	78%	77%	77%
<b>Good quality peat bog is good for carbon capture</b>	77%	74%	82%	78%	81%	76%
<b>The peat in the Mosses holds a unique historic record</b>	81%	76%	84%	82%	85%	80%
<b>Birch trees are not good on a peat bog</b>	35%	41%	39%	35%	42%	24%
<b>Peat cutting ended here in the 1990s</b>	57%	61%	64%	54%	64%	48%
<b>The Mosses played important roles in both World Wars</b>	66%	78%	72%	66%	75%	54%
<b>Good drainage is beneficial for the Mosses</b>	57%	49%	55%	56%	56%	56%

The following messages can be taken from Table 5:

- Overall, people were most likely to know that the peat holds a unique historic record, and least likely to know that birch trees are not good on a peat bog.

- The only significant difference between men and women respondents was on the date that peat cutting stopped on the Mosses, with men more likely to answer correctly.
- Those who were already aware of the BogLIFE project were more likely to correctly know when peat cutting ended, that the Mosses played important roles in both World Wars, and most importantly, were more likely to know that birch trees are not good on a peat bog.
- Respondents who live in the Mosses were less likely to say that it is true that it is important to retain water on the Mosses and were more likely to know that the Mosses played important roles in both World Wars.

An important forward task for the conservation agencies will be to work out how they catalyse the interest they have created and enable community organisations to turn their intentions into action e.g. by continuing to make resources available, providing expert speakers/event leaders and maintaining communication channels. Organisations made it clear that they have enjoyed the developing relationship, but most would welcome ongoing support with the subject matter.

With specific reference to protecting the flora and fauna of the Moss, efforts have been made to educate dog walkers about the dangers to wildlife and to pets of not keeping them under control when walking on the Moss. Warning signs have been erected and reportedly, volunteers are prepared to politely approach walkers to explain the problems. There is no firm evidence to demonstrate the impact of this work, but consultees felt that a lot of walkers still ignore the dangers and so this educational work will have to be ongoing.

As part of the management of the NNR, the project team have adopted a 'donut' strategy' in order to encourage and manage visitor growth and the associated pressures i.e., protecting the sensitive core of the site as a no disturbance nature reserve. At the same time, they have developed improved access opportunities and interpretation on and around the site fringes (with a focus on the south area), building links to the wider countryside to enable visitors to experience and appreciate the amazing peatland site without compromising it.

The focus on improving access for the less able-bodied is helping to raise awareness amongst staff about the challenges faced, which includes attitudes to disability as well as practical solutions. There is evidence that the conservation agencies are broadening the remit of this advice into aspects of their work and operations beyond BogLIFE, which has the potential to create a major positive legacy from the project, particularly because their volunteer advisers appear willing to continue their input after BogLIFE has finished.

Reportedly, a further positive result was that the agencies and their contractors now realise that the DDA standard with which they comply does not address the differing needs of manual and motorised wheelchair users. In future, this will be a consideration at the planning stage for improvement works.

Contractors found that the plastic planking used on and around the Mammoth Tower was not fit for purpose on a site like the Mosses and will be reviewing their use of it going forward. It was not adequately durable, when being sawn, the dust produced is plastic and difficult to contain, and end of life recycling is not as easy or sustainable as had been hoped.

## A wider range of people will be involved in heritage

From a community perspective, the intention of the project to engage with different audiences has been positively received, achieved a number of successes, and has laid

some good foundations for further interaction in the future, if resources can be found. Working with community groups and organisations has provided access to their existing networks, which often contain people that the project would have found it difficult to link with by its own efforts alone. In effect, this has created a number of trusted intermediaries (albeit individually small organisations) who can secure interest from their members/customers in nature and their local area. The relationships appear to be mutually beneficial, enabling the community organisations to extend/enhance service provision.

The groups we consulted were all complimentary about the services provided by BogLIFE, which often (but not exclusively) took the form of learning or activity events. Their favourable experience means that the project has heightened awareness amongst existing and long-standing organisations, which are interested in the subject matter, which appear to be keen to continue the relationship and have the potential to, at least, spread information about the Meres and Mosses to the local community and may even develop into informal ambassadors.

