Managing Churchyards and Grounds for Wildlife

In the church, as in the wider community, there is a growing realisation of the interdependence of all life. '*We are not consumers of what God has made, we are in communion with it'* [1]. As such, and in accord with the Diocesan Environment Policy, it is appropriate that the management of churchyards should respect and encourage the diversity of wildlife within them. This is the responsibility of the parish priest and the Parochial Church Council.

A. Traditional Churchyards

'The churchyard is a sermon not only in stones but in plants and animals.' [2]

Our churchyards are part of our Christian faith and heritage. Through consecration they are set apart for the reverent burial of parishioners and they are places of contemplation for friends and relatives.

The prominence of churchyards in local communities gives them a role in educating the public about conservation and living in greater harmony with all creation, and in proclaiming the Church's faith that the natural processes of death are followed by the divine intervention of new life.

1 How to proceed

1.1 It is best practice to undertake a survey in order to identify what species are present before developing a management plan for the churchyard incorporating areas managed for wildlife. Even where the species are not especially rare, a churchyard has an important role to play in contributing to the patchwork of sites in an area and providing a reservoir that may colonise other sites if the conditions become suitable.

1.2 Help with surveys and developing a management plan is available free of charge from Judith Evans, who can be contacted via the DAC Team (see below).

1.3 If the churchyard is maintained by the local authority consider asking them if they will adjust their maintenance routine to incorporate wildlife areas. They are often willing to do this if the areas are clearly marked. Alternatively the PCC could consider taking back the management.

2 Grassland

2.1 In virtually every churchyard the grassland is the most important habitat. Nearly all our lowland hay meadows, which were rich in wildflowers, butterflies and insects, have been lost since the Second World War due to the application of fertilisers and herbicides, and churchyards are often the last refuge in a parish for the species that they supported.

2.2 The management plan should contain mowing and maintenance policies that respect and encourage wildlife in areas of the churchyard that are less frequently visited.

2.3 Aim to create areas of grass of different lengths to provide the maximum diversity for wildlife. When long grass is first cut it should be raked off in order to prevent an increase in soil fertility which is detrimental to wild flowers. Preferably add it to a compost heap in a secluded corner of the churchyard.

2.4 Do not mow areas containing wild flowers to "bowling-green length" as the plants will eventually be destroyed.

2.5 Do not introduce wild flowers to old churchyards without first checking with a conservation organisation.

3 Lichens

3.1 Many churchyards have over 100 species and some do not occur in other habitats. A survey can be arranged through the Diocesan Office.

3.2 Damage to stonework by lichens is minimal. Do not 'clean' them off headstones or walls**.**

4 Invertebrates

4.1 Butterflies need specific plants in order to breed. Some species require long grass on which to lay their eggs, others need specific wild flowers.

4.2 Grasshoppers require grass of at least 10cm or 4 inches.

4.3 Log piles are a valuable habitat in an out of the way corner.

5 Vertebrates

5.1 Churchyards are one of the last places providing suitable habitats for slow-worms and lizards. Compost heaps are valuable for sheltering over-wintering grass snakes.

5.2 Churches and churchyards are often important sites for bats, providing both roosts and hunting ground.

5.3 The birds most likely to be dependent on churches are those which require them for nesting sites, namely swifts, martins, swallows and barn owls. All of these are declining in numbers.

6 County Wildlife Sites

Many churchyards have been designated as County Wildlife Sites in recognition of their importance for wildlife. The designation was made by the county council's Biological Record Centre (or the wildlife trust on their behalf) and they are integral in assisting the counties in meeting their biodiversity action plan (BAP) targets as set out by central government. Designated churches should have received notification from their County Wildlife Trust or County Council. The Diocesan Environment Group has also written to designated churches.

In all cases an appropriate management plan should be in place.

7 Protected Species

The Schedules of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 contain the original lists of protected plants and animals, but some changes have been made by subsequent legislation. If in doubt check on the government website: www.opsi.gov.uk/legislation

Note that the following may well occur in churchyards and are protected: some lichens and mosses, most snakes and lizards, the great-crested newt and the natterjack toad, barn owls and their nest site, dormice, bats and their roosts, badgers and their setts. Natural England must be consulted before any work is undertaken that could affect them.

B. Modern Churchyards and Grounds

'As room is made for creation, so is room made for the Creator.' [2]

Many churches stand in an area of ground which is not a traditional churchyard. Generally they are relatively modern churches or churches in town centres where much of the original churchyard is now a car park. Despite this they still have the potential to enhance biodiversity if managed appropriately, and at the same time bring pleasure to those using the areas.

1 How to proceed

1.1 The emphasis is on providing food and shelter for birds and insects, many of which are now threatened due to lack of suitable habitat for feeding and breeding. It is also important to consider the environmental impact of buying various products.

