



Left to right: Bedgebury Probationers Scheme (photos: Julian Dormady); HMP Dartmoor Scheme (photo: Angel Tomney); HMP Winchester Scheme (photo: Ben Phelan)

Offenders and Nature Schemes

What are the schemes?

Offenders and Nature (O&N) schemes involve offenders working as volunteers on woodland sites, carrying out tasks such as creating and maintaining footpaths, coppicing, fencing sites and opening up dense vegetation to create more diverse habitats.

This conservation work would otherwise use scarce financial and human resources or remain undone due to resource constraints. Those entering the Forestry Commission (FC) O&N schemes during their community sentence are often working for one or two days per week, whereas those serving a custodial sentence usually participate full-time in the last six months of their prison sentence.

O&N schemes are seen as reparative work that benefits the public and provides experience of teamwork, life and skills training to offenders, at the same time boosting their confidence and self-esteem through the worthwhile and visible tasks and outcomes. Thus the schemes are able to introduce the forest environment to a wider audience through the direct action by the offenders and also via the improved access and amenity to the surrounding communities.

What makes these schemes special?

A growing body of research supports the range of positive impacts that contact with Nature can have on both physical and mental health, social and psychological development, reducing anti-social behaviour, and facilitating social interactions.

O&N schemes offer physically demanding work in green space – numeracy, literacy and other academic skills are less relevant to the work than commitment, enthusiasm and diligence in following demonstrations and instructions given on site by skilled staff. Offenders learn basic conservation and forest management skills and get to know different tree, plant and animal species. They have to be flexible as to working independently on some tasks and as part of a team on others. Work often requires stamina and perseverance, but is clearly visible and often immediately appreciated by the local community and visitors. Some offenders and supervisors observe a ‘calming’ and ‘focusing’ effect in volunteers. Days spent outside working in all weathers also improves physical fitness and a general feeling of well-being.

The work may not suit everyone, but those who are placed on these schemes often not only learn new skills but more importantly feel that they can do something that they enjoy, which is also appreciated by others and good for the environment.

Who is involved?

O&N initiatives involve partnerships between an offender-management organisation and a natural-environment organisation; sometimes including several public sector and non-governmental organisations. Successful partnerships between organisations require some understanding of each other’s priorities, drivers and the policy context in which they operate. O&N projects offer placements in line with the aims of the Home Office’s ‘Reducing Re-Offending Alliances’ and the ‘Community Payback’ drive. The FC’s remit includes managing forests in a way that enables the public to experience, enjoy and benefit from wooded landscapes. Environmental voluntary work is an important element in local probation and youth-offender programmes, with a multitude of anecdotal accounts highlighting the schemes’ positive effects.

Past, present and future

Some schemes started after several arson incidents in forests by local youths. Others were started by the probation or prison service making contact with FC regional and local offices to have meaningful placements that benefit society, provide effective work experience, and good job prospects for ex-prisoners. While a few schemes operated in the 1990s, most have started in the past 3 years. Several new ones are being planned and funding sought to secure the future of and to further develop existing schemes (especially regarding the transition to paid and longer term work). To date over 1000 offenders, mainly between 12 and 50 years old, have participated across England in O&N schemes. Existing schemes share key aims and a basic set-up, yet each scheme also evolves with and adapts to the specific local conditions and requirements as reflected in the two case studies.

Case Study 1: Bedgebury Probationers Scheme

Since 2004, probationers from Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge in Kent have carried out a wide range of tasks on FC land to benefit the local community and visitors to Bedgebury Forest. Work parties consist of up to 25 probationers who carry out reparative work under the supervision of a probationer officer. A large group of younger offenders, aged 18 to 25, usually works every Sunday, and two slightly smaller groups of offenders, generally aged 25 to 50, work on a Tuesday and Thursday. Most forestry management work takes place during the winter months, mainly focusing on clearance of scrub and invasive plants such as rhododendron. During the summer, probationers often get placed elsewhere and working groups range in size from one person to a few people. Some offenders prefer to do a block of 5 days to reduce their community service time, and thus can stay with a task to see it through. The teams use their own tools and are supervised by probation service staff. FC staff identify the work areas and jobs, and at the beginning of the day demonstrate

new tasks and explain Health and Safety issues. All work that is carried out is covered by the Probation Services' risk assessments and the FC's site risk assessment. The scheme keeps track of all the work carried out and records any problems and issues, so that they can be addressed and resolved.

With several of the offenders being skilled joiners or builders some tasks involve construction (e.g. picnic areas and shelters as featured in the photo) and decorating/painting (e.g. visitor centre and teaching rooms).

Some projects have been completed ahead of schedule, under-budget and to a high standard.



'Thank you for the opportunity it has given me in life that I may not have had. My time with the Forestry Commission has changed my outlook to life and work. I really believe for the first time I have a future.' Ex-offender, HMP Dartmoor

Case Study 2: Scheme with Dartmoor Prison

In January 2004 the FC agreed to take on two prisoners for voluntary work experience as part of the HMP Dartmoor Prisoner Resettlement Programme. Dartmoor Prison at Princetown, Devon, is a category C training prison with a stage 1 and 2 Resettlement Unit. The two prisoners worked as an integral part of the Dartmoor field team, participating in a wide range of practical forest management tasks. From a very early stage this proved a popular arrangement with the prisoners, HMP Dartmoor and FC. FC England then agreed to provide Stage 1 Resettlement programme opportunities incorporating a varied programme of (unpaid) work experience combined with nationally accredited training in specialist skills, particularly clearing saw work and chainsaws.

In July 2004 HMP Dartmoor secured Home Office approval to provide a Stage 2 Resettlement Programme. Along with more personal freedom inside the prison, Stage 2 offers the opportunity for participants to earn a regular 'wage' for work undertaken. Money earned is then retained in a dedicated account for the prisoner administered by HMP Dartmoor and only available to them on release (to help break out of the vicious cycle of 'no job', 'nowhere to live' and 'no money').



The first 3-year trial period (steps 1–4) finished at the end of 2006, and the second 3-year programme will have an additional stage (step 5) for those offenders who are interested to continue work with the FC after release.

1. Suitable offenders selected by HMP Dartmoor Resettlement Unit.
2. Voluntary work (4–6 weeks) is completed with the Dartmoor Forest Beat team and each prisoner's suitability for further work experience assessed (Stage 1).
3. Entry into the Stage 2 resettlement scheme – a paid work experience and skills training scheme (typically 6 months in duration).
4. Offender released with the benefit of money in a bank account, new skills and an employment reference.
5. An optional 3-month employment contract with the FC is offered to ex-offenders who have performed satisfactorily during Steps 1–3. This option will be available to start immediately following release.

By the end of March 2006 nine prisoners had taken part in the project; all of them found employment or a training position within the first six months of release and only one was accused of an offence following release but received a 'not guilty' verdict. An important by-product of this initiative has been the environmental benefits resulting from over 7 kilometres of streamside biodiversity improvements.

The scheme receives financial support from Dartmoor National Park Sustainability Fund, Forest Enterprise and Devon Renaissance.

For more information and a full summary report contact: Claudia Carter, Forest Research, Alice Holt Lodge, Farnham, GU10 4LH, Tel 01420 526191
claudia.carter@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

or visit: www.forestresearch.gov.uk/offendersandnature