

'Wild' University Landscapes

Executive Summary

The Problem

What are the expectations of staff and students with regard to landscaping on campus? Is there a bias against areas left "wild"? If so, what might shift this bias?

The study assesses awareness and perceptions of biodiversity conservation at The University of Edinburgh. It aims to produce results and recommendations which can inform the University's new Biodiversity Strategy, which is currently being developed by the Department for Social Responsibility and Sustainability.

The Study

...consisted of three components: a survey, two focus groups, and interviews.

The survey was conducted among staff and students at the School of GeoSciences. It provided an overview of awareness and perceptions of those areas left "wild", and also of green spaces at the University in general. It must be said that most respondents were environmentally aware and engaged in some way.

The two focus groups were held with students and members of staff. The responses and discussions gave a better insight on the survey results, and sparked ideas to raise awareness and inform people about biodiversity conservation at the University.

The interviews were conducted with environmental and grounds maintenance officers from other universities. They were asked about biodiversity conservation at their respective institutions, how it was perceived, and how it is communicated.

Results

- People mostly appreciate green spaces for their visual aspect and their value for the environment. They enjoy them as a place for mental and physical restoration as well as social interaction.
- Perceptions are generally positive: Whether people have seen "wild" or untended green spaces or not, they consider or expect them to be aesthetically pleasing, biodiverse, and natural.
- Green spaces at the University are not really considered to be "wild" at all. Even the biodiversity conservation areas appear controlled and manicured. This may have to do with their size as well as their situation in an urban environment.
- Awareness of biodiversity conservation is low even among environmentally engaged people. Students think that they should engage more with it, especially if their studies focus on environmental issues, landscaping, etc.
- At other universities, staff and students are informed about biodiversity conservation by interpretation boards, signage, gardening/conservation opportunities, and by using the campus as a teaching facility for habitat surveys etc. Signage can reach people regardless of their level of environmental engagement.
- Other universities collaborate successfully with environmental organisations as well as local communities for green space maintenance and biodiversity conservation.

Recommendations



Capturing attention

Signage at biodiversity conservation sites: simple but eye-catching (like a Point of Interest symbol, a question mark...) with a recognisable symbol, such as a bee, a hedgehog, or a flower. Biodiversity/sustainability tours for new students at Pollock Halls, Easter Bush, King's Buildings.



Raising awareness

Interpretation boards at bigger sites (King's Buildings, Easter Bush, Pollock). Online display of biodiversity strategy, including a map which displays all sites. Promoting conservation work in University newsletters.



Balancing perceptions and expectations

Keeping "wild" sites within their borders, they should not clash with other uses of green spaces. Investigating perceptions in further surveys. Communicating the comprehensiveness of the Strategy especially to environmentally engaged staff and students.



Encouraging participation

Opportunities for staff and students to get involved (conservation work sessions, societies). Cooperation with community gardens, local communities (student allotments?), Scottish Wildlife Trust or other environmental organisations. Habitat/species surveys for biodiversity reports conducted by staff and students as part of teaching.