



Living River project review

Engaging new audiences with the natural environment through the arts

The River Avon is a unique part of the heritage and landscape of England. It is one of a number of Chalk Rivers that follow the band of chalk that sweeps across England from the north east to the south west. They occur nowhere else in the UK and are very rare in the world as a whole.

The importance of the River Avon and its tributaries is recognised by its national, European and international wildlife designations.

The current look and character of the river and river valley has been shaped by a long history of human use and support a unique variety and abundance of wildlife not found in other English rivers.

Case Study: In 2007 we started a sculpture project with locally based defence contractor QinetiQ. A group of apprentices worked with an artist to engineer a sculpture with an environmental theme. The apprentices chose to make a dragonfly, due to its similarity of form and manoeuvrability to the helicopters that they usually work on. They used the shell of an old Gazelle helicopter to create a giant dragonfly which is now installed as public art at Solstice Business Park in Amesbury (close to the River Avon).

This sculpture inspired people all through QinetiQ including design staff, welders, the paint-shop and even directors who all became very enthusiastic about dragonflies and the River Avon. The project won regional and national Art in Business awards, and was considered so successful that by QinetiQ that each year since they have run an annual arts project with the Festival and Living River project, including in 2009 a sculpture based on the course of the River Avon from Amesbury to Salisbury. QinetiQ staff have also volunteered in Living River habitat restoration works.

The Outcome

We have engaged 626 people that would choose to engage with the arts but not necessarily with environmental issues. Active engagement with the arts projects achieved a lasting increase in awareness of the rivers and their wildlife: our evaluation shows that people who took part in the Salisbury Festival projects have increased awareness of the river, its wildlife, accessibility and issues that it faces.,

The work with the Festival generated publicity and raised awareness through local and regional media with audiences that were new to us.

We have created a lasting physical legacy of the Living River project in the sculptures and the audio archive installations. We also developed an inspiring relationship with the Salisbury Festival that should endure long after the Living River Project. In the first year we worked within the Project Plan, but through the life of the project we each identified mutually beneficial ideas that we could work on together. This collaboration was significantly helped by our project staff being based at the Festival office.

Lessons learnt:

- In project set up and execution, think about new / unusual partners to reach the people environmental organisations do not usually reach.
- Ensure enough project flexibility to be able to explore new avenues that arise when the project is underway



For more information - www.livingriver.org.uk