

## Northern Ireland

# Be fair to Bees – Plan B

## Bees help us, so we should help them



**Following an intensive summer on an RSPB science research placement assessing the benefits of wildlife friendly farming, student Annie from Down High School in Downpatrick wanted to do more to help bees and other pollinators by raising awareness with her school and wider community.**

The RSPB research placement with Down High during July and August 2018, on two County Down farms, showed that “the nature-friendly farm supported 4 times the abundance of pollinators compared with the neighbouring control farm that has never managed for wildlife demonstrating overwhelmingly the benefits of wildlife-friendly farming options to support our valuable pollinators. During the period of sustained drought-like conditions in 2018, many short-rooted flower species wilted and died. The wildlife-friendly farm with its greater variety of plant species sustained long-rooted plants which survived and provided nectar and pollen for pollinators. The RSPB have been able to use this research to provide more specific advice to farmers for example, staggering the maintenance of meadows to ensure sustained provision of wildflowers throughout the whole breeding season.” (Annie Magowan, 2018).

RSPB research volunteer Annie Magowan was passionate about continuing to protect “her” wild bees and use her newly acquired knowledge to raise awareness about how to help pollinators in schools and her local community. She came up with the idea to channel her passion into an “Eco UNESCO Young Environmentalist” project. She approached her Biology Society including some very vocal Politics students, her Head of Biology Mrs Rachel Wilson, Eco teacher of the year 2019 and her RSPB research placement mentor for help designing an Eco UNESCO project. Following their project steps (get a team together, research an issue, develop an action plan, take action and raise awareness) they created a “Be fair to Bees” conservation advocacy project. Each team member brought different skills to the project enabling them to fulfil each element of the project. They involved younger pupils from their Zoology Club, their Eco-Schools group and other local schools taking conservation action by planting trees, making seed bombs, creating a wildflower meadow and came up with innovative ideas to raise awareness with different audiences about the issues affecting bees and how to help them. They designed an e-petition and “Buzz Point” posters with QR codes, which they leaflet-dropped into the local community. The team members learned new advocacy skills of engaging with the public at family events and through the media and with policy makers face to face at Stormont, by email and through Twitter and Facebook.



Mutual enthusiasm and innovation flowed between the team and their inspirational Biology teacher Rachel Wilson, who supported the whole process of the Eco UNESCO project by facilitating team discussions, the delivery of awareness-raising and conservation action within school and out into the community. The palpable “buzz” around this project resulted in immense support not only from school pupils, staff and senior management but also outside agencies including Newry and Down Council and the RSPB. The confidence of each member soared as they were pushed way out beyond their comfort zones to engage with an ever-widening range of audiences from their peers at assemblies to primary school children, the public, MLAs, media and the judges at the Eco UNESCO Young Environmentalist award. They took part in the regional

‘Eco Den’ event at Oxford Island and final award ceremony in Dublin where they received the *Senior Biodiversity Award*.

RSPB NI Education Development Officer, Karen Sheil said, “I have watched the various members of the team as their confidence grew, speaking with such passion and authority and taking ownership of every aspect of the project. They have inspired RSPB staff to support them in becoming the first group of young people in the UK to design and have an e-petition accepted for publication on the UK government petitions website.

“Their enthusiasm and commitment reached across RSPB NI inspiring our members and staff and further afield to our UKHQ in Bedfordshire involving our campaigning, communications and conservation advocacy

departments and volunteer e-campaigners. They created podcasts and articles for our website and engaged directly with MLAs at a “Listenup” event in Belfast, by email and through social media.

The students spoke face to face alongside RSPB conservation advocacy staff with policy makers at Stormont and alongside our agri-environment officer to the public through filming for BBC “Homeground” and “Newline”. They spoke on Radio Ulster and Downpatrick U105 Community radio about their Eco UNESCO project. We feel so honoured that they chose to speak up for nature and support the RSPB’s current advocacy work asking our government to ensure that public money is directed to farmers who carry out nature-friendly farming.”



It was the constant inspiration of Eco-Schools “Teacher of the Year”, Rachel Wilson, and her on-the-ground support for every aspect of this project including the submission of the evidence for the Eco UNESCO project that led to the recognition of this team’s immense achievements when they received Eco UNESCOs “Young Environmentalist of the Year” 2019 *Senior Biodiversity Award*.

In the words of one of the team members, Jack Campbell, ‘Without the enthusiasm, knowledge and support that Mrs Wilson provided, our “Be Fair to Bees” project would not be anywhere near the success it is now. Her tireless efforts have both maximised the potential of this project and our own. I am glad to see that her commitment to all things Eco was recognised with her winning Eco-Schools Teacher of the Year!’

Annie’s research placement with RSPB demonstrated overwhelmingly the benefits of wildlife-friendly farming for pollinators, identified very specific requirements for each bumblebee species observed at each stage of their lifecycle and considered the impact of climatically challenging conditions. The RSPB have been able to use this research to provide additional more specific advice for farmers and DAERA on the content of environmental farming options for pollinators.



## Further information

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The RSPB is a member of BirdLife International, a partnership of conservation organisations working to give nature a home around the world.

