

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



Mid Term Report

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Introduction

The Rural Alternatives project (RAP) started in February 2006 and has been running for approximately 20 months. RAP is considered a pilot project and is due to end on the 31 March 2008. The following report represents a detailed record of what has been achieved by the project and its partners to date.

Aims

1. To identify opportunities for the revival of traditional knowledge about NTFPs through Community Woodland Groups.
2. To work with the community to explore how these resources could present solutions to local problems such as under-employment access to local food and craft products.
3. To train community members in traditional skills and knowledge about NTFPs.
4. To encourage participatory planning processes within the community to continue developing traditional skills and passing on knowledge and products to other members of community.

Progress towards achieving the project aims

1. To identify opportunities for the revival of traditional knowledge about NTFPs through Community Woodland Groups.

The project has been working with 4 community woodland groups:

- Culag Community Woodland Trust, based in Lochinver in the Assynt area,
- Acharacle and surrounding community groups in the Sunart Oakwoods Initiative Area of Lochaber,
- Kirkhill and Bunchrew Community Trust Woodland Group, near Inverness,
- Tinne Beag Workers Cooperative near Newtonmore in Dumfries and Galloway.

1A. & 1B. Four planning visits and four surveys of NTFP resources in woodlands available to communities-

A survey of the physical NTFP resources was seen as an essential start to the project, in that it identified 'opportunities' for reviving traditional knowledge in the woodland types local to the project communities.

NTFP surveys have been carried out at all of the four communities. All sites have participated in surveys termed as 'transect walks': simple qualitative visits where compass bearings are chosen in local woods and the groups follow them with an NTFP expert, Dr Alison Dyke, identifying and noting useful NTFP species and discussing their uses.

It was only felt appropriate to carry out fuller surveys at two of the project sites (Sunart Oakwoods Area and Kirkhill and Bunchrew areas) and an important lesson has been that people are generally more interested in a qualitative understanding of what is in the forest than in learning quantitative survey methods. Generally speaking a transect walk was sufficient to identify the resources available in local woodlands and to introduce community members to them.

A total of 23 participants took part in the survey process covering a total of 10 woodland sites.



Photos: Kirkhill and Bunchrew survey at Newtonhill woods (by Les Bates).



Photos: Species identification as part of the survey process at Sunart Oakwoods Initiative Area (by Ben Hayes).

1C. Survey of NTFP local community knowledge and expertise in the use of NTFPs and the potential for improving NTFP resources-

It was not felt appropriate to carry out a formal social-survey process. Instead an informal process of asking for people to come forward through emails, posters, articles in newspapers and letters and word of mouth was felt much more suitable to the small communities the project was working with, where everyone knew each other. In this way a group of knowledgeable individuals within, and out with, the project communities were identified as possible trainers, or simply as people who might be willing participants in the project. The implication of this being that their skills and knowledge would be incorporated into the project.

Many of the people who came forward were invited to take part in a physical NTFP survey of woods (for example this was the way the project started in the

Sunart Oakwoods Area and in Assynt). This provided a starting point for discussing local and traditional NTFP knowledge and sharing it through oral legend. So in many ways the physical survey was also a survey of traditional community knowledge. Mini-disc recordings were made of all local knowledge relating to NTFPs that was offered at two of the surveys and a video recording of one survey was made.

2. To work with the community to explore how these resources could present solutions to local problems such as under-employment access to local food and craft products.

2A. Six case studies of best practice from Scotland and overseas written up and delivered to community groups

Two NTFPs have been selected from each of the project sites to give a total of eight case studies. These have been selected on the basis of interest and relevance to local people's needs.

In the case of the Sunart Oakwoods Initiative Area communities, dyeing (using berries, plants, fungi, mosses and lichens) has been selected on the basis of it being of direct interest to a local wool spinning and weaving group that is very active. Charcoal has also been selected but is not likely to be well developed. See the photographs below which illustrate the dyeing project.



Photos: Natural dyeing ingredients and Spinning wool for use as a dyeing medium in the Sunart Oakwoods Initiative Area (by Isabel Isherwood).