1.2 It may be useful to identify what plants are present before developing a management plan for the churchyard. Help is available free of charge. Contact Judith Evans (see below).

2 Moths

2.1 Moths are important as they pollinate flowers and are food for other wildlife; each brood of Blue Tit chicks will consume about 15,000 moth caterpillars. Some moths are day-flying and may be confused with butterflies as they are just as attractive. There are more than 2,000 species of moth in Britain and a small garden can support over 100 species throughout the year. However their numbers have fallen dramatically, for example the Garden Tiger moth has decreased in number by 89% since the late 1960s.

3 Butterflies

3.1 The number of butterflies has seriously declined in the last 20 years. Some species of butterfly are migrants and arrive in Britain for the summer, others are resident here; together they total about 60 species. Some species have one generation a year while others may have 2, 3 or 4. At the onset of winter butterflies or their larval stages hibernate.

3.2 Butterflies visit gardens in search of food i.e. nectar found in flowers.

3.3 The caterpillars of most species only feed on native plants (wild flowers or shrubs) so it may not be possible to provide for them. However the Holly Blue butterfly has two generations a year - in spring the caterpillars tend to live on holly and in the autumn on ivy.

4 Bees

4.1 Honey bees and bumble bees in particular are under threat. They are important as pollinators, especially of fruit.

4.2 At least 6 species of bumble bee can be found in a garden and they feed on pollen.

5 Birds

5.1 The church grounds can provide nest sites and food for birds.

5.2 The birds most likely to be dependent on churches are those which require them for nesting sites, namely swifts, martins and swallows. All of these are declining in numbers. However, many other species of birds would also benefit from the provision of nest sites.

6 Management

6.1 The best way to help insects is to have a good mix of plants in a sunny site to provide a source of food throughout the year, and to leave some of the old plant material over the winter as caterpillars and pupae may be sheltering there.

6.2 ***Please note it is not appropriate to introduce plants into the grass of a traditional churchyard as it may destroy its botanical integrity and threaten the survival of native plants*.**

Many cultivated flowers are good sources of nectar and pollen but generally double-flowers and modern varieties are not of much use. Cottage garden plants are the most useful. Try and include some of the following:

Flowers Aubretia, Candytuft, Hollyhocks, Lavender, Michaelmas Daisy, Pinks, Polyanthus, Primrose, Scabious, Sedum spectabile (Ice plant), Sunflower, Thyme, Verbena.

Shrubs Buddleia davidii (not dark red and purple varieties), Cotoneaster, Holly, Honeysuckle, Lilac, Rosemary.

6.3 Plants with berries provide a useful source of food for birds. e.g. hawthorn, holly, ivy, rowan, as do the seed heads of some flowers. Some birds eat insects so increasing their numbers provides more food for birds.

6.4 Bird feeders should only be used if there is somebody prepared to be responsible for keeping them clean and filled. They should always be hung so that they are out of reach of vermin.

6.5 Various 'bug boxes' are available which provide a home for ladybirds, lacewings etc.

6.6 Bird boxes of various designs appropriate to different species of birds are readily available and can be attached to trees without the need for a faculty. Consult the DAC if you wish to attach a box to a building. Bird boxes containing a CCTV camera are now quite reasonably priced and are especially popular with children. Bird boxes should be cleaned out each winter to prevent the build-up of bird parasites.

6.7 Avoid using any chemicals, especially pesticides. If the use of herbicides is required on paths or car parks ensure that the manufacturer's instructions are followed.

6.8 Avoid using peat as peat bogs are a threatened habitat. Their decline has a serious effect on species which are dependent on them, and also on their ability to absorb carbon from the atmosphere.

7 Hard landscaping

7.1 Keep the amount of paved and tarmac areas to a minimum as these do not support any wildlife and the water runs off them. Gravel is better as water passes through and is absorbed by the ground.

7.2 Try and use recycled materials rather than freshly quarried.

Further information:
http://www.stalbans.anglican.org/faith/living-churchyards/

Beds, Cambs and Northants:
http://www.wildlifebcn.org/

Herts and Middlesex:
http://www.hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/

www.rspb.org.uk
www.butterfly-conservation.org
www.mothscount.org
www.bumblebeeconservation.org
www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk

Grants are sometimes available. See www.conservationfoundation.co.uk

References

1 ***Sharing God's Planet****:* A report from the Mission and Public Affairs Council (2006) - Church House Publishing.

2 ***Wildlife in church and churchyard****: Plants, animals and their management. 2nd edition.* Cooper, N. (2001) - Church House Publishing

Additional information and advice
Available from Judith Evans, promoter of The Living Churchyard Project in St Albans Diocese who can be contacted at: livingchurchyards@stalbans.anglican.org

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