



Ullswater Heights Leisure Park, Cumbria
Penrith, Cumbria
Leisure Resorts Ltd

BIG Biodiversity Challenge Award Category: **Habitat Creation: (>5 ha)**

Project overview

Leisure Resorts' £20M Ullswater Heights Holiday Park has become a key employer and component of the regional economy. Development of the park had to overcome complicated ecological constraints. The solution has delivered significant biodiversity gain through an innovative biodiversity-led approach that is now key to marketing the site.

What were the biodiversity conditions on site, prior to the enhancement?

Large parts of the site comprised a former limestone quarry with the remainder, in which habitat creation took place, being intensively managed sheep grazed pasture. The principal ecological interest of the site prior to development was its large (exceptional for the region) population of great crested newts (GCN).

The development therefore needed to deliver substantial mitigation, compensation and enhancement to provide clear evidence that the conservation status of GCN would not be affected, and to address European Protected Species licencing requirements. The scheme also needed to deliver against wider (local and national) biodiversity policy to be acceptable to Cumbria County Council and Natural England.

What were the reasons behind this project?

An exemplar biodiversity solution was needed to enable planning conditions to be discharged and provide mitigation for the large GCN population on site. This involved working closely with the landowners and detailed consultation with Natural England to derive a management plan that would deliver habitat enhancement and creation for both GCN and a wide range of other species, while also allowing the development of a commercially viable, high quality leisure park.



Wildflower planting adjacent to holiday lodges



One of the main waterbodies created for GCN & other amphibians

What were the biodiversity measures taken?

Biodiversity Solution

The site was enhanced by creating high quality ponds and hibernacula. Working closely with the contractor, waste materials from site preparation and construction that would otherwise have been exported were recycled to form new habitats. Three new ponds were created by working with the complex hydrology and geology of the site, and a bespoke 'mega hibernacula' within a 150 m long by 5 m high screening bund. Bunds are frequently used as visibility screening or part of the sustainable drainage systems in development schemes. The adaption from single function retaining structure to a multifunctional supporting feature for local wildlife is innovative, and something that could be readily replicated on other sites using clean waste materials. Hedgerows and woodland patches have also been created, linked by new areas of wildflower meadow and scrub, which extend through the public areas of the site contributing to LBAP objectives.

Delivering Long Term Biodiversity Benefit

The GCN licence mitigation and 10 year Habitat Management Plan were designed to ensure that the favourable conservation status of the newt population could be maintained, and that biodiversity gains objectives are successful. Monitoring results over the last 5 years have exceeded expectations, both in GCN numbers and the biodiversity recorded across the site.

Staff Engagement

Another key success is that the operators now see the biodiversity value of their site as an asset and celebrate it. This is reflected in their website material, and on-site educational interpretation panels. The Operations Manager was provided training throughout the project by BSG Ecology staff, which goes beyond normal practice. This helped him achieve his GCN survey licence and has assisted Leisure Resorts in incorporating biodiversity values into normal business practices, making practical on the ground decisions and providing advice to staff if newts are found during routine operations.



Large-scale mega hibernacula being incorporated into screening bund and retained enhanced pond showing holiday park



Before and after: High-quality grassland offering habitat for amphibians & invertebrates has been created across the site

Further information

Installation

The locations of new ponds were selected with consideration of connectivity to the existing GCN population, site hydrology, geology and layout. Ponds were initially unlined and left to vegetate naturally; this was very successful for two of the three ponds. In one pond, its position over underlying drainage caused water levels to vary. This was rectified by lining the pond and introducing locally sourced vegetation to provide instant refuge for amphibians. Communication with the site team, monitoring and a fast response to the issue, meant that there was very little delay in rectifying the problem.

Monitoring

The condition of habitats is monitored annually against objectives in the Habitat Management Plan, so that management strategies can be adjusted where necessary. Monitoring in 2020 revealed a peak count of 200 GCN; making it one of the largest populations in Cumbria. Through working closely with the landowners and contractors, who have been understanding and motivated in welcoming biodiversity into the development, the site is now home not just a large and stable GCN population, but also toads, frogs and smooth newt, protected species including barn owl, peregrine falcon and badger, and a diverse range of invertebrates associated with the mosaic of grassland and scrub habitats woven through the holiday park and within the wetland habitats in the area dedicated for GCN.

Legacy

Training of the operations manager has resulted in a legacy of upskilling and education, and allows monitoring of the GCN population to be carried out by site staff.

Project Team

Leisure Resorts Ltd, BSG Ecology & Planning consultant (WS Planning)

What was the motivation for carrying out the enhancement?

Although the project started as a complex planning and licencing issue, the operators saw the opportunity to maximise biodiversity value in their scheme, and the wider wellbeing and educational opportunities this provided. They have gone beyond what was required and made biodiversity enhancement and visitor education an intrinsic part of the development.



Examples of the on-site interpretation panels



Before and after: New pond with varying depths encouraging a wider range of species. All images Jim Fairclough – BSG Ecology