Event hosts in community organisations all said they had learnt more about the importance of the Mosses and, anecdotally, they felt attendees at their events were also more knowledgeable as a result of the sessions. This included multi-generational groups, where the primary audience might have been very young children such as toddler groups but where the presence of their parents and, in some cases grandparents, meant that adults had also been engaged. A range of venues were used and, although some events took place indoors, a number were held outdoors in green spaces to give a realistic backdrop to the activities.



[Photo: Shropshire Wildlife Trust, 2022]

It was interesting to note that, generally, the range of information-giving and learning materials and other resources used in one single session where two or more generations

were present was felt to be appropriate to engage all participants and had made the sessions fun for children and adults, not an easy balance to strike. The use of handmade craft dragonflies, the Moss Mat (a mattress children can bounce on that illustrates how water levels hydrate or dehydrate the peat) and toy animals to help animate storytelling were all cited. The feedback reports from attendees at those sessions are strongly positive.

The focus of awareness-raising was not just about the importance of peatlands but the importance of peatlands in the local area, where most of the attendees live. Event hosts reported that, whilst numerous attendees had not previously visited the Mosses, a level of enthusiasm for taking trips to the Mosses after the event was evident and people were keen to take away information leaflets that would help them to make the trip. Whilst there is no way of knowing if people have yet followed through on that intention, at least it had opened their eyes to the potential of local recreational activities and enhanced their knowledge about these important green spaces.

In addition, event hosts were themselves generally keen to build on the introduction they had received. Most had not visited the Mosses but said they intended to do so. All were interested in finding out more, in running further sessions, using the subject matter for further learning activities and, in some cases, organising field trips either working with SWT/NE or self-led, where they felt confident to do so.

The actions taken to achieve this outcome have not been limited to events alone. Building on relationships established during the former Meres and Mosses LPS project, regular interaction has continued with local parish councils, which can play a significant role as a sounding board, a communication tool with and for the local community and a formal supporter and stakeholder for such projects. The work and commitment of the Engagement Officer was praised in this regard. Feedback suggests that his attendance at meetings and provision of regular update reports was valued and helped to strengthen the relationship with such organisations. Now that his role has ceased, the interaction is missed, and hope was expressed that the conservation agencies will find the resources to keep the communication going in some way.

A really positive aspect of the work undertaken to deliver this outcome has been the efforts made to improve disabled access to the Mosses, spearheaded by the Events Officer, who has been highly praised for her enthusiasm, commitment and professionalism by many of our consultees.

A pivotal part of the approach has been to seek the help of volunteer disability advisers to give first-hand insights into the problems faced by less mobile visitors and, more importantly, to undertake specific assessments of the information resources, the sites and the new facilities to pinpoint information gaps, obstacles to access and practical fixes that will make visiting the Mosses easier and will enhance the experience of less able-bodied visitors. Whilst there is more that could be done, there are clear examples of improvements to site information on the SWT website, the physical widening of a boardwalk to provide a viable turning circle for a motorised wheelchair and the lowering of viewing hatch window catches so they can be reached by visitors in wheelchairs.

## People will have greater wellbeing

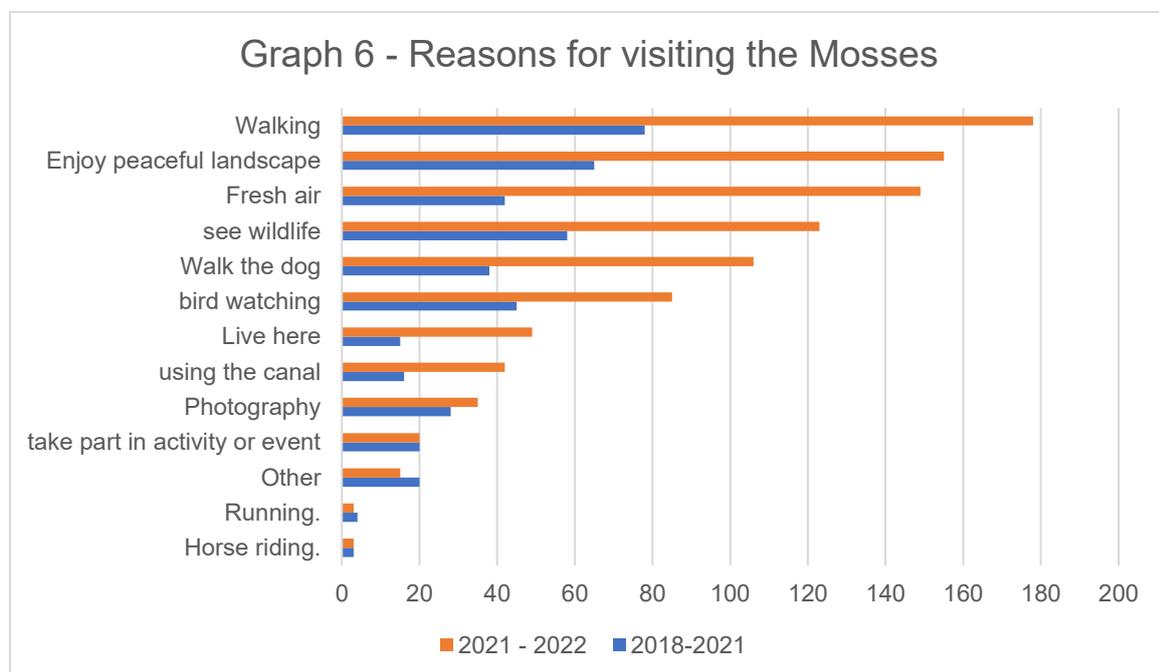
Numerous consultees reported that they have valued being involved with the project. Reasons include giving something back, enjoying the outdoors, making a contribution that will help others, changing people's views, interacting with other people and promoting the