Photos: The dyeing process in progress in the Sunart Oakwoods Initiative Area (by Isabel Isherwood).



Photos: Dyed wools ready for knitting and Felts coloured using natural dyes produced in the Sunart Oakwoods Initiative Area (by Isabel Isherwood).

The Assynt community is developing a project to use Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) as it is plentiful and its control is an important issue on community lands. Assynt hopes to develop a process for using bracken as an alternative energy source by burning it as a wood-fuel substitute. The ash from this process will then be used in organic agricultural as a fertiliser. The second Assynt case study focuses largely on a business plan that is being developed for Birch-sap syrup for use in a similar way to Maple syrup as a food product. This will make use of the local abundance of Birch trees in the North of Scotland the use of which is considered largely commercially unviable due to transportation costs. See the photo below which illustrates work one so far on packaging and labelling.



Photo: Birch sap syrup bottle and label developed by Culag Community Woodland Trust with an Assynt community member (by Jake Paul).

Interested members of Kirkhill and Bunchrew community are developing musical instruments from their forest (principally Xylophones). Community NTFP survey processes are also being developed as a case study in a community managed forest.

The community at the Doon of May is developing a CD of music tracks incorporating sounds from the community forest and packaging this using handmade materials made from raw materials from the forest. They are also developing a study of the sustainability of harvesting moss products.

2B. Four participatory workshops to present case studies, discuss survey results and identify training needs for community members

These workshops are planned to take place in February 2008 once the case studies have been completed and will seek to identify how the project should continue beyond this initial funding phase. The workshops will identify how successful the project has been in delivering NTFP knowledge and skills to address issues that are important for the communities.

What people need in the way of training and consequently what they will be interested in for a future phase of the project will also be discussed.

3. To train community members in traditional skills and knowledge about NTFPs.

3A. Identify trainers and existing training courses.

This was carried out in a rather ad hoc manner within most of the community areas the project worked. There was no single model for how trainers and training courses were identified. It was felt most appropriate to determine local participants interests first and then to look at what trainers were available locally. In most cases all the local coordinators were members of the communities they worked with and consequently had an understanding of trainers that were local or suitable to the project.

At some of the locations there were existing training programmes or partners-collaboration with which synergised the work of the Rural Alternatives Project either through providing local co-funding or helping in the organisation of training in tandem with the Local Coordinators.

In the Sunart Oakwoods area a key partner to the project is Sgilean Na Coille ("Skills of the Woodland" in Gaelic) - a project set up to strengthen the economy of the Sunart Oakwood Initiative area by maximising the benefits of the abundant woodland resource and the internationally important biodiversity, cultural and natural heritage of the area. So far Sgilean Na Coille has provided a total of £2440 of co-funding to RAP activities in the Sunart Oakwoods Initiative Area. They have also been a useful source of trainers for RAP. A local spinning and textiles group has also yielded some local trainers in relation to a dyeing using natural products workshop.

In Kirkhill and Bunchrew CROFT 7, the home of the Local Coordinator Les Bates has been a major resource for the project providing both a training location and trainers (Les and Sheila Bates have skills and knowledge about many different NTFP areas including dyeing, wine making, preserve making and crafts such as basketry and hurdle making).

Culag has collaborated with local NTFP related movements such as North-West Sutherland Food Links and the ranger service to identify trainers and relevant skills.

Tinne Beag has focused largely on the knowledge of its immediate community members at the Doon of May (principally apiculture, brewing/wine-making and

music production) and this has contributed to several informal information-sharing events.

3B. Four training courses run under existing programmes.

The 'Sgilean na Coille' project has been working in the Sunart Oakwoods Initiative Area for several years. A total of £2440 so far has been donated from this fund towards training elements of RAP and has resulted in three workshops (a wild foods demo, a fungi day and a beekeeping day) as well as a woodland survey being carried out.

3C. Four new training programmes run where no existing provision exists.

