

BTCV Environments for All - Annual Review 2002-03

Executive summary and excerpt

Traditionally (and typically of the whole environmental sector), BTCV has been perceived as an overwhelmingly white, middle-class organisation that is dedicated primarily to conserving the countryside. In order to break out of this enclave, in pursuit of our strategic aim to 'expand the boundaries of conservation volunteering', we conceived the initiative Environments for All with three key objectives:

- to encourage marginalised people, and especially those from black and minority ethnic communities, to improve their local environments, and to provide opportunities to do so that were culturally and socially appropriate to them
- to share the lessons learnt from this exercise throughout BTCV and the wider environmental sector
- to make BTCV itself more representative of society, both in the profile of its staff and volunteers and in the way it is run

The initiative was launched in May 2001, with funding from the Community Fund and support from Barclays and the New Opportunities Fund. Fourteen staff were recruited, many with a background in community development, and deployed in eight different locations across the United Kingdom: in Glasgow, in south Wales and Wrexham, across Northern Ireland and in Oldham, Leicester, Small Heath in Birmingham and the London borough of Brent.

In this second annual review, we can report that the initiative has been a huge, if not unqualified, success. By October 2003:

- more than 38,000 people had benefited directly and 183,000 indirectly – respectively, more than double and more than 10 times what we had aimed for
- the impact of this new, and often highly inventive, approach had been felt in 1,176 community groups
- almost half of the beneficiaries were unemployed and 13 per cent disabled:
- nearly 3,000 were asylum seekers or refugees, and the vast majority came from disadvantaged urban areas.

EfA has challenged and changed the way BTCV works and the kind of people it attracts. It has helped to dispel the myth that people from ethnic minorities and other marginalised groups are not interested in taking practical environmental action. It has shown that such action can make a huge contribution to both personal development and neighbourhood regeneration.

The specific lessons we have learnt include the fundamental importance of planning and consultation, flexibility and innovation, commitment and continuity. We have to form partnerships with communities that are grounded in mutual respect and an understanding of local customs and concerns; and those partnerships need to be sustained.

The challenges we have encountered have included a high turnover of staff and a lack of funding to support vulnerable communities for longer than three years.

These lessons are now being shared across BTCV and with the wider environmental sector to help to establish and encourage good practice. We have published reviews in print and, along with case studies and a summary report, on our website (www.btcv.org/efa); and have organised workshops in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We have produced DVDs and videos in Scotland, and a 'community toolkit' is in hand. We are holding an external conference on EfA.

BTCV's own profile has generally improved, with modest progress in attracting more BME staff and volunteers, though we need to do more to recruit disabled staff.

We have established many valuable links, from Age Concern to the Brent Asian Women's Resource Centre. We are also developing several partnerships to research the benefits of practical environmental action.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the ethos of EfA has quickly taken hold. In England, the picture is more confused, not least because many government agencies and authorities still need to be convinced of the social and economic value of practical environmental work; but there are signs of hope.

Diversity will be a major theme of our new strategic plan for 2004-08, as BTCV is resolved to become a truly representative organisation, committed to encouraging and enabling everyone to take practical action to improve their local environments and to enjoy all the benefits that ensue.

Nine out of 10 from BEN

For its third and final review of Environments for All, Black Environment Network sent questionnaires to all the BTCV staff and the community representatives involved. Thirty-five out of 134 responded.

Of the 16 BTCV staff, all but one agreed that EfA projects had been different from BTCV's traditional conservation work. 'There has been a lot more room to manoeuvre, allowing some innovative projects.' They had been 'well resourced from the beginning', with 'no requirement to bring in additional income'; but 'far more time-intensive', with 'more emphasis on personal and community development and less on environmental outcomes'.

There was unanimity that EfA had been a success. Staff spoke of 'trust' and 'acceptance' by community groups which now realised that BTCV was 'for real', and said that EfA had 'raised [people's] confidence to tackle other issues'. It had 'dispelled myths about BME and lower-income people doing environmental work', and had also 'made BTCV more aware of the need to make the environment relevant to people's lives and circumstances'.

The respondents testified that EfA had 'raised awareness', 'made contacts', 'provided a case study which [could] be shown to funding partners' and 'helped credibility with council departments'. It had 'given people opportunities outside their communities' – some groups have taken part in BTCV Action Breaks – and had also 'enabled [staff from] neighbouring BTCV projects to make links with BME groups'.

