

Wye Community Farm Kent, England



A community supported agriculture cooperative relying on scrub woodland management and firewood business to generate income for livestock management

This case study is one of a set written as part of a Forest Research project. Some case studies are written by the community group, others by researchers who visited and interviewed group members, but they have all been validated and endorsed by the community groups.

Forest Research developed a standard method for describing the case studies, outlined in Lawrence and Ambrose-Oji, 2013 "A framework for sharing experiences of community woodland groups" Forestry Commission Research Note 15 (available from www.forestry.gov.uk/publications).

The case study comprises three parts:

1. The **Group Profile** provides essential information about the form and function of the community woodland group. Profiles were prepared following the methodology
2. The **Change Narrative** which documents key moments in the evolution of the community woodland group with a particular focus on the evolution of engagement and empowerment
3. The **Engagement and Impacts Timeline** documents milestones in the development of the community woodland group, its woodland and any assumed or evidenced impacts.

The case studies collectively provide a resource which documents the diversity and evolution of community woodland groups across Scotland, Wales and England. The method ensures that the case studies are consistent and can be compared with each other. We welcome further case studies to add to this growing resource.

For further information, and for the detailed case study method, please contact:

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1. Group profile

Woodland: Wye Downs NNR
Map ref: TR 076 452
Webpage: <http://wyecommunityfarm.org.uk/>
Date of profile: September 2013
Resources: Site visit, face-to-face interview, 2007 Business Plan

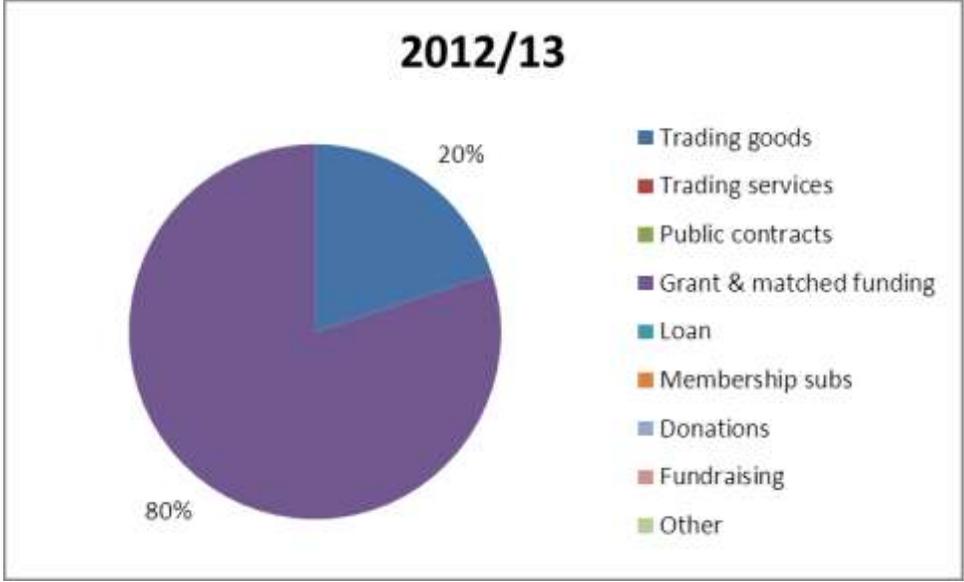
1. Institutional context (in September 2013)

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| <p>1.1 Ownership of the woodland(s)</p> | <p>Wye Community Farm (WCF) has a management agreement with Natural England for grazing, which maintains the biodiversity value of Wye Downs NNR. There are also some wooded and scrub areas that make up part of the National Nature Reserve (NNR) that the group manages or uses to produce charcoal.</p> <p>WCF also uses other land and buildings in and around Wye, and these are owned by a number of different private individuals, organisations and businesses.</p> <p>Classification of tenure: Formal agreement (public)</p> |
| <p>1.2 Access and use rights to the woodland(s)</p> | <p>The land the group operate on is an NNR, so conservation legislation applies over the site. There is public access through Public Right of Way (PROW).</p> |
| <p>1.3 Regulations/responsibilities affecting the woodland(s)</p> | <p>The minimum legal requirements for H&S, biodiversity, historic monuments and pest and diseases management as outlined in the UK Forestry Standard.</p> |