area. One of the project trainees specifically cited improved wellbeing as part of the benefits of their time with the project.

In the Visitor and Residents Survey, respondents were asked why they visited the Mosses; the responses are shown in Graph 6. Running and horse riding were not given options but were popular among the “other” responses given, particularly among respondents in the 2018-21 time period. Walking, enjoying the peaceful landscape and getting fresh air were key reasons for visiting in all instances, although fresh air was more popular among respondents to the postal survey. Walking the dog was the fifth most cited reason in 2021 – 22 and sixth in the earlier survey, and a specific piece of work has been done with dog walkers. Photography and taking part in an activity or event were comparatively more likely in the 2018 – 21 surveys, not least as questionnaires were often distributed at events, while using the canal was more likely among those responding to the postal survey in 2021 - 22.

Up to late 2021, those who were already aware of BogLIFE were more likely to cite photography, bird watching, living there and taking part in activities or events as reasons for visiting. In the 2022 responses, those who were already aware of BogLIFE were more likely to cite living there, birdwatching, seeing wildlife, walking, and enjoying the peaceful landscape as reasons for visiting. While some of these are the same as for the earlier batch of responses, the different means of sending out the questionnaire is likely to have influenced any changes.

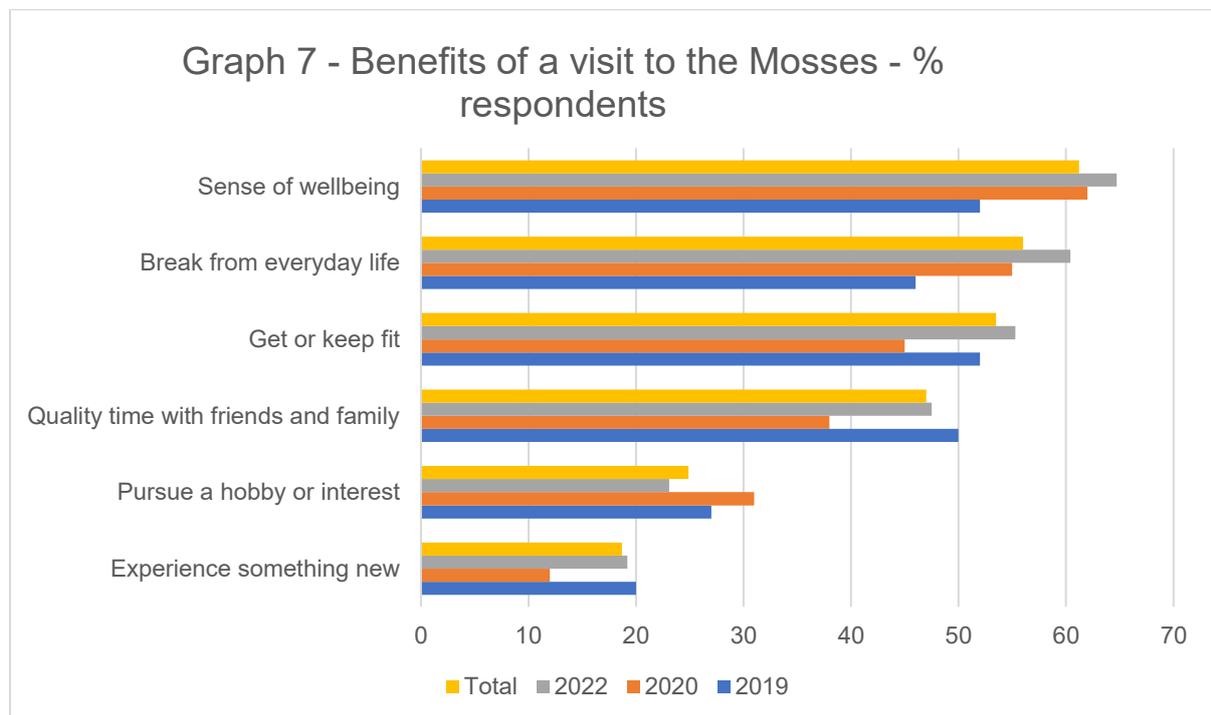
Up to late 2021, women were more likely to say they visited to walk the dog or because they lived there and less likely to say photography or taking part in an activity or event. In the 2022 responses, men were more likely to visit to walk, to see wildlife and to enjoy the peaceful landscape.



