

Green Corridors

by Paul Howe

Paul, Rushmoor and Hart's Ecology/Biodiversity Officer, began by explaining that his role is divided between planning and operational activities across both authorities.

He went on to define green corridors, sometimes called wildlife corridors, as multifunctional green links, often in an urban context, that are a key part of green infrastructure. Roads, railways, hedgerows, historic boundaries and aquatic features may all serve as green corridors, and not just in the UK. This is a global concept, and California provides an excellent large-scale example of this important kind of connectivity.

The concept came about as a reaction to the increased fragmentation of landscapes and increased monoculture, to provide penetrability through barriers. Bodies such as DEFRA and the Environment Agency have developed it further to recognise blue corridors that make use of: rivers, canals, ponds, historic river channels, flood plains and multi-use parks. Inevitably, there is a strong overlap between green and blue corridors, for instance tow-paths are both. In Rushmoor, for planning purposes, they are treated as one.

These corridors fulfil a number of functions, primarily as wildlife highways and providing connectivity within a fragmented landscape. But they also have intrinsic value, especially in an urban landscape, providing feeding, roosting and nesting to a wide range of animals: butterflies, birds, bats and mammals, even larger mammals such as badgers.

Green corridors also encourage biodiversity by assisting seed dispersal. This is not always beneficial, however, because it allows invasive exotic plants such as Oxford ragwort and Himalayan balsam to spread.

Nor is it only invasive plants that threaten native species. The larger American crayfish out-competes our indigenous crayfish, and mink released into the wild have wreaked havoc among our much less aggressive native animals.

Important as their ecological benefits are, green corridors also serve a number of other important functions, including: recreation; visual amenity; noise attenuation and flood alleviation.

In Rushmoor, the Council works closely with Railtracks to ensure the health of trackside lands, and with the Highways Authorities on motorway and major road verges; the M3 is home to substantial populations of adders, slow-worms and bats. The Council also works closely with the Environment Agency to manage our local streams, ditch systems and the Basingstoke Canal, which is designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest, its combination of acid and alkaline soils making it unique in the UK. The Cove Brook Greenway Group and the Basingstoke Canal Society are, of course, key partners in maintaining the health of our local waterways. All these partnerships are crucial to Rushmoor's resilience planning, especially for flooding emergencies.

With regard to planning, Paul told us that the National Planning Policy Framework encourages the kind of work that he does and offers guidance, but he sometimes struggles with its application because of local policies. For instance, buffer zones are a good idea in principle but not actually

enforceable. And it is not at all clear exactly how much control of management he actually has. Nevertheless, planning can be useful to strengthen environmental health, as with placing conditions on planning approvals to ensure appropriate planting. With regard to policies, Paul believes that policy CP11 of Rushmoor's Core Strategy, a 'saved' policy, needs to be reviewed.

Paul's interesting and informative presentation provided us with a new appreciation of a part of our green infrastructure that we tend to overlook, and a recognition that we need to actively support efforts to maintain the health and vitality of our local green and blue corridors.