

# Rural Alternatives Project: *Cultural Skills & Community Woodlands*



## Case study no. 2: Singing Trees – Highland Xylophones



One of the Rural Alternatives Project (RAP) events held in the Kirkhill and Bunchrew area was a xylophone workshop. This took place in Upper Reelig Glen Wood, in partnership with Kirkhill and Bunchrew Community Trust Woodland Group. It was part of the development of a plan for a local woodland-based business: Singing Trees – Highland Xylophones ([www.happyness.org](http://www.happyness.org)).

### **Xylophones – a sustainable woodland product**

Simple, robust musical instruments can be a valuable way of helping schoolchildren and others express themselves musically as a group. Doing this outdoors, especially in a woodland setting, adds a magical extra dimension. Stephen Inckle-Sharpe, one of the partners behind Singing Trees, has an impressive track record of delivering drumming and percussion workshops to schools, hospitals, businesses and community groups in Scotland. He currently uses instruments imported from Africa, and was inspired by the idea of doing the same kind of work but with instruments sustainably made in Scotland from local materials.

The workshop at Reelig Wood demonstrated that such an instrument could be made as part of a community workshop, and both made and played in a woodland setting. It fits the non-timber ethos, because it is a way of adding value to wood which is too small to be part of a conventional commercial timber crop.

### **Making a xylophone**

Making a xylophone is a fascinating combination of very simple construction methods and expert fine tuning. Workshop participants can readily see the results of their work as suitable pieces of wood are selected, split, cut to length, and assembled using nails and ropework. The element of expertise comes in as the keys are fine-tuned, a process that is different every time due to the natural variability of the raw material. At the end of a very wet workshop in Reelig Wood, a group of four people were able to play together on the new instrument, with the rain becoming just a natural accompaniment to their music.



The xylophone workshop at Reelig Glen Wood

## Local community needs

The Singing Trees concept offers a way for a local family to support themselves through a sustainable business in the locality. At the same time it will establish more business opportunities and permanent social links with the already active Community Trust, while strengthening rural community identity in an area all too easily swamped by the city of Inverness. It offers therapeutic value in a woodland environment to local residents and visitors.

## The business: planning and developing Singing Trees

Singing Trees was launched via the vehicle of a comprehensive business plan (see References below), which incorporates an analysis of the customer base, a marketing plan, a promotional strategy and details of the market research that has been carried out.



The Singing Trees woodland  
(the small lot mid photo in pasture)

Central to the idea is a young family with two children, needing a sustainable income. Once the business plan was in place, they purchased a small compartment of Sitka Spruce (*Picea sitkensis*) trees from a private woodland owner with the intention of developing it as a sustainable forest management demonstration site and course venue. The 1.48 hectares of mature woodland offer the possibility of a business based upon the manufacture of xylophones from commercially non-viable pieces of wood and the associated provision of training in xylophone construction to local community groups. The plan also specifies that a

Forest Garden will be planted and harvested to provide fruit and naturally-occurring fungi and herbs, and that the woodland compartment will provide timber for the construction of a self-build house and workshop.

The following steps were then taken:

- Dialogue was encouraged among individuals, the Community Council and the Community Trust.
- Existing local woodland resource builders and garden design businesses were engaged with for support and advice.
- The workshop in Reeling Woods was carried out in partnership with RAP; volunteers helped to create a xylophone in the wood for enjoyment by local residents and woodland users.
- Workshops were carried around Scotland to help establish demand for woodland instruments.

## The future and lessons learned

Getting the support of the local community for the business idea has been very important. A high level of local interest in Singing Trees has manifested itself through a large amount of community participation in events organised by Singing Trees to date. This indicates that the development and success of this business would be welcomed by the local community. However the most significant issue of concern for the business idea now lies in persuading the local council Planning Department of the project's merits. Unless the planners can be made to understand the opportunities that lie in diversifying woodland business in this manner the broader objectives of the business plan may never be realised and the overall survival of the business remains uncertain as a result. The Forest Croft approach may eventually provide some opportunities to address such planning issues, but the Forest Croft process is still young and currently focused on Forestry Commission land.

## RESOURCES – SINGING TREES AND FOREST GARDENS

- Inckle-Sharpe, S.P & Inckle-Sharpe C.E. (2007). *Singing Trees-Highland Xylophones Business Plan*. Available from [www.happyness.org/htm/xylophones.php](http://www.happyness.org/htm/xylophones.php)
- FCS (2006). *The potential and practicalities of Forest Crofts: Steering group report*. Published by Forestry Commission Scotland
- Hart, R. (1996). *Forest gardening*. Published by Green Earth Books.
- Whitefield, P. (1998). *How To Make a Forest Garden*. Published by Permanent Publications
- Law, B. (2001). *The Woodland Way*. Published by Permanent Publications

## RESOURCES – SITKA SPRUCE NTFPs

- Highland Natural Products Ltd has developed Sitka spruce-based products including food-smoking flavourants  
[www.highlandnaturalproducts.co.uk](http://www.highlandnaturalproducts.co.uk)
- Crookedstanes have developed a range of Sitka spruce-based food products  
[www.crookedstanekindling.com](http://www.crookedstanekindling.com)
- The Dunbeag Project, located in Argyll, has been applying the use of Sitka spruce to the issue of sustainable housing  
[www.dunbeag.org.uk](http://www.dunbeag.org.uk)

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*For further information about the Rural Alternatives Project, visit:*  
[www.reforestingscotland.org/projects/rural\\_alternatives.php](http://www.reforestingscotland.org/projects/rural_alternatives.php)

*For general information about non-timber forest products, visit: [www.forestharvest.org.uk](http://www.forestharvest.org.uk)*

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Writing by Les Bates, RAP Local Coordinator for Kirkhill and Bunchrew  
Images by Les Bates and by Singing Trees