



Press Release

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Memory key for Yorkshire's environment mapmakers

People in a Yorkshire community are using their recollections of the past to help researchers to understand the history of biodiversity in the area.

Researchers from the University of York are working with a number of local groups and organisations including Tang Hall Local History Group in the city to map the neighbourhood's environmental history.

It is part of a pioneering national initiative called the Open Air Laboratories Network (OPAL), supported by the Big Lottery Fund, which aims to encourage people to assess the quality of their own environment.

Tang Hall is the first of four communities in Yorkshire and Humber that will take part in the project. Eventually, around 8,000 people across the region will take part.

The Environment Department, and the Stockholm Environment Institute, at the University of York are leading the OPAL project in the region. The initiative is being co-ordinated by steering group that includes representatives from Natural England, the Environment Agency, Yorkshire Forward, the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust and City of York Council.

OPAL will produce five education packs on different environmental topics which will be available for use by schools and community groups in Yorkshire and Humber. The project aims to produce a community-based environmental report for the region by 2012.

Community scientist, Sarah West said: "We will work with each community to develop the vision for each individual project. We are using GIS (Geographical Information Systems) which use residents' local knowledge and recollections to map their local environment.

"We'll investigate residents' experiences of environmental problems, and identify where -- and why -- these issues are most significant. We'll also use it to understand how the history of land use in the community is reflected in the plants and animals that are found there today. The maps and mapping process allow local citizens and experts to engage with each other."

She added that OPAL was also organising a Family Fun Day at Chapman's Pond in Dringhouses, in partnership with the Friends of Chapman's Pond, who have had problems with vandalism, people lighting fires and leaving litter in the area. The aim of the Fun Day on 12 August is to encourage people to use the site in a positive way, as well as publicising OPAL and recruiting schools and volunteers to take part in the national surveys.

"There will be a mini-beast hunt for kids and a water survey team from University College London will be on hand to answer questions about plants, invertebrates and fish in the Pond. They will also organise pond-dipping for kids, under 16s are very welcome but will need to be accompanied by an adult"" she said.

On the 9 August, the OPAL project will have a stand at the Hull Road Open Day in Hull Road Park, and it will also be represented at the York Green Festival in Rowntree Park on 31 August.

Anyone interested in joining OPAL should contact opalproject@york.ac.uk or go to website www.OPAExploreNature.org.

ENDS

Notes to editors:

- The Open Air Laboratories (OPAL) network is an exciting new initiative which received an £11.7m grant from The Big Lottery Fund in August 2007. OPAL is encouraging people to get back in touch with nature by enabling them to explore and study their local environments. Through partnerships nation-wide, OPAL is running projects which anyone can get involved with. From playing fields and window boxes to business parks or beaches, all spaces are different and all are important. The five year programme will bring scientists and the public closer together, allowing environmental issues to be explored which have both local and global relevance. OPAL aims to create a new generation of nature-lovers by getting people to engage with the natural world around them.
- The Environment Department at the University of York was founded in 1992, initially to integrate ecological and environmental sciences with environmental economics. The aim was to improve understanding of environmental problems, and how to solve them, through the consideration of both the human dimension and the underpinning science. Its objective is to develop sustainable solutions to environmental problems that are consistent with human aspirations and with global, regional and local institutions and markets. More information at www.york.ac.uk/depts/eeem/
- More information on the Stockholm Environment Institute at York at www.sei.se