Kilfinan Community Forest delivers diverse skills development opportunities

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Kilfinan Community Forest Company (KCFC) ran a six-month 'Volunteer For Skills' programme (funded by the Voluntary Action Fund), as well as a four week pilot work placement in July with five 15-17 year old students from Dunoon Grammar school. This culminated in a formal archaeology walkover survey of the entire forest (funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund) with professional archaeologists Argyll Archaeology and volunteers from the local community.

Volunteering
KCFC's 'Volunteer For Skills' project involved volunteers working at the forest in exchange for unique training opportunities, giving them practical experience in all areas of forestry and in many cases helping to improve their employability. KCFC was able to provide a combination of formal and in-house training for 44 volunteers, with training courses including: wood carving, emergency first aid at work, chipper (Lantra), telehandler, Chainsaw City Guilds NPTC, and a course in pesticide spraying. KCFC also provided inductions on the Wood-Mizer sawmill and firewood processor. Whilst volunteers were gaining skills, they were also able to offer useful work for the forest, including firewood processing, saw milling, path and wind blow clearance, and tree felling.

As a result of his excellent volunteer work over the course of four months, Andrew Mackenzie from Dunoon is now employed part-time as KCFC's Operations Worker. He says: "I was really happy volunteering at the forest as I was able to get formal qualifications in different areas of forestry; I'm now getting paid work at the forest which was the ideal outcome – it's helping me to develop my skills and experience even further."

School placements
During their summer holiday in July, KCFC employed five students from Dunoon Grammar School in a four-week pilot work placement, in which they would get paid to work, whilst benefiting from land-based, nature, and archaeological skills and training. The students were involved in creating a forest squirrel walk from start to finish (including training in sign carving and bench making), planning an event space area, developing a forest product, and acting as team leaders in KCFC's archaeology walkover survey. KCFC received valuable feedback from the students at the end of their placement, which was also celebrated with a barbecue and presentation of their work, attracting 30 attendees from the local community.

One student's parent said: "I'm amazed at how my son has developed during his placement at KCFC. He has thoroughly enjoyed his time here and may consider a change of direction and look to work within the forestry industry." Another student's parent said: "Getting paid three days per week provided some balance and meant he could enjoy his summer holiday as well. The placement has given the students wider experience in different disciplines, as well as a sense of purpose and something to put on their CVs. It's also opened my eyes to all the positive things happening at the forest."

Archaeology week
The archaeological walkover survey was a great success, with over 20 volunteers taking part and being trained in the art of archaeological survey by Clare Ellis and Ben Bendiks of Argyll Archaeology. The team surveyed all of the forest, weaving their way through dense forest, leaping over bogs and scaling the height of Barr Liath from which they were

treated to fantastic views south to Arran and beyond. Exciting discoveries included the route of an ancient road which is shown on a 1747-55 military map running northwards through the forest. Clare Ellis said: “We have discovered that this road is still visible in many places. Much of the road is lower than the surrounding ground, eroded by hundreds of years of use by women and children taking their cattle up into the hills for the summer grazing as well as by drovers taking their cattle to market.”

The team also recorded the original water tanks and a series of weirs associated with the Tighnabruiach reservoir, which was built in the late 19th century. The weirs create a series of dramatic ponds within a natural gorge of the Allt Mor, all of which can be appreciated from the newly clear forest path. Also found during the clearance of rhododendrons was a curling rink which was in use until the 1950s. Clare said: “We are really keen to find out more about the rink. We would love to hear from you if have photographs of the curling rink being used or if you or one of your relatively used the rink; is it true for example that women weren’t allowed to use the rink?” Please e-mail your photos or stories to Clare at ellisclare@argyll-archaeology.co.uk.

Colin McLean, Head of HLF Scotland, said the archaeology project was a great example of uncovering hidden heritage: “It is great to find the hidden clues as to the way our ancestors lived and how the community around here developed into what it is today. By delving into this history, volunteers have not only expanded their knowledge and learnt lots of new skills, but it has also added a unique record of the area for others to learn, enjoy and – hopefully - be inspired by.”

KCFC’s Chairman, David Blair, commented on the success of these initiatives: “Involving volunteers at the forest and working with partner organisations to reach as many diverse groups as possible, is fundamental to our ethos and will continue to happen in the future. What started as an initiative to encourage volunteers to the forest has developed into a diverse work programme where people can gain real, practical skills to improve their employment prospects. The forest was buzzing over the summer as a result and we certainly hope to build on the success of this project and develop it even further.

“We’d like to thank everyone involved in making the programme such a success – in particular our former Volunteer Coordinator Craig Blair, as well as our partners, funders and the volunteers themselves. We’d also like to thank the placement students, who were an excellent addition to the KCFC team and brilliant at leading volunteers during archaeology week.”

If you are interested in volunteering at KCFC, please contact KCFC’s Development Manager Nikki Brown, email: nikki@kilfinancommunityforest.com or on 01700 811 159.

Notes to editors

Kilfinan Community Forest Company (KCFC) is a fully registered Scottish charity based in Tighnabruaich, Argyll. The organisation works with and for the local community, managing and developing their forest, creating opportunities for a sustainable future for the local economy in recreation, tourism, education and the local environment. KCFC comprises of a committed board of directors who are all volunteers and live and work locally in the Kilfinan Parish The organisation has over 190 members. For further information and latest news, please visit the Kilfinan Community Forest website.

Further information

Kilfinan Community Forest Company: Nikki Brown, Development Manager, email: nikki@kilfinancommunityforest.com or 01700 811 159.