Up to 2021, nearly half of respondents said that nothing prevented them from visiting the Mosses more, while in 2022, 47% said nothing prevents them. For those that did choose a reason, too wet or muddy was chosen by 11% of respondents up to 2021, and among the other reasons cited (free text), time and dog walking restrictions were specifically mentioned. Men were more likely to be put off by the distance to get there, while women were more likely to be concerned about it being too wet or muddy. Among the 2022 responses, 25%

said that it was too wet or muddy, with no other given response options having more than 10% of responses. Looking at the “other” responses, time and old age or disability were cited a number of times, while some mentioned concerns over adders, biting insects or dogs off leads. Again, women were marginally more likely to be concerned about it being too wet or muddy.

Graph 7 shows the benefits respondents felt they got from a visit to the Mosses – the figures are shown in percentages and as well as the overall figure for the survey, we include the data for 2019 and 2020 to show the difference that Covid made. In 2020, the sense of wellbeing and a break from everyday life were more likely to be mentioned, rather than experiencing something new, not least as activity programmes were difficult or impossible to run. In 2022, a sense of wellbeing, a break from everyday life and getting or keeping fit were cited by more than half of respondents.



The commitment to improving access for less able-bodied visitors should open up opportunities for many people to enjoy the experience of being outdoors in a beautiful and important landscape. AutismWM also commented on improvements among their beneficiaries as they were able to access the tower and hide in particular.

Access improvements and interpretation will encourage more of the public at large to visit, spend time in the fresh air and will provide an enhanced visitor experience.

### People will have developed skills

All the trainees have moved on to employment in the conservation sector, a progression that those we spoke to firmly linked to the experience gained and the learning achieved during their time with the Marches Mosses.

Volunteers have/are attending formal training to certificate prior knowledge or extend their knowledge on relevant topics, which include power tool usage, DDA compliance and

environmental testing. One volunteer offered the following thought on being a volunteer at the Mosses – “*Natural England & SWT do so much for volunteers, they really do want to contribute to your personal development*”.



[Photo: Natural England, 2022]

The Volunteer Co-ordinator has had to change communications and the way work parties are organised to cope with Covid restrictions, although some tasks have been able to continue with relatively little change (particularly the water monitoring work). Expanding the range of tasks for skilled and unskilled volunteers has helped to improve the knowledge base of the volunteers and gives a chance to work on productive tasks (planting) or more positive things (nest box monitoring), although the scrub management and litter picking remain vital to the Mosses.

SWT workers have gained knowledge in order to deliver learning sessions for BogLIFE and they will now carry that experience through into their normal work post BogLIFE.

### The local area will be a better place to live, work and visit

Both NLHF and LIFE plans recognised the importance of tourism to the Marches Mosses and looked to increase awareness, day visitors and find ways to create packages that would attract visitors, in reasonable numbers, to the area to improve the local economy. SWT has produced a report on the tourism aspects of the project, including how they have worked with local providers, “influencing the influencers”, providing digital materials and ensuring a legacy that is durable.

