

Media Release: 03/01/24

# Harper students gain ecology experience with Natural England woodland restoration project

During June and July 2023, Harper Adams University supported Natural England in the delivery of a £5 million woodland restoration project across the Peak District Dales. The LIFE in the Ravines project, funded by EU Life, is working to restore the river valleys and hills of the area, which were once covered in a forest of lime, ash and elm trees but now face significant threats, particularly since the recent spread of ash dieback disease.

Led by Natural England, this partnership project is working to monitor and restore these woodlands and promote a better understanding of why they are so special. It is specifically tackling the threat that ash dieback poses to the *Tilio-Acerion* ravine woodlands, of the Peak District Dales SAC (Special Area of Conservation).

The project received £3.6m in funding from the EU LIFE programme, with an added £1.4m coming from project partners, including the Derbyshire Wildlife Trust, Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, National Trust and the Chatsworth Estate. The project is also working with the Peak District National Park, Derbyshire Dales District Council, the Forestry Commission and the Woodland Trust.

Ecological surveying work monitoring the long term effects of ash dieback on the woodlands have been carried out by Harper Adams Lecturer in Forestry and Woodland, Nick Covarr and Lecturer in Wildlife Conservation and Environment, Paul O' Hagan. They were supported by three Harper Adams students over the summer of 2023, gathering data to gain an understanding of how these woodlands are changing.

Nick said: "We were contracted to undertake six weeks of ecological surveying in the incredible ravine woodlands of the Derbyshire Dales. These are beautiful and awe-inspiring woodland habitats in the heart of England"

"We had two members of Harper Adams University staff and three of our students – two studying Wildlife Conservation and Ecology and one Zoology who helped us to collect data."

"We were recording tree species, densities, heights, diameters and health as well as soil moisture and pH. We also carried out extensive ground vegetation surveys including vascular plants, mosses and lichens. The method we were given by Natural England replicates studies undertaken in 2015, allowing direct comparison of how the woodlands are changing, as a result of ash dieback disease."

Ash dieback disease, caused by a fungus lethal to ash trees, arrived in the Peak District in 2015. The ravine woodlands of the Peak District are dominated by ash, so

the whole woodland area could be devastated without intervention. The woods already have high levels of infection and have lost mature trees. The loss of ash threatens all the woodland wildlife, from rare beetles and moths to birds such as redstarts.

LIFE in the Ravines Project Manager, Becky Plunkett said: “The Peak District’s scenic ravines are treasured by locals and visitors alike. LIFE in the Ravines is saving several woodlands, including the iconic five dales of the Derbyshire Dales National Nature Reserve, such as the well-visited Lathkill. All the sites are part of the Peak District Dales Special Area of Conservation, recognised as of international importance.

“LIFE in the Ravines is helping 900 hectares of woodland survive this threat with a programme of tree planting and woodland management. Small and large-leaved lime and wych elm trees, historically present in the woods, will be planted to step into the spaces left behind when ash trees die.

“The project won’t give up on ash and is seeking out trees that might be resilient to the disease, to give a helping hand to natural ash regeneration. Planting aspen, willow and other trees will build resilience and add to the diversity of wildlife in the woods.”

LIFE in the Ravines will pioneer some specialist techniques, including using drones for the first time in the Peak District to aid planting on the steep, rocky slopes of the Dales. The programme will help these special ravine woodland ecosystems survive beyond ash dieback, thrive into the future and help counter other threats such as climate change and flooding. The lessons learnt from the programme will also be useful for others battling ash dieback across Europe, especially in other ravine woodlands in the UK.

Nick added: “Not only was this a great opportunity to be involved in a long-term scientific project of significant value with Natural England but from our perspective, being able to involve our students was a real highlight. These are students aspiring to have long term careers in ecology so equipping them with the skills they need in terms of plant ID, data collection, scientific methods and project management is a real bonus for the students and the university.”

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**For comment and media opportunities, contact:**

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## **Images and Video: Single use only**



Photo by Harper Adams University: Students on Derbyshire Dales site

### **.....Additional Notes for Editor.....**

## **LIFE in the Ravines – The Project**

This £5m partnership project, led by Natural England, is restoring 876ha of ravine woodland within the Peak District Dales Special Area of Conservation (SAC). This is 16% of the UK's ravine woodland, a European Priority Habitat. All the project sites are now heavily infected with ash dieback caused by the fungus *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*, which usually leads to tree death. Without intervention, in some areas the whole woodland would be lost. LIFE in the Ravines will replant trees historically found in the woods such as *Tilia cordata* (small leaved lime), *Tilia platyphyllos* (large leaved lime) and *Ulmus glabra* (wych elm), alongside others such as *Populus tremula* (aspen) and *Salix* (willow). The woods are too far from seed sources for these species to rely on natural regeneration. The project will also seek to retain ash in the woods.