| 2. Internal organisation of the group/enterprise | |
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| 2.1 Group members, representation and decision making | <p>Membership is open to anybody with an interest. There are two levels of membership: (1) buying a share and (2) volunteering. Shares can be purchased for £50 each. Holding either a single share or a larger shareholding entitles the member to just one vote. There are about 150 shareholder members, with around 250 shares between them. Those who are a member through volunteering engage in activities such as looking after the animals and taking part in the fuelwood business. There are plans to formalise this kind of membership through payment of a £20 annual membership fee.</p> <p>The membership is mostly drawn from the local area, particularly the villages of Wye and Brook, although some share holders have an historic connection to Wye College and joined Wye Community Farm when it first established itself in a bid to save the College Farm. Volunteers range from retired people looking for opportunities to give back to their local area, younger people wanting to gain experience in conservation or land and livestock management, and unemployed people wanting to maintain their CVs and learn new skills. There is a monthly committee meeting, and there are five shareholders who sit on this. Committee members are elected on an annual basis through the AGM. Decisions about the farming strategy, events, and funding opportunities are discussed at the meeting. Decisions are carried by quorate.</p> |
| 2.2 Communication and learning processes | <p>Communication is through the website, notices placed in Wye village, and informally between villagers and volunteers in the course of farming, events and business activities. Learning is informal through committee meetings, and through farming practice. Learning about woodland management is minimal due to the nature of the management agreement, land holding and opportunity for forestry.</p> |
| 2.3 Structure and legal status | <p>Wye Community Farm is set up as a co-operative Industrial and Provident Society (IPS). The rules of the <u>Cooperative</u> outline the working procedures, responsibilities and limitations of the group. Financial reporting and auditing of the IPS is annually to the Financial Conduct Authority.</p> <p>Classification of legal form: Industrial and Provident Society</p> |
| 2.4 Regulations/responsibilities affecting the group/enterprise | <p>Financial reporting to the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) on an annual basis.</p> |

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| <p>2.5 Forest management objectives and planning procedures</p> | <p>The objective is conservation management of the NNR. The management plan is set by Natural England. The management of WCF livestock is to encourage biodiversity of the chalk grassland. Because of that, there are certain areas which are grazed in summer and winter. Scrub management is an important part of the mix, and this constitutes the woodland portion of the plan.</p> <p>Overall aim of plan: Conservation</p> |
| <p>2.6 Implementing the woodland management plan</p> | <p>The management is undertaken by Wye Community Farm.</p> |
| <p>2.7 Business/ operating model and sustainability</p> | <p>The initial investment by shares has created a small capital reserve (less than £10k) which is held in a separate account for future development. Income comes from two main sources. Revenue generated from trading goods/services (i.e., the firewood business, garden services & farm products) and grant income. The grant income level varies from year to year.</p> <p>The firewood business is staffed by volunteers and NEETS/individuals doing community service. Wye Community Farm garden services works in partnership with local arboriculturalists, and works a little like a machinery ring, in that WCF passes on tree work to partners for a 10 percent commission on the price of the job, and uses the resulting timber and brash for firewood. Other firewood comes from non-commercial brash, coppice and thinnings from local woodlands that WCF volunteers collect in partnership with local foresters. To ensure continuous supply of firewood for sale, some firewood is bought in (@£45/t). Firewood is corded, split and either bagged for sale to a local shop in Wye, or delivered to customers in Brook and Wye in large (240 ltr) wheelie bins (@ £17.50). Other items for sale include charcoal produced on the NNR, meat from the animals, and some horticultural produce. The firewood business is the major contributor to WCF's income stream. There is sufficient demand from Wye, Brook and Ashford to make the enterprise profitable.</p> <p>Grant income comes from Natural England, which provides around £5,000 to help covering the costs of livestock management on the NNR and rental of farm buildings. Various other funders also contribute. A Big Lottery grant currently supports the work with excluded and community service groups.</p> <p>The costs of livestock management (British White cows, sheep, indoor pigs and chickens) run at about</p> |

