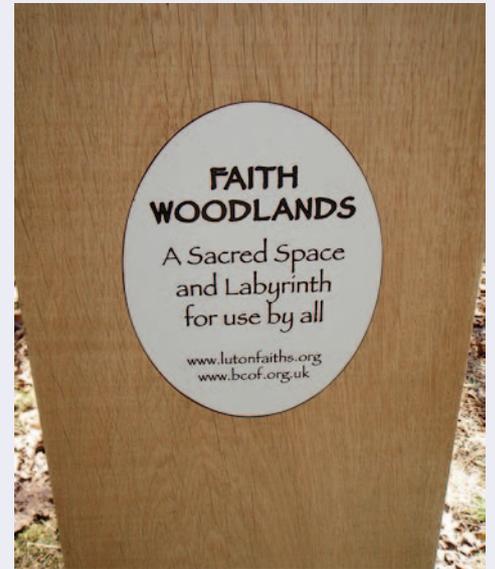


The 'Faith Woodland' project in Maulden Woods: an evaluation

A pioneering 'Faith Woodland' project at Maulden Wood in Bedfordshire was evaluated in 2007, nearly two years after it was initiated. Different parties to the scheme had different objectives, with the main actors in the faith communities focusing on a spiritual and interfaith ideal, while the local Forestry Commission England (FCE) managers were focused on community outreach, and particularly the inclusion of groups of people who do not normally access woodland. There was strong positive feedback from participants, who in some cases had enjoyed no previous access to woodland and who now expressed enthusiasm and were more likely to use woodlands in future. The Faith Woodlands leaflet produced through the project has the strapline 'Different faiths working together creating a special space in Bedfordshire for the mind, body and spirit', and bears the logos of the partners: 'Grassroots' (an ecumenical organisation); Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund; Councils of Faith (Bedford and Luton); and FCE. As the project progressed a relationship was forged with 'The Greensand Trust', a charity with an office in the wood, that is funded through the Big Lottery Fund and dedicated to the health benefits of countryside access.

Forest Design Plan objectives for the woodland concentrated on nature conservation and timber production, and these were, to an extent, in conflict with the access objectives, although the issues were successfully resolved through local negotiation.



"What a fantastic project it's been, and I hope that it will fulfil its targets and get a lot of people into the woodlands who wouldn't usually access it, ... and also encourage people to mix with different faiths who wouldn't have necessarily done it before. I see the woodland as a neutral space, it's not like going into somebody's church or mosque and trying to start a dialogue, it's a completely non-biased situation where you can talk freely"

Field Officer for a charitable organisation promoting health and well-being in 'vulnerable' groups

Background

The idea of establishing a Faith Woodland site on Forestry Commission land was first suggested by a private individual, developed from his personal interest in this area. The proposal was of interest to FCE nationally as it met the objectives to encourage woodland access by groups that can sometimes be hard to reach.

The policy context for the Faith Woodland project in England is provided by the England Forestry Strategy, revised in 2007 as the Strategy for England's Trees, Woods and Forests. The country strategy reflects UK government policies for increased forest access and social inclusion. Although the aims of the project instigators were based on promotion of interfaith

understanding, the benefits that fit best with the Forestry Commission's strategies were in the area of community outreach to ethnic minority groups who may be under-represented as forest visitors.

Objectives

The evaluation aimed to:

- examine the processes through which the Faith Woodland scheme has been developed in Maulden Wood
- examine the objectives and achievements of the scheme to establish its main features and benefits

Methods

- A series of site visits was undertaken and eight interviews were held with the main actors responsible for developing the project.
- An open day was held at the site on 30 March 2008. This presented an opportunity to contact a number of participants who represented the 'targets' of the initiative. Four people from different backgrounds were selected for in-depth interviews by telephone.

Findings

Principal actors, such as the rangers, and project partners had very different sets of objectives, but there was no sense of conflict between them. The process by which partnerships had been forged relied heavily on existing social networks, particularly those presented by the two Interfaith Councils, Luton and Bedford Councils of Faith. The relationship with the Greensand Trust was especially fortuitous since it had a project officer and office actually in Maulden Wood, and funding from the Big Lottery Fund for community outreach in the woodland related to health. As a result, the Greensand Trust was able to

organise volunteers and carry out site works, such as erecting way marks and signs. Relations between the project and the local FCE staff have been good and the Steering Group members interviewed expressed gratitude for the co-operation received. Nevertheless, it was clear that there was some tension between the management objectives of the woodland, which for FCE concerned conservation of habitats (the site has SSSI status) and timber production (economic woodland management), and the objectives of the project, which were social objectives including community outreach, woodland access and improving environmental awareness. A balance between these objectives is a general requirement for sustainable forest management that requires local community engagement in the context of national policy through the forest design planning process.

Maulden Wood exemplifies the potential for the development of access to English woodlands. It is situated close to two centres of population (Luton and Bedford), in one of the mostly sparsely wooded areas of Europe, and is ideally placed to offer much-needed opportunities for woodland access. The Faith Woodland project is an excellent example of community outreach in action, with the spiritual or religious storyline representing only one of a number of ways of engaging with local communities.

Recommendations

- Faith groups, accessible through Councils of Faith, should be routinely included in FCE outreach programmes to encourage use by those groups who do not normally access woodland. This could be formalised by seeking to develop a national-level understanding with the Interfaith Network.
- Faith groups should be seen as only one example of social networks through which FCE and government objectives concerning access to forests and green spaces can be delivered. Interfaith integration *per se* is outside the Forestry Commission's remit.
- The groups who benefited were reached through strong social networks such as the Councils of Faith. Efforts also have to be made to encourage groups that are not represented by strong social networks if social inclusion objectives are to be met.
- Local compromises concerning economic, environment and social objectives should be reached through a process of deliberation including all the important stakeholders (not just powerful government agencies and NGOs).
- Given the central role of English woodlands in providing space for the delivery of a whole range of social benefits, FCE resources to promote and maintain access are clearly inadequate to sustain this level of outreach across all sites.
- Partnerships with third-sector organisations (such as the Greensand Trust) which have complementary or similar objectives are particularly advantageous.
- It is recommended that social objectives be emphasised and clearly communicated through the FCE line management structure.

Partners

Research carried out by Paul Tabbush in collaboration with Liz O'Brien

Funding / Support

Funded by Forestry Commission England.

For further information contact: liz.obrien@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

Reports and publications

Tabbush, P.M. (2008). Maulden Faith Woodland: an investigation. Unpublished Report to the Forestry Commission, 28 pp.