Seals returning to the North East benefit from Heritage Lottery Fund investment

15/08/2011

The project, ‘A Date with Seals’ focuses on a colony of harbour seals (a BAP species*) living on the Tees Estuary, close to the RSPB’s wildlife reserve and discovery park at Saltholme, near Stockton-on-Tees. Greatham Creek has become home to over 70 harbour seals, which are now recognised as the largest colony in the North East. In the last forty years the seals have grown in number and now 70 harbour seals and 30 grey seals live and breed in nearby coastal waters.

Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund in the North East, Ivor Crowther, said: “Heritage is not just about buildings and museums; it is also about landscapes and our natural environment. The North East is home to a vast array of wildlife especially along our picturesque coastlines. This fascinating project will help local people to get a real insight into the lives of these precious animals, encouraging people to learn about and get involved with their natural heritage and wildlife. Having such an amazing opportunity to interact with this seal colony is great and shouldn’t be missed”.

A representative from the RSPB’s A Date with Seals, Rhian Davies, said: “The industrial heart of the Tees Valley isn’t the first place that springs to mind when thinking of an amazing wildlife spectacle. But, the seals at Greatham Creek are an experience not to be missed.

Thanks to HLF, the RSPB will, for the first time, be able to tell the story of the seals on a regular basis. From Wednesday through to Sunday until the end of October, we’ll connect visitors with their environmental and industrial heritage and generate support for the conservation of marine wildlife.

The project will involve up to 15 volunteers who will, over the next three years, encourage as many as 3,000 people to come to Greatham Creek and enjoy and learn about these impressive animals. Each volunteer will learn all about the seals and tell their fascinating story to visitors Story-telling will be a key part of this project, helping the local community to get involved and appreciate the fascinating natural heritage.

A wide range of activities will be on offer for visitors, including story telling sessions, arts and craft workshops based around the seals and daily seal viewing events that will help raise awareness of the colony to more people than ever before.

The history of the colony has close links to the area’s local industrial heritage. It was the heavy industrialisation in the 1930’s that is thought to be behind the colony’s gradual disappearance. The environment at the time was heavily polluted which led to the waters of the estuary becoming an intolerable breeding ground. Following significant environmental improvements, the colony of seals has returned to North East waters and it is thought to be the only European site where seals have re-colonised due to a cleaner natural environment.

Notes to editors

Using money raised through the National Lottery, HLF sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. HLF has supported more

than 30,000 projects allocating £4.6billion across the UK including £214million in the North East.

Further information

HLF press office
Lucinda Tyrell on 020 7591 6031 lucindat@hlf.org.uk or Laura Bates on 020 7591 6027 lbates@hlf.org.uk.

Please call Ben Calvert, the RSPB's visitor officer, on 01642 542 075 to arrange a photo opportunity or for more information.

The RSPB's A Date with Seals projects aim to show large numbers of people a wildlife spectacle. Annually, these projects meet thousands of people and raise awareness and generate support for wildlife conservation.

Greatham Creek is situated near the mouth of the River Tees between Seaton Carew and Middlesbrough, adjacent to the A178. The RSPB's work at Saltholme is a partnership with the Teesside Environmental Trust (TET), a local charity whose aims of wildlife conservation, environmental education and regeneration, closely match those of the RSPB.

* A Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) is an internationally recognised programme addressing threatened species and habitats and is designed to protect and restore biological systems.