Commenting on the challenges and obstacles, staff spoke of the need to 'be yourself and not too PC', 'keep an open mind' and 'seek solutions to issues from the communities themselves' and 'share their culture's approach – eg using their traditional materials'. It was also important to be clear in the initial research and targeting and to 'think much earlier about how to get long-term funds'. One respondent suggested for the future a focus on fewer groups but in greater detail. Others reported 'suspicion that help is a "token gesture" [that wouldn't] survive the next change in the funding stream' and warned that 'sometimes people want instant results, otherwise they lose interest.'

Among the lessons to be learnt, BTCV staff observed that:

- every organisation should be representative of its community
- people from all backgrounds are interested in the environment but wish to participate in different ways
- it's paramount to recognise a community's cultural and religious beliefs and to be sensitive to its needs (eg for praying facilities or single-gender activities)
- it's important not to use jargon or to assume understanding
- it takes time to establish trust and acceptance
- it needs 10-year funding to really make [EfA] work
- it's important to have people from BME communities on the staff

The principal issues and concerns BTCV staff identified included:

- the fact that not all communities think in terms of conservation, so that it takes time to build relationships before they are ready for ideas that are new to them
- the number of marginalised groups that have not been contacted – and how to prioritise which to help
- the fact that high levels of staff turnover mean that people are having to learn what others have already found out, which makes progress slow and is frustrating for other staff
- an insufficiency of central publicity and public impact to share the lessons learnt
- the need to make EfA sustainable and secure longer-term funding

Two-thirds of the BTCV staff who responded agreed that EfA had progressed from being an initiative to being an ethos within BTCV (though 'organisational change takes time and happens organically'). It is 'the way forward for BTCV' and 'will significantly influence future strategic direction' – though some warned that 'staff are so caught up in their own workload that they can't give much attention to it,' and 'without funding it won't last.'

Of the 19 community representatives and volunteers who responded, 82 per cent agreed that their perception of BTCV had been changed for the better (though some said, 'Our experience of BTCV has

always been positive,' and one said, 'We'd never heard of them'). 'Our project officer completely changed our outlook,' said one, and another spoke of 'a complete turnaround'.

Here, too, there was unanimity that EfA had been a success. The observations included that the EfA officer 'showed that everyone can get involved, and made it fun, too' and that 'group members still talk about the project – and want more.' Respondents spoke of 'a lot of fun, hard work and great experiences', 'just getting hands dirty and ending up with something pretty and useful'.

Commenting on the challenges and the lessons learnt, respondents identified:

- combining different ages and ethnic groups into a workable unit
- motivating older people to change their way of life (eg recycling)
- the importance of 'listening to the people involved, as it is "their" project,' and 'understanding cultural and religious values', as 'other communities' perceptions are different in many ways'

All but one of the respondents wanted their group or community's relationship with BTCV to continue, and all but one would recommend BTCV to others.

The BEN review concludes that, overall, both BTCV staff and the communities they have worked with have had very positive and constructive experiences of Environments for All, in terms both of practical environmental action and of social, cultural and personal development.

Among the communities where EfA has been implemented, there has been a marked increase in awareness of both BTCV and the environmental sector in general, and a marked increase in the numbers of people from such communities involved with environmental projects – though the level of involvement has not been so great that community groups can sustain their environmental action without continued support. Furthermore, BTCV now faces a new challenge, of how it can respond to and support this increased awareness and interest both amongst the communities and groups it has already worked with and elsewhere.

However, the review notes that, apart from EfA, there has been little or no increase in diversity in other areas of BTCV, such as in its staff or management, and says that the challenge now is to allow the ethos of EfA to influence, first, recruitment and training in BTCV and, second, the culture and management of other organisations in the environmental sector.

Otherwise, the review recommends that BTCV should consolidate its work with the communities and groups it is currently involved with to equip them to initiate and manage their own programmes of environmental action, so that they can set an example as champions for the environment within the wider network of minority ethnic and other marginalised groups.

It also recommends that BTCV should invest in a new programme to share the experience and expertise gained from EfA so as to ensure the 'mainstreaming' of diversity in the ethos of both BTCV and the whole environmental sector.

The full review is downloadable from www.btcv.org/efa/lessons.htm

More information about the Environments for All initiative see www.btcv.org/efa