

WILDER FOR WATER, ENGAGING TO PROTECT

A FRESHWATER HABITATS TRUST PROJECT

The New Forest is an Important Freshwater Landscape, which supports an incredible diversity of wildlife, boasting the highest proportion of designated land for nature conservation than any other National Park in the country. The freshwater habitats in the New Forest are extremely important. With a significant proportion of all lowland bog and valley mire in NW Europe, hundreds of ephemeral ponds full of rarities, and a network of small streams of extremely high quality which have no lowland equivalent in the UK. This rare waterscape and high biodiversity value is underpinned by two important factors, traditional grazing management and a diverse suite of running and standing waters which are free from agricultural and urban pollution.



Each year thousands of holiday makers and day trippers choose to visit the New Forest, giving the local economy a boost and providing people with a connection to nature - a real tonic for our body and mind. However, whilst increasing our wellbeing and keeping us healthy, it's important that we understand the true environmental value of these spaces and that in their own right, places like the New Forest are living breathing landscapes and are sensitive to certain pressures, including recreation.

New Forest ponies grazing in a clean water ephemeral pond near Brockenhurst.

Ensuring we don't leave a scar on the landscape will keep the Forest in its pristine state and allow it to continue as a space where people can visit and be in harmony with their natural surroundings. Unintentionally a visit to the Forest can disturb wildlife, erode and compact the banks of sensitive waterbodies, and add pollutants. High visitor numbers concentrated in small areas around water, such as Hatchet Pond or Balmer Lawn, result in damaged habitats. In addition to this, campsite owners and observers of car parks have noticed visitors improperly disposing of wastewater. The quantity of visitors the New Forest receives means that small actions that would normally have minimal impacts are compounding and resulting in a serious risk to the biodiversity.

Creating a project to target the issue

Identifying visitor pressures has led to the development of the Wilder for Water project. The aim of the Wilder for Water project is to share the special qualities of the New Forest wetlands alongside a set of best practice behaviours with visitors.

Wilder for Water is funded through the Green Recovery Challenge Fund and the Environment Agency's Water Environment Improvement Fund and shares the larger goal of protecting the New Forest environment. The project will work with partners and businesses, and covers engagement across a wide range of audiences, from policy makers to school groups, to foster and create positive social change. The project seeks to find solutions to visitor related issues by listening to partners and building a network of freshwater champions.



Wilder for Water project officer delivering a talk to New Forest National Park Authority Ambassadors while on a public litter pick from Hollands Wood.

So far...

In the first year (2021/22), the project focused on fundraising, providing resources and content for partners, and liaising with landowners to identify issues and interventions which would reduce pressure on the water environment. We developed a New Forest Water Code, with input from partners, to outline a set of best practice behaviours for visitors to follow.

This year (2022/23), we have been able to employ a Wilder for Water Project Officer to deliver our messages more directly to visitors.



Children at Ringwood Eco-fair making paper dragonflies, while learning about the New Forest's freshwater landscape and how to visit in a responsible way.

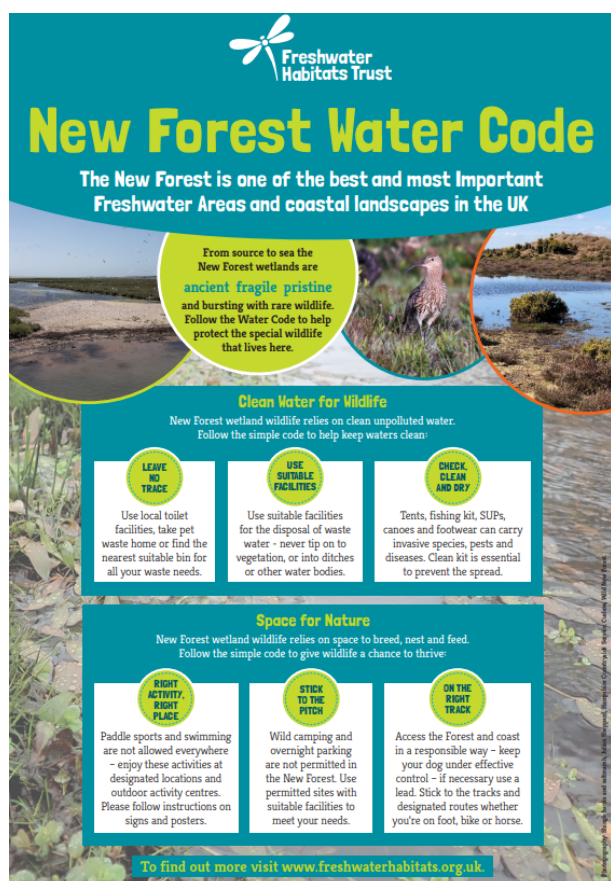
Since April, we have been to 27 events (averaging more than one event per week), and directly engaged with over 5,600 people! We've also distributed more than 600 Water Code leaflets and posters, at 17 campsites, 25 activity centres and recreation outlets, and 5 public toilets in and around the New Forest. Plus our weekly social media posts via Twitter, Facebook and Instagram which have reached a further 14,700 people!

Through passive and direct engagement, residents and visitors will learn about the New Forest's freshwater and coastal landscape and how to access it in a responsible way.

Our Water code

Our [Water Code](#), promoting responsible behaviour, is condensed into six succinct positive actions we are encouraging visitors to take: Leave no trace; Use suitable facilities; Check, clean, dry; Right activity, right place; Stick to the pitch; and, On the right track. .

Each month, during the busy summer season, we have been focusing on one of these messages while maintaining the idea that planning a visit is key and thinking ahead means visitors know where the public toilets are, where the nearest bins will be for pet waste or litter; and that BBQs and fires are banned in the New Forest.



The New Forest Water Code, which provides a set of best practice behaviours to follow when visiting the New Forest.

A trip to the New Forest should be tranquil, whether for a day visit or a holiday retreat. The overriding message is leave nothing behind and take nothing away, except for a love of the Forest.



Water Code leaflets being displayed at Avon Tyrrell activity centre, alongside the New Forest code and other leaflets.

Leave No Trace

The first of our key messages, leave no trace, is not a new message and has been applied across the British countryside and worldwide. But, it is especially important for freshwater habitats and even more important in a protected landscape such as the New Forest. The message goes beyond litter (the very visible evidence of visitor impact) to also include human and dog waste. Water quality, along with habitat loss, is one of the biggest drivers of species extinction in freshwaters - and it's crucial to remember that this applies to all freshwaters (ponds, lakes, rivers, streams and ditches). In fact small habitats, like headwater streams and ponds, which are the most wildlife rich freshwater in the New Forest, are also the most vulnerable due to their small size.

Wilder for Water sits within a broader context, helping to promote regional and national campaigns seeking to drive social change to reduce waste alongside removing litter from the environment. Nationally, WWF are running a '[No Plastic in Nature](#)' campaign, [Keep Britain Tidy](#) supports many local litter picking groups and there is a [zero-waste movement](#). Locally, we've also been working with the New Forest National Park Authorities [Ambassadors scheme](#) and other organisations to run litter picking events.

This included a joint litter picking event as part of the Environment Agency's [Preventing Plastic Pollution](#). This pilot project, which is currently being trialled with 7 Catchment Partnerships in the CaBA network ([Catchment Based Approach \(CaBA\)](#)), seeks to remove plastic from the environment and influence consumer choice around plastic, to improve the quality of transitional waters between parts of the North West Coast of France and the South Coast of England.

Preventing Plastic Pollution will work with businesses, schools, water sport enthusiasts and the general public to achieve:

- A 10% improvement in good ecological status in transitional waters.
- A reduction in the harm caused by plastic pollution in rivers and the sea equivalent of up to €126 million (150 km river/coast cleared, 200 tonnes plastic removed).
- A plastic-free charter implemented by 650 businesses and 50 supply chains modified.

Projected uptake will include 10 more catchments 2 years post-project, and 100 catchments after 5 years. We hope that the New Forest Catchment will be ahead of the game with the work we've already started during Wilder for Water.



Thea Margetts (Wilder for Water Project Officer) at an Environment Agency, preventing plastic pollution event. The table behind displayed plastic free products and had surveys to record data about the quantity and type of litter collected.

If you want to learn more about the other messages we're promoting through Wilder for Water, and our work with visitors, schools, organisations and local businesses along with up-coming events, surveys, and the Water Code leaflet please visit the project web page: [New Forest Wilder for Water](#).

Green Recovery Challenge Fund



The
National Lottery
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