Since 2019, officers have researched tourism sites within 10 miles of the Mosses, as well as tourism linked companies including pubs, B&Bs, appropriate hobby groups and organisations linked to the Canal. They have also talked to members of the Meres and Mosses Business Enterprise Network. The long list of potential links was then reduced to 20 and a targeted campaign of information and meetings has been undertaken to develop relationships. Probably the most fruitful of these to date has been with the Marina and the Marina Café.

Links with the Marina are seen as positive in promoting the area and providing facilities that make visiting more comfortable/attractive. It appears that the marina is being developed as a tourism destination, attracting both local people and visitors/holiday makers from outside the area. The Marina has produced their own walks leaflet, including one walk onto the moss, while SWT has ensured that there is an information board to tell people about the area and interpretation inside the café for its users. A positive working relationship appears to have developed with the Marina owners and their staff. This offers great potential for further collaboration and could also create opportunities to further the aims of the BogLIFE project after the contract is finished and the funding ceases.

Although there is some limited (very limited) negative feedback on social media, the new structures that have been created – the Mammoth Tower and bird hide – have attracted lots of positive comment and were generally liked by our community consultees. Most see them as an enhancement to the landscape and people’s enjoyment of the landscape, a draw for visitors and landmarks for people to aim at when walking. The artistic interpretation created in the bird hide and the chance to view the landscape from a higher level at the tower also brought lots of compliments.

The various forms of interpretation created were welcomed by consultees as having the potential to help people both understand and access their local area/destination, albeit some was not in place for the most recent summer season, and some consultees think more will be needed. Interpretation is seen to be an important tool for reducing fears about the dangers of walking on the Mosses, which can be seen as inhospitable, confusing and dangerous to navigate.

Improved disabled facilities and information will make natural and built assets more accessible for those with limited mobility.

### The local economy will be boosted

This aspect is not covered here as it has been fully analysed and discussed in the report “Socio-economic Analysis of the Marches Mosses BogLIFE project”, Matt Georges, Orbital Applied Economics, September 2022 for Natural England.

### The funded organisation will be more resilient

The core partnership between NE and SWT was critical to project delivery and in making things happen. NE was well placed to bid for and manage the LIFE funding, as being a large organisation, it was able to manage the funding flows and currency fluctuations that come with a grant in Euros. SWT could bid for and manage the NLHF monies, and had experience in that area, as the lead organisation for the previous Meres and Mosses LPS and NIA. Similarly, NE had the resources and knowledge to run the complex procurements for capital works and the formal powers to facilitate compulsory purchase orders, although not able to purchase land itself at the time of application. SWT could work more flexibly in

other procurement areas and in managing the clean-up of the Scrapyard, without being constrained by lengthy government procurement processes. The different ways of working are also evident in how each organisation restarted activities and events following the Covid lockdowns, with NE staff more limited by national procedures than SWT.

The success of the project has meant that both NRW and NE have committed to providing a greater level of resource to the NNR post project funding, and that has allowed the NNR to increase the staffing levels. This in turn is vital to being able to manage an increased cadre of volunteers and also maintain the expanded NNR.

The lead partners are all very pleased with how the project has worked with Will Sanderson of NRW saying *“it’s been one of the best LIFE projects I’ve been involved with, and the benefits are visible already.”* Robert Duff of NE said *“I feel proud that we have been able to achieve 95% of what we set out to do, collectively as a partnership. With passion and focus, it is amazing what we can achieve!”* Richard Grindle of SWT said, *“We haven’t created a white elephant, instead we have a Mammoth Tower with its innovative interpretation to help people understand the Mosses”.*

All community consultees were enthusiastic about the objectives of the project and the benefits it has brought, so overall, from a community perspective, the reputation of the conservation agencies has been strengthened.

However, the controversy caused by the tree clearance work on Whixall Moss has not been forgotten and despite best efforts, it is unlikely to be possible to win round 100% of the local community. The funded organisations will need to continue to sell the benefits of restoring/maintaining the moss in a healthy condition, to maintain general support for their actions.

There is evidence of links being created into different parts of the community that allow the conservation agencies to promote their objectives, so it will be important to keep these relationships going and strengthen them. These include with pre-schools, schools, libraries, parish councils and individuals. The potential reach of all these organisations through their networks to new audiences is substantial.

The use of disability advisers has the potential to improve the organisation’s approach to and policy on inclusivity, increasing its appeal to a wider audience and strengthening its corporate governance.

