

Trentham Estate restoration project - Press release, 18th May 2009

The restoration of the 450 hectare Trentham Estate in Staffordshire provides a case study of a novel approach to securing large-scale nature conservation benefits from development. The estate, recognised to be of substantial historical and ecological importance for its landscapes, ancient woodland, Italianate gardens and buildings, deteriorated in recent years as a result of inadequate management, mining subsidence, recreation pressure and a lack of investment.

In August 1997, a planning application for the estate was submitted by St Modwen Developments for two hotels, a conservatory style garden centre, a landscaped shopping complex, a boating centre, a new fishing lake, 150 timber framed holiday lodges, and the restoration of the 10 acre Italianate Gardens (the largest in the country) and parkland. A particularly controversial component of the project involved the release of a free-living colony of Barbary macaques [*Macaca sylvanus*] into part of King's Wood Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) as a visitor attraction.

English Nature (now Natural England) and consultants initially considered that the project would be likely to have localised detrimental effects on the SSSI. However, funding from the development was identified at an early stage as a means of offsetting potential damage through a phased programme of restoration of the entire estate. The planning process involved a public inquiry that considered the impact of the development on tourism, traffic and transportation, landscape, ecology, and regional socio-economics. A thorough evaluation of the ecological issues at the planning stage resulted in the creation of a long-term ecological management plan for the estate, and

ongoing monitoring was made a condition of the planning permission. English Nature was satisfied that subject to implementation of this management plan, the development would actually enhance the biodiversity value of the whole estate.

Habitat restoration has subsequently been undertaken on a large scale, comprising work including the removal of vast areas of invasive plants such as Bracken, Rhododendron, Himalayan balsam and Japanese knotweed. Large plots of commercial forestry are being removed and converted to broadleaved forest to complement the ancient woodland SSSI. Heathland and wood pasture habitats are also being reinstated. Already the restoration work has resulted in significant biodiversity improvements and the estate is now being visited and enjoyed by greater numbers of people, with associated benefits to their health and well-being and the local economy.

Trentham is a prime example of how a development project, if carefully managed, can be deployed to fund a net enhancement in biodiversity, as well as provide benefits for our historic heritage, for the public, and for the economy. At present such projects are unusual. However, we believe that development offers an underexploited, much-needed additional source of funding for wildlife conservation in the wider countryside and for the protection and enhancement of sites of conservation importance. Engagement with developers, embracing the government's policy of environmental enhancements associated with development, would be facilitated through the use of 'habitat banking' which has already developed as a successful mechanism for putting more funds into the natural environment in the United States. It has a great deal to offer in the UK.