



THE RADICAL ROWAN



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Rural Alternatives - forging ahead

Now that the project is up and running, the four community groups involved with Rural Alternatives (RA) have spent much of their time organising and running training and workshops focused on delivering the community benefits from Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs).

The *Sunart Oakwoods* local coordinator, Isabel Isherwood, ran a very successful series of autumn workshops which were co-funded by the local 'Sgillean na coille' project. The 'fungi identification and uses' workshop covered the basics of



'Natural dyeing' workshop

identification followed by a fungi foray to allow the participants to observe habitats and identification features in the field. Specimens were collected for further studies indoors. Sixty species were recorded with emphasis being placed on edible species and those used for dyeing.

The 'wild food cookery' workshop was attended by six people, two of whom were professional cooks working locally. It is hoped that these cooks might play a part in helping to boost awareness and use of NTFPs for food in the local area, thereby creating a potentially synergistic output from the project, and supporting growth of the local economy.

The 'natural dyes' workshop focused on which species to use and was attended by a group keen to apply these skills to spinning, weaving and knitting. The

participants also raised the possibility of starting a longer-term project focusing on natural dyes and traditional crafts.

The 'introduction to bee-keeping' workshop focused on equipment, the tasks of the beekeeper during the year and good pollen/nectar plant species. This will be followed up with further sessions in the spring, when a thatching course is also being planned.

The *Kirkhill and Bunchrew* group held a series of three winemaking workshops which were led by Les Bates, the local co-ordinator, and Sheila Bates. Les has also produced a handbook on wine production. Further workshops have been carried out by Sue Blaney, who trained community members in the art and science of producing chutneys, jams and preserves, and a two-day transect-walk and survey workshop run by Alison Dyke was carried out with the Kirkhill and Bunchrew community on 8 October. Les has also tirelessly promoted the RA project at a series of events which have included local Scout groups and schools, as well as a talk and display at Inverness College.

Sadly, D amhnait de Brun, who was local co-ordinator for *Doon of May*, near Newton Stewart, had to return to Ireland at the beginning of August. A series of workshops had been prepared and so far one of these has gone ahead: a 'green wood working' course held over three days in August. The community at the Doon is currently debating re-focusing the project on building a nursery to grow native tree seed collected both from the Doon and nearby. Seedlings would be both sold to generate income and also used to sensitively replace the local exotic forest cover with native species.

August was a significant month for the *Culag* group as an information evening was held at the village hall, which was attended by 17 people - an excellent start.



An introduction to bee-keeping

The meeting delivered a definitive list of 17 priority NTFPs and interests for the Assynt community. The meeting also produced a list of the training and information required by the community to address their interests, which the local coordinator, Hilary MacDonald, has subsequently focused project activities on. Hilary has taken the priority NTFP list forward by researching ways to develop birch syrup, seed-collecting for sale to



Know your mushrooms!

nurseries, the use of bracken for organic farming and the possibility of supplying edible NTFPs to North West Sutherland Food Links, which has a stall at events in the North West.

Community members also participated in a series of 'transect walk' workshops in three local woodlands to identify locally available NTFPs and a 'Local Provenance Tree-Seed Collection Information Day' with Mark Banham who owns a small tree nursery near Dornoch and collects seeds for his nursery.

Jake Paul