Public-facing staff (those giving sessions and talks) reported they have researched information and learnt more about the landscape as a result of BogLIFE. Consequently, they are better informed to continue promoting the importance of the mosses, a core objective for the conservation agencies.



[Photo: Graham Walker and Sarah Jane Lamb officially opening the bird hide, July 2022, Marches Mosses website]

# Annex

## Annex 1 – Visitor and Resident Survey Questionnaire



### Marches Mosses BogLIFE Visitor Survey

All responses are anonymous

Please give today's date below:

\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

1 How often have you visited the Mosses in the past 6 months?

- Not at all
- Once
- 2 – 4 times
- 5 – 7 times
- 8 – 10 times
- More than 10 times
- I live there

2 How has that frequency changed in the past 2 years (if applicable)?

- Increased
- Stayed the same
- Decreased

3 Why do you visit the Mosses? (please tick all that apply)

- I live there
- Walk the dog
- Bird watching
- Using the canal
- To see wildlife
- Walking
- Fresh air
- Take part in an activity or event
- Photography
- Enjoy the peaceful landscape
- Other (please specify)

4 What, if anything, prevents you from visiting the Mosses or spending more time there?

- Too far away
  - Lack of public transport
  - Not sure where to park
- [more options at the top of the next column]

- It can be too wet/muddy
- There's nothing for me to do there
- I don't know enough about access or what to do there
- It feels unsafe
- Nothing prevents me
- Other (please specify)

5 Please rate the following aspects of the Mosses based on your most recent visit, where 1 is very poor and 5 is excellent (leave blank any that don't apply):

	1	2	3	4	5
Signposting to the Mosses					
Parking					
Information about the Mosses' restoration					
Paths, trails and tracks					
Signposting on the Mosses					
Views					

6 **If** you have visited the Mosses before/live there, how have the following changed over the past 2 years?

	Better	No change	Worse
Signposting to the Mosses			
Parking			
Information about the Mosses' restoration			
Paths, trails and tracks			
Signposting on the Mosses			
Views			

For more information on the Marches Mosses BogLIFE project see our website – [www.themeressandmosses.co.uk](http://www.themeressandmosses.co.uk) or e-mail us at [info.whixall@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:info.whixall@naturalengland.org.uk)



7 What benefits do you get from visiting the Mosses (please tick all that apply)?

- Quality time with friends and/or family
- Developing an interest or hobby
- Experiencing something new or different
- A sense of wellbeing
- A break from everyday life
- A chance to get/keep fit
- Other (please specify)

8 Before today, were you aware of the Marches Mosses BogLIFE project?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

9 If yes, how did you hear about the Marches Mosses BogLIFE project? (please tick all that apply)

- Leaflet
- Public meeting
- Television/radio
- Newspapers
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Marches Mosses BogLIFE website
- Word of mouth
- Shropshire Wildlife Trust
- Meres and Mosses Landscape Partnership Scheme
- Merefest
- Brown road signs
- Through the National Nature Reserve
- Other (please specify below)

10 On a scale of 1 to 5, how far do you agree that restoration of the Marches Mosses peatlands contributes to fighting climate change?

- 1. Strongly disagree
- 2. Disagree
- 3. Neither agree nor disagree
- 4. Agree
- 5. Strongly agree

11 Which of the following statements about the Mosses do you think are true (please tick all that you believe apply)?

- It is important to retain water on the Mosses
- Good quality peatbog is good for carbon capture
- The peat in the Mosses holds a unique historic record of local plant and animal life
- Birch trees are not good on a peatbog
- Peat cutting ended here in the 1990s
- The Mosses played important roles in both World Wars
- Good drainage is beneficial for the Mosses

12 Please enter your postcode in the box below – this is only so we can plot how far respondents live from the Marches Mosses and not for anything else:

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13 Which of the following age groups do you belong to?

Under 16		45 – 54	
16 – 24		55 – 64	
25 – 34		65 – 74	
35 – 44		75 and over	

14 Are you?

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say

15 Do you have any other comments you would like to make about the Mosses or BogLIFE?

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.

For more information on the Marches Mosses BogLIFE project see our website – [www.themeressandmosses.co.uk](http://www.themeressandmosses.co.uk) or e-mail us at [info.whixall@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:info.whixall@naturalengland.org.uk)