

# A better environment

## Conservation Volunteers Northern Ireland



### POSITION PAPER



**A** better environment is at the heart of everything Conservation Volunteers Northern Ireland (CVNI) does.

The environment is under greater pressure than ever and concerns about climate change and loss of biodiversity continue to grow. Our ecosystems, biodiversity, and natural resources are the "natural capital" that underpins economies, societies and individual well-being<sup>1</sup>, but not enough is being done to address the environmental problems the world faces. Recent government figures report that 76% of people in Northern Ireland are concerned about the environment.<sup>2</sup>

Annually, volunteers spend 36,000 workdays protecting Northern Ireland's environment, including urban and rural habitats, designated sites, areas of outstanding natural beauty, priority habitats, public open-spaces and school grounds.

CVNI also uses the environment as a focus for community involvement, education, training and improved health. The ability and willingness to help anyone who wants to improve the environment is our unique service and selling point.

### Key points

Long-lasting improvements to the environment can only come by working with people. Our response to the many environmental challenges is:

- **LOCAL** Concentrating on what people can do in the places where they live and work.
- **COLLECTIVE** Bringing people together in common effort for community benefit.
- **ACTIVE** Helping people do something practical and with a visible results.

#### SENSITIVE HABITAT MANAGEMENT AT GARRISON, COUNTY FERMANAGH

CVNI was asked to clear areas of Bog Myrtle which was shading out more delicate wildflowers on a fen grassland. During the work the rare Argent and Sable moth (*Rheumaptera hastata*), which had



not been recorded in Northern Ireland for seven years, was discovered on the site. Bog Myrtle is an important food plant in the moth's life-cycle, so the management activities were changed to balance the needs of the moth with the need to maintain a species-rich fen grassland and areas of Bog Myrtle were left to support the moth.

## The environmental challenges which we face and the work CVNI undertakes to help achieve solutions

<p><b>THE NEED TO INCREASE ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING</b></p>	<p><b>CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS SOLUTIONS</b></p>
<p>The population of Northern Ireland has limited understanding and awareness of the environment. Only 29% of the Northern Ireland population are aware of the word "biodiversity" and only 16% know what it means. But when given a definition of biodiversity, 58% felt it was either fairly or very important and 59% were either fairly or very concerned about decline of native species in Northern Ireland.<sup>3</sup></p>	<p>Our work promotes awareness and understanding of biodiversity and involves people in practical action to improve the local area and safeguard biodiversity.</p> <p>We work with schools to improve the quality of their grounds and this is linked to the Northern Ireland Curriculum.<sup>4</sup></p>
<p><b>HALTING LOSS OF BIODIVERSITY</b></p>	<p><b>CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS SOLUTIONS</b></p>
<p>Biodiversity is the diversity of life on earth and more than a quarter of the world's wildlife has been lost in the last 35 years<sup>5</sup></p> <p>The Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group said in their 2009 report, "We conclude that we are a long way from having confidence that the 2016 target of halting biodiversity loss will be achieved."<sup>6</sup></p>	<p>Our volunteers dedicate 24,000 work days annually to habitat creation and management work, helping to create ecological networks and to maintain Priority Habitats and implement Local Biodiversity Actions Plans.<sup>7</sup></p> <p>We provide 250 advisory visits per year to support land owners in improving the biodiversity value of their land.</p>
<p><b>MAINTAINING THE QUALITY OF THE LANDSCAPE</b></p>	<p><b>CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS SOLUTIONS</b></p>
<p>Many of Northern Ireland's most important landscapes are designated as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).<sup>8</sup> A great deal of work needed to retain and enhance the quality of these landscapes and the landscape of the wider countryside.</p>	<p>Our Conservation Action Teams undertake projects such as repairing dry stone walls, planting hedges and managing woodlands, which help to maintain the character and quality of the landscape within AONBs and the wider countryside.<sup>9</sup></p>
<p><b>ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY</b></p>	<p><b>CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS SOLUTIONS</b></p>
<p>Climate change is "...the greatest and widest-ranging market failure ever seen."<sup>10</sup></p> <p>Environmental degradation has the potential to undermine long-term prosperity.<sup>11</sup></p> <p>The cost of global biodiversity decline under a business-as-usual scenario is estimated to be as much as €14 trillion by 2050.<sup>12</sup></p>	<p>Maintaining nature's capacity to fulfil essential functions e.g. flood alleviation, will be cheaper than having to invest in alternative heavy infrastructure.<sup>13</sup></p> <p>Our volunteers contribute over £1.8 million of environmental value to Northern Ireland each year.<sup>14</sup></p> <p>The environment is a growth area for employment and CVNI provides environmental training and qualifications which helps people contribute to the green economy.<sup>15</sup></p>
<p><b>QUALITY OF LIFE AND HEALTH</b></p>	<p><b>CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS SOLUTIONS</b></p>
<p>A greater burden of poor environment is borne by disadvantaged communities.<sup>16</sup></p> <p>Graffiti, vandalism, street litter and lack of access to green spaces have significant impact on wellbeing and mental health.<sup>17</sup></p>	<p>We actively target the most disadvantaged communities to help them improve their local environment.</p> <p>The Green Gym helps provide access to the environment and is a proven way to benefit well-being, promote higher levels of physical activity and improve mental health.<sup>18</sup></p>
<p><b>CLIMATE CHANGE</b></p>	<p><b>CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS SOLUTIONS</b></p>
<p>Per capita carbon emissions of 12.83 tonnes in Northern Ireland compares badly with the UK average of 10.48 tonnes, the global average of 4 tonnes and the global fair share of 1.65 tonnes.<sup>19</sup></p> <p>38% of people in Northern Ireland are concerned about climate change.<sup>20</sup></p>	<p>CVNI has a major role in mobilising people to help manage habitats such as peatlands and woodlands, which will act as carbon stores and contribute to reducing the impact of carbon emissions.<sup>11</sup></p> <p>The Carbon Army is our main campaign to promote awareness and understanding of climate change and pro-environmental behaviour.</p>



