

# Faith Woodlands

Engaging with Black and Minority Ethnic communities



Tranquil woodlands offer diverse communities a truly unique, conflict-free space for meditation. Recognising this potential, the Forestry Commission is working with people of all beliefs to create a shared outdoor 'faith space' in Maulden Woods, Bedfordshire. No specific religious symbols will be installed, but organisers hope to carve a maze from harvest-age conifers to represent the twists and turns of life we share. This is an important contribution towards social harmony in a diversely populated area. It highlights the health benefits of exercise to communities that suffer higher than average rates of heart disease. The project is at an early stage but already has the support of the local Council of Faiths.

## objectives

- To involve faith communities in developing, designing and using special areas within existing woodland that have meaning to them, which are accessible to all and which help to involve and educate people from all sections of society.
- To introduce the use of woodlands for health, recreation and education to those sectors that normally feel excluded from woodlands.
- To increase participation of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups in recreation, and increase regular activity across the community populations. The project also aims to engage participants from disadvantaged urban areas, to increase activity and to reduce social exclusion of older people, women and young people.
- To build on successful existing work by the East of England Faiths Council and Luton Council of Faiths to integrate groups of faiths by helping them to work together on a new project with a common social and environmental purpose.
- To help break down barriers and prejudices about the environment and increase its use by all.

## actions

- A partnership has been set up including the Tree Council, Luton Council of Faiths and representatives from the Forestry Commission.
- Maulden Woods in Ampthill Forest, Bedfordshire, was identified as the most suitable area to develop the project, being midway between Luton and Bedford which both have a high proportion of ethnic groupings. It is also accessible by public transport.
- A steering group has been established, chaired by the Archdeacon of Bedford, which includes representatives of the Luton and Bedford Councils of Faiths, as well as Sikh, Muslim, Christian, Ba'hai, Quaker, Hindu and pagan communities.
- Plans are under development to determine how to create and develop special areas which have meaning for all faith groups.

## achievements

- The decision on the form and location of the Faith Woods, taken by representatives of the Luton and Bedford Councils of Faiths. The woods will establish a quiet, calm area where people can meet, sit and meditate, or hold talks, play music or dance. This could include sculptures and a maze, but no temple or buildings. The space will not be directed at any particular faith.
- The group will apply for permission to carve a maze from harvest-age conifers.
- Discussions have been held on the viability of placing organic, temporary art in the space, and taking the project into schools, community groups and women's groups.

## background

The project aims to link in to the goals of the Forestry Commission East of England's Regional Woodland Strategy: to raise the awareness of the benefits of woodlands for health and well-being, and to develop opportunities for lifelong learning through trees and woodland.

Luton, which is one of the most deprived areas in the region, has a 28% Black and Minority Ethnic population. Mortality rates and heart disease are higher than average and Black and Minority Ethnic groups are shown to be more likely to develop health problems. There is significant evidence for the health and well-being benefits of contact with nature. However, research on access to the outdoors by the Countryside Agency's Diversity Review found that Black and Minority Ethnic groups were under-represented as visitors to nature sites.

This project is an opportunity to engage with an under-represented group of visitors. The nearby Whipsnade Tree Cathedral will be used as a model, together with the work of groups such as ARC, the German Freunde der Baume and some of the UK Community Forests.

## quotes

*"All faiths believe in the preservation of our earth, this is one of the many things we have in common, and this should encourage us to work together to break down barriers".* Yasmin Akhtar, Luton Council of Faiths.

*"After the events of September 11, I wanted to do something to help bring communities together through the environment."* Kevin Hand, former Tree Council campaign director.

*"Working directly with the faith groups has given us an inside track on the needs and views of the BME community. We are fortunate to have had them on board from the outset."* Sunny Singh, Forestry Commission Social Development Adviser.

## partners

East of England Faiths Council  
Bedford Council of Faiths  
Luton Council of Faiths  
The Greensands Trust  
Grassroots  
Environment Agency  
National Interfaith Network

## funding

Forestry Commission