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| | <p>£10,000 p.a. so this is the level of income WCF needs to break even. The rent of farm buildings, including firewood storage, is a major cost. Insurance costs are significant at over £3,000 p.a. The rent of the area that is currently used as a firewood yard and for business activity is largely at peppercorn rates.</p> <p>A breakdown of the income streams in Financial Year 2012/13 was roughly:</p> <table data-bbox="405 443 1182 584"> <tr> <td>Grant aid and matched funding</td> <td>80%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Revenue from firewood sales</td> <td>15%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Revenue from other businesses</td> <td>5%</td> </tr> </table> <div data-bbox="651 616 1615 1198">  <p>The pie chart illustrates the income streams for 2012/13. The largest slice is 'Grant & matched funding' at 80%, followed by 'Trading goods' at 20%. The legend includes: Trading goods, Trading services, Public contracts, Grant & matched funding, Loan, Membership subs, Donations, Fundraising, and Other.</p> </div> | Grant aid and matched funding | 80% | Revenue from firewood sales | 15% | Revenue from other businesses | 5% |
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| Revenue from firewood sales | 15% | | | | | | |
| Revenue from other businesses | 5% | | | | | | |
| <p>2.8 Benefit distribution rules</p> | <p>There are no tangible benefits for members other than the public benefits of conservation management, and the opportunities to volunteer.</p> <p>The assets held by the IPS (e.g., machinery & livestock) are subject to an asset lock for the benefit of the</p> | | | | | | |

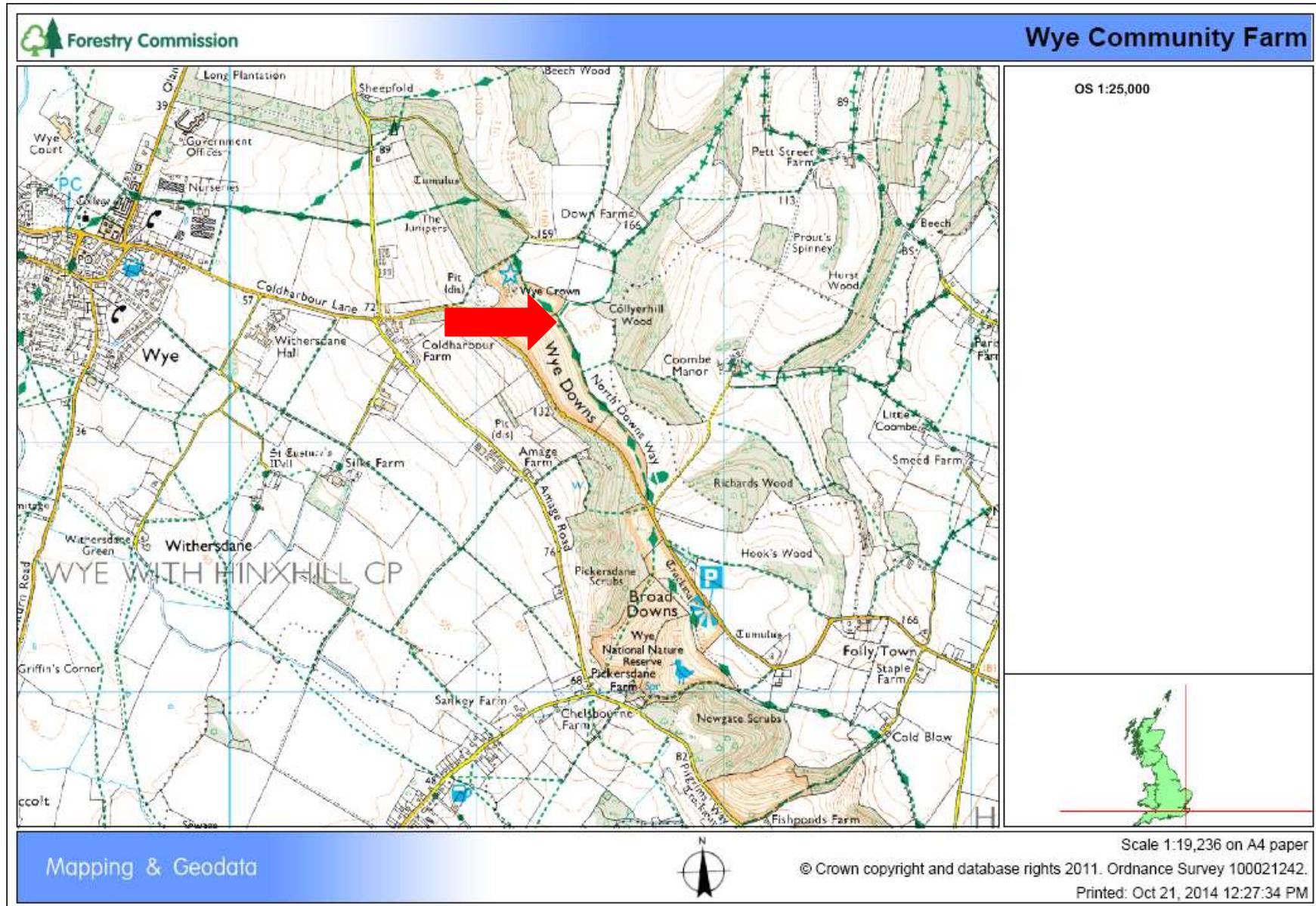
Wye Community Farm

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| | community alone. |
| 3. External linkages | |
| 3.1 Partnerships and agreements | The main partnership agreement is with Natural England. |
| 3.2 Associations | There are links with Ford Hall Community Farm in Shropshire on which WCF based their model. |
| 4. Resources | |
| 4.1 Forest/woodland | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size: the NNR is 134 Hectares • Location: Wye Downs NNR is located 2 km south east of the town of Wye and 6 km north east of Ashford. By car, access to Wye is via minor roads from the A28. • Access: There is one main access point via the road and car park. The site is accessible by public transport via the railway station in nearby Wye village, and by public footpaths. • Soil type and site potential: The soil is slightly acid loamy and clayey soils with impeded drainage sitting over chalk. • Species mix: The woodland in the NNR is scrub with a small section of hazel coppice. The composition includes hawthorn, ash, blackthorn, wayfaring tree, (<i>Viburnum lantana</i>) wild privet and traveller's joy (<i>Clematis vitalba</i>). The grassland on the slopes of the downs has a rich mix of calcareous loving wild species. The valley bottom has some areas of clay which support species such as adders tongue. • Major operations: Limiting the extent of regenerating woodland and scrub as well as establishing a conservation supporting grazing regime are the main operations on the NNR. The hazel woodland is coppiced. • Features: Species rich wild flower grassland. • Classification of woodland type: Broadleaved (scrub) with coppice • Outline management history: The site has been a nature reserve since the 1960s. The |

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| | <p>unimproved grassland has been grazed by sheep and cattle since Tudor times. Formal NNR status was achieved in the 1980s. The woodland and regenerating scrub are controlled in favour of maintaining the grassland. The coppice is managed for wildlife conservation values.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biodiversity: The site’s chalk grassland is notable for the range of orchids it supports, 21 species having been recorded including lady orchid, fly orchid and the rare late and early spider orchid and man orchid. As well as grassland the reserve encompasses areas of scrub, woodland and over 3.5 kilometres of hedgerows; these habitats support around 50 breeding bird species including nightingale, hawfinch, lesser spotted woodpecker and kestrel. Reptiles found here include adder, grass snake, slow worm and common lizard. |
| 4.2 Woodland and group funding sources | Natural England, Heritage Lottery, Big Lottery, SITA Trust and Landfill Tax, Kent Downs AONB Unit, The Co-operative group (CWS) Ltd, Grassroots Grants and Kent Community Foundation. |
| 4.3 Knowledge, skills, human and social capital | Members of WCF committee are local landowners and farmers, as well as local business people, so the degree of skills and knowledge about agriculture and business management is very high. |

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Title: **Wye Community Farm**

Date: 21 October 2014

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Scale @ A4: 1:10,000



2. Change Narrative

1. Group History. Moments of change, motivations and engagement

When Wye College closed its doors, there was considerable local concern about the fate of the College Farm and a fear that it would be sold off for residential and commercial development. A large group of worried residents came together to campaign for a different outcome for the College land. About 12 well known and recognised community leaders and land owners got together in Autumn 2006, to lead a group of people interested in securing the tenancy of the College Farm through a community-led bid. The steering group of the Wye Community Land Trust (the initial campaigning group) spent nine months carrying out research into Community Land Trusts/ Community Supported Agriculture, and conducted a number of public consultation exercises and meetings which showed a broad level of support for establishing a Community Farm. In anticipation of tendering for the tenancy they believed would be offered, Wye Community Farm Limited (WCF) got constituted as an IPS in July 2007 (**informal enjoyment to group formation**). The aims of WCF were to secure the tenancy and establish a community farming model, drawing inspiration from Ford Hall Community Farm in Shropshire. A business plan was developed and a community share scheme set up. The latter served to raise the capital required for securing the farm business tenancy. The business plan identified low input beef, dairy and sheep farming as the core activities along with direct sales of products (e.g. through a box scheme for meat or horticultural products). It also outlined plans for providing some educational services to support the National Curriculum. However, WCF was not successful in securing the tenancy.

