

Making Biodiversity Visible

One thing we have learned through the work that we do together with our community and partners, is that understanding the impact of your work is key to making the case for the neighbourhood.

There are many ways that this can be done, but having an understanding of distance travelled, and change made is key to demonstrating and attributing that impact. This can mean that knowing where you are starting from can be important.

One of the things we have begun to measure in our community is levels of biodiversity, so that we can have a sense of where we are at the start of our plan. This way we can understand the impact of the environmental interventions we make.

We have developed a way to make biodiversity visible in our area with our Portland Palissy Ware.

Why is biodiversity important to us on a neighbourhood level?

This is a question we have been concerned with since in March 2021, a large Brownfield neighbouring our community was cleared without warning, at the height of nesting season.

Through our work to aim to engage the developer of that site in considering their responsibility to recognise the interim nature haven that the Brownfield had become, we aimed to advocate for the maximisation of homes for nature and biodiversity support within the development plan.

After the clearance, the developer stated that they had worked with an ecologist, who had found that there was nothing much of significance on the site, aside from there being one or two nests and a badger outpost (not a main set).

We paid Staffordshire Ecological Records for the biodiversity data relating to the area, to see if there was any evidence of the rich diversity of species our community anecdotally reported; hearing owls hunting at nights, badger sightings, bats and a variety of bird species. There were no significant records for the neighbourhood, which we then discovered is typical of neighbourhoods in so called 'deprived' areas – where there is a lack of survey culture in terms of engaging with recording and reporting on local species.

We realise that it is easy for developers to tell us there is nothing of significance if we have no evidence to counter that, and so aim to make it our mission to begin a process of keeping better records of the nature on our doorstep with our community – for a number of reasons beyond the rationale given here.

We know that spending time in nature is good for health and wellbeing of citizens, and that recognising that nature and knowing it by name can be important for community members to feel grounded in our place. We also know that contributing positively to improving the environment on our doorstep, and seeing the impact of the interventions we make can help spur us on, through some of the challenges we face.

How does the neighbourhood level loss of biodiversity relate to the national picture?

The 2019 State of Nature report by RSPB using data compiled by Natural History Museum, sharing a league table of 240 countries; scored UK as 12th worst, retaining just 50% of our plants and animals. In addition to this 41% of our species are currently in decline.

This shows us that nature in this country is in a shocking state of decline, demonstrating an urgent need for each of us to consider what we can do at a neighbourhood level to redress this loss. Even the smallest of interventions can make a big difference.

Ecological reporting

We have begun to record the nature we have on our doorstep. We are capturing the plants growing in the neighbourhood, both those planted there by humans and those that have chosen to be there as well as keeping records of birds, mammals, invertebrates and other beings we see in the area. We are using a variety of methods to map and track species levels, aided by a range of methods and equipment that we are learning how to use. We are beginning to record those on iNaturalist, so that the next time someone appeals to Staffordshire Ecological Record for data about the biodiversity of our neighbourhood, they will see that there are many species to speak of.

We can also see the link between our actions and the positive effect we can have quite quickly. We are looking at making environmental interventions across the neighbourhood; through using the moth trap last summer, we learnt that there is a mint moth living in the neighbourhood – made possible because we planted mint locally.

Visibility

Data on a spreadsheet doesn't fill everyone with joy. At The Portland Inn project we are often looking for ways to tell our story and telling the story of the non-human species we share this place with is part of that. Our Portland Palissy Ware then, is a way for us to make the data we are collecting more visible, and to learn some new skills in making with ceramics while we do that. Based on the amazing decorative plaques of French Huguenot Ceramic Artist Bernard Palissy, who was known for his platters depicting small animals and vegetation – our Portland Palissy is a visual way for us to make visible the species data we are aiming to collect periodically. In our Portland Palissy sessions we use ecological species capturing equipment and identification methods to collect data, and then create a plaque showing the species we have discovered in that session.

We hope other neighbourhoods like ours might begin to do the same.