

Biodiversity simply means “the variety of life” and encompasses the complete spectrum of living organisms from plants and fungi to birds, mammals, insects, bacteria and viruses.

## Why Biodiversity matters

We depend upon biodiversity for our very existence. Plant and animal life and the ecosystems which they are part of, constitute the Earth’s irreplaceable ‘life support system’, providing oxygen, water, food and shelter for all life forms. Many people would consider this alone to be a good reason to conserve and encourage wildlife, but there are other good reasons, for example:

- Biodiversity is an important contributor to “quality of life”. Our lives would be poorer without the sound of birdsong, colourful flower-rich meadows alive with insects, or a diverse landscape rich in wildlife.
- Micro-organisms, plants and animal species provide us with important chemicals used in agriculture, food and medicines – some of which hold the key to human health.
- Many of the crops farmers grow rely on pollination by insects. Crop resistance to disease may depend on the existence of wild plant species with which they can be crossed.
- The landscapes and wildlife of Cumbria provide a basis for our leisure and tourism industries and are an important educational resource.

The whole of the UK is covered by Local Biodiversity Action Plans. Visit [www.ukbap.co.uk](http://www.ukbap.co.uk) to view Cumbria’s Biodiversity Action Plan.

## How to help wildlife

### Habitat creation

- Make and site bird and bat boxes, bug and mammal homes
- Pile up branches and logs to make a ‘habitat heap’
- Even the smallest water feature will provide a fantastic habitat for a diverse range of wildlife

### Planting

- Choose plants for their wildlife value e.g. flowers, berries
- Collect and sow seeds from local wildflowers and trees
- Allow some plants to set seed to provide food for birds

### Reduce, Re-use, Re-cycle

- Get composting to reduce material going into landfill and re-cycle nutrients
- Collect rain in a water butt to reduce your water usage in dry spells
- Use reduced peat or peat free compost to help protect the valuable peat bog habitats

### Feeding

- If you are lucky enough to have red squirrels install a ‘red-only’ feeding box
- Feed hedgehogs with cat or dog food (not bread and milk). They will eat your slugs and snails too.
- Provide bird feeders for winter birds.

## Getting started

Improving biodiversity can often be done for little or no cost, all that is required is enthusiasm and commitment.

- **Identify what you already have.** Surveying can be carried out as a community or school exercise to create a general species and habitat list. If funding is available a more comprehensive ecological survey could be carried out. The historical ownership/management of a site can inform later decision making.
- **Assess what you want to do.** What resources does your community have (money, labour equipment etc).
- **Write a short Biodiversity Action Plan for each species/habitat or bit of land.** Identify your basic aims, objectives, targets and success indicators (where possible link to other communities, the wider landscape and existing local initiatives).
- **Find funding and carrying out the work.** Will local fundraising be sufficient or do you need to apply for funding? Allow for long term maintenance as well as carrying out the work. Can you do the work yourself or do you need a contractor?
- **Celebrate the results!** After all that hard work you should reward yourselves and enjoy your success.

## Timescales and budget

Habitat creation and improvement does not have to be expensive, however it might be useful to have some funds available to cover your costs. The community may have access to funding or you may wish to apply for a grant to help with the project.

As a group it would be useful to look at timescales, do you want the work to be completed in time for a community event or by a certain date? If so:

- How much time is available?
- What do you want to achieve and by when?
- Is some of the work limited by season?
- Are there any long term aims/plans for the project?

Working out a schedule based on the work that needs to be done can help, and setting a 'launch date' will help everyone to stay focussed.

## Hiring a specialist contractor

Designing and developing a wildlife site, woodland, pond or wild flower meadow requires knowledge of ground preparation, correct species to use and aftercare. Depending on the skills you already have, you may want to consider hiring a specialist contractor.

There are some very good specialist companies in Cumbria and you could start by searching [www.businesslinknw.co.uk](http://www.businesslinknw.co.uk) or search engines (e.g. Google, Yahoo) for local companies. Select the three companies that you feel meet your requirements and discuss the project with them before asking for a detailed quote.

Once you have selected a company, make sure you have a robust contract or agreement in place, detailing deliverables, costs and timescales.

When work is underway, it is important that the community stays involved. If everyone feels they have ownership of the project, the end product will be better and it will continue to be maintained and looked after by everyone once completed.



## Practical ideas

Ponds are a fantastic habitat benefiting amphibians, insects, birds and mammals. Making a wildlife pond is a great way to attract more species and is relatively simple.

Trees are an important part of our landscape and support a considerable number of organisms. How about collecting and growing seeds from local trees or holding a community tree planting event?

Changing the management of grassed areas can allow wild flowers to bloom and set seed. The numbers of wildflowers can be boosted by collecting local wildflower seeds and growing young plants which can then be added to the sward.

Traditional skills such as dry-stone walling and hedge-laying are sadly in decline. Both are prominent features in the Cumbrian landscape as well as being great habitats. Repairing or building a new wall is a great way to learn a new skill and planting a new hedge or laying an old one to rejuvenate it will help to conserve these important features.

## Useful websites

[www.cumbriaaction.org.uk](http://www.cumbriaaction.org.uk)

[www.thirdsectorcumbria.org.uk](http://www.thirdsectorcumbria.org.uk)

[www.cumbriawildlifetrust.org.uk](http://www.cumbriawildlifetrust.org.uk)

[www.lake-district.gov.uk](http://www.lake-district.gov.uk)

[www.fld.org.uk](http://www.fld.org.uk)

[www.ourgreenspace.org.uk](http://www.ourgreenspace.org.uk)

[www.woodlandtrust.org.uk](http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk)

[www.edenrivertrust.org.uk](http://www.edenrivertrust.org.uk)

[www.lunerivertrust.org.uk](http://www.lunerivertrust.org.uk)

[www.saveoursquirrels.org.uk](http://www.saveoursquirrels.org.uk)

[www.owls.org](http://www.owls.org)    [www.bats.org.uk](http://www.bats.org.uk)

[www.bumblebeeconservationtrust.co.uk](http://www.bumblebeeconservationtrust.co.uk)

[www.butterfly-conservation.org](http://www.butterfly-conservation.org)

[www.lakelandwildlife.co.uk](http://www.lakelandwildlife.co.uk)

[www.johnmuiraward.org](http://www.johnmuiraward.org)

## More information

ACT Development Officers can offer further support and advice. A range of additional Guidance Sheets are also available on our website.

**For more information please contact ACTion with Communities in Cumbria on Tel: 01228 817224 or visit our website: [www.cumbriaaction.org.uk](http://www.cumbriaaction.org.uk)**

**ACT Champions community and rural issues**

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