**Conservation Volunteers first worked on the East Strand dune system in Portrush in 1993. Erosion problems were serious, with several major erosion areas along the dunes caused mainly by visitor pressure. The worst of the damage was repaired in the first five years and the work has continued since, to maintain the dune system as an important habitat and amenity.**

**Conservation Volunteers has gone on to restore dunes at Waterfoot, Castlerock & The Whiterocks, and has acquired extensive expertise in managing coastal dune habitats.**

**“We have worked with CVNI since 1993 and are delighted with the ongoing sand dune management work” Joe Finlay, Head Green Keeper, Royal Portrush Golf Club**



**CVNI is the largest grower of native local provenance trees in Northern Ireland, producing around 100,000 plants each year in our tree nursery at Cladeboye, using seed collected from ancient and semi-natural woodlands. The native trees of Ireland are the species which arrived by natural means after the last ice age and before human settlement, including aspen, birch, hazel, oak and ash.**

## Conservation Volunteers beliefs and values

**Based on our experience of working with people in the natural environment over the past 28 years and the evidence outlined above, we believe that:**

- CVNI's Strategic Objective is to involve people in practical action to improve the rural and urban environments of Northern Ireland.
- Practical environmental volunteering not only improves the environment, it also helps to achieve many other objectives including improved health and well-being for those involved, learning new skills helps to find employment; and overcoming isolation and exclusion by providing increased social contact.
- Improving the local environment is a good way to involve people from the local community, bring people together and develop cross-community and inter-generational contact.
- There is a huge amount of work needed to halt the loss of biodiversity, and environmental volunteering is a good way to mobilise a workforce to do this important work. Greater public engagement and involvement is crucial, if understanding of biodiversity and environmental issues is to move beyond a narrow group of academics and scientists.
- Northern Ireland's poorest communities generally experience the poorest quality environments and there is an urgent need to encourage communities to become involved in improving the quality of local environment.
- Environmental volunteering offers a way to involve people in actions that help achieve both mitigation and adaptation to the impacts of climate change.
- Native trees grown from local provenance seed are an important resource for maintaining the quality of Northern Ireland's woodland habitats and creating new native woodlands, helping to link existing habitats and begin to achieve an ecosystem approach to habitat management.
- CVNI's work with schools and young people helps to build understanding of the environment through practical action, and also supports many aspects of the Northern Ireland Curriculum.

## Conservation Volunteers Northern Ireland's commitments

We will enable some 135,000 local people (contributing to half a million people across BTCV) to contribute to improving 2,500 sites across Northern Ireland over the next three years. We will achieve this through environmental volunteering opportunities which offer enjoyable physical activity, a connection with the natural environment and with other people and the chance to learn new skills.

**LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY** We will help to conserve Northern Ireland's finest landscapes and highest value sites including Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, local and National Nature Reserves, Areas of Special Scientific Interest, the wider countryside and urban green spaces. We will support



the delivery of Habitat Action Plans, Species Action Plans and Local Biodiversity Action Plans, helping to conserve habitats and rare or declining species.

#### PARTNERSHIP WITH OWNERS AND MANAGERS OF LAND

Owning no land ourselves, we will work with many sorts of land owners to help them improve their own land and involve people in achieving positive environmental change and improvement, helping land managers to develop better understanding of what communities want from their local green spaces.

**COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT** Conservation Volunteers will work to involve communities in improving their local environmental quality and raise awareness and understanding of environmental issues. We will support communities to improve sites ranging from parks, school grounds, and urban green spaces to priority habitats and Areas of Special Scientific Interest.

**SHARING GOOD PRACTICE AND EXPERIENCE** Our training programme and in particular the training for land managers, offers training in skills specifically relevant to land managers and environmental professionals. Conservation Volunteers also provides an advisory service to land owners to help them identify ways to improve their lands environmental quality e.g. advice on woodland management, pond and wetland creation or hedge planting.

**PUTTING OUR OWN HOUSE IN ORDER** We are dedicated to the concept of "one planet living" and want to "put our own house in order" and be a leader in this field. We are committed to reducing our carbon footprint by 3% per year every year and looking at ways of reducing environmental impacts and increased sustainability, including reduction in resource usage and increased recycling. Our Regional Office in Belfast has the Environmental Quality Standard BS8555. We will actively encourage others to follow our example.

Conservation Volunteers will continue to ask those involved in developing and implementing public policy in Northern Ireland for the following:

- That Northern Ireland Government supports the value of community involvement and volunteering in tackling environmental problems such as halting biodiversity loss and endeavour to fund relevant projects whenever possible.
- Northern Ireland councils who have not already developed Local Biodiversity Action Plans, should do so urgently and aim to involve as many people as possible in their implementation.
- A commitment to make "a better environment for all" a key objective of social and economic regeneration policy.
- Make implementing the statutory duty on all public bodies to conserve biodiversity, as set out in the new Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill, a priority.
- Consider ways to achieve increased community and volunteer involvement in some of the new and expanding policy areas for example, River Basin Management Plans under the EU Water Framework Directive or Integrated Coastal Zone Management plans.

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Registered Charity in England 261009 and Scotland SC039302  
[Environment\_PP\_CVNI/04.11/RS/RB\_pdf]



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE