

Save Our Magnificent Meadows Grasslands Conference, March 2017

Workshop B - *What are the knowledge and skills gaps with community groups - in relation to developing community meadows?*

Summary notes from the discussions that took place in the four workshops

Working with groups

- All groups are different depending on how they are made up.
- Working with existing groups (eg friends of) who already have momentum is easier as just providing expertise. Those groups with more experience and clear leadership will need a lighter touch, allowing them to make their own mistakes and try their own ideas, building up their confidence to do the work themselves. There is an important role to empower community groups through training and to keep them motivated with specialist advice providing back up only.
- However some groups will need more hand-holding and help. These can be signposted to other groups with leadership knowledge so the group can learn to become self sufficient.
- On a landscape partnership basis, take groups back to basics. People have found smallholders easier to work with and happier to change management on land, but much harder to work with farmers. At one area, smallholders manage the meadow and then provide the seed to local farmers on a wider scale.
- Getting into the farming community, farmers need someone to trust. Set up a demonstration farm with local farmer, not a countryside organisation and share best practice peer to peer.

Understand the purpose of meadow and work needed from the outset

- To be effective in providing help it is important to know what the group are trying to achieve and what is suitable for the site. Consult with the community/volunteer group to find out their 'shopping list' and understand their experience to see what possibilities they have amongst them for developing the relationship with the meadow.
- Provide detailed management plans for groups to follow.

Manage expectations

- Many see a meadow as the pictorial cornflower meadows, so can be disappointed that the meadow is not as colourful as expected. Written information of what a meadow is or a day trip to an established meadow could help with this.
- Explain the time scale expected - visit a 2yr, 5yr and 20yr meadow - explaining that it won't be instant.
- Set realistic targets of what can be achieved eg start with just adding Yellow Rattle, enjoy just managing with annual cut, then start diversifying several years later.
- Keep advice simple.

Exchange ideas and information

- Help groups create informal connections between other groups across a landscape to limit any feelings of isolation, to share ideas and even equipment.
- Encourage site visits.
- Create partnerships between organisations and community groups which can work well. Example: Francesca's meadow and Preston Montford FSC partnership. The group does the maintenance and events whilst the FSC centre cuts the meadow.

Ensure sustainability of group and work

- The need to find the volunteers with the right knowledge and organisational/leadership skills to sustain themselves.
- Keep the group dynamic and encourage new members to join.
- Help with access to equipment/grazing animals as sometimes this can be a barrier to sustainable management - create a network of groups that could buy equipment as a shared resource. Although they could all need it at the same time of year!!!
- Lack of organisational and communication skills can threaten the long-term future of work being carried out, especially if project staff help a community and then leave, the group can disintegrate afterwards. There is a need for building organisational capacity within groups.
- Groups need help finding funding and small grants and also filling in the application forms.

Suggestions for helping organisations

- For help with communication within the group create a social media group/ forum.
- Learn about governance from other groups such as WI
- Help communities to start with applying for small grants and work up as they gain experience.
- Provide a Community Group Support Pack with generic templates for:
 - Health & Safety procedures for working parties
 - Risk assessment
 - Grazing agreement
 - Construction of Friends agreement
 - Safeguarding (for working with children and vulnerable adults)

Identification and practical field skills

- Understanding the heritage of the site. We often need to remind people that originally meadows were created to provide winter food for livestock.
- Some people have found that certain groups don't see the value in the species-rich meadow that they have as they don't know what plants they have. If there is botanical expertise in the community group that will provide better appreciation of what is present and how it progresses over the years.
- It is more likely that there will be existing expertise in a rural area. Whereas in an urban area they are likely to need training in using machinery, brushcutters, scything etc
- The general feeling is that it is easier to engage with people if it's hands on ie a cut/bale system rather than machinery/grazed system. Scythes have proved to be very popular. Example: One group (Stiperstones) were gifted a tractor and baling kit to then be run by a contractor - struggling to then fund it's upkeep and fuel etc.

Training suggestions

- Identification and botanical training
- 1 day course - Heritage of meadows and management
- 1 day course - Ecological restoration and management (include matching planting species to soil & location).
- Livestock management and welfare checks
- Grassland Management Apprenticeships with NGOs. Eg. "Natural Talent" apprenticeship with TCV Scotland.
- Consider transfer skills between groups if in close proximity.

Urban areas/local authority open spaces

- Mowing less often and removing arisings will slow down growth to meet their objective of saving money and give more opportunities for wildflowers.
- Connect with urban areas.



- Councils are facing budget cuts so are managed their parks less and ‘creating a meadow’ by just not cutting areas.
- Federation of Friends contact with over 5000 groups - maybe a group can take responsibility for area of urban park

