Helping our natural heritage hit the Lottery jackpot

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Introduction from Matt Shardlow of Buglife

"HLF funding for the natural environment is exceedingly important for saving wildlife. Funding from HLF has enabled Buglife to conserve brownfield wildlife in Essex, catalogue local people's memories about wildlife at Fallin Bing near Stirling and create pollinator habitats in Peterborough and Plymouth.

"Despite all their good work, HLF has received criticism because of the comparatively low investment in environmental benefits and the high costs to charities of undertaking HLF projects. Here Drew, who is taking strides to improve the availability of funding for remediating the steep decline in British wildlife, explains why it is important that these difficulties are resolved and how more funding may be found for conserving biodiversity.

"Enjoy. Matt Shardlow."

Since 1994 Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) has awarded around £400m to over 3,000 projects with a focus on the UK's natural heritage. Not bad for a funder that many think only supports museums and buildings. But whilst an impressive sum, it's a relatively small fraction of the overall £6bn we've awarded to date.

Research by HLF has shown that our investments in natural heritage have not only proven to be some of the most successful, The Great Fen in Cambridgeshire for example, but have also led the way in showing how important it is to engage people with nature. We believe that unless people are given the opportunity to understand, appreciate and learn about heritage, then heritage will never be sustainable. That's why we always talk about the need for conservation as well as participation and learning. They need to go hand-in-hand. This is now common place and accepted by the natural heritage sector. Government policy documents such as the Natural Choice: securing the value of nature now devote a whole chapter to reconnecting people and nature.

So why has the natural heritage sector not managed to secure more HLF funding in the past? To understand why, we ran a Survey Monkey which 47 organisations across the UK completed. Amongst the things we asked were questions around barriers to applying, the types of projects people want to deliver and future sources of match funding.

Capacity of the natural heritage sector is a key factor. Compared to the built heritage sector, the number of natural heritage organisations that apply to us is actually relatively small, for every organisation like Buglife there are numerous built heritage bodies representing individual buildings or types of building. The number of natural heritage organisations we have supported over the past 19 years is in the low hundreds whereas we have supported several thousand building trusts, museums and individual conservation societies. And the size of projects also varies. Building conservation is expensive whereas habitat conservation can be delivered generally at lower cost particularly as the sector is so expert at engaging and motivating volunteers. So it would seem inevitable that the natural sector is always likely to be the smaller partner in the HLF family. But how can it do better?

Our Survey Monkey results showed that there are barriers that HLF needs to help break down. The most quoted barrier is resources to write applications. We have tried to address this and our new application forms launched last year have reduced repetition and focus applicants on delivering clear outcomes. Full cost recovery is an issue and we have received helpful comments on how our approach might be more consistent across the UK. We also need to work harder to encourage smaller organisations to apply such as local nature societies many of which are gearing themselves up to take on wildlife sites previously maintained by local authorities. We are also doing more to train our staff in understanding the needs of natural heritage applicants and have worked hard over the last few years to ensure every one of our regional and country committees benefit from natural heritage expertise. We are also delighted to welcome Dr Tom Tew, former Chief Scientist at Natural England, as one of our newest Trustees.

Our survey also looked at future demands for funding and potential sources of match funding. Not surprisingly future applicants intend to concentrate on habitat and species conservation, landscape-scale projects and projects that work to influence other land managers. This reflects the approach advocated by Sir John Lawton that whilst a key aim is getting conservation hotspots in favourable condition, there is also a need to deliver more and better connected habitats across much wider geographic areas. That's why we are seeing huge demand for our Landscape Partnerships programme which, like the government's 12 Nature Improvement Areas, is all about working at a much larger scale.

Two key issues emerged from our research. One is that many organisations in the natural heritage sector are relatively small and that limits their ability to deliver larger projects. Whilst the big players like RSPB, Woodland Trusts and the Wildlife Trusts are able to manage and fund projects over £1m, few others are. We think that applicants need to look at more joint working to common goals if larger projects are to be successful. Our recent grant award of £1.2m to The Learning Through Landscapes Trust's Polli:Nation project is a good example. Pollinators are a priority for a number of conservation groups so joint working could help focus precious resources, bring economies of scale and ultimately greater rewards.

The second issue is the limited aspiration for securing match funding for projects. Competition for our support is becoming increasingly fierce. To give the very best chance of success projects must offer value for money; attracting partnership funding is one way to achieve that. But our survey shows that looking forward there is an emphasis on traditional sources of funding such as donations, memberships and grants rather than more innovative sources. In looking ahead to the next few years, few organisations seem to be exploring planning gain (Community Infrastructure Levy), income generation, consultancy services, offsetting or payments for delivering ecosystem services (PES). We wonder if more needs to be done by Defra to make more funding sources accessible and also by the sector to explore innovative new ways of encouraging private investment and income generation. We know pilots for PES are underway but is there a way that Lottery funding could help unlock more private investment in a similar way to our new Heritage Enterprise programme for the built environment? That's something we are keen to investigate so please let us know if you have great ideas!

Our new (well last year anyway) Strategic Framework (2013-2018) clearly sets out that we want to encourage more fundable projects that deliver outcomes for the UK's natural heritage. That doesn't mean lowering the bar but simply that we want to do more to encourage strong applications from the natural heritage sector. It means we want to explore new ways we can help and engage with a sector.

HLF is unique in being the only UK-wide organisation with a brief that includes everything we consider to be heritage, and investing in pollinators, wildflower meadows, traditional orchards, red ants and freshwater pearl mussels is every bit as important to us for the future of our heritage as investments in Stonehenge, the British Museum and the Mary Rose.