The project has more than achieved its target number of workshops and other training events at all sites except Tinne Beag. A total of 37 workshops & events with a total of 316 direct participants has been achieved so far. A summary of events held is given below under each of the project's locations:

Assynt, Sutherland

1. Local Provenance Tree Seed Collection information day (30 September 2006) x8 participants.
2. Bracken in Organic Agriculture/for Bio-fuel information day (24 March 2007) x 12 participants.
3. Chainsaw Furniture Course (Saturday 12 May 2007) x?? participants.
4. Guided walk (x 23 participants plus children and dogs) and talk (x6 participants) on traditional remedies from the woods (17 May 2007).
5. Making green wood toys (23 June 2007 as part of Assynt Foundation Fun Week) x?? participants.
6. Wine-making (25 June 2007 as part of Assynt Foundation Fun Week) x 5 participants.
7. Natural Dying (26 June 2007 as part of Assynt Foundation Fun Week) x 3 participants.

Sunart Oakwoods Initiative Area

1. Wild Food Cookery Demo- gathering and preparing edible plant/fungi species (24 September 2006) x6 participants.
2. Wild Fungi Identification workshop and foray (30 September 2006) x16 participants.
3. Natural Dyes workshop (7 October 2006) x 6 participants.
4. Introduction to Beekeeping workshop- 21 October 2006 (x9 participants).
5. Spinning workshop (January 2007) x6 participants.
- 6&7. Felting and dyeing with lichens workshops x2 (February 2007) x13 and x13 participants respectively.
8. Bee-keeping workshop- 4 June 2007 (x7 participants).
9. Bee-keeping workshop-7 June 2007 (x6 participants).
9. Weaving workshop (an important accompaniment to the dyeing workshops) held mid-June 2007, x5 participants.
10. Wild Food Foraging weekend- 18/19 August 2007(x10 & x16 participants respectively).



Photos: Wild fungi identification/foraging and Bee-keeping workshop in the Sunart Oakwoods Initiative Area (by Isabel Isherwood).



Photos: Wild food cookery demonstration in the Sunart Oakwoods Initiative Area (by Isabel Isherwood).

Kirkhill and Bunchrew, near Inverness

- 1-3. Wine making workshops- 26 July 2006, (7 participants) 19 August 2006 (x6 participants), 20 September 2006 (4 Participants).
4. Willow Sculpture/weaving & Fruit tree/native tree workshop with Kirkhill Scout Troop (x24- 18 children & 6 adults).
- 5-6. Chutney workshops- 11 Nov 2006 (x5 participants); 16 Nov 2006 (x3 participants).
7. Willow workshop 29 Nov 2006 (x30 participants).
8. Decorative Garland workshop- 9 Dec 2006 (x11 participants).
9. Basket-making workshop- 27 Jan 07 (x9 participants).
10. Beekeeping course- 24 Feb 07 (x6 participants).
11. Rush-mat workshop- 17 March 07 (x11 participants).
12. Spoon-making workshop- 31 Mar 07 (x3 participants).
13. Birch Sap workshop- 7 Apr 07 (x2 participants).
14. Nettle day workshop including practical preparations and publication - May 2007 (x4 participants).
15. Gorse Flower Day and publication- 9 June 2007 (x4 participants).
16. Elderflower Day and publication- 7 July 2007 (x3 participants).