## **Project Partners**

Project partners are the Derbyshire Wildlife Trust, Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, the National Trust and the Chatsworth Estate.

The project will also work with the Peak District National Park, Derbyshire Dales District Council, the Forestry Commission, and the Woodland Trust.

## **EU LIFE Funding**

The EU's LIFE fund had agreed to support this £5 million project prior to the UK's exit from the EU. EU LIFE has given £3.6 million funding. The rest of the funding has come from project partners and supporters.

## **About Natural England**



Natural England is the government's adviser for the natural environment in England, helping to protect England's nature and landscapes for people to enjoy and for the services they provide.

Within England, Natural England is responsible for:

- Promoting nature conservation and protecting biodiversity
- Conserving and enhancing the landscape
- Securing the provision and improvement of facilities for the study, understanding and enjoyment of the natural environment
- Promoting access to the countryside and open spaces and encouraging open-air recreation
- Contributing in other ways to social and economic well-being through management of the natural environment
- Find out more on Natural England's website and follow us on Twitter: @NaturalEngland
- Natural England leads several other ambitious conservation projects that have benefitted from LIFE funding. These include Dynamic Dunescapes, working to restore sand dunes across the UK; and LIFE Recreation ReMEDIES, saving seagrass and other delicate underwater habitats around our coasts.

### **About Derbyshire Wildlife Trust**

Derbyshire Wildlife Trust, a Registered Charity, is the only organisation working to protect all wildlife across the county. We are one of 47 in The Wildlife Trusts Partnership, a nationwide network of local trusts. We manage 47 nature reserves throughout Derbyshire, advise local authorities and landowners on nature conservation issues and run a range of conservation and education projects. We are committed to The Wildlife Trusts' strategy of creating Living Landscapes – robust, connected landscapes that address the challenges facing our wildlife and countryside. Find out more at [www.derbyshirewildlifetrust.org.uk](http://www.derbyshirewildlifetrust.org.uk)

### **About Staffordshire Wildlife Trust**

Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, a registered charity, is the leading nature conservation body in the County of Staffordshire. It protects and enhances our wildlife and wild places and promotes involvement, enjoyment and understanding of the natural world. With the support of over 17,000 members, it manages 31 sites covering over 4,000 acres including sites of international, European and national importance. As part of The Wildlife Trusts, the Trust is the local face of the largest organisation in the UK concerned with the conservation of all forms of wildlife.

### **About Chatsworth Estate**



Chatsworth is home to the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire and is located in the Peak District National Park. The house, many of its contents and much of the surrounding landscape are leased to a registered charity, the Chatsworth House Trust. The Duke and Duchess pay rent to the charity to live at Chatsworth and work with the charity and others to welcome Chatsworth's visitors. Every penny of visitor admission goes directly to the Chatsworth House Trust, which is dedicated to the long-term preservation of Chatsworth House, the collections, garden, woodlands and park for the long-term benefit of the public. The charity promotes the study and appreciation of Chatsworth as a place of historic, architectural, and artistic interest and of natural beauty, and encourages the use and enjoyment of Chatsworth by visitors for education and recreation.

### **About the National Trust**

The National Trust is a conservation charity founded in 1895 by three people, Octavia Hill, Sir Robert Hunter and Hardwicke Rawnsley who saw the importance of the nation's heritage and open spaces and wanted to preserve them for everyone to enjoy. The Trust has committed to achieving carbon net zero emissions by 2030 and establish 20 million trees to help tackle climate change, creating green corridors for people and nature near towns and cities, running a year-long campaign to connect people with nature and continuing investment in arts and heritage. Ensuring everyone who visits feels welcome, and more people can access its places continues to be another key aspect of the charity's work. Entirely independent of Government, the National Trust looks after more than 250,000 hectares of countryside, 780 miles of coastline and hundreds of special places across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The National Trust receives more than 26.9 million visits each year to the places it cares for that have an entry fee, and an estimated 100 million visits to the outdoor places looked after by the charity. Together with 5.9 million members and more than 65,000 volunteers, they help to support the conservation charity in its work to care for nature, beauty, history. For everyone, for ever.

### **.....Additional Information.....**

To find out more about LIFE in the Ravines:

- [WWW.LIFEintheRavines/Storymap](http://WWW.LIFEintheRavines/Storymap)
- [www.LIFEintheRavines.co.uk](http://www.LIFEintheRavines.co.uk)
- Twitter / Instagram / Facebook: @lifeinravines
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