Having raised capital and expectations, decisions had to be made about how to progress. Wye Downs is an area of important local amenity. In recent years the management of the Downs had declined. WCF therefore put forward a proposal to run cattle and sheep on the Downs to contribute to biodiversity management, and still realise some of its original aims. The search for an alternative community-based farming opportunity on the Downs coincided with a change in Natural England's capacity to manage Wye Downs NNR. In 2008, WCF were successful in their negotiation and, consequently, a small herd of six British White cattle was established. **Active management** of the NNR began in 2008/9 and this included control of scrub and wooded elements on the landholding. Regular twice weekly **volunteering** sessions to look after the livestock and take part in some of the smaller livestock enterprises saw a small group of people step forward, many of whom were not the same core group that had campaigned for WCF's business tenancy. The start-up costs of herd and flock establishment were quite significant, whilst returns from the meat box sales were not due for 18-24 months. Additional sources of income were sought. Partnership working

with the Probation Service opened and the development of a firewood business was identified as a low skill, low barrier business opportunity. Income from the firewood business continues to be an important part of the business model. Management of WCF on a day-to-day basis currently rests with one member of WCF Committee.

2. Challenges, barriers and opportunities for change: Key issues in evolution

Facilitating Factors

- The main motivation behind initiating the community farm (i.e. not the woodland or firewood business alone) was to prevent loss of agricultural land to threatened housing and business park development. This challenge united Wye and Brook residents. **Involving well known and respected individuals** in attempts to secure the tenancy and the relatively **high degree of public consultation** were important factors establishing the legitimacy of the initiative and WCF.
- Although not anticipated in the original planning, the **development of the firewood business** has been critical in supporting the WCF project. The income received makes an important contribution to supporting the group and the costs of livestock management.

Barriers and Challenges

- The lack of success in securing a farm business tenancy resulted in **a loss of interest by many of the original shareholders and interested residents** in the ongoing project as it no longer meet their original expectations for community supported agriculture. This had impacts on the numbers of volunteers coming forward to help with productive WCF activities and business development.
- The very high fixed costs (livestock feed, rent and insurance) are perceived to be the main barriers to WCF becoming a profitable enterprise.

3. Evolution of income streams

No information

4. Woodland history and change: Benefits and impacts before group involvement

The site became a nature reserve in 1961. The main focus since then has been conservation management of the chalk grassland. The woodland resource has always been incidental, and the management of the grassland has involved clearance of developing scrub and woodland.

| Time Period | Owner/Manager | Objectives / Benefits (and evidence) | Major operations | Access and use rights |
|-------------|-----------------|--------------------------------------|---|-----------------------|
| Up to 2008 | Natural England | Conservation management | Management of sheep flock, fencing, scrub bashing | PROW |

5. Woodland history and change: Benefits and impacts since group involvement

| Time Period | Owner/Manager | Objectives / Benefits (and evidence) | Major operations | Access and use rights |
|--------------|-------------------------------------|---|--|-----------------------|
| 2008 to 2013 | Natural England with WCF management | Conservation management, community-based meat production Charcoal and firewood production Environmental education | Management of cattle and sheep, fencing, scrub bashing | PROW |

6. Future plans

WCF is looking to develop the farm business as and when opportunities arrive. This includes continuing to look for grant funding as well as developing the income generating aspects of the enterprise. The ambition is still to buy land and establish a viable farm according to the original aims of the group.

3. Engagement and impacts timeline

| Year | Event | ENGAGEMENT | Reasons | Changes / Impacts and outcomes Social (evidence) | Changes / Impacts and outcomes Woodland (evidence) | Changes / Impacts and outcomes Financial / Economic (evidence) |
|--------|---|--|--|---|--|---|
| 2006/7 | WCF is constituted as an IPS | INFORMAL ENJOYMENT to GROUP FORMATION | Perceived opportunity to take up farm business tenancy | Community cohesion | | |
| 2008 | A management agreement is signed with Natural England | GROUP FORMATION to ACTIVE MANAGEMENT | Conservation grazing opportunity on NNR | | Grassland biodiversity maintained | |
| 2008/9 | Development of a portfolio of business and activities | ACTIVE MANAGEMENT through VOLUNTEERING | | School visits, volunteering, skills, development of community service | Grassland biodiversity maintained | Income from firewood and subsidises for conservation management |