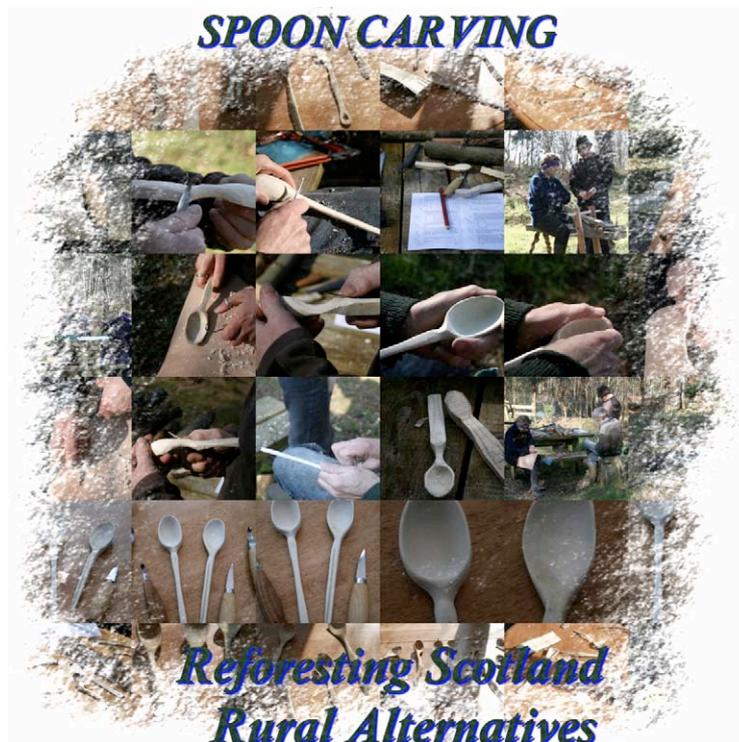
Photos: collage from nettle day at Croft7 (by Les Bates).

1st line- fresh nettles for soup, wine, nettle haggis. In the dye shed, at the worktable, dyed wool skein.

2nd line- nettle dyed wool skeins, examining the skeins, nettle haggis, the green room workshop at Croft7.

3rd line- the busy workshop table, stirring the nettle soup, preparing the young nettles, dye room.

4th line- at the worktable, dyed wool skein, dyed wools using nettles and different colours achieved, examining the skeins.



Photos: Collage of Spoon Carving workshop at Croft 7 (by Les Bates)

Doon of May, near Newton Stewart

1. Green Wood Working course- 22,23,24 Aug 2006 (x6, x15, x10 participants respectively).



Photos: Green woodworking in process and a finished spoon being proudly displayed (by Jake Paul).

4. To encourage participatory planning processes within the community to continue developing traditional skills and passing on knowledge and products to other members of community.

4A. Four participatory workshops to a) review the experiences of the project, and b) develop a framework for a future project.

The participatory workshops are planned to take place in February 2008 at the end of this funding phase of the project. It is intended that these will act as a local review of what has been done and how the project should develop into its next phase.

4B. Four project proposals developed, one for each community.

Four new project proposals are emerging from the Rural Alternatives project. Three of these have been from Assynt- a description follows:

A 'Bracken as a Biofuel' project is being developed (since March 2007) in conjunction with a bracken expert, Dr Eric Donnelly, and the Highland and Islands Community Energy Company to see whether bracken can be used in lieu of woodchips in burners. Similarly a feasibility study is being carried out developing bracken for use in organic agriculture. Both of these projects aim to try to turn a problem into an opportunity.

Weekly meetings have been taking place between the project's Local Coordinator and one community member interested in developing a Birch Sap syrup enterprise. A Business Plan has been in development with the help of Caithness and Sutherland Enterprise and Food Industry North Development since November 2006.

The Local Coordinator has also collaborated with the Ranger Service to help develop a project proposal for 'collecting and growing native tree seeds' (October 2006).

The bracken and birch projects will be documented as case studies towards the end of the project

Members of Kirkhill and Bunchrew community have been developing a business plan for a xylophone project entitled 'Singing Trees'. The project will incorporate a forest garden and provide an outdoor musical environment for visiting groups as well as providing a working model of sustainable and renewable 'manufacturing' of instruments from woodland.

4C. Displays at local events

Displays have been held at a variety of events ranging from community meetings to conferences and trade shows- to promote the multiple benefits of NTFPs as well as the Rural Alternatives project. A summary of these is presented below under each of the project areas:

Assynt, Sutherland

Assynt Foundation Fun Week- Wild Foods (wild garlic, sorrel, and hazel), recipes and information boards prepared and distributed (June 2007 report).
Local display to raise project profile locally displayed at Lochinver leisure centre.

Sunart Oakwoods Initiative Area

Sunart show (12 August 2007) - Woolcrafts group had two sessions preparing a display for this.
Participation in Community Woodlands Association Conference - November 2006.
Sunart Oakwoods Initiative schools' day at the Sgoil na Coille as part of Healthy Highland Week- January 2007

Kirkhill and Bunchrew, near Inverness

Kirkhill and Bunchrew Gala Day- 9 June 2006
ELAV project conference in Orkney - 6 & 7 September 2006.
Aigas Centre Open Days (x4 events) - 25 June 2006 & 23 July 2006, 24 June 2007 & 30 July 2007
Beaully & Glens Trust Open day- 29 July 2006,
Inverness College Forestry School open day- 16 September 2006
Community Woodlands Association conference display- 10-12 November 2006.
Touchwood display- 1&2 June 2007

Doon of May, near Newton Stewart

Community meeting in Wigtown Hall- 17 May 2006 x8 participants

Mid Term Review and Changes to the project

Soon after funding was accumulated for this project the decision was made to restructure it so as to make it more workable and more appropriate to local community needs. Consequently instead of a single peripatetic Project

Coordinator being responsible for delivering the project with 4 collaborating community groups, it was decided to re-arrange the budget so as to create one centrally-based Project Coordinator and four Local Coordinators each of which were to be based in or near each partner community. The staff budget was split accordingly.

The Local Coordinator at the Doon of May project resigned after about five months in post. After an attempt to recruit a new Local Coordinator failed due to internal politics, the decision was made to place the project on hold at that site until the situation improved. The overall project has not been set-back in achieving its objectives because of the productivity of the three other partner locations. RAP has since restarted at the Doon of May with a new local coordinator and it is expected that it will be able to meet the overall project's aims and in particular will contribute to the case studies.

A mid-term review of the project was held at CROFT 7 in Kirkhill and Bunchrew on 12 February 2007. This involved all of the project staff (except Hilary MacDonald) and two Reforesting Scotland Directors and was held principally to discuss project progress and structure. One of the major decisions that came out of the mid-term review was to increase the Local Coordinators contract length by an extra six months until the end of the project (i.e. 31 March 2008) so that delivery of the case studies might be carried out locally and not by the Project Coordinator. This approach was considered by all to be more appropriate and more practical as it is the Local Coordinators who will have the best knowledge of the specific NTFP ideas that have been earmarked to be written-up as case studies.

The decision was also made at the mid-term review to increase the Project Coordinator's time from two days to two and a half days per week. This was mainly to address the fact that the Project Coordinator had been struggling to carry out visits to the different partner groups due to the large distances involved and the time this has meant away from the office. This extra time will also be used by the Project Coordinator to prepare the case studies and participatory workshops in the project's final quarter.

Approved and Expected project costs

Activity Costs

Activity Costs	Agreed costs	Costs to date	Expected total cost
Staff costs	60,504	38,190	57,987
Recruitment costs	426	477	477
Fees for freelance workers & staff on short term contracts	2,042	3,515	5,449
Design, writing & printing information, educational & promotional materials	544	0	1,000
Travel for staff & volunteers	4,062	2,247	3,498
Overheads	18,620	14,761	21,890
Office stationery	1,064	847	1,302
Non-cash contributions & volunteer labour related to activities	2,240	0	0
Other Activity Costs	2,874	483	758
Total Activity Costs	92,376	60,520	92,361

Other Costs

Other Costs	Agreed costs	Costs to date	Expected total cost
Contingency	3,458	0	1,500
Inflation	920	329	794
Non-recoverable VAT	3,176	1,169	1,993
Total other costs	7,554	1,498	4,287

Project Partners

Acharacle and surrounding community groups in the Sunart Oakwoods Initiative Area of Lochaber.

Culag Community Woodland Trust and community members in the Assynt area.

Kirkhill and Bunchrew Community Trust Woodland Group and community members.

Tinne Beag Workers Cooperative and community members.

Project Sponsors



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Co-operative Community Dividend- Tinne Beag

The Gatliff Trust

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